



COLLEGE OF GENERAL STUDIES

CAPSTONE 2012

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN 2012 AMERICA

The concept of a capstone project is older than, and certainly not unique to, the College of General Studies. A final research project has historically been considered the culmination of a liberal arts education. In addition to historical and academic meanings of the term, there is an architectural sense to the word “capstone.” A capstone is the final block that is placed on top of a construction project to tie the whole structure together. Further, in the language of the building industry, each layer of brick is called a “course.” Therefore, it is appropriate to use the word “capstone” for our final project at the College since it will be the final stage of your education here, the last course which caps two years of study.

As you begin this project, keep two thoughts in mind. First, just as the construction of a building is not an individual effort, but rather the culmination of the labors of an organized group, so too is the Capstone Project a group effort. You will be expected to work together for the success of your group. The more that each individual gives to the group, the more each person will gain from the month’s work. The final product will be better and your paper will be more rewarding. Secondly, the Capstone paper is *not* to be merely a fifty-page research term paper. Instead it should be a synthesis, or combining of separate elements to form a coherent whole. The Capstone is also a kind of drama, requiring an act of imagination as you assume the roles of experts or advocates and present your findings in real-world formats. Research is, to be sure, an indispensable part of the project; but you will be expected to construct arguments, to analyze and synthesize this research in order to make a proposal or reach a verdict and justify your conclusions. In other words, research is more than gathering raw data as an end-in-itself. What is important is the synthesis of these data into a meaningful whole which, if done properly, will be greater than the sum of its parts.

Introduction

Because in the administration it hath respect not to the few but to the multitude, our form of government is called a democracy. Wherein there is not only an equality amongst all men in point of law . . . but in election to public offices we consider neither class nor rank, but each . . . is preferred according to his virtue or to the esteem in which he is held . . .

-Pericles' Funeral Oration, from Book II of Thucydides'
The Peloponnesian War, translated by Thomas Hobbes

Democracies are not utopian societies. They are constructed on the principle that no perfect society is good, and no good society perfect. The ferment of interests, values, and opinions is perpetual in a democracy, temporarily resolved by periodic elections.

Not all the citizens of Classical Athens found self-government as effective and noble as did Pericles. Plato simply mocked it:

Democracy . . . is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike.

-*The Republic*, Book VII

Aristotle, as usual, took a guarded, moderate position:

If liberty and equality, as thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained where all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.

-*Politics*, Book IV

In the twenty-first century, the Athenian idea that only governments with popular mandates can be considered legitimate has become well established, if not adhered to universally. The American idea of representative democracy is admired and emulated; yet there are also doubts about our nation's ability to meet the challenges it faces. There are competing models—China, for instance. Where all participate in government, all enjoy rights they must protect and take on responsibilities they must meet, including the one to make their republic not perfect but, in the words of the Preamble, “more perfect.” To succeed, a society that emphasizes individual enterprise, individual rights and interests requires all its citizens to entertain a vision of what Plato called “the good of the whole state.”

This is a presidential election year. The two major parties are sharply divided, taking different, often opposed, positions on tax policy, consumer and environmental protection, the regulation of financial markets, immigration, campaign finance, renewable energy, the rights of public employees to bargain collectively, what to do about reducing the national debt, trade deficit, and unemployment; they differ on the appropriate size of government and even how the Constitution is to be interpreted. The nation is deep in debt, income inequality is way up and social mobility down. Millions are unemployed and more are underemployed. The economy is not flourishing for most people. The Senate is filled with millionaires. Huge anonymous contributions to ever-more-costly campaigns call democracy itself into question. Resources are becoming scarce. We face a daunting range of intractable domestic problems and policy choices. This year's Capstone Project will require you, as students and citizens, to choose one of these issues, research it thoroughly, and—applying what you have learned at the

College about ethics, history, the natural and social sciences—debate the alternatives, and propose a position.

MECHANICS OF THE CAPSTONE PROJECT

1. Groups: The Capstone Project is a group project. The groups, each made up of 5 to 7 students, will be organized according to criteria established by your team's faculty. You will be a member of the group during the entire project and each group will need to work out for itself some form of division of labor and responsibility. Each member of the group will be responsible not only to herself or himself, but to the other members as well. We encourage you to use Google Documents, DropBox, Google Wave, or other group projects tools to add to, edit, and co-edit your Capstone paper. We especially encourage you to document your contributions to the group's work using E-Portfolio. Each student should create a specific Capstone tab for his or her work on the E-Portfolio site to document individual contributions. This should be done by listing the work you accomplished during each week of the project. In addition, we request that you use your E-Portfolio to assess your experience of the Project after the final report is submitted on April 27 but before the oral defenses begin the following week. Instructions for this assessment will be made available before the end of the Project period.

2. Project Grades: You will receive one grade for the Project as a whole. This grade will make up 25% of your semester grade in Natural Science, Social Science, and Humanities. There will be three components of the grade: the written report, the oral defense, and your individual participation in the project. You will be evaluated as a *group* on the written report (in other words each member of the group will receive the same paper grade), but as *individuals* on the oral defense and participation. Thus, each individual will be evaluated on the paper, his or her performance during the oral defense, and participation in the total project. Your final Capstone grade will be a combination of these three components.

3. Reporting of Capstone Grades: No Capstone grades will be released until the conclusion of all oral exams. This is necessary because team faculty do not assign Capstone grades until all orals are finished. Your faculty will discuss the mechanics of reporting grades to you. Note that you will receive only your individual Capstone grade, as this is what constitutes 25% of your semester grade in each course.

4. The Written Report: The length of the Capstone paper should be no more than 50 double-spaced pages. This does not include preliminary pages (table of contents, abstract, etc.), or endnotes, bibliography, or appendices. Copies of the report must be provided for each faculty member and also each member of the group in order to prepare for the oral defense.

5. The Oral Defense: After the final report has been submitted to the faculty, your group will meet at an appointed time to defend its work before your team faculty. The oral defense usually lasts two hours. Each group member should be prepared to answer questions on all aspects of the report. **Again, feedback will be offered during the oral and not through written comments.**

6. The Project Schedule: The project will begin on Friday, March 30 and continue to the end of the semester on Friday, May 11. This period of time will be subdivided as follows:

a. Capstone will begin with a kickoff assembly for each team during Humanities lecture hours on Friday, March 30. Unless you have a conflict with an elective, be sure to attend.

b. Individual groups will have scheduled meetings with their faculty twice during the week of

April 2 and once during the week of April 9.

c. The period from April 16 through April 27 will be devoted to writing, editing, copying, and binding the finished report.

d. The written project report will be due at **NOON** on Friday, April 27. **THERE WILL BE NO EXTENSIONS.**

All sophomores are to be present in Jacob Sleeper Auditorium at NOON, Friday, April 27, at which time all Capstone Projects will be collected by faculty teams.

e. There will then follow a period from Monday, April 30 to Friday, May 11 during which your group's oral defense will be scheduled. Scheduling of the orals is carried out by the faculty teams.

7. Statement on Plagiarism: To plagiarize is "to take (ideas, writings, etc.) from another and pass them off as one's own" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 3rd College Edition, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988, p. 1031). You are expected to indicate sources using approved techniques. Since students are often confused about the use of quotation marks, the faculty has established the general rule that whenever five words are copied consecutively from another author, the material must be put in quotation marks; failure to do this is plagiarism. Students should note that the sources of ideas and thoughts, even though paraphrased in one's own words and expressed in what is commonly called an indirect quotation, must be credited.

