

The Learning Curve

Episode 18: Designing Capstone Projects with Dr. Rosie Frasso and Dr. Katie DiSantis

[00;00;00;02 - 00;00;14;04] **Leah Miller**

Welcome to the Learning Curve, an audio series presented by the Academic Commons.

[00;00;14;06 - 00;00;27;19] **Leah Miller**

Your host for today's episode are me, Leah and Demi. Our mission is to illuminate higher education, teaching and learning through the power of shared experiences and research informed practices.

[00;00;27;21 - 00;00;36;00] **Demi Harte**

On this episode of The Learning Curve, we'll be discussing capstone projects with Doctor Rosie Frasso and Doctor Katie DeSantis.

[00;00;36;01 - 00;01;05;10] **Leah Miller**

Stick around to hear how two award winning public health educators use intentional mentoring, structured support, and high expectations to help students build real world skills and turn ambitious ideas into meaningful capstone projects that have lasting community impact. Doctor Rosemary Rosie Frasso is program director for the Master of Public Health and the Victor Heiser, MD, Professor of Population Health at Thomas Jefferson University's College of Population Health.

[00;01;05;12 - 00;01;37;25] **Leah Miller**

Doctor Frasso is recognized as an expert in mixed method study design and director of the Qualitative Institute. Doctor Frasso is the recipient of the 2024 Association for prevention, Teaching and Research F Marian Bishop Educator of the Year Award. Doctor Katie DeSantis is an associate professor of public health in JCPH. She is the lead faculty member for MPH level courses in research methods and capstone, and also teaches a course on health behavior theories.

[00;01;37;26 - 00;01;48;11] **Leah Miller**

Doctor DeSantis has received multiple awards, most recently the 2025 Outstanding Mentor Award and the 2026 Provost Award for Applied Research.

[00;01;48;14 - 00;01;49;27] **Demi Harte**

Welcome, Rosie and Katie.

[00;01;49;28 - 00;01;51;04] **Rosie Frasso**

Thanks for having us.

[00;01;51;10 - 00;01;54;25] **Demi Harte**

Could you both describe your teaching practice in three words?

[00;01;54;26 - 00;02;16;13] **Rosie Frasso**

Three words. If I give you a nickel. Let me give you four words. All right. I'll send you a nickel in the mail. So I would say I try to be very supportive, clear, nimble, but I hold the bar high, so I'm tough. And I think that's how I would describe my approach. Yeah.

[00;02;16;15 - 00;02;47;00] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah, I would also use that word supportive. It's very feedback driven. So students have lots of opportunity to take in feedback and revise and get to that high bar. And also very focused on the community. So, so thinking about how the work they're doing in the program is going to impact the community, even though it might just be a paper in a class, always bringing it back to the potential impact on community health.

[00;02;47;03 - 00;02;59;01] **Leah Miller**

That is wonderful. It sounds like you're both pretty student centered, and I love both community focused and nimble. I think that's super important.

[00;02;59;02 - 00;03;20;14] **Leah Miller**

So this next section we're kind of going to move into like the capstone and developing a capstone project. So could you walk us through the development process of the capstone that you use including goals intentions. And we'll start there.

[00;03;20;16 - 00;03;47;24] **Rosie Frasso**

Sure. I mean, our capstone projects take a few forms. Most of them are research, but not all. We've had students do evaluations or policy analyzes. We've even had a student write a children's book about body positivity. So we try to keep the capstone options pretty open and creative. So in my first meeting with students about their capstone, I get to know them and try to figure out what their career goals are.

[00;03;47;25 - 00;04;14;01] **Rosie Frasso**

So what do you want to do with this degree and how can we position this time we have together in scholarship to better help you achieve that academic and professional goal. So if a student is planning to do a PhD, then we want to make sure their capstone sets them up in a way that allows them to get off, sort of jump off the the launch pad in that regard.

[00;04;14;02 - 00;04;35;06] **Rosie Frasso**

If they're a medical student and they're applying to residency, we want to make sure their capstone is at the intersection of public health and the field they hope to go into for residency. So ophthalmology or emergency medicine, if they're hoping to work in the community, we want them to get some more opportunities to practice those skills.

