



NHS Doctoral Capstone Project Handbook

for DNP, DrPH, and DHA
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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the DNP, DrPH, DHA, Project Manual

This manual supports learners and faculty at Capella University in understanding the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), Doctor of Public Health (DrPH), and Doctor of Healthcare Administration (DHA) project process. It provides an overview of the process and outlines milestones by which learners fulfill the academic and administrative requirements for their doctoral degree at Capella University. The manual also describes in broad terms the roles and responsibilities of the learner, the mentor, the project committee members, and the university support staff.

Minimum Expectations for the Doctoral Capstone Courseroom and Academic Standing

To meet minimum expectations to earn a grade of Satisfactory (“S”) in the Doctoral Capstone course, learners:

- Submit Plan of Action Week 1.
- Make reasonable progress toward identified goals in Plan of Action. These goals should include demonstrated progress toward milestone completion.
- If challenges arise, submit a revised Plan of Action to mentor (by Week 7).
- Maintain weekly communication with mentor regarding progress.
- Submit Log for midterm review by mentor (by Week 5).
- Participate in at least one conference call if requested/required by mentor.
- Submit completed Plan of Action and final log (validated by preceptor if approved; see later in this manual under “Preceptor Roles and Responsibilities”).

Failure to complete these minimum expectations may result in a grade of Not Satisfactory (“NS”) for the Doctoral Capstone course. Learners who receive an NS grade will receive an academic standing warning notification. Learners who receive a second consecutive NS grade will be notified that they will be withdrawn due to failure to maintain satisfactory academic standing and will be given the option to appeal. Per university policy [3.01.04 Academic Standing](#), doctoral learners who have been administratively withdrawn from the university as a result of failing to meet program-specific requirements are not eligible for readmission to that program or for admission to any doctoral program at Capella University. Learners who have their appeal granted will be allowed to register for one additional quarter. Learners who receive an NS grade in the third consecutive quarter will be administratively withdrawn with no additional options for appeal. Learners who earn an S grade at any point in this process will return to good academic standing.

SECTION 1. OVERVIEW OF THE DNP, DRPH, AND DHA CAPSTONE PROJECT & PRACTICE REQUIREMENTS

The Capella School of Nursing and Health Sciences (SoNHS) doctoral education is distinguished by the completion of a capstone project that demonstrates synthesis of a learner's work and lays the groundwork for future scholarship. The SoNHS capstone project includes an oral presentation and a finished article manuscript, which might be suitable for publication in a journal.

Capella's SoNHS doctoral programs also provide rich and varied opportunities for practice experiences aimed at helping graduates achieve essential and specialty competencies upon completion of the program. To achieve the SoNHS Doctoral competencies, learners are required to complete a minimum number of hours of practice (number varies by program). Learners and their mentors will develop a plan including personal outcomes and explanations of how learners' experiences meet the SoNHS doctoral program outcomes and essentials.

Doctoral Capstone Courseroom

One of the most commonly cited benefits of the Doctoral Capstone courseroom is the networking and sense of academic community it builds among learners. Doctoral Capstone learners will move to a courseroom in which the assigned mentor is the courseroom instructor. Learners use the Doctoral Capstone courseroom as the main point of contact with the mentor and peers. Learners are strongly encouraged to participate in the network-building the courseroom provides.

Doctoral Capstone Milestones

Every Doctoral Capstone project is unique, but the process moves through a similar sequence of steps for all learners. Capella refers to these steps as milestones. (See Table 1.) Progress in the Doctoral Capstone project is measured by progress through the milestones. In the Doctoral Capstone courseroom, each milestone is associated with at least one specific assignment.

The time required to complete each Doctoral Capstone project milestone varies because learners progress at different rates. The speed of progress depends on the nature of the project plan and how quickly, carefully, and effectively the learner applies competencies.

Table 1. The Five Project Milestones

Milestone	Description
1	Mentor and Program/Specialization Approval of Proposed Doctoral Capstone Project and Deliverable
2	Mentor and School Approval of Doctoral Capstone Proposal/Research Plan
3	Ethics Review and IRB Screening
4	Mentor and Committee Approval of Doctoral Capstone
5	School Approval of Doctoral Capstone

Saving Your Work

Doctoral Capstone learners must save drafts, assignments, and other project materials to verify successful completion of Doctoral Capstone milestones.

The Doctoral Capstone courseroom is reset every quarter. This reset means all information that Doctoral Capstone learners have submitted through the courseroom will be removed at the end of the quarter. Thus, to maintain a record of progress throughout the Doctoral Capstone milestones, Doctoral Capstone learners must save copies of all written work outside the courseroom.

Communication within the Courseroom

Although communication may occur between learners and mentors in several places, primary interaction will occur through course messages and Capella email. However, within the milestone Discussion and Assignment areas, mentors may place additional feedback that learners need to address. **Learners are expected to check into the course once a week (every seven days) in the appropriate milestone area.**

Also, it is important to remember that mentors, Doctoral Capstone project committee members, and school-level reviewers have 10 business days to respond to a submission. In the meantime, learner should begin work on the next milestone so as to not delay progress.

To ensure feedback by the end of the quarter, submissions must be received no later than Friday of **Week 9 at 5:00 PM CST.**

SECTION 2. UNDERSTANDING THE CAPSTONE PROJECT

What Is the Doctoral Capstone Project?

A hallmark of a School of Nursing and Health Sciences doctoral graduate is the completion of a final Capstone project. The aim is to develop a practice change project that requires the appraisal, translation, and application of evidence to practice. Learners investigate a clinical, organizational, or process question—a PICO (T) question—related to an area of nursing practice, the healthcare delivery system, or a public health policy issue. Each project must demonstrate the use of evidence to improve outcomes or resolve a gap.