THE GROUP'S IDENTITY

Each Capstone group is charged with the task of formulating a policy recommendation or court decision on an issue that is related to the theme of ethical problems in various fields of contemporary public life. For that purpose, the group may constitute itself as a panel of experts that has been charged with the responsibility of surveying the history and scope of an appropriate problem, considering the many possible solutions, and recommending what it determines to be the best alternative. The group may be a special commission of inquiry, bureaucrats in a government agency, an independent panel of scholars or citizens, etc. The group will consider the ethical, philosophical, social, political, scientific, and technological implications of the chosen problem and of the policy. The research necessary to formulate such policy recommendations should reflect the scientific method of investigation.

FORMAT OPTIONS FOR THE WRITTEN REPORT

Your group may choose to act either as an informed panel investigating one of the problems outlined later in this syllabus and developing a recommendation that is presented to a government agency or international group (**Policy Recommendation Format**), or to act as the arbitrator in a dispute, deciding between two conflicting advocates. The group argues both sides of the contention and then the group makes the final decision (**Adversary Format**). Once you choose your topic you should discuss the format of your presentation with your team faculty.

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATION FORMAT:

If your group chooses this format you will set yourselves up as a commission that is charged with investigating a specific problem (e.g., income inequality) and will through your investigation develop a realistic recommendation as a solution to the problem. Your recommendation will be presented to the proper policy enforcing agency, in this case the House or Senate, but it might also be a government agency, international organization, or even a private corporation. Your

paper should follow these general guidelines:

A. Introduction: Clearly state the problem you are investigating, why it is important to investigate this problem, and to whom you will be presenting your recommendation. Your introduction should make the readers realize the nature of the problem, and why a solution is needed.

B. Discussion and Development of the Problem: This section of the paper should provide the background information on the problem and present data on all its aspects. Do not simply outline the research you have done on the issue, but present data that draw together all aspects of your research and help to express the **controversy** that makes your topic a **problem**. This section organizes and presents data that:

- 1) outline and develop the problem,
- 2) develop the various and most likely competing responses to the problem,
- 3) direct you toward, and ultimately support, your policy recommendation.

C. The Recommendation: Your recommendation should be a logical outcome of the data and background you presented in section B. It may be a recommendation that has already been proposed (which you discovered from your research); it may combine various aspects of different published proposals, or it may be a unique solution. This section should reiterate what data support your recommendation and why your recommendation is superior to others. You should also be careful to include what values (scientific, ethical, social) you used to develop your recommendation. Your recommendation should be a realistic solution, not a utopian, pie-in-the-sky proposal. You should discuss how your recommendation will be implemented. You must consider the cost (how much and to whom) of the implementation of your proposal. Finally, you should argue the functional role of your recommendation. Who will benefit from your proposal: society, the individual, a country, the world? Is your recommendation a long-term solution or a short-term fix? The major point is not to sit on the fence with your proposal, but to make a statement and be able to defend it.

II. ADVERSARY FORMAT:

In this format your group presents alternative solutions and acts as the arbitrator of a dispute (e.g., for or against new Internet privacy regulation). Two petitioners argue their respective positions on the controversy and the arbitrator makes a final ruling in favor of one of the petitioners. Your paper will develop competing arguments for each side of the controversy in an orderly, logical manner, render a judgment, and explain the reasons for favoring one position over the other. Your paper should be organized as follows:

A. Introduction: Clearly state the controversy, and why it is a controversy. It may help to provide a brief history of the controversy in this section. Indicate who the two petitioners are and what positions they will be representing.

B. Petitioner I - Arguments: State the controversy that is being argued and what judgment is desired. Develop the history behind the controversy that will support this petitioner's arguments. Present, in a logical, clear manner, the data that support this petitioner's position. For example, if you were arguing against the use of property taxes to fund public education you might want to present data showing that such funding leads to inadequate resources for schools in poor districts. Any evidence that will support the petitioner's position and sway the judgment towards their side should be presented.

C. Petitioner II - Arguments: Follow the same approach as above. It is advisable to present counter-arguments and evidence that opposes the other petitioner's position. These

arguments can be developed as in a point-counterpoint debate; for example, if you were arguing in favor of the current use of property taxes to fund public education you might want to provide data that shows that it does provide adequate resources. Petitioner II should present evidence that will support their position and sway the judgment towards their side.

D. Judgment by the Arbitrator: State what the ruling of the arbitrator is, then logically develop the rationale for the ruling. Data presented by both petitioners should be used to support the ruling. You should strive for a realistic ruling and one that is consistent with the arguments presented. Be careful not to rule against a strong argument, or if you do, be able to justify your ruling. Try to be realistic in the ruling and consider such points as implementation of the favored position, cost to both society and the individual of the ruling, and what values were important in arriving at your ruling.

General Points: Be careful to present opposing positions objectively. Do not weaken one petitioner's arguments just to arrive at a ruling favored by the group. It strengthens this type of paper to present arguments as near to equally strong as possible.

FOCUSING YOUR MAJOR TOPIC AREA

After your group chooses a major topic area and has decided which type of format to use, you should ask yourselves some of the following questions to help focus your area.

1. What *specific* problem do you want to examine? A word of caution: Do not be *too inclusive* (e.g., "We are going to study the American economy."). You must define a problem which is manageable within the framework of the Capstone project. Your faculty will help with this task.
2. Investigate your problem from an historical perspective. Include any pertinent background information you can find.
3. What is the current thinking about your issue? Whether or not you elect to use the adversary format, you should present opposing views about the issue and become familiar with the disagreements surrounding the issue. This lends more credibility to your eventual policy recommendations.
4. What are the various alternative policies or solutions to the problem you are investigating? Be sure to discuss each of them.
5. Your group must select one of these alternatives or you may create an alternative you believe is superior to any suggested by your study of the literature. In constructing your solution you should draw upon your knowledge of ethics to justify the goals you seek to achieve and the means you propose to use.
6. How can your policy be implemented?
7. What are the implications of your recommendations? What are the political, social, economic, technological, and cultural ramifications of your suggestions?

TOPICS

1. Income Inequality and Social Mobility

Upward social mobility is at the core of the immigrant's dream that unifies the United States; it is how we see ourselves. Mobility is likewise an economic resource, as static societies tend to have inefficient economies with unmotivated workers who generate little innovation.

So it was a shock when the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development recently published a report finding that social mobility between generations is far lower in the U.S. than in Denmark, Canada, Sweden, Australia, Norway, Spain, and Germany. Equally arresting was the information that income distribution in the U.S. is now more unequal than in most developed nations but also in countries to which we are not accustomed to be compared, such as Guyana and Nicaragua.

Since the financial collapse of 2008, social mobility has actually increased in the U.S., but only downwards. In fact, the financial status of the middle class in the United States has been eroding for thirty years. (See, for example, <http://www.dailyfinance.com/2010/10/17/disturbing-statistics-on-the-decline-of-americas-middle-class/>.)

One cause of diminished social mobility according to the OECD is lack of educational opportunity, including second-rate public education. Another is income inequality itself. The greater a country's inequality the harder it is to climb up the social ladder because there's more space between the rungs. Income inequality in the U.S. is now higher than at any time since the 1920s.

Do all economists agree that income inequality and the decline in social mobility are bad things? If not, why not? Do these developments really constitute a threat to the middle class or are they merely the natural outcome of a competitive free-market economic system? Are the changes permanent ("structural") or are they temporary, due only to a prolonged financial crisis?

