Capstone Part 3: Jumping In/Asking For Help

I mentioned in my blog post about course selection that one of my recommendations for choosing courses is to stalk professors. I know, that sounded just as weird here as it did there. Really what I mean is that it’s beneficial to take lots of classes with professors who have taught classes you’ve enjoyed in the past. If you like an introductory level class with a professor, you’ll probably like their upper levels as well. Really, you can’t go wrong. Where this following professors around thing really comes in handy, though, is when you need to ask professors for things - references, recommendations, nominations, and, in my case right now, Capstone Committee Members.

In my past two Capstone entries (one and two), I talked about getting to know the Capstone Experience: thinking about it, worrying over it, taking a peek at what it might look like. While testing the water is good for a while, I had to acknowledge soon after that I couldn’t think about it forever - it was time to jump in (oh, sorry, corny extended metaphor. I have to get them out of my system so they stay out of my Capstone).

So what’s the next step? I guess, technically, the next step is thinking about what you’d actually like to do for your project, but this idea isn’t something that you need to conjure out of thin air. Ideally you’ve been working towards this experience since your first semester, even if you didn’t know it. Obviously it doesn’t make sense to take on a huge project about something in which you are not interested, so hopefully throughout your time at UMass so far you’ve found something in which you are interested, and some professors (which you have been stalking) who share that interest.
Luckily, also, it isn’t very important that you have what you want to do all figured out right away. After all, this project takes a long time (two semesters!) and, as I’ve been told, it tends to “take on a life of its own.” It will change as you work on it, that’s just the nature of the project. So think up a rough idea, and then get onto the real next step.

Shoot an email over to one of those professors you’ve been getting to know. If you aren’t taking a class with him or her right now, ask how the semester is going. Let them know what you’ve been up to. And then, ask for a meeting to talk about your Capstone.

I know it can be hard to ask for favors, and looking for Capstone Committee Members seems like a big favor to ask. But don’t worry - professors actually like being on Capstone Committees. They’re academics - being involved in the creation of new knowledge is kind of their thing. Plus, the worst thing that could happen is that they’ll say no. And that’s okay! It’s not personal, and even if a professor isn’t interested in a project or doesn’t have time to take it on, they’ll probably be more than willing to point you in the direction of someone else who might be interested or to help you shape your idea while you’re there.

Okay, so what if you haven’t really gotten to know some professors. Well then you’re out of luck! No, just kidding. Look at your department website - the English Department faculty list their areas of interest and expertise online. Make an appointment with the Honors Program Director in your major - they’ll know who might be good for your idea.

Don’t worry about it, in general. It’ll go well. I’m planning to complete a Capstone in each of my majors (I think that I’m crazy, but more on that next time), and all the faculty members I have spoken with in both departments have been more than enthusiastic to hear about my ideas and to agree to be on my committee. Actually, I wasn’t sure whom to ask to be on my Spanish committee, so I went to talk to the Honors Program Director in Spanish, and he volunteered to help on the spot, because my idea is in his area of expertise. Like I said, professors like to help if they can, so go ahead and send those emails. While you’re at it, comment and let us know what you’re thinking of writing about, and good luck!

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