“Rather than a knowledge-generating research effort, the learner in a practice-focused program generally carries out a practice application-oriented ‘final Capstone Project,’ which is an integral part of the integrative practice experience” (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2006, p. 3).

Doctoral Capstone Project Characteristics

A SoNHS Capstone project must:

- a. Focus on a change or changes that positively impact(s) health care/public health outcomes.
- b. Be original.
- c. Be amenable to an evidence-based study.
- d. Transform a macro- or microsystem to improve health care and public health outcomes.
- e. Demonstrate implementation in the appropriate arena or area of practice.
- f. Address six quality improvement areas:
 - Safety
 - Effectiveness
 - Patient, client, or community centeredness
 - Timeliness
 - Efficiency
 - Equitability
- g. Incorporate technology as appropriate.
- h. Include a plan for sustainability (i.e., take into account financial, systems, or political realities, not only theoretical abstractions).
- i. Include an evaluation of processes and/or outcomes (formative or summative).
 - All SoNHS doctoral projects should be designed so that processes and/or outcomes will be evaluated to guide practice and policy.
 - Real-world application is as important in guiding practice as statistical significance is in evaluating research.
- j. Provide a foundation for future practice scholarship through the development of a manuscript suitable for (but not dependent on) journal submission.

The final Doctoral Capstone project will culminate in a manuscript as it is referred to in the Doctoral Capstone courseroom.

Learners will use the [Standards for Quality Improvement Reporting Excellence](#) (SQUIRE) guidelines to develop the content for the final project manuscript. They provide guidance on how to capture project details in a narrative.

Acceptable Doctoral Capstone Projects

Types of Doctoral Capstone projects vary and build upon the leadership focus of Capella SoNHS Doctoral programs. Learners begin the Doctoral Capstone project with the development of a plan. Learners select and defend a topic, question, design, and methodology. Selection of an appropriate topic, question, design, and method must be defensible on an academic, objective level rather than personal, subjective level. **All Capstone projects have a methodology, are implemented, and are evaluated.** Examples of acceptable projects follow:

- Translate research into practice.
- Create a quality improvement project (care processes, patient outcomes).
- Implement and evaluate evidence-based practice guidelines.
- Analyze policy: Develop, implement, evaluate, or revise policy.
- Design and use databases to retrieve information for decision making, planning, evaluation.
- Conduct financial analyses to compare care models and potential cost savings.
- Implement and evaluate innovative uses of technology to enhance/evaluate care.
- Design and evaluate new models of care, health care administration, or public health applications.
- Design and evaluate programs directly related to health care and public health.
- Provide leadership of interprofessional or intraprofessional collaborative projects to implement policy, evaluate care models, transitions, etc.
- Collaborate with stakeholders to answer clinical questions.
- Collaborate on legislative change using evidence.
- Work with lay or professional coalitions to develop, implement, or evaluate health programs (such as health promotion and disease prevention programs for vulnerable patients, groups, or communities).

Unacceptable Doctoral Capstone Projects

- Nursing education projects (including simulation and clinical practice).
- Development of a website or smartphone/iPad app, or teaching/learning (curriculum) as the sole purpose of the project.
- Projects that cannot be measured or evaluated.

Examples of Practice Inquiry Areas

According to Magyary, Whitney, and Brown (2006), the following are some inquiry areas:

- Who does/does not have access to nursing services and health care programs, and why?

- How are nursing, health care, and public health programs being delivered in a timely and cost-effective way?
- What types of clinical, demographic, process, and outcome variable data need to be systematically collected and analyzed in order to monitor and evaluate clinical, programmatic, or policy patterns and practices over time and to monitor variance in health care or public health services and outcomes that account for health disparity across subpopulations?
- How can clinical or programmatic epidemiological benchmark comparison studies yield viable quality-improvement information?
- What system, structural, and technological changes are necessary to capture relevant and critical data?
- What types of evidence-based prevention and treatment nursing or public health clinical guidelines are/are not implemented?
- What are the issues and barriers that prevent implementation of evidence-based guidelines?
- What are successful approaches for implementing and evaluating evidence-based nursing clinical guidelines to influence clinical, administrative, program, or policy processes and outcomes?
- Who is most/least likely to benefit from certain types of nursing, health care, or public health services and programs (differential effects)?
- What types of moderating and mediating variables are linked to intervention processes and outcomes?
- How are interventions appropriately modified for subpopulations?
- How are evidence-based guidelines modified to be culturally relevant for diverse populations?
- What types of relational partnerships with patients, families, and communities are linked to health outcomes?
- How are individuals, families, and populations motivated to engage in intergenerational patterns of healthy lifestyles?
- What types of organizational structures, financial incentives, and health care policies positively or negatively impact how nursing, health care, or public health practice and programs are delivered?

Examples of Doctoral Capstone Projects

- [Vanderbilt University School of Nursing](#)
- [Sigma Theta Tau International Virginia Henderson Global e-Repository](#) (use the search bar to visit different programs)

Examples of Theoretical Frameworks for use in SONHS Doctoral Capstone projects

A variety of theories and perspectives are appropriate as a framework for SoNHS Doctoral Capstone projects. Popular theories include, but are not limited to:

- social learning theory
- social development theory

- social cognition
- theories of reasoned action and planned behavior
- community organization model
- organizational change
- theory diffusion of innovations
- health belief models
- health promotion theory
- wellness theories
- change theories
- economic theories

Important Journals for School of Nursing and Health Sciences

- American Journal of Public Health
- Lancet Global Health
- Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health
- Environmental Health Perspectives
- Annual Review of Public Health
- International Journal of Epidemiology
- Journal of Public Health Research
- Bulletin of World Health Organization
- Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)
- American Journal of Epidemiology
- Emerging Infectious Diseases
- Journal of Public Health Research
- Journal of Public Health Policy
- Journal of Public Health Management and Practice
- Health Affairs
- The Journal of Healthcare Management
- The Journal of Health Care Compliance
- Journal of Health Care Leadership
- Health Care Executive Magazine
- Health Care Management Forum
- Journal of the American Association of Nursing Practitioners
- American Journal of Nursing
- Online Journal of Issues in Nursing (OJIN)
- Journal of Professional Nursing