Research income inequality in the U.S. over the last century. When did what economists call "the Great Compression" (greater equality) occur, and why? Why and when was it replaced by "the Great Divergence" (greater inequality)? Why, over the last decades, has 80% of the total increase in American incomes gone to the top 1%? Why have significant productivity gains by workers not resulted in wage increases?

Economists disagree on the causes of increased income inequality and decreased upward mobility. Some have pointed to immigration, others to race and gender discrimination, the breakdown of the traditional family, still others to the decline of labor unions, global competition, new technology, and the control of government by the super-rich.

The clearest political debate, however, has been over tax rates (including estate taxes) which the Democrats propose raising for the rich, a policy opposed by Republicans. You might focus on this specific issue. What are the Bush-era tax breaks and should they be repealed or not? (On tax policy, particularly that of the Republican Party, in recent years see <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/how-the-gop-became-the-party-of-the-rich-20111109>)

You might also choose one of the other possible causes of income inequality, and write a report proposing new policies to change these trends. Alternatively, you could write your report in the form of a debate over current policy and proposed changes.

2. Funding Public Education

Public schools in the U.S. are funded primarily through local property taxes along with some state and federal funds. This system has led to inequalities: affluent communities collect more from property taxes than poorer ones and therefore have more money to spend on their school systems. Of course, more money does not necessarily mean better schooling, but it does

often result in smaller class size, more and better computers and science labs, more money for music, art, after-school activities, and teacher salaries.

These inequalities have led to numerous law suits over the years. For example, in 1993 the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court declared in *McDuffy v. The Secretary of the Executive Office of Education* that the state has a constitutional responsibility to provide an education “without regard to the fiscal capacity of the community.” In 1999, students from several of the poorest districts in Massachusetts filed suit in *Hancock v. Driscoll* claiming that they were not receiving adequate education due to overcrowded classrooms and insufficient books, computers and other technologies.

One alternative to the property tax is to increase state income taxes with the state passing on funds to each district as equitably as possible. Vermont has experimented with “sharing pools” and block grants to guarantee equal access to education to all students, reducing the per-pupil spending gap between rich and poor communities by 20%.

Many citizens of wealthy communities support property tax funding of schools since their children benefit directly from the high taxes they pay for on their expensive homes. After all, many people move to affluent communities primarily to benefit from the good school systems. Paying higher housing costs and property taxes to support poorer school districts in other communities does not seem fair to them. Those in poorer districts argue that funding public education via property taxes maintains the cycle of poverty: poorer schools lead to an impoverished education, higher drop-out rates, lower acceptance rates at colleges and universities, and fewer good jobs.

What are the effects on school funding of the Race to the Top Law, the Charter School movement, and standardized competency testing?

You could use the adversary approach to argue for and against using property taxes to fund public schools, with a mediator offering a judgment; or you could take the proposal approach, analyzing the benefits and deficits of the current system and offer a proposal to improve it. In either case, take into consideration factors that have complicated the use of property taxes for funding education, such as the increased need for expensive computers and science equipment in schools, the increase in special education funding, and the growing economic gap between rich and poor communities nationwide. Any approach to this topic should address this fundamental question: does a democratic society have an ethical obligation to provide the same quality of education to children, regardless of the affluence of the communities in which they live?

3. Campaign Finance Reform: Reconsidering the Citizens United Decision

Perhaps the most controversial and consequential Supreme Court decision in recent years is that in the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, issued in the 2009 term. The 5-4 decision struck down legislated limits on corporate and union spending. Many legal scholars, journalists, and politicians see the decision, which reversed years of precedent and gutted campaign finance laws, as increasing the potential for corruption of the election process. Others see it as striking a blow for free speech, guaranteed by the First Amendment.

Among the critics is President Obama. He stated that the decision “gives the special interests and their lobbyists even more power in Washington—while undermining the influence of average Americans who make small contributions to support their preferred candidates.” In his weekly radio address he continued his criticism by saying that “this ruling strikes at our democracy itself” and “I can’t think of anything more devastating to the public interest.” On January 27, 2010, Obama condemned the decision in an unprecedented criticism of the Supreme Court, who were sitting only feet away from him, during his State of the Union address: “Last week, the Supreme Court reversed a century of law to open the floodgates for special interests—including foreign corporations—to spend without limit in our elections. Well, I don’t think American elections should be bankrolled by America’s most powerful interests, or worse, by foreign entities.”

What are the provisions of the Citizens United decision? What have been its effects so far? How does the debate break down politically?

Imagine there is a change in the membership of the Supreme Court and that Congress passes a new law governing campaign financing. Imagine the law is challenged and the case reaches the newly constituted Court. What sort of regulation, if any, is most likely to stand legal challenge? Write briefs for and against the authority of Congress to regulate campaign financing.

Here is a good site with which to begin: <http://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/citizens-united-v-federal-election-commission/>

4. Redistricting for the House of Representatives

Congressional districts are generally revised after each decade's census. In thirty-six states redistricting is the prerogative of state legislatures. Due to partisan bitterness and the precise demographic analysis made possible by computer technology, it has become routine for whichever party controls the legislature to construct districts for their own political gain or to protect incumbents—in short, Gerrymandering.

In an attempt to eliminate the abuses of this system, five states have set up independent bipartisan commissions to carry out redistricting and two others use independent bodies but give the final decision to the legislature. Movements for redistricting reform have been established in many states, backed by local activists and national organizations like Americans for Redistricting Reform. Many disputes over redistricting have wound up in the federal courts. In 2004 a split decision by the Supreme Court permitted elected officials to choose their constituents. The result has been that each party now controls as much as two hundred safe seats so that a relatively small number of competitive districts in a few states can decide which party controls the House of Representatives.

One problem for the reformers is that even non-partisan commissions can be turned to partisan purposes. This is why most reformers favor a national system to ensure competitive elections, legislative diversity, and proportional voting to make elections more democratic and the House of Representatives more representative. While it is unclear that national legislation would pass a Constitutional challenge, there is precedent for federal regulation of redistricting, as federal law makes redistricting that disenfranchises racial groups illegal.

What is the purpose of redistricting? How does it work, and under what rules? What federal legislation regulates redistricting? What court decisions affect redistricting? What has been the experience of those states that have set up non-partisan commissions?

A report on this topic could take the form of proposed national legislation, an argument before the Supreme Court on the constitutionality of such a law, a court case over a proposed redistricting plan in a single state, or a debate between advocates of the current system and those who wish to reform it. You might also propose a national movement aimed at passing a reform proposal for single states as a model for all, achieving non-partisan reform one state at a time thereby evading Constitutional concerns.

A good site to begin with is www.fairvote.org

5. Is The United States Senate Anti-Democratic?

18% of the population is represented by 52% of the members of the Senate. Critics argue that this is anti-democratic in both principle and practice. Small states, especially rural ones, can vote together for their special interests. A president and Senate dominated by a minority sharing his or her views could pack the federal judiciary to reflect their opinions or approve international treaties not supported by, or in the interest of, a majority of citizens.

Research how the Constitution's Article I, section 3, clause 1 ("The Senate shall be composed of two Senators from each State") came about in the first place. What were the

debates about at the time? What were the Virginia Plan, the New Jersey Plan, and the Connecticut Compromise? Is this debate among the Founding Fathers still relevant? Might it be time to reopen it?