[00;04;35;06 - 00;05;00;02] **Rosie Frasso**

So we want that project to be related to their goals, their professional goals and community driven. I'm a real proponent of capstones not being a waste of anyone's time. Faculty put a lot of time into supporting learners, so we want to make sure that the learners get a lot out of it. But there's also value to someone that the work ends up in someone's hands that can be useful.

[00;05;00;02 - 00;05;15;26] **Rosie Frasso**

So if students are putting all that effort in, you know, we want to make sure that it ends up in the peer review literature or it ends up in the community's hands so they can use it as a guide or a resource. So we really try hard to make that happen. Doesn't happen 100% of the time, but it is.

[00;05;15;28 - 00;05;18;10] **Rosie Frasso**

It is definitely a priority for us.

[00;05;18;11 - 00;05;24;14] **Leah Miller**

Katie, do you have anything to add? Because I do have kind of a follow up question. Unless?

[00;05;24;17 - 00;06;00;02] **Katie DiSantis**

Not, not too much to add. I think the other thing we do is, you know, really connect early on in the process, the the student to someone with content knowledge or an expert on, on the topic. And that really helps to get to what Rosie was saying, something, some project that that holds meaning for the field. It allows the student to very quickly become familiar with where the gaps are in the research, and then align that with their goals with the constraints that a capstone holds.

[00;06;00;03 - 00;06;09;18] **Katie DiSantis**

Given the time that you have to complete it, and then they're more quickly able to figure out what their research question will be.

[00;06;09;21 - 00;06;28;29] **Rosie Frasso**

I guess I would add to that too, is it takes a village. So as Katie pointed out, we try to hook them up with content experts, but we also lean heavy on our friends in the library and really in the writing center. And, you know, it's it's a community that kind of wraps around a student to produce something of quality.

[00;06;28;29 - 00;06;40;21] **Rosie Frasso**

And, you know, we really couldn't do it in the absence of support from from the writing center in the library. We couldn't do it. Well, we could do it, but we couldn't do it as well. Yeah, okay.

[00;06;40;26 - 00;07;08;15] **Leah Miller**

I'm glad you mentioned that. I think we actually got kind of your names or initially Collins name from our librarians, about just great people in the College of Population Health to talk to about these projects. So my follow up question is, actually, were there any hurdles or barriers to overcome to kind of develop the capstone project into the success it is today?

[00;07;08;15 - 00;07;22;19] **Leah Miller**

And I know we just mentioned, like the library is and the writing center are huge supports, but just kind of as it was getting started, as you were adding it to the program, were there any hurdles or barriers to get it, what it looks like today?

[00;07;22;22 - 00;07;42;10] **Rosie Frasso**

Yeah, there's one for sure. So when I came on board here, students took a capstone class and then they were left to finish their capstone outside of the context of a course. So they would start it off with, with faculty and then it would be, okay, finish it, we'll check in. And so there was a little bit of loss to follow up there.

[00;07;42;10 - 00;08;10;09] **Rosie Frasso**

So we reframed the approach where it's now a two course requirement. And you're with a faculty member as you design and begin that process. And if you need IRB approval and I guess big shout out to the IRB because a lot of these projects get IRB approval and they're very patient with us. You're in a class there. And then when you're ready to bring your project to fruition, maybe it's the next term or one term away.

[00;08;10;12 - 00;08;39;13] **Rosie Frasso**

There's another class, so there's steady check in on progress, and no one runs afloat without their cap being in a capstone. Sort of course, that allows us to touch base with the learner and make sure they're making steady progress. And that was definitely a pivot, because in other programs, you know, it's often like more like a dissertation where you get launched and then, you know, you're you're flying solo pretty much.

[00;08;39;14 - 00;08;59;13] **Rosie Frasso**

And it's really, you know, some people never finish their PhD for this very reason. But a master's degree is different, like a almost a master's degree doesn't count for anything. So we really want to make sure learners have support through fruition. And that was a change in the way the program was run when I came on board.