References

American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (2006, October). The essentials of doctoral education for advanced nursing practice. Retrieved from <http://www.aacn.nche.edu/publications/position/DNPEssentials.pdf>

Magyary, D., Whitney, J. D., & Brown, M. A. (2006). Advancing practice inquiry: Research foundations of the practice doctorate in nursing. *Nursing Outlook*, 54(3), 139-151. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2006.03.004>

SECTION 3. MENTEE-MENTOR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The development and implementation of a Doctoral Capstone project is not an independent effort. Doctoral learners work under supervision of their mentors, committee members, preceptors, and other faculty, who have expertise conducive to the success of the Doctoral Capstone project. For example, some faculty members have strong skills in project design and data analysis, while others are subject matter experts in their fields. Regardless of the support received from the mentor, learners are solely responsible for the quality and integrity of all aspects of their Capstone project. This includes the development and writing of the final Doctoral Capstone project manuscript.

SoNHS mentees will work through the milestones sequentially and at their own pace. However, some milestone approvals (Milestone 1: Topic Approval–Doctoral Prospectus Part I; Milestone 2–Proposal Approval–Doctoral Prospectus Part II; and Milestone 5: School Approval of Capstone) are iterative (meaning you may be asked to rewrite the document several times based on feedback) and may take longer than anticipated.

Role of Doctoral Capstone Mentee

Upon entering the project phase of a Doctoral Capstone, the graduate learner moves from the role of learner to the role of mentee; he or she is now an individual engaged in scholarly inquiry who works with a faculty mentor to complete each of the Doctoral Capstone project milestones.

Mentees are expected to:

- Understand the inquiry process in completing each Doctoral Capstone project milestone.
- Use Capella Doctoral Capstone resources to develop a plan and final project document that aligns with school and university requirements.
- Dive deeply into the study of the literature, applying the skills and competencies gained as a Doctoral Capstone learner.
- Keep the principles of ethical conduct at the forefront of project design and implementation.
- Avoid misconduct and academic dishonesty by ensuring the integrity of the data collection process and avoiding plagiarism.
- Assess personal understanding of the process and discuss with the mentor areas of concern as well as individual strengths.
- Seek referral information from the mentor and other academic support experts to address gaps in knowledge and understanding.
- Seek information about the Doctoral Capstone project process, learn about the milestone sequence, and map milestone tasks and activities to a personal plan.
- Communicate regularly with the mentor in the courseroom and adhere to the mentor’s stated expectations regarding frequency of communication and the timelines for assignments and deliverables.
- Post a written summary of conference call discussion topics with their mentors in the courseroom
- Post an update in the Progress section of the current milestone at least once every week.

Role of Doctoral Capstone Project Mentor

Each Doctoral Capstone learner, or mentee, works with a faculty mentor to progress through the Doctoral Capstone project completion process. The mentor's role is a combination of leader, collaborator, director, facilitator, coach, and challenger. The mentor role is dedicated to providing the mentee with the guidance and support that allows the mentee to consistently make progress toward project completion.

Mentors are expected to:

- Establish expectations regarding frequency of communication, regular check-ins, and mentor-initiated contact to evaluate progress; provide feedback; and offer supportive guidance.
- Engage regularly in the courseroom once communication expectations have been established.
- Provide Doctoral Capstone project process guidance and direction throughout the process.
- Highlight Capella resources to mentees. Referrals may include university resources found on Campus (iGuide), milestone-specific resources such as IRB materials, and school-specific support services.
- Collaborate with mentees to promote consistent progress in milestone completion. For example, many external factors can influence how a mentee progresses toward milestone completion. The mentor, however, consistently follows up with mentees to assess progress, help mentees redirect their focus, or set due dates for deliverables.
- Advise mentees about project plan requirements that ensure alignment with ethical conduct and school requirements. When necessary, mentors will require changes to a project design to ensure that tenets of ethical conduct are honored.
- Respectfully yet directly provide critical feedback on Doctoral Capstone project deliverables.

Mentor-Mentee Relationship

The mentee completes the Doctoral Capstone project with the guidance, support, and direction of the mentor. The working relationship between the learner mentee and the faculty mentor focuses on one ultimate goal: the learner's completion of the Doctoral Capstone project. At each step in the process, the mentee produces deliverables for mentor review and critique. The mentee uses the mentor's feedback to clarify, revise, strengthen, and complete each project element. This iterative process is the backbone of the mentor-mentee relationship.

The following key assumptions form the infrastructure for this crucial working relationship:

- Both mentor and mentee commit to uphold ethical principles as integral to the Doctoral Capstone project process. This includes discussions about ensuring participant protections and avoiding misconduct and academic dishonesty as the plan is developed or as part of the implementation stage of the project.
- Mentee and mentor each bring specific competencies, skills, and knowledge to their collaboration. For example, mentees may focus on a particular area of practice change, while mentors provide guidance and direction to develop the plan and final Doctoral Capstone project.

- Mentees respect the mentor's experience in Doctoral Capstone project completion and expertise that the mentee can benefit from; based on this, mentees value and use the advice provided.
- Mentors respect that the mentee is engaged in a learning process and that mentees can benefit from guidance and direction from mentors while exercising independent decision making and personal accountability for their project.
- Mentees are independent project managers who accept the guidance, coaching, direction, and support the mentor provides to complete Capstone milestones.
- Each mentor-mentee relationship has its own interpersonal dynamic. As the relationship moves forward, its effectiveness and maintenance require both mentor and mentee to engage in objective, respectful, and consistent communication.
- Mentors and mentees work together to ensure that communication channels are used and kept in good working order. For example, mentors or mentees who are confused or lack clarity about expectations must discuss solutions in an open and timely manner.