When the Constitution was adopted the most populous state, Virginia, had a population twenty-one times the size of the smallest, Delaware. Today, the ratio between California and Wyoming, is over 70:1. In other words, a rancher in Wyoming has seventy times more clout in the Senate than a software engineer from Silicon Valley.

Based on the census, adjustments are made each decade to the House of Representatives to reflect changes in population; however, the Senate formula is fixed. On the insistence of small states in 1787, Article Five made this explicit: "...no state, without its Consent, shall be deprived of its equal Suffrage in the Senate." Given the requirement that Constitutional amendments must be approved by two-thirds of both Houses of Congress and three-fourths of state legislatures, and that even those proposed by a Constitutional Convention require 75% state approval, no amendment altering the make-up of the Senate has ever been proposed. But critics of the current arrangements are becoming more numerous and it is possible to imagine that a Constitutional Convention has been called to address the issue.

Should the disproportionate nature of *state* suffrage trump *individual* suffrage? Is the Senate really anti-democratic or does it provide a prudent check on majority rule? Does a democratic system require that citizens be *equally* represented? Do citizens still identify sufficiently with their states so that the current system remains both popular and tenable? The Founding Fathers were influenced in setting up the second house of Congress not by the democratic Athenian Assembly but by the patrician Senate of the Roman Republic. Should the Senate be representative of *voters*, like the House, or ought it to be a group of wise, experienced statesmen representing states whose votes have equal weight and who can correct for the short-term enthusiasms of the electorate? What alternative proposals have been proposed regarding the constitution of the Senate and what are the arguments for and against these alternatives?

The adversary format is most suitable for this issue.

6. Should the Electoral College Be Eliminated?

Criticisms of the American political system have been made throughout our history, and the debates at the original writing of the Constitution reveal that even the Founding Fathers were hardly of one mind about the structure of the new nation's government. Imagine that 34 state legislatures—*i.e.*, two-thirds of all states, the minimum required by Article V of the Constitution—have applied to Congress for the purpose of holding a new Constitutional Convention. Such a gathering will provide a forum for discussing proposals for specific Constitutional reforms, ones that address current as well as past challenges to the American political system. How might the current arrangements governing the Presidency, the Senate, and the Electoral College have contributed to recent threats of government shutdown, political stalemate, and unsatisfactory compromise—or unwillingness to compromise? Can these kinds of problems in the system be remedied through specific Constitutional reforms? Imagine that you are a committee of political and constitutional experts assigned to present a report to the upcoming convention.

The presidential election of 2000 turned out to be a neck-and-neck race between Democratic candidate Al Gore and Republican candidate George W. Bush. The election concluded with a limited attempt at a re-count of votes in Florida and ended ultimately with a controversial Supreme Court decision [*Bush v. Gore*] that halted the re-count process. Florida's 25 electoral votes were awarded to Bush, resulting in his victory, despite the fact that Gore had earned over half a million more votes than Bush in the national popular election. In addition to the controversies and debates surrounding the 2000 election, there were many Americans who did not fully comprehend the intricacies of the electoral college system. More than a few observers

were surprised to learn that it is entirely possible for a candidate to win the presidency even if he or she does not win the majority of the national popular vote.

Research the origins, history, and “mechanics” of the electoral college system and then explore current as well as past debates about this system. Why did our Founding Fathers institute such a system in the first place? Are those reasons still valid or applicable in today’s America? Who are “electors,” how are they chosen, and what is a “caucus”? What is the problem of the “faithless elector”? What are the overall strengths and weaknesses of the electoral college system? Are similar systems used in other nations? If so, what can we learn from the history of elections in other nations? In sum, are there strong enough reasons to keep the current electoral system in place or are there stronger reasons why we should modify or even eliminate that system?

7. The Rights of, and Duties Towards, Non-Human Species

The success of social movements in the latter half of the 20th century based on Kant’s idea of treating other rational creatures as ends—Civil Rights, Women’s Liberation, Gay Rights—combined with an urgent new concern for ecology, have given rise to ethical questions about the distinction between species. For instance, to what degree is non-human life due moral consideration, and should that consideration be conditioned by human needs and purposes?

In 1977 the philosopher Peter Singer published an influential book in which he argued that conventional attitudes towards animals—and behaviors such as hunting, experimentation, and our eating habits—resemble bigotry based on race and sex and thus are morally wrong. Singer coined the word “speciesism” and defines it as “a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (*Animal Liberation*, New York: Avon Books, 1977).

Singer’s position that species-identity is of no moral account has been challenged. For instance, Bonnie Steinbock, while allowing that the suffering of animals caused by human beings is morally repugnant, rejects the analogy to race and sex and argues that the differences between species do indeed have moral relevance: “We do not subject animals to different moral treatment simply because they have fur and feathers, but because they are in fact different from human beings in ways that could be morally relevant” (“Speciesism and the Idea of Equality,” *Philosophy* 52, 204, April 1978).

Half a century ago Aldo Leopold called for a broader view of the subject by advocating a “land ethic” that would focus on *neither* humans *nor* animals but on the welfare of the entire “biotic community” (See Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1949). Leopold’s broad ethical stance, popular with contemporary ecological activists, comprehends not only humans and animals but also plants, forests, wetlands, rivers and oceans. The land ethic thus avoids multiplying the competing moral claims of individual species but implies severe moral restraints on human exploitation of natural resources.

Imagine a situation where the needs of humans, animals, or the environment in general are in competition. You might work out a policy statement or formulate a legal case. In researching this topic you would need to examine not only the various theories of environmental ethics but also relevant history and legislation.

8. Constitutional Interpretation: Originalism v. the “Living Constitution”

One of the most important tasks of a United States Supreme Court justice is determining whether the decisions of lower courts are constitutional—whether or not they square with the legal precedents established in the U.S. Constitution. However, on today’s Supreme Court, there are real disagreements as to how justices should interpret that document.

Conservative justices—among them Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas—adhere to an interpretive model often called “originalism.” According to originalist jurists, the Constitution is a static document whose meaning has not changed since its composition over 200 years ago; it is the

job of judges, then, to discern the original intent of the Constitution's framers—often by historical or lexical analysis—and apply that meaning in deciding contemporary cases.

Opponents of originalism—among them more liberal judges like Ruth Bader Ginsberg and John Paul Stevens (retired)—contend that the Constitution is a “living” document. Insofar as the United States has changed dramatically in the two-plus centuries since its founding, judges' methods of interpreting the nation's founding document must also change and grow. The Constitution's framers owned slaves, did not allow women the right to vote, and lived in fear of a new British invasion; for proponents of the living Constitution, judges should not apply the framers' understanding of legal process to a radically different contemporary world.

Critics argue that originalists cannot effectively discern the intentions and meanings of men dead for 200 years. They further claim that originalist readings of the Constitution are deaf to various contemporary issues—especially those that directly address new technologies or constituencies that the framers did not consider part of the citizenry, *e.g.* women, African-Americans, new immigrant populations, etc. Opponents of the “living Constitution” argue that a founding document whose meaning changes with each new age—and with each new justice—has no real meaning.