[00;08;59;15 - 00;09;29;09] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah. And I would just add that there is even a different set of support for students that are doing it in an accelerated fashion. So, you know, for those students who are on a particularly tight timeline, we have set them up to perform a systematic review. And that course for the accelerated students is run in a way that leads to their success.

[00;09;29;09 - 00;09;46;13] **Katie DiSantis**

So I think also because we have students who are on a number of different pathways who have different, you know, career goals that that there's some tailoring that gets done to, to meet the students needs while they're here.

[00;09;46;19 - 00;09;58;28] **Demi Harte**

I would love to talk a little bit more about the two semester structure. So how does that type of structure help students show mastery of competencies rather than simply completing a project?

[00;09;59;03 - 00;10;23;00] **Rosie Frasso**

Oh, because we we're we're in it with them and we're checking on those competencies as we as we go through. So because the MPH here at Jefferson is accredited and it's a competency based curriculum, students have to identify competency goals when they begin their capstone. And then we check in on the acquisition of those competencies throughout the process.

[00;10;23;00 - 00;10;45;03] **Rosie Frasso**

And then at the at the end, we evaluate them based on that competency achievement. So I think the two semester piece of it is, you know, makes that easier, makes sort of affirmation a confirming competency acquisition a little bit easier because they're not running, you know, you're not having to chase them down. There's a course they're acquired to take it.

[00;10;45;03 - 00;11;09;08] **Rosie Frasso**

I will say that it's not credit bearing. So the second term of the capstone, you're graded and it goes on to your transcript. But the way, you know, the way sort of credits are distributed, it was impossible to split the three credits across two courses because that would impact students ability to get scholarships and loans. So we had to leave.

[00;11;09;09 - 00;11;23;29] **Rosie Frasso**

We had a front load the credits, but they have to finish to graduate. So it's a requirement of graduation to complete that second course. And it just creates those touchpoints that keep the project moving.

[00;11;24;01 - 00;11;56;22] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah. Now I'll just add that, you know, in every course that the students take, the competencies are listed, you know, what will this course address and which assignments align with with what competencies. But the process of the students doing that self-selection in capstone, I think, for some students, yields this sort of moment where they really make the connection between, you know, what is it that they're learning in the program, what are they trying to solidify what's most important to their career journey?

[00;11;56;22 - 00;12;21;15] **Katie DiSantis**

So that process, I think, is really helpful for students to better understand and reflect on everything that they've learned, especially because graduate students today, you know, take a lot of courses and it's a bit of a wild ride. So it does allow them to reflect as they go into the the most important course in their masters.

[00;12;21;17 - 00;12;22;28] **Leah Miller**

I really appreciate.

[00;12;22;28 - 00;12;50;13] **Leah Miller**

The amount of scaffolding and student support that you have just built into this capstone project. I'm sure the students appreciate it, and I'm sure that's part of why you see such wonderful projects come out of this. If there's a way to kind of summarize the capstone a little bit, what would you say are the most important elements of a successful capstone project or if it varies?

[00;12;50;19 - 00;13;12;05] **Rosie Frasso**

Yeah, it definitely varies and it depends on the learner and their goals. But I would say in the context of research having a clear, feasible question, I mean, students come in with a very often very ambitious ideas about what they can do with their capstone. And my favorite story I often tell is a student, the student, for the first time.

[00;13;12;05 - 00;13;34;22] **Rosie Frasso**

She said, I know exactly what I want to do. I want to deal with Aids in Africa. I'm like, that's a continent. And this is, you know, you have \$100 and two terms. So it's unlikely with our budget, your time, that we're going to solve that problem. But what contribution can you make to a topic that matters to you?

[00;13;34;22 - 00;13;51;14] **Rosie Frasso**

So it has to be a feasible project. And even our students that are physicians that, you know, that that are quite seasoned and there are many, you know, it needs to be a project that's feasible in the time that they have, because the goal is learning how to do it from soup to nuts, not getting the Nobel Prize.