Doctoral Capstone Project Success

As learners move through the milestone process, they may simultaneously face the challenges of staying motivated and staying connected with their advisor and mentor. At times, too, learners may feel discouraged or require additional academic or personal support. It is critical that learners ask for help when it is needed. Learners should reach out to their mentors to schedule a conference call to discuss any questions. Visiting the courseroom at least three times each week and posting at least once a week help maintain connection with mentors and peers. Learners may also contact their Doctoral Advisor to explore any concerns. They may email their advisor directly to set up an appointment or contact doctoral@capella.edu.

SECTION 4. UNDERSTANDING THE SONHS DOCTORAL CAPSTONE MILESTONES

The Doctoral Capstone courseroom contains thorough discussion of the milestones and the specific activities and tasks related to each milestone. The milestones are briefly discussed below.

Milestone 1. Mentor and Program/Specialization Approval of Proposed Doctoral Capstone Topic and Deliverable (Doctoral Project Prospectus Part I)

Overview

Learners submit their [Doctoral Project Prospectus Form](#) (DPP Part I) and all other required paperwork to the mentor for feedback and approval. Once the mentor has approved the DPP Part I, the learner submits the work for review by the specialization. All required forms can be found on the [SoNHS Doctoral Capstone page](#) on Campus (iGuide). The DPP may require multiple iterations before it receives mentor approval. Milestone 1 is marked complete when the mentor and program/specialization approve the project plan.

Expected Timeframe for Milestone Completion: Learners are expected to complete Milestone 1 in approximately one quarter.

Instructions for Milestone 1

Step 1. Mentor Approval of Topic and Deliverable (DPP Part I)

Building on the keystone course, learners define their Doctoral Capstone topic and complete part I of their Doctoral Project Prospectus (DPP) Form. Learners then submit this portion of the DPP to their mentor in the Doctoral Capstone courseroom until the mentor believes it is ready to be reviewed by the specialization for approval. Project site and preceptor approval occurs at this stage. More information on this can be found on the [Practicum page](#) on Campus (iGuide). Specific instructions for submitting this work for review can be found for both the learner and mentor in the doctoral capstone courses.

Learners should refer back to Section 1 of this handbook and to the courseroom to review the requirements for acceptable topics before developing part 1 of the DPP.

Step 2. Specialization Approval of Topic and Deliverable (DPP Part I)

Learners work with their mentor to obtain part 1 approval of the DPP. The mentor will submit for specialization review. The DPP may require multiple iterations before it receives specialization approval.

School-specific Assessment Criteria

All Doctoral Capstone learners must meet specific criteria for obtaining topic approval. There are also criteria specific to the SONHS. Learner:

1. Completes all components of the Doctoral Project Proposal (DPP) Part 1, which align with the PICO(T) question and gap in practice and the DPP is ready for mentor review.
2. Describes a PICO(T) question, gap in practice, and policy or programs that are in alignment, and the PICO(T) question is complete and clearly described.
3. Aligns the proposed intervention with the PICO (T) question and gap within the parameters described by the SoNHS and justifies the intervention by citing relevant sources.

4. Provides a DPP and secures a site and preceptor that are acceptable for the proposed project and provides documentation confirming the site and preceptor.
5. Writes with expert logic, flow, structure, and content focus to cohesively, comprehensively, and clearly explain the Capstone topic and deliverable, meeting professional publication standards.
6. Writes with proper grammar, usage, and expert APA format and style, meeting professional publication standards.
7. Writes with expert paragraph development, transitions, and academic tone, meeting professional publication standards.

Milestone 2. Mentor and School Approval of Doctoral Capstone Proposal/Research Plan (Doctoral Project Prospectus Parts I and II)

Overview

This milestone has two steps for completion: (a) DPP Parts I and II approval by the mentor, and (b) DPP Parts I and II approval by the school.

Part 1: The mentor shares the approved DPP Parts I and II with the Doctoral Capstone Project Committee for review. Committee approval is not required at this milestone.

Part 2: The mentor submits the mentor--approved DPP for school-level review/approval. A project is considered approved when it advances knowledge in the field and meets requirements for sound project methodology. Learners should be prepared for multiple iterations before the plan obtains final school-level approval.

Expected Timeframe for Milestone Completion: Learners are expected to complete Milestone 2 in approximately one quarter.

Note: IRB approval must be obtained prior to beginning implementation of the project. Additionally, the study site may require institutional IRB approval. If this is the case, learners work directly with their mentor for the appropriate procedure.

Instructions for Milestone 2

In the Milestone 2 assignment area of the capstone courseroom are links to everything needed to complete Milestone 2 and obtain mentor and school approval of the DPP including the program-specific proposal/research plan form. Learners must select the appropriate materials based on the school and program and also carefully review the scoring guide to understand criteria for DPP approval.

Instructions for School Approval

1. Learners work with their mentors to obtain approval of the complete DPP Parts I and II. The mentor will submit for school review. The DPP may require multiple iterations before it receives school approval.

School-specific Assessment Criteria

All Doctoral Capstone learners must meet specific criteria for obtaining DPP approval. There are also criteria specific to the SoNHS. Learner:

1. Defines the need at the organization/site of the project with data to substantiate and cites the source of the data.
2. Describes the benefits of the project and explains why those benefits are significant.