Originalists and proponents of the “living Constitution” will likely clash when the Supreme Court decides the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the Democrats' far-reaching health care reform bill which passed Congress last year. The act's legal opponents—many of them, originalists—argue that the federal government may not require Americans to purchase health care insurance, as the ACA does. (See Epstein, Richard. “The Constitutional Challenges to the PPACA: Why Don't We Go Back to First Principles.” SCOTUSblog.com, 11 August 2011. Web. 8 September 2011.) The law's supporters disagree. (See Tribe, Laurence. “Responding to the Eleventh Circuit and to Richard Epstein.” SCOTUSblog.com, 16 August 2011. Web. 8 November 2011.)

Using the adversary format, imagine that the ACA case has made its way to the Supreme Court and write two briefs and a decision. Those who oppose the Act would argue against it on “originalist” grounds while its supporters argue from the standpoint of the “living constitution.” After researching and writing the two briefs, you will become the Supreme Court and decide the case, giving your reasons for accepting one side and rejecting the other.

9. Secrecy and the Funding of Scientific Research

Corporate sponsorship of research in universities has resulted in a threat to academic freedom. As Steven Rosenberg, a leading cancer researcher, tells us, “One of the most basic tenets of science is that we share information in an open way. As biotech and pharmaceutical companies have become more involved in funding research, there's been a shift toward confidentiality that is severely inhibiting the interchange of information” (*The Atlantic Monthly* online, www.theatlantic.com, March 2000).

Scientists today, whose important research is increasingly funded (directly or indirectly) by industries and corporations, are often asked to sign confidentiality or non-disclosure agreements that require them to maintain the secrecy of their research results for a given period of time, sometimes for more than six months. Companies such as pharmaceutical firms are increasingly willing to fund research undertaken by well-trained and sometimes renowned scientists in the Academy; educational institutions benefit financially from this funding. However, these corporations are not disinterested parties, since one of the chief aims of the funded research is to produce results that will benefit the companies financially (*e.g.*, research leading to the production of a new cancer-fighting drug). It is in the economic interest of such a corporation to limit public access to the research results until that company has had time to manufacture and patent a desired product. Confidentiality/non-disclosure agreements are necessary, from a company's perspective, in order to prevent competitors from gaining access to “trade secrets.”

In addition to issues of imposed *secrecy and delay*, there is the problem of the *manipulation* of research results. There have been clear cases of corporate sponsors who secretly attempt, in their own interest, to influence and control the nature of the research that they fund and the determination of the results. Many graduate students who attempt to learn objective scientific “protocols” are now learning, due to corporate sponsorship of their research, about the ways in which money influences and inhibits science.

Do certain restrictions on the public’s access to research results, such as confidentiality contracts, present dangers to academic freedom and to the public welfare in general? Is there a reasonable period of time in which secrecy can be demanded of corporately sponsored researchers? What rights, if any, should corporate sponsors have in determining the outcome of research or the dissemination of research results, especially research done in the Academy? How does corporate funding affect the credibility of researchers and the accuracy of their findings? Does the dependence of research universities on private corporate funding infringe upon the academic freedom of researchers? What kinds of university policies exist to protect the free transmission of ideas? If such policies are absent or inadequate should they be adopted? Should the federal government intervene in these arrangements, for instance, by outlawing confidentiality contracts? Should Congress regulate the merger of academic research and corporate sponsorship or should decisions be dictated only by the free market? Finally, since the federal government itself funds most basic research in this country, should the government be able to restrict research efforts or restrain publication of results if it is determined that such activity might affect *national security*?

Choose a specific aspect of this problem concerning the issue of secrecy and science. Based on your own research, analysis and evaluation, propose a policy that addresses this problem. Your Capstone team might adopt, for instance, the identity of a governmental body (e.g., The National Institutes of Health) deciding on a uniform federal policy, a private political think-tank advocating a certain policy, a committee of University scientists and administrators attempting to address the current situation, or a lobbying committee representing major corporate sponsors of academic research. Another approach would be to use the adversary format to debate a proposal for regulation. For example, two panels could present arguments for and against regulation to a Congressional committee which would then decide whether or not to recommend regulation.

10. Privacy and the “Private” Sector

Many states in the U.S. have attempted to legislate matters pertinent to privacy, and the basis for most of these efforts is the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution:

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

The questionable relevance of this Amendment in the Information Age, and the several advantages data collection offers corporate health and public safety provide what many find convincing arguments in defense of actions others see as violations of a basic right.

The legal ground for the supervision of Internet usage by corporations, universities, and secondary schools remains uncertain. While it is generally understood that employees may be monitored when using company materials, corporations collect data for other reasons as well. For example, many shopping and consumer service sites have found information about Internet use a valuable source of data for direct and indirect marketing. More insidious are such concerns as spyware, abuse of cookies, and other invisible efforts to collect information about particular users’ surfing activities and off-line interests. To a certain extent, the monitorings and data-collections by employers and retailers seem a clear violation of our culture’s attitude toward privacy; but the identification of illegal activities such as child pornography, hate speech, and fraud complicate the case for those who oppose all monitoring of computer use.

The following site offers some material that may be helpful on each of these fronts:
<https://www.privacyrights.org/fs/fs7-work.htm>.

For what might legislation regulating privacy need to account? How can individuals be protected from potentially unfair and largely invisible information gathering? For your report, review current legislation, regulations, and pending proposals, then imagine a proposed law to strengthen privacy rights in the private sector. Write a brief in favor of the proposed legislation and another against. Then produce a decision for one side or the other and justify your choice.

II. Governmental Surveillance, National Security, and the Right to Privacy

American citizens now live in a society in which they increasingly become objects of surveillance by national, state, and local government. More and more communities have equipped their police officers with cameras in police cars and with micro-cameras built into badges. Cameras have been installed on the roofs of city buildings and at traffic intersections, all for the sake of apprehending possible criminals and speeding motorists. The FBI once used a technology called “Carnivore” to monitor Internet communications and it has recently been replaced by the “NarusInsight” supercomputer system. The US’s National Security Agency – in conjunction with the secret intelligence agencies of the United Kingdom – has for some time operated a secret and global surveillance system whose codename is ECHELON. It is claimed that ECHELON can detect and analyze nearly every telephone call, fax, or e-mail transmitted from any spot on the planet.

After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, national security became such a paramount concern that the government resorted to its most sophisticated surveillance technologies in the fight against terrorism. Some viewed the uses of these technologies as an indispensable weapon; others viewed them as an intrusive menace. A month after the events of 9/11, Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act with broad bipartisan support. The law gave enforcement officers, intelligence agents, and immigration officials more powers to fight terrorism. The Act authorized the indefinite detention of immigrants and expanded the definition of “terrorism” to include domestic actions as well as those originating overseas.

Many members of Congress later confessed that, in the rush to enact what seemed to be a necessary piece of legislation, they did not study the bill properly. Editorialists and groups like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) promptly criticized the Act as being overly intrusive. In 2002, the ACLU filed a Freedom of Information Act request, petitioning the US Department of Justice to release information about the extent of domestic spying. Several legal challenges were filed against the USA PATRIOT Act and federal courts decided that several of the Act’s provisions were indeed unconstitutional.

Congress re-authorized many of the Act’s provisions in March of 2006, despite persistent concerns that some of its provisions violated civil liberties. In May of 2011, President Obama approved the four-year extension of three key provisions of the Act, including “roving wiretaps.” Supporters of the Act argue that the federal government, and especially its executive branch, must be able to act swiftly and decisively to guarantee our national security in times of crisis. Research some of the recent news stories, court cases, and debates about the federal government’s use of surveillance technologies. Explore a specific issue or question in this debate. What are some of the more controversial uses of these technologies? Do you believe that the government is justified in utilizing these surveillance methods for crime-fighting and terrorism-fighting purposes? Was President Obama justified in approving the four-year extension of three PATRIOT Act provisions? Are there specific uses of governmental surveillance that should be outlawed by Congress or deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court? In sum, how can we best achieve a proper balance between our government’s attempts to ensure security and its attempts to protect our basic civil liberties?