[00;13;51;14 - 00;14;15;07] **Rosie Frasso**

So I think I want them to walk away with knowing how to carry something out and do it well. So feasibility in sort of the practical way allows them to focus on learning the steps and accomplishing their goals and acquiring those competencies. But when things are not feasible, then it becomes untenable.

[00;14;15;09 - 00;14;38;10] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah. I mean, I was definitely going to say the question is the most important component because a student could do a tremendous job, you know, in the in the steps it takes in the research process. But if the core question isn't particularly relevant or or feasible, it it creates problems along the way. So the question is the most important component.

[00;14;38;10 - 00;15;07;22] **Katie DiSantis**

And from there, you know, we emphasize a lot the, the the act of writing and learning what your writing style is and adjusting your writing style to meet the requirements that we have in the MPH program, but also what the field would expect, especially if you're going to publish. So we spent a lot of time on writing, you know, as a feature of the project and ensuring that gets to a high level.

[00;15;07;22 - 00;15;43;12] **Katie DiSantis**

I think the other thing that happens in the it's not necessarily a component of the final project, but an amazing thing in public health, as both an instructor and a student is that it's a field that allows you to study a wide variety of, of issues that are out there. And so in the process, because we're in class together and sharing, and you're doing mini presentations along the way to your peers and your instructor, we learn a lot about different topics.

[00;15;43;12 - 00;16;16;07] **Katie DiSantis**

So that kind of growth that occurs when you start to understand, you know, you might be focused on one population and you're studying this aspect of the population, but your peers studying this, you get a more comprehensive picture just from that, that sharing. So I think the the act of doing presentations is not only a benefit for the student as a component, they certainly get very good at communicating to different audiences, but we learn a lot from each other in the process.

[00;16;16;07 - 00;16;32;29] **Katie DiSantis**

And I say every year that, you know, I think that it's the year that I, I'm not going to see a new topic, something, you know, something I've never seen before. But every year there's one that I'm like, oh, I didn't know that was a health problem, or I didn't know for that population that was a health problem.

[00;16;33;01 - 00;16;37;21] **Rosie Frasso**

Yeah. That's true. I mean, this last batch was exceptional.

[00;16;37;22 - 00;16;38;10] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah.

[00;16;38;15 - 00;17;01;20] **Rosie Frasso**

Really was the other thing that we added to the capstone a couple of years ago, maybe inspired by misinformation and issues around communicating health information, is that every student has to summarize their capstone in lay terms. So they write a lay summary of their capstone. I don't want anybody walking out of here that can't communicate to a lay audience.

[00;17;01;22 - 00;17;20;04] **Rosie Frasso**

It really haunts me that we don't do that well in science. And so the way I frame it when I ask them to do it is to have someone in mind, like, have a third grade cousin in mind, or your grandmother who didn't had a very different professional journey or none, and explain your capstone to them.

[00;17;20;04 - 00;17;45;02] **Rosie Frasso**

And in that, in that lay summary and students really struggle with it. I reject those so often I'm like, give that another run. Like, this is all fancy terminology. You wrote this for scientists, but you're going to have to do this work on the ground respectfully in communities, and you have to speak the language of communities and translate your work into that space.

[00;17;45;03 - 00;18;03;12] **Rosie Frasso**

And I think that's a special piece of our capstone. I mean, they do a presentation, they do a poster, they're prepared for a scientific meeting, and many go on to present their work in scientific meetings, and we're really proud of that. But I think the that lay summary is important.

[00;18;03;14 - 00;18;32;28] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah. And I think definitely this year it was emphasized, although it's probably been emphasized previously having that part of the oral presentation. They have a slide that's titled Public Health Impact. And I think it's very helpful for the students after having their nose down, focused on the work for, you know, 6 or 9 month period to sort of put their head back up and realize, like what?

[00;18;33;04 - 00;18;47;02] **Katie DiSantis**

You know, why is it that I did this? Because we were really trying to emphasize in public health research that it's it's never just for knowledge creation. It should always have some impact on real people.