3. Describes the area of expertise anticipated at the end of the project and explains how that expertise will be useful.
4. Describes the preceptor's role and level of involvement.
5. Describes how project is leadership focused and describes how leadership skills will be enhanced during the project.
6. Describes how the project is doctoral level and makes comparisons to master's-level projects.
7. Introduces the problem or gap in practice to justify the selection of the topic and argues persuasively that the project will be beneficial.
8. Thoroughly, clearly, and concisely discusses the PICO (T) question to be answered and its components in the DPP Part 1.
9. Introduces the project, describing its focus and the significance and the relevance of the problem, citing sources to justify its significance.
10. Includes background studies (at least one or two) related to the topic and cites the studies using correct APA formatting.
11. Describes the theoretical framework or conceptual model to be used in the project and cites scholarly sources related to the framework or model.
12. Connects the project aims and PICO (T) question to the framework or model and cites scholarly sources related to justify the connection.
13. Defines project variables and explains how they affect the study.
14. Describes any project assumptions and explains how they may affect study outcomes.
15. Describes an exhaustive review of the literature (including key words, search phrases, databases used, number of articles found, inclusion/exclusion criteria, number of articles retained and why). Explains the rationale behind the specifics of the review.
16. Provides a thorough review and critical analysis of the literature and describes possible alternative analyses.
17. Synthesizes the evidence supporting the question and project and explains the thinking behind the synthesis.
18. Provides a completed evidence table that is concise and accurate.
19. Describes the project design, setting, population, and sampling, providing all relevant details and the rationale behind the design.
20. Describes human subjects protection methods (as applicable) and explains why they are important.
21. Identifies outcome measures and describes how measurement will be implemented.
22. Describes implementation plans including a thorough description of the implementation process. Indicates who will do what in the implementation.
23. Describes psychometric properties (reliability and validity) of any instruments used and cites appropriate sources to validate the description.

24. Describes the status of permission to use instruments and procedures for data collection and explains what methods were used to seek permission.
25. Describes the project evaluation plan, including types of data analysis, and cites appropriate sources to justify the plan.
26. Provides a detailed timeline and work plan for the project and demonstrates how the timeline and work plan are workable.
27. Describes anticipated findings and limitations of the study and explains how the limitations may affect the findings.
28. Completes the evidence table in the DPP, including all references. Cites all references using correct APA style and formatting.
29. Completes the reference list for the DPP. Cites all references using correct APA style and formatting.
30. Writes with expert logic, flow, structure, and content focus to cohesively, comprehensively, and clearly explain the Capstone topic and deliverable, meeting professional publication standards.
31. Writes with proper grammar, usage, and expert APA format and style, meeting professional publication standards.
32. Writes with expert paragraph development, transitions, and academic tone, meeting professional publication standards.

Milestone 3. Ethics Review and IRB Screening

Overview

Capella University is committed to the responsible conduct of research and fostering research that is both sound and ethical. Milestone 3 occurs in two stages:

- **Stage 1. Ethics Review:** Learners are required to complete an ethics review in order to demonstrate a general understanding of the ethical issues that must be considered when planning and carrying out their Capstone project.
- **Stage 2. IRB Screening:** Learners submit the Doctoral Capstone IRB Screening Form to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review. All IRBs ensure that the rights of human subject participants are respected. SoNHS learners should refer to the [IRB Resources](#) on Campus (iGuide) IRB resources for additional IRB information.

Learners are responsible for adhering to ethical and legal standards, as well as the specific project guidelines for their discipline. **Once IRB approval is granted, the procedures and methods cannot be changed without consultation and approval from the IRB.**

Note: Depending on the nature of each individual project, learners may spend more than one quarter between completion of Milestone 3 and Milestone 4 because this is the time when most of the project implementation will be taking place. However, learners must remain in contact with their mentor and provide appropriate check-in posts in the Discussion areas weekly throughout the quarter.

Instructions for Ethics Review

Learners will develop an analysis of ethical issues that must be considered when planning and carrying out Doctoral Capstone projects. This analysis should be rooted in the literature of the profession. The analysis will result in an eight- to 10-page paper that demonstrates a

conceptual and practical understanding of the five ethical issues and the way in which they will be addressed in the Doctoral Capstone project.

Learners should address the following ethical considerations as part of their ethical review:

1. Mitigating risks to human participants
2. Collaboratively engaging the site/organization and obtaining buy-in and permission
3. Managing potential conflict of interest
4. Managing potential bias
5. Handling issues related to intellectual property
6. Managing HIPAA compliance
7. Following the American Nurses Association Code of Ethics
8. Writing with proper grammar, usage, and expert APA format and style, meeting professional publication standards.
9. Writing with expert paragraph development, transitions, and academic tone, meeting professional publication standards.
10. Submitting their paper to TurnItIn, analyzing the results, and addressing plagiarism as needed.

Once the paper is complete and has passed Step 1 of the Ethics Review, learners submit it through the Ethics Review assignment under Milestone 3 in the courseroom. The mentor will assess the paper using the Ethics Review criteria below. Learners will move to Stage 2 of the milestone once the Ethics Review is graded Proficient for all of the criteria and the paper is free of plagiarism. If one or more criteria are graded as less than Proficient, the paper will be revised until all criteria are met. This may be an iterative process until the Ethics Review meets the criteria for approval.

Assessment Criteria for Ethics Review

Learners complete an Ethics Review paper, which includes the components of the rubrics found in the course.

Instructions for Milestone 3

The IRB screens all Doctoral Capstone projects to determine the level of IRB review, if any, required by the federal regulations. Capella University's IRB uses IRBManager, a third-party system, to manage the IRB process. Applications in IRBManager are web-based forms (called xforms). The IRB forms have built-in skip logic and supplemental questions, meaning that answers to some questions or sets of questions are only required based on your responses.

Projects that are determined not to involve human subjects research as federally defined will be considered to have passed the screening. Projects that are determined to involve human subjects research will require further IRB review, and learners will be required to complete an IRB application. Those that involve greater than minimal risk to participants require a robust review by the full IRB committee. Minimal-risk human subjects research studies, including those that involve existing records, tend to present fewer ethical concerns, but are still reviewed according to IRB regulations. Studies with significant risk may not be appropriate for novice Capstone researchers.