Your report could take the form of a proposed policy on surveillance or a court case testing the constitutionality of the PATRIOT Act’s provisions. For example you could research and

argue a current court case called *United States v. Jones* or decide whether or not a proposed law regulating government surveillance, The Geolocation and Surveillance Act, should be enacted. On these see http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/13/opinion/protect-our-right-to-anonymity.html?_r=1&scp=6&sq=privacy&st=cse.

12. Federal Funding for the Arts and Humanities

Skepticism about the value of the arts and humanities has been increasingly expressed as the economy has deteriorated. Perhaps most disconcertingly, many schools at every level have downsized or entirely eliminated arts programs over the past decade.

Such reductions in funding are troubling given the cognitive advantages those exposed to the arts and allowed practice in the development of critical thought display. The American assumption that an educated electorate is essential suggests that these recent funding gaps are potentially serious detriments to the future political health of the country. There are some who argue against funding for the arts and humanities for strictly budgetary reasons. If funding for national defense needs to be cut, for example, why not subsidies for the National Endowment for the Humanities? Furthermore, there are those who would argue that the funding of the arts and humanities involves choices about what gets funded and what does not get funded, a decision that inherently involves the government in questions about the respective merit of different artworks and projects. The government should have no role in such aesthetic decisions, according to these critics, perhaps especially when certain artworks and projects have the potential of offending certain sectors of the public (e.g., for religious or political reasons). Finally, some have argued against federal funding of certain media networks such as the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) due to partisan reasons; conservatives tend to view these networks as inherently oriented toward liberal causes.

What role should the government play in funding the arts and humanities, and how reasonable are recent budget cuts in these areas given the nation's economic health? Are such cuts simply the best choice from among a limited set of options?

Your report should offer cases for and against reductions in government funding for the arts and humanities. After elaborating arguments in support of each position, decide in favor of one of them and justify that choice. This site will likely provide a few good preliminary materials: <http://www.nhalliance.org/>.

13. Tort Reform and Medical Malpractice

American civil courts exist to allow individuals and corporations to resolve private differences. Most frequently, these differences involve one party's claim that the other party failed to live up to a legal obligation; in legal jargon, these failures are called "torts." An individual may sue in civil court for breaches of contract, for workplace discrimination, or for medical malpractice. However, some critics believe that many people abuse the civil court system by bringing frivolous lawsuits that waste the time and money of defendants and judges and serve the interests of trial lawyers. They favor wide-ranging reform of the tort system to limit the right to sue.

Many also argue that a particular type of tort reform—malpractice law reform—is one of the best ways to fix the United States' ailing health care system. Unnecessary medical lawsuits, they argue, cost doctors and hospitals billions of dollars in court, legal, and insurance fees, and these costs get passed along to consumers in the form of higher health insurance premiums. These reformers suggest a number of legal changes that would decrease costs by making it harder to bring and win a malpractice case. Among the suggested changes are shorter statutes of limitations on malpractice charges, caps on the money awarded to plaintiffs, and "loser-pay" laws that require unsuccessful litigants to pay their opponents' court fees. (On such legislation in Texas see: <http://www.economist.com/node/18712311>.)

The American Tort Reform Association offers a variety of other potential changes that they claim would save money and streamline the American justice system (see: www.atra.org).

Opponents of these reforms argue that such reforms are unnecessary and that the damage done by frivolous lawsuits is overstated. Tom Baker, professor and author of *The Medical Malpractice Myth*, calls such reform a “red herring.” He argues that unnecessary malpractice suits are rare and that the number of suits is declining when compared to actual medical errors. He claims, remarkably, that only 4 to 7 percent of patients injured by doctors bring suits. Further, he suggests that advocates significantly inflate the savings tort reform would produce. (See the *New York Times* “Prescriptions” blog for his views:

<http://prescriptions.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/31/would-tort-reform-lower-health-care-costs/>.)

A recent HBO documentary, *Hot Coffee*, argues that the civil justice system provides American citizens with a valuable way of pursuing restitution when facing off against an increasingly corporate medical industry. It further claims that justified malpractice suits allow injured patients the only viable means of seeking fair compensation for medical mistakes.

Focusing on the narrow topic of malpractice law, use the adversary format to write two briefs: one in support of legal reform, and one against it; then decide why one position is preferable to the other. As you do so, you should engage supporters’ claims that changes to malpractice law would reduce health care costs and so improve the American health care system.

14. Poverty in the United States

Poverty is a pervasive aspect of life in the United States of America. In 2010, 46.2 million individuals, or roughly 15% of all American citizens, earned incomes beneath the federally defined “poverty threshold” or “poverty line” – \$22,314 for a family of four and \$11,129 for a single adult (http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/income_wealth/cb11-157.html). Moreover, the percent of Americans living below the poverty line has increased from 13% in 2005 to 15% in 2010. The problem of poverty in America has grown worse with the recession and its aftermath.

The extent of the poverty problem in America has not escaped the attention of lawmakers and many government programs have attempted to reduce the number of people living below the poverty line. Generally speaking, these programs attempt to raise impoverished individuals and families above the poverty threshold (through welfare assistance, tax credits, employment training, and job connector programs) or to prevent people from falling into poverty (through various kinds of social insurance programs). And while these programs do a great deal to alleviate the burdens of poverty, it is also clear that more can be done, and new approaches need to be taken to combat this persistent problem in American life.

The reality of poverty in America raises many questions that can be answered in a capstone project. The status of federally funded anti-poverty programs has come under increasing fire from lawmakers concerned with short and long-term deficits. A capstone could examine the debate between those who wish to maintain or expand existing anti-poverty programs and those who wish to cut these programs in favor of new approaches. This focus might also lend itself to the adversary format. Another approach might involve an analysis and policy recommendation targeting a specific group of people. For instance, 22% of all children in the United States live below the poverty line. A capstone could examine current programs that seek to reduce the number of children living below the poverty threshold and then offer improvements. The relation between gender and poverty could also be examined. Currently, 31.6% of all female-headed households with no husband present live under the poverty line. A report might examine the programs in place that help these mothers and their children live above the poverty threshold and then go on to address the question: how might these programs be improved? But whichever approach a capstone group chooses to adopt in confronting this problem, the key question remains: what can be done to lower the number of people living below the poverty line in the United States?

15. The Keystone XL Pipeline and Energy Independence

In November 2011 the Obama Administration announced a delay in reaching a final decision on whether to approve the controversial Keystone XL pipeline until 2013, thus ensuring that the proposed project will emerge as an important point of contention during the 2012 Presidential campaign. In announcing this delay, the White House noted that concerns had been raised about the initial approval process and that more time was needed to assess the potential environmental impacts of the proposed pipeline.

If completed, the 1,700 mile pipeline would deliver acidic crude oil from tar sands in Alberta, Canada to refineries in Oklahoma and along the Gulf Coast. With an estimated construction cost of \$7 Billion, the pipeline would travel through the heart of America's Great Plains and near aquifers that supply fresh water to that part of the country.

