



BUILDING THE CAPSTONE



By David Glaser

The end products come with titles such as, “Parallels in the Metamorphoses of Apuleius” and a study in “Ternary Process Efficiency.” Dig below the surface, however, and you’ll find much more than just a brain-twisting research project. It’s an exercise designed to help students learn as much about themselves as their chosen topic.

"It's the first time they haven't been told, 'Here's what to do and you will succeed.' That's a big change. There is no grade to chase. It's a purely academic pursuit for them," says Library Director Christina Pommer, who helps coordinate the Capstone program at Saint Stephen's.

Now in its fourth year, with seniors Sidney Knowles (economics) and Matthew Thomas (classics) currently hard at work on their projects, the program combines a love of learning with important questions that SSES students will need to answer affirmatively as they pursue their college and professional careers.

Can I be effective working independently as well as collaboratively? Can I manage my time properly to get the job done? Can I think of new and creative solutions to problems? Can I uncover the right resources to help me succeed?

Capstone is an enhanced independent study that has been offered annually to two students at SSES since 2016. The process is fairly simple. Candidates are identified near the end of their junior year, when they have typically taken every class offered at the school in a particular discipline. The students put forth a proposal for a project that will help them expand their knowledge in this area of interest. A current faculty member serves as mentor and a relationship with an outside mentor is also created.

last year of a film study class co-taught with English Department Chair Jamie Moore and mentorship from Del Jacobs, Director of Film and Media Studies at State College of Florida.

"It was definitely valuable. It gave me a chance to combine two of my interests (education and film) and pursue them beyond what the classroom offered. It was good practice for managing my time and motivating myself to stay on top of things, which has been helpful in handling my college workload," says Valadie, now a freshman at Williams College. "It was a collaborative effort, and working as a team on a long-term project was a great experience. I'm writing film reviews for my college's student newspaper now, so all the time I spent discussing and thinking about movies last year is definitely a useful background to have."

According to SSES Department of Modern and Classical Languages Chair Geoff Revard, who has already served as a faculty mentor for three Capstone students, the opportunity for the students to discover independence through the pursuit of their project is a valuable byproduct of the process. It gives them a chance to be responsible – at least partially – for their own learning, on their own terms.

It also offers the faculty mentor a chance to stretch his or her own academic muscles.

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How the project unfolds over the next school year depends on the student's individual passion and resourcefulness.

"They create their curriculum and there has to be a component outside school. They check in, but there is no requirement about how often to meet. We assume they will do what's expected," Pommer says. "We have two students each year so they can provide support for each other during the process. They take their five core courses and then use 6th/7th periods for Capstone. That's the ideal."

The program itself was born out of a desire to offer similar growth opportunities on the academic side to those already provided for years to students who leave campus early to pursue individual athletic training at IMG Academy and other local sports facilities.

Capstone launched in 2016 with seniors Zack Gromko (current MIT student) and Ethan Leuchter (Denison). They set the early standard with projects in very different disciplines: Gromko in science with mentorship from nanotechnology researcher Josh Jackman, and Leuchter in classics with Dr. David Rohrbacher, Professor of Classics, Humanities, Medieval and Renaissance studies at New College of Florida.

Projects that followed have included Julia Woodson's brain blog and hands-on research (2017) mentored by Dr. Edwin Weeber, Chief Scientific Officer of the USF Health Byrd Alzheimer's Institute; MaryAnn Placheril's study of Apuleius (2017) with USF Associate Professor of Classics Eleni Manolaraki, and Luke Valadie's creation

"These are kids that are going to go on and do PhDs, so you have to keep up with them. That's not always easy," Revard says, chuckling. "But watching them reach and accomplish is really the essence of why I ended up teaching. I know it sounds hokey, but it's true. That's the reward."

The culmination of each student's project is an oral presentation in May to Head of School Dr. Jan Pullen, administration members, and student peers. This is another valuable experience. Part of the overall measure of a student's success is his or her ability to present sometimes very complex academic information to a lay audience.

Those presentations also have the potential to reach outside the walls of Saint Stephen's. Placheril's research resulted in a paper that she submitted as an abstract, was eventually accepted, and presented at the 2017 national gathering of the Classical Association of New England.

"We always have good students, but the big thing is their passion about the topic. It's something they live and breathe," Pommer says. "It can be a life-changing opportunity for the right student. They love learning about the subject – not just learning, but creating something that is new."

"The students I've worked with have, in their own way, told me, 'Thank you for your belief in me and your trust in me; for believing I could do this when I'm not sure I would have believed in myself,'" Revard added.