To complete the Doctoral Capstone IRB screening, the following documents must be ready to submit:

- Approved Doctoral Project Prospectus (DPP)
- Completed and approved ethics review paper
- Documentation of mentor approval of the Ethics Review paper (mentors may access a form for use in validating this approval in the Instructor Resources of the Doctoral Capstone courseroom)
- The signed site agreement or a description of the process used to secure it
- Copy of the CITI certificate of completion

The following steps will occur:

1. Learners complete the Doctoral Capstone IRB Screening Form, providing all necessary supporting documentation.
2. The IRB reviews the screening form within approximately five business days to determine whether the study meets the criteria for human subjects research.
3. If the IRB determines that the study does not involve human subjects research, no further action is required, and the learner may proceed to Milestone 4, mentor, and committee approval. The learner and mentor will receive a notification.
4. If the study does involve human subjects research, the IRB will instruct learners on how to complete the IRB application. The application will have to be reviewed and approved before the learners moves onto Milestone 4.

Registering for IRBManager and Completing the IRB Screening Form

Note: All SoNHS Capstone learners must complete the Doctoral Capstone IRB Screening Form.

Follow [these instructions](#) to register for IRB Manager.

When registering, learners should:

- Use their primary Capella email address.
- Have their learner ID handy because it is needed during the registration process.

Once registered, to complete the SoNHS Doctoral Capstone Screening Form, learners will:

1. Login to IRBManager
2. Click on Doctoral Capstone IRB Screening Form, under Actions, in the left-hand navigation window.
3. Complete the form and attach the following:
 - Doctoral Project Prospectus (DPP)
 - Ethics review paper
 - Approval of ethics review paper from mentor
 - Site permission on letterhead. Templates are available under [Site Permission](#) on Campus (iGuide)
 - Copies of instruments and letters of permission to use as applicable
 - Consent forms, as applicable
4. Click the Submit button on the last page of the form.

The IRB will review form to determine if IRB review is necessary.

Submitting an IRB Application or Records-Based Research Application

The IRB will send an email notice if the learner needs to complete the IRB application (or records-based research application). Carefully follow the instructions in the email for completing the application. The IRB will inform learners which application to complete. If the IRB determines the study involves human subjects, learners must complete the IRB application to obtain approval to conduct the Capstone.

Milestone 4. Mentor and Committee Approval of Doctoral Capstone

Overview

This milestone has two components: mentor approval of Doctoral Capstone and committee approval of Doctoral Capstone.

In this milestone, the learner will submit a final manuscript (following the SoNHS template located under program-specific resources in the doctoral capstone course) to the mentor. The final Capstone manuscript is considered approved when all components have been fully developed, are written in a scholarly manner, and have no errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics. Learners should be prepared for multiple iterations before the project obtains final mentor approval.

The mentor submits the Doctoral Capstone project manuscript to the entire Doctoral Capstone Project Committee for review. Learners confer with their mentor to receive and address committee feedback.

Instructions for Milestone 4

In the Milestone 4 assignment area of the capstone courseroom are links to everything needed for completing the Capstone manuscript and obtaining mentor approval, including program-specific templates. Appropriate materials must be selected based on school and program. Learners should carefully review the scoring guide to understand criteria for approval of the Capstone.

Important Note: SoNHS learners are not required to complete a separate deliverable; they are only required to complete the final capstone manuscript. SoNHS should bypass the u04a1 assignment. SoNHS learners must only complete the u04a2 assignment in the capstone courseroom.

School-specific Assessment Criteria

All Doctoral Capstone learners must meet specific criteria for obtaining topic approval. There are also criteria specific to the SoNHS. Learner:

1. Follows the SoNHS template for the Capstone manuscript, providing input to all sections.
2. Follows the Standards for Quality Improvement Reporting Excellence (SQUIRE) guidelines (as applicable for project) for content, meeting all requirements.
3. Describes the theoretical framework or conceptual model and cites scholarly sources about the framework or model.
4. Connects project aims and the PICO (T) question to the framework or model, explaining clearly how the framework or model applies.
5. Defines project variables and explains how they are used in the study.
6. Describes any project assumptions and explains how they affect the study.

7. Provides a review and critical analysis of the literature, including search strategies and synthesis of the evidence supporting the purpose, aim, objective, or clinical question. Cites all sources using APA style and formatting.
8. Clearly identifies the problem/issue and purpose, including appropriate background and the significance to the organization. Justifies the significance by citing appropriate sources.
9. Describes the setting, population/sample, implementation process, data collection tools, and analysis. The description is concise and complete.
10. Discusses the results in relationship to the problem/issue and explains what the results indicate.
11. Describes the extent to which project outcomes were achieved; if they were not achieved, then provides appropriate rationale and explanation. Explains what complete achievement of the outcomes would look like.
12. Describes key facilitators and barriers to meeting outcomes and describes how these elements were active in the project.
13. Describes any unexpected results or unintended consequences and discusses their significance to the project.
14. Analyzes the sustainability of the project (as applicable) and suggests ways to improve sustainability.
15. Provides recommendations for future practice and practice inquiry activities and explains how the activities might be conducted.
16. Follows the SoNHS template for the abstract and provides a coherent and useful abstract.
17. Writes with expert logic, flow, structure, and content focus to cohesively, comprehensively, and clearly explain the capstone topic and deliverable, meeting professional publication standards.
18. Writes with proper grammar, usage, and expert APA format and style, meeting professional publication standards.
19. Writes with expert paragraph development, transitions, and academic tone, meeting professional publication standards.
20. Writes with attention to academic integrity and appropriate use of paraphrasing, summarizing, direct quotation, and citation.

Milestone 5. School Approval of Doctoral Capstone

Overview

This milestone has three parts: Doctoral Publication Review, school-level review of the final Doctoral Capstone project, and a conference call presentation.