Environmental groups have vociferously opposed the pipeline from the moment that plans to build it were announced. Much of their concern centers on the process of extracting and separating the oil from the mixture of clay, sand, water, and bitumen commonly known as "tar sands." Because the oil in these sands runs so thick, conventional drilling methods will not work. Rather, the crude must be obtained by using mining technologies and then separated from the clay and sand. According to groups such as the Sierra Club, the process leaves acres of toxic sludge near massive pits while also destroying Alberta's boreal forests, one of the western hemisphere's most important absorbers of atmospheric carbon. Furthermore, leaks and ruptures could pose dangers to water supplies and animal life anywhere along the pipeline's 1,700 mile path. All of this, environmentalists contend, comes at a time when America should be reducing its use of fossil fuels rather than going to further extremes to keep the oil flowing.

Pipeline supporters argue that Canadian oil – extracted from a friendly and politically stable ally – can help Americans achieve energy security in a rapidly changing world. As conventional wells run dry, they argue, unconventional sources such as Canada's tar sands and expanded offshore drilling will be necessary to meet future energy needs. Moreover, keeping the tar sand crude out American refineries would not slow the production of Canadian oil; it would only redirect where it might be sold. And American labor groups, who, like environmentalists, represent an important voting bloc, view the pipeline as an important source of jobs at a time when American unemployment hovers near 9%.

You might consider the pipeline debate as part of a related discussion concerning energy independence and sustainability. Are these achievable goals? A policy format Capstone could offer a set of proposals on how the Obama Administration ought to proceed. How might the pipeline help or hurt American environmental and economic interests? The adversary format can be used to pit supporters of the pipeline against its opponents.

16. Water Rights

On July 28th of 2010, the United Nations' General Assembly "explicitly recognized the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realization of all human rights."

(http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human_right_to_water.shtml) The United States was one of 43 nations that abstained from taking a position on this resolution. All the same, access to treated water is a growing concern in the country. A report submitted to Congress in April of last year warned of the effect of climate change on water basins in the Western States.

(<http://www.usbr.gov/climate/SECURE/>) The Sacramento/San Joaquin River basin, the principal source of water for San Francisco, the Colorado River basin, the principal source of water for Phoenix and Las Vegas, and the Rio Grande basin, the principal source of water for Albuquerque and El Paso – are all predicted to receive substantially less rainfall in the next 50 to 100 years. The reduction of rainfall amounts due to shifting climate patterns will affect agricultural interests in

the West. For instance, 70% of all water rights the Rio Grande in Texas are owned by agricultural interests. (<http://riogrande.tamu.edu/>) The Secure Water Act of 2009 addressed reduced water availability. How well did it do?

A separate problem involves the aging status of the nation's water treatment and distribution systems. According to a report leased by the Environmental Protection Agency in 2009: "The nation's drinking water utilities need \$334.8 billion in infrastructure investments over the next 20 years for thousands of miles of pipe as well as thousands of treatment plants, storage tanks, and other key assets to ensure the public health and economic well-being of our cities, towns, and communities."

(http://water.epa.gov/infrastructure/drinkingwater/dwns/upload/2009_03_26_needssurvey_2007_report_needssurvey_2007.pdf)

The problems posed by changing patterns of rainfall and the nation's aging water infrastructure offer many possibilities for a project report. You could examine ways to respond to the water infrastructure needs of the country at a time when the federal deficit needs to be cut. A second possibility is to examine a major watershed that is predicted to receive substantially less rainfall over the next 100 years. What can be done to insure the people in a cities such as San Francisco, Phoenix, Las Vegas, Albuquerque, and El Paso will have adequate access to treated water without undermining the agricultural interests that rely on the same watersheds? But which ever aspect of the question one adopts the main question remains: how can the United States insure the human right to clean drinking water?

17. Natural Gas, "Fracking", and American Energy Security

Long viewed as cleaner than petroleum or coal, natural gas plays an increasingly prominent role in America's energy portfolio. According to the Energy Information Administration, natural gas accounted for 25% of the country's energy use in 2010. With plentiful supplies available domestically, natural gas has also been seen as providing a path toward American energy security, one that would be less reliant on foreign oil. Although perhaps not as clean as historically portrayed, many analysts have seen natural gas as the ideal low-carbon "bridge fuel" that could be used as America moves toward more renewable energy sources in the 21st century.

In recent years, the abundance of natural gas found in buried shale in the eastern United States has led gas industry leaders to call for the expansion of hydraulic fracturing, a controversial drilling technique commonly known as "fracking." In this process, a mixture of water, sand, and chemicals is drilled vertically into the shale in order to release the trapped natural gas. Environmental groups claim that fracking leads to widespread pollution in the rural counties where the process is most commonly carried out. Contaminated water supplies left behind by the use of toxic chemicals likewise raise environmental concerns, as do the large industrial sites that pop up almost overnight in the most productive regions. Other critics argue that the process tears apart communities by forcing residents either to lease their land to energy companies or refuse and fight for environmental protection. Natural gas companies, who are enthusiastic about fracking, have argued that the negative impact of the process has been overstated. Moreover, they claim, unconventional extraction methods such as fracking are necessary for the country to meet its energy needs.

Research the process of natural gas fracking to determine whether it should be encouraged or curtailed. You might begin with recent reports issued by the Department of Energy. Does natural gas represent a clean and safe bridge to a future with more renewable energy sources? Is it a threat to the environment that requires careful regulation? How is fracking currently regulated? Should the process be banned outright?

18. National Service

Proposals to encourage national service have been much discussed in recent years. Many argue that the best way to harness the energy and idealism of young Americans and to create a greater sense of community is to promote the expectation that every young American should spend a period of their youth engaged in humanitarian or disaster relief, Peace Corps work, teaching, or contributing their time and energy in some similar capacity. During the last presidential campaign Barack Obama pledged to “set a goal for all American middle and high school students to perform 50 hours of service a year, and for all college students to perform 100 hours of service a year.” <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/07/02/obamas-remarks-on-service/> President Obama’s opponent in 2008, Senator John McCain, agreed that the government should expand programs that promote volunteerism, but insisted that national service ought never to be mandatory. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/11/AR2008091103788.html?sid=ST2008091103946> Would it in fact be desirable to impose a mandatory period of non-military national service upon all Americans of a certain age?

Is it a good idea to create federal programs or augment existing ones that encourage and/or reward “service to the nation”? If you do support the idea, then what kind of national service program does your group believe would be feasible, popular, and effective? Do you think it should be mandatory or optional? How should participants be paid or rewarded? Or, on the contrary, do you think the whole idea of national service by the young is wrong, especially if it is mandatory?

19. Immigration

The states of Arizona, South Carolina, and Alabama have recently enacted tough laws aimed at curtailing illegal immigration and deporting illegal immigrants. These laws have been challenged in court by the Justice Department. The wrangling has heightened a perennial debate in American politics about illegal immigration. The number of undocumented immigrants currently in the country is estimated at around 11 million. Some argue that these people provide an indispensable work-force for agriculture, construction, and meat-processing; others say they depress wages and working conditions for legal workers. Some say that the undocumented deserve a route to legal citizenship, others that this would be a betrayal of people who wait decades to immigrate legally. There are those who regard illegal immigrants as a tremendous drain on public monies while others see them as an economic boon. Then there are the debates over the children of the undocumented immigrants: Should they pay in-state college tuition? Should they have full access to public services? Are they, if they were born here, American citizens even if their parents are not?