[00;18;47;05 - 00;19;08;24] **Demi Harte**

No, I love that. I think that's so important to be able to communicate with, you know, a lot of people, because I feel like a lot of times, you know, you're reading a paper or some research and the terminology is, you know, a little too high and not really understanding what's going on. You just skip it. So, you know, that's that's a really great skill that you're giving these students to be able to do that.

[00;19;08;24 - 00;19;20;15] **Demi Harte**

So I do want to talk a little bit more about these valuable skills that these students will get from these capstones. What would you say are the skills that grow the most during these capstone projects?

[00;19;20;19 - 00;19;48;27] **Rosie Frasso**

I think they learn how to identify and summarize the literature. So building an argument is a piece that I think is really important. You have to build a justification for your project. And I think that, you know, that comes from pulling the literature together to make that argument. And how to construct an argument is an important skill. And I think that, you know, their capstone has to pass the so what test.

[00;19;48;27 - 00;20;10;10] **Rosie Frasso**

I got to want to read this and say, like so what? You know, they need to convince me that this matters. And I think that's a place where I really push hard on learners to, to construct that argument well, and I think by the time, you know, by the time we're done with them, they're good at that and they're good at identifying those sources to build that argument.

[00;20;10;12 - 00;20;40;26] **Rosie Frasso**

You know, I think writing the results and the discussion and sort of distinguishing between the difference between the results and the discussion, I think that's a tough thing for new writers, new academic writers to do. They tend to want to discuss the results in the results section of a paper. And that's something that, you know, I often send them back to the literature to, like, read a paper and sort of read it with an idea of focusing on its construction and not its delivery.

[00;20;40;26 - 00;20;50;10] **Rosie Frasso**

And sort of I think they are better consumers of the literature once they've gone through the capstone process, because they understand how the sausage is made.

[00;20;50;12 - 00;21;23;23] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah, I agree with everything, Rosie said. I'm trying to think if I have anything to add. I guess the other piece of gross that you see is just their, their confidence in in feeling like they are an expert in that topic area that they've chosen for their capstone. The growth from the early presentations in the first part of capstone to that final presentation is, you know, pretty profound.

[00;21;23;23 - 00;21;49;29] **Katie DiSantis**

And you can tell that the students feel like they have fully researched a topic in a way that they were able to they're confident in their research question. And then in presenting the work that they did in the methods and, and the results. So just an overall growth in confidence that they can become an expert in an area that they're they're interested in.

[00;21;50;02 - 00;21;57;00] **Rosie Frasso**

And their podium presentations, you know, like getting that presentation skills down. You know, they do a lot of practice.

[00;21;57;03 - 00;22;10;04] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah, we have them do a five minute talk, which is extremely challenging, but is something that's becoming very popular at professional meetings. And so it's a great skill for them to learn.

[00;22;10;07 - 00;22;45;20] **Leah Miller**

That's wonderful. The support and the student centeredness is so clear in everything that you do. We've focused a little bit on the students or we've primarily focused on the students, the project, kind of how it all works, how the sausage gets made, as you said. This next question is kind of a general, what would you love for other faculty to understand about capstone work, about the value of capstone work, or any like misconceptions you'd like to correct?

[00;22;45;23 - 00;23;08;05] **Rosie Frasso**

I think that it shouldn't be done to sit in a drawer, like I think that it has to be authentic and have value. Not that all of ours do, I mean, but the goal is always that that it'll be a project that contributes to understanding or has some utility in the community or in the patient population or some it has.

[00;23;08;12 - 00;23;34;20] **Rosie Frasso**

When it's useful, the motivation is better. And I guess you have to be tough. Like there are some students that you know, don't finish in the two terms and they have to take it in progress because we're not going to let them move forward if we're not satisfied with the product. And I think there are some students that need a little more time and a little more support, but they're often surprised that there's a time in which that they can't move forward, you know?