Part 1. The Doctoral Success Center submits the committee-approved work for Doctoral Publication Review once it has been received from the mentor following committee approval. The Doctoral Publication Review is intended to ensure the Doctoral Capstone manuscript meets standards for publication.

Part 2. The school reviewer assesses and approves the project. In this milestone, the manuscript moves from the relatively small audience of the committee to the larger audience of the school. Learners confer with their mentor to address school feedback. All projects must have school-level approval.

Part 3. Learners coordinate and complete the final conference call with PowerPoint presentation. The final conference call is an opportunity for the learner to share and discuss the completed project with the Doctoral Capstone Project Committee. The committee may provide suggestions to improve the PowerPoint for the final Adobe Connect recorded presentation or may provide suggestions for future projects.

Note to DNP Learners

DNP learners may additionally desire to submit the project to the Sigma Theta Tau International (STTI) Virginia Henderson Global e-Repository. Membership in STTI is not required for submission. Revisions specified during STTI Virginia Henderson e-Repository peer review must be completed before the repository approves and publishes the manuscript. Visit the [STTI Virginia Henderson website](#) to learn more about the e-repository submission process.

Modifications to Doctoral Project Prospectus

In rare instances, a learner may need to make substantive modifications to the Doctoral Project Prospectus after having already obtained Milestone 2 approval. The learner must request and obtain approval to modify the DPP before implementing any changes. The mentor should resubmit the modified DPP via email to doctoral@capella.edu to initiate the school's review. The mentor should include a note in the email explaining that the learner is making a modification to an approved DPP and requesting that the school conduct another review.

Substantive modifications include changes in:

- the scope of the project
- the focus of the project
- the data being collected for the project
- the targeted population for the project
- the analytical procedures
- the site where the project will be conducted

In the event of uncertainty about whether a modification is substantive, learners and mentors should consult with their chair for a determination as to whether the school must review the revised DPP. In general, consultation is encouraged before making any modifications to an approved Doctoral Capstone project.

Following the school's approval of the revised DPP, the learner sends a copy of the modified DPP to the IRB Office requesting approval of the modification. If the modification requires changes to other documents that were reviewed by the IRB (site permission letters, data collection tools, etc, these must be submitted to the IRB as well). In most instances, the learner will not be required to submit a revised ethics review. However, the IRB may request that the ethics review be revised if the modification raises significant new ethical concerns. The IRB will notify the learner and mentor whether email notification of the modification is sufficient, or whether the learner will need to submit a modification form through IRBManager.

Note: School approval (Milestone 2) and IRB approval (Milestone 3) of the modified Doctoral Project Prospectus must be obtained before the learner may move forward in implementing the revised Doctoral Capstone project.

Revising the Doctoral Capstone Topic

Less commonly, a learner may need to change topics after Milestone 1 has been approved. This is a more significant change, which necessitates the learner's obtaining approval of the new topic and deliverable. The learner and mentor must engage their chair, as well as the Doctoral Success Center, before such a change is made, because the implications are significant. Mentors may initiate the discussion of such a change by emailing doctoral@capella.edu.

Additional Requirements: Mentor Approves Practicum Log

Overview

Learner submits final practicum log documenting all activities and hours spent. Requirements for this task may vary by program. Learners should check with their mentor for clarification.

DNP Practicum Hours

DNP learners are required to complete 1,000 post-BSN practicum hours (the number of required Practicum hours will vary for other programs). DNP learners may transfer up to 500 academically based hours from their MS/MSN degree. Forms and Instructions are available on Campus (iGuide) under "Resources" at DNP Practicum.

The remaining hours are negotiated with the mentor based on the project focus and time required to complete the project. Learners should seek experiences related to their project and the leadership focus of the DNP such as administration, policy, population health, and technology. A DNP practicum log is submitted at the end of each quarter and a final log in Milestone 4 and the ePortfolio.

Regardless of how many hours a learner needs to complete during the program, learners must take the Doctoral Capstone course a minimum of four consecutive times. Therefore, a learner who requires 1,000 practicum hours should plan on an average 250 hours per quarter. A learner who transfers in 500 hours will only be required to complete 500 additional hours; therefore, learners should plan on an average of 125 hours per quarter. Other learners will fall somewhere between and should plan to budget their time accordingly with assistance from their mentor.

DrPH Practicum Hours

DrPH learners are required to complete 100 supervised hours at an approved public health organization. The aim of the practicum should be directed at a systems-level change within the site or organization. If learners are passionate about a specific topic, they may find strong supporting evidence to serve as a foundation for a scholarly project. In other cases, experience with an organization may reveal a project applicable to a learner's area of interest. Whatever the approach, it is important that the practicum site has agreed that the problem identified needs to be addressed and that the learner's efforts will be supported.

A practicum log is submitted at the end of each quarter and a final log in Milestone 4. Regardless of how many hours a learner needs to complete during the program, learners must take the Doctoral Capstone course a minimum of four consecutive times. The majority of the practicum hours will occur in the second and third quarters of Capstone.

DHA Practicum Hours

DHA learners are required to complete 100 supervised hours at an approved health care organization. The aim of the practicum should be directed at a systems-level change, process improvement, or policy application/change within the site or organization. If learners are passionate about a specific topic, they may find strong supporting evidence to

serve as a foundation for a scholarly project. In other cases, experience with an organization may reveal a project applicable to a learner's area of interest. Whatever the approach, it is important that the practicum site has agreed that the problem identified needs to be addressed within their own organization and that the learner's efforts will be supported.

A practicum log is submitted at the end of each quarter and a final log in Milestone 4. Regardless of how many hours a learner needs to complete during the program, learners must take the Doctoral Capstone course a minimum of four consecutive times. The majority of the practicum hours will occur in the second and third quarters of Capstone.