What are the provisions of the new state laws? What proposals have been put forward to allow the undocumented and/or their children to become citizens? Who is for and against these laws and proposals, and why? What are the politics of the issue? Consider that most of the illegal immigrants are Spanish-speakers from Mexico or Central America; but Latinos are also the fastest growing ethnic group (and therefore voting bloc) in the U. S. Do Latinos back candidates who are liberal on immigration? Is there a division of opinion among Hispanics?

A report on this topic could take the form of a review of policy proposals and current legislation followed by a recommended policy. Another option is a debate between two parties with opposed policy views and a final verdict for one or the other.

Here are a couple of links with which to begin: in favor of a liberal reform policy: <http://www.theodora.com/debate.html> and a conservative, anti-undocumented-immigrant source: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2006/03/the-real-problem-with-immigration-and-the-real-solution>.

20. Local Food/Big Agriculture – Possibilities for sustainable farming in the 21st century

Although food prices have increased in virtually every country, Americans today enjoy the cheapest food supply in the world. Several factors contribute to the low cost of American food. Chief among them is the incredible efficiency of the contemporary American farm. A century ago, nearly 60% of all Americans lived or worked on the nation's farms. Today, the figure stands at 1% of the population. Encouraged by federal agricultural policies, farms have grown larger and more efficient so that they now resemble large-scale factories that dominate markets because they achieved economies of scale. As a result, most of the food we eat travels thousands of miles before it reaches our plate. One result of these developments is the recent emphasis on locally grown food, which many assume to be healthier to consume and more gentle on the environment.

Despite the presumed economic benefits of inexpensive food, many critics allege that the rush to consolidate farms and decrease production costs has come with an enormous social and environmental price. Towns and counties in the American Midwest, for example, have become centers of rural poverty as displaced farm workers and families can no longer afford to buy enough food – despite living amidst millions of bushels of corn, soybeans, and wheat destined to enter the global food chain. And whereas traditional agriculture drew its energy from the sun and the muscle power of humans and a few animals, its industrial counterpart depends on vast quantities of fossil fuels to produce the fertilizers, run the machines, and package and transport goods. As the environmental writer Bill McKibben notes, “Cheap and abundant fossil fuel has shaped the farming system we’ve come to think of as normal; it’s the main reason you can go to the store and get anything you want at any time and for not much money.”

For this topic, use either the policy format or the adversary format to examine the social, economic, and environmental tensions that force many of us to choose between cheap food and healthy environments. Should the government implement policies that encourage local food? Should we reconsider the system of agricultural subsidies? Is local food necessarily better than food shipped from far away? How should we settle this debate? What institutions of government and law might apply? You might explore a particular agricultural product, region, or policy of state and local governments.

21. Public Employee Trade Unions and the Right to Collective Bargaining

In 2011, two states, Wisconsin and Ohio, enacted laws limiting the collective bargaining power of trade unions representing state and local employees. In Wisconsin, the law withstood a recall campaign directed against several legislators who had voted for its passage and a judge likely to affirm its constitutionality, as well as a court challenge. In Ohio, the law was overturned in a statewide referendum.

The Wisconsin law prohibits collective bargaining over pensions and health coverage and requires that any salary increase for public workers above the level of inflation be approved by voters in a referendum. It also increases the percentage of their salaries public employees must contribute to their pensions and health care plans. However, the Wisconsin law did not affect the collective bargaining rights of police and firefighters. The Ohio law did, which appears to be one of the main reasons it was overturned by the voters.

Advocates of these laws argue that state and local governments can no longer afford to pay the heavy pension and health care obligations they have incurred under collective bargaining. They point out that these obligations are so heavy because unionized public employees pay a very small percentage of what these benefits actually cost, far less, for example, than do employees in the private sector. As a result, wages and benefits of unionized public employees currently exceed those of workers in the private sector, with most of that difference consisting of benefits. This is a burden that hard-pressed private sector workers, who make up the great majority of taxpayers, should not be forced to bear.

Opponents of these laws argue that they compromise basic rights won by workers after decades of hard struggle. They maintain that the main reason municipalities and states face insolvency is that tax laws allow the wealthy to avoid paying their fair share of the cost of government. They often add that the real goal behind the movement to deny public workers

collective bargaining rights is to destroy or at least seriously weaken the American trade union movement.

If your Capstone group chooses to investigate this problem, you should pick a specific state where the issue of public union collective bargaining is being debated or where there is a serious financial crisis (New Jersey, California, or Florida would be good candidates). If you choose the policy recommendation format, a good group identity would be an advisory body proposing a law to the governor or a legislative committee. If you choose the adversary format—which is well suited to this topic—a good option is to have a taxpayer group in favor of limiting public union collective bargaining oppose a trade union group defending that practice at a legislative hearing considering a law limiting the bargaining rights of public employees.

SUMMARY

We have presented you with a detailed syllabus designed to serve as a guideline for the Capstone Project. Remember, these pages are only a *syllabus*, nothing more. You are not expected simply to read this document and be able to go off and produce a Capstone report. Your team faculty are to serve as your ultimate directors. Each team may have slightly different expectations and may set slightly different guidelines to follow. In any case, your faculty are there to *guide* you through this venture in an attempt to make the Capstone a productive and profitable learning experience.

If you are feeling slightly overwhelmed at this point, relax. It may be helpful to take a moment to consider that the entire Capstone procedure can be condensed into four tasks:

1. State a problem.
2. Gather the pertinent facts about this problem, being careful to examine all sides of the issue.
3. Based on these facts, formulate a decision or recommendation.
4. Determine the implications of your recommendation.

CAPSTONE E-PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT, 2012

As part of the Capstone project, students need to set up a “Capstone” tab on their Digication sites and to keep a record of their work on the project. Specifically, you need to:

1. Keep a weekly log of your individual work on the project (e.g. the books and articles read, the drafts written, the group meetings attended etc.). Please write at least one paragraph per week.
2. Cut and paste all drafts that you’ve written into the “Capstone” tab of your e-portfolio (include even the drafts that don’t make the group’s final cut).
3. Include a copy of the final Capstone project on your Digication site.
4. Submit your whole e-portfolio to the team’s course site *BEFORE* your Capstone defense. (See instructions below)*

Your e-portfolio can be a good tool for keeping track of your progress on the Capstone, and it can also be useful in determining your participation in the project.

* Steps for students to submit final snapshots of their e-portfolios at the end of the semester.

- 1) Open your e-portfolio. On the top right of the page you will see a box called “portfolio tools.” Click on this pull-down menu and select “submit.”
- 2) On the left-hand side, you will see a list of courses in which you have been automatically enrolled. Choose the one that corresponds to your team. (Example: CGS Team X Spring 2011.) A green check mark will appear next to your course once you select it.
- 3) Return to the top right of the page, where you will now see a “next step” button. Click this.
- 4) On the left, you should now see a title or description of the course assignment. (entitled “End-of-year Portfolio”). Click on this, and you will then see a green check mark appear next to it.
- 5) Go back to the top right and choose “next step.”
- 6) Now on the box on the left you see "My Evidence." Click on that.
- 7) Go back to the top right and choose "Next Step."
- 8) Now on the left you should see your name with an empty box next to it and underneath it a list of all of the files in your portfolio. For the purposes of this end-of-year assignment, choose the first option, which is “all pages.” Check marks should now appear in all boxes.
- 9) Return to the top right of the screen and choose the first box, “Save and Submit.” You’re done—thanks!