[00;23;34;21 - 00;24;03;00] **Rosie Frasso**

And so we're really clear up front, like, my name is on this, Katie's names on it, like our names are on these and they're out there in public spaces. So, you know, we're really adamant about the quality. And so I think that's important for other faculty to know that you have to be prepared. If you're going to do it well, you have to be prepared for some people that don't meet the bar, and you're going to have to really figure out how to create more time so they can get to the bar and not just lower the bar.

[00;24;03;01 - 00;24;21;16] **Rosie Frasso**

And I think that's an important thing to consider if you're going to do it with in an authentic way. It also used to be pass fail on our program and we made it graded. We give students feedback along the way, and if they don't interpret, if they don't address that feedback and, you know, create, they can create a perfect paper.

[00;24;21;16 - 00;24;36;08] **Rosie Frasso**

If they're if they listen to the time that if they listen to the feedback we give them and weave it all in, then the odds of succeeding are exceedingly, well, good, because we don't stink at this, so we're giving them feedback that's going to help them write a really strong paper.

[00;24;36;08 - 00;24;53;17] **Demi Harte**

I think having setting that bar high is so important just for students to make sure, you know, you want them to do the best they can do. So we are wrapping things up and if possible, what 1 to 2 pieces of advice would you give to educators who are curious about implementing capstone projects into their courses?

[00;24;53;18 - 00;25;17;25] **Rosie Frasso**

Well, it's not course driven, right? It's curricula driven. So it's like taking the whole program and wrapping it up and sort of leaning into everything. You learn to build this final project. So I think if folks are considering it, they have to really look across their curriculum to make sure that the curriculum is giving the learners the skills they need to do the thing that you're expecting them to do.

[00;25;17;25 - 00;25;45;12] **Rosie Frasso**

So there has to be you have to be able to pull those threads from the coursework to that capstone in a pretty clear way, and make sure that the capstone is not just a box you check, but it is designed with an eye towards what where the learner wants to go and what will benefit them professionally. Because, you know, master's degrees aren't cheap and we want to set students up for success in the job market or in the next leg of their training.

[00;25;45;12 - 00;25;53;17] **Rosie Frasso**

So I think it has to really be informed and reflect the skills that are taught across the curriculum.

[00;25;53;18 - 00;26;22;05] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah, and I think just going back to the idea that, you know, it's this culminating project that's coming out of a master's level curriculum, which is pretty wide, that there should be some options. So I think it can be tempting to say that, you know, our capstone is this one thing. So it's, you know, we only do research projects and you have to collect primary data or you might create these narrow set of requirements.

[00;26;22;05 - 00;26;55;06] **Katie DiSantis**

But most of the time the students will have a variety of questions and finding projects that that will answer those questions. And then also served that student after graduation. Because if they're going to be more in our field, you know, a public health practitioner, and they're going to be working at a nonprofit, being able to do something around program evaluation needs, assessments that might program design, that might prove more meaningful than a traditional research project.

[00;26;55;06 - 00;27;13;14] **Katie DiSantis**

So designing a capstone that has some options that I'll pull from the curriculum, I think, leads to student success and to things that actually become products they can use when they're interviewing, when they're going out to start their career.

[00;27;13;14 - 00;27;26;07] **Leah Miller**

I think. There's are great pieces of advice, and thank you for correcting our understanding and reminding us that it's a curriculum capstone. It's not a course capstone.

[00;27;26;07 - 00;27;41;00] **Leah Miller**

So that actually brings us to the end of our interview for today. Rosie and Katie, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to be here and share your knowledge and expertise with us. We really appreciate it.

[00;27;41;07 - 00;27;42;21] **Rosie Frasso**

Thanks for including us.

[00;27;42;22 - 00;27;46;14] **Katie DiSantis**

Yeah. Thank you.

[00;27;46;16 - 00;27;59;16] **Jacob Santos**

Thank you for joining us this month on The Learning Curve. You can find more information and resources related to this episode at academiccommons.jefferson.edu/thelearningcurve

[00;27;59;18 - 00;28;11;08] **Jacob Santos**

and we hope to see you at some upcoming Academic Commons workshops. If you would like to be featured on a future episode of The Learning Curve. Please contact us using the button on our show page. Thanks for tuning in!