Practicum Paperwork

All paperwork needed for project approval (including the Doctoral Capstone project DPP document) is located on the SoNHS Doctoral Capstone project page on Campus (iGuide).

SECTION 5. PRECEPTOR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Preceptor Performance Expectations

Preceptors provide direct Doctoral Capstone project supervision while the learner is at the Doctoral Capstone project site. (The mentor is responsible for indirect supervision, maintaining the overall components of the course, and submission of the final grade.) As direct Doctoral Capstone project supervisor, the preceptor:

- Substantively contributes to the progress of the learner in collaboration with the mentor and attends at least one scheduled conference call or as needed.
- Participates in a project plan conference call, if requested by the mentor.
- Participates in the final conference call of the Doctoral Capstone project.
- This provides the opportunity for the learner to present project outcomes via a conference call that includes the learner, mentor, committee members, and preceptor.
- Contributes to the evaluation of the learner progress as issues arise.
- The preceptor completes the Evaluation of the Learner Progress Form within three business days and contacts the mentor to address issues. This identifies needed areas of personal and professional development.
- Substantively contributes to the evaluation of the learner in collaboration with the mentor.
- Collaborates with the mentor regarding oversight of the Doctoral Capstone project experience to assure appropriateness of the unfolding experience, focus on competency development, and collection of appropriate evaluation data. This collaboration includes:
 - Meeting with the SoNHS Doctoral Capstone project mentor at least twice a quarter to discuss specific expectations, course and program outcomes, and learner progress. At least one meeting is a scheduled conference call. Additional means of contact may include email correspondence.
 - Completing evaluation of the Preceptor Experience Form within three business days of the Doctoral Capstone project completion.

Preceptor Qualifications

The preceptor assists the learner in navigating the chosen site and in meeting Doctoral Capstone project objectives. Due to a potential conflict of interest, the preceptor must not be an immediate supervisor. The preceptor may be in a remote location but must stay in touch with the learner through avenues including Skype, FaceTime, and conference calls.

The preceptor must meet the following qualifications:

- Must have a minimum of a graduate degree (doctorate preferred).
- Must hold a position of leadership.
- Cannot be the immediate supervisor of the learner.
- Must not be a current Capella learner.
- Must have documented expertise in the area of specialization to support student achievement of expected outcomes.

Preceptors must also meet the following additional qualifications:

- Agrees to assume the role of preceptor until the completion of the project unless an issue with the learner arises and the preceptor no longer wishes to remain in this role or there is a change in employment/role of the preceptor.
- Maintains a willingness and ability to consult with mentor regarding required learner outcomes.

SECTION 6. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The courseroom and Campus (iGuide) contain a wealth of helpful resources.

Doctoral advisors provide advanced doctoral learners with direction in completing their doctoral capstone project and navigating challenges along the way. The best way for learners and mentors to contact the Doctoral advising team or an individual advisor is by emailing doctoral@capella.edu. Learners and mentors may also phone 1-888-CAPELLA (1-888-227-3552), option 2.

Learners should be prepared to schedule an appointment outside of quarter start to address complex issues. Although advisors work hard to be responsive, they are not always able to provide an immediate response.

APA Style

Familiarity with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.), typically referred to as APA or APA 6, is assumed. Learners must purchase their own copy of APA 6, which is widely available.

APA's Style Blog addresses specific elements of APA formatting. The tone of the style blog is more informal than the manual but no less rigorous in its requirements. Available at [APA Style](#).

For learners who need more APA help, these interactive Campus (iGuide) tools will help improve skills:

[APA Citation: Citing a Book](#)

[APA Citation: Citing a Journal Article](#)

[APA Citation: Citing a Web Site](#)

IRB

Detailed information for designing an ethical study, conducting ethical research, and navigating the IRB process are available on Campus (iGuide) on the [Institutional Review Board](#) pages.

Library

The Capella University Library has a huge database of journal subscriptions, e-books, and dissertations, along with access to the interlibrary loan service. The library's knowledgeable staff are on call for search strategy discussions and discipline-specific consultations. Available on Campus (iGuide) at [Library](#).

The library also has a number of aids to assist learners with a site devoted to research guides, tutorials, and resources for learners in the SoNHS programs. Available on Campus (iGuide) at [Nursing Doctoral \(DNP\) Research Guide](#).

Smarthinking

Smarthinking is a free, online tutoring service available to all Capella learners. More than 160 minutes are available each quarter for learners to use toward tutoring. Thousands of Capella learners use Smarthinking every year. Learners submit discussion postings and course papers to Smarthinking tutors, who provide individual writing feedback, usually within 24 hours. Drop-in tutoring, live chat, and offline questions are also available. Many faculty members require learners to submit writing pieces to Smarthinking for feedback as part of the course curriculum. Available through the [Smarthinking Campus \(iGuide\) Page](#).

TurnItIn

TurnItIn is a text-matching software platform that scans submitted papers for instances of potential plagiarism. Schools, programs, and instructors may have specific requirements regarding learners' use of TurnItIn. Available on Campus (iGuide) at [TurnItIn](#).

Common plagiarism errors are discussed in a TurnItIn white paper, *Defining Plagiarism: The Plagiarism Spectrum*. Available through the [TurnItIn website](#).

Writing and Revising Toolkit

The editors of the Doctoral Publications Team have provided this suite of resources to support learners throughout the writing process. Doctoral Capstone writers can use these handouts and interactive modules as they revise their manuscripts. Available on Campus (iGuide) on the [Writing, Revising, and Format Editing Review](#); scroll down to the Revisions Toolbox.

Graduation and Commencement

SoNHS learners are eligible to apply for graduation following the successful completion of Milestone 4. Once approved for graduation, learners may also participate in a commencement ceremony. To participate in commencement, learners must RSVP by the published deadline. For more information, learners can visit the [Graduation and Commencement](#) page on Campus (iGuide).