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Outcomes assessment in a capstone management course: engaging multiple stakeholders

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we present a program assurance of learning method (“RealTest”) that engages multiple stakeholders in a one-day assessment center (AC) design integrated into our management majors’ capstone course. In addition to involving graduating seniors, department faculty, and College of Business administrators, the day-long process engages individuals from the local business community and alumni who serve as assessors (“coaches”) for the activities included. During the RealTest experience, we collect data for use in our program review’s process for continuous improvement of the curriculum and provide career networking opportunities for the participants. We share data from several years’ worth of events and 2017 feedback survey data from coaches, student participants, and alumni who participated in the most recent capstone experience. We describe how the AC approach works, its contribution to our program review process, and the ways in which it supports student development and community engagement.

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Undergraduate business programs are under pressure to demonstrate the value of the education they provide and to ensure career readiness (Burke-Smalley & Wheatley, 2015; Desai, Tippins, & Arbaugh, 2014), with employability under increased scrutiny by students, parents, and employers alike. Business programs, in particular, must develop students’ knowledge as well as the skills necessary to succeed (Bartels, Bommer, & Rubin, 2000). Assessing whether or not these outcomes have occurred can be challenging, and much has been written about the nature of assurance of learning in contemporary business education (Betters-Reed, Nitkin, & Sampson, 2008; Marshall, 2007; Moskal, Ellis, & Keon, 2008).

In this article, we describe a one-day “assessment center” (AC) process, the RealTest Event (RTE), that is embedded in our management program’s capstone course. Seniors in the Management and Leadership (MGL) major enroll in the capstone course in their last semester prior to graduation. The capstone integrates student learning from the required curriculum with application of this learning to business situations and includes a career preparedness component. At mid-semester, MGL students participate in RTE, a one-day series of activities designed to assess knowledge and skills learned as management majors and provide opportunities for students to prepare for their transition to the workplace. Every student participates

in multiple activities and is assessed by volunteer alumni and members of the local business community as “coaches.” During the RTE day, students demonstrate the skills they have been working on during their academic journey, receive feedback from business professionals, and have an opportunity to network for post-graduate employment and internships. The structure of the activities and the assessment by alumni and business representatives (rather than faculty) helps students recognize and connect the relevance of these activities to their future business success.

Using an AC approach with outside coaches in a management capstone course provides a unique opportunity for students and faculty. Students practice their organizational and managerial skills by performing tasks that are relevant to their future career success and faculty gain external assessment of student knowledge and skills. While some activities in the RTE require prior preparation, all activities in whole or part must be executed by the students in real time. This real-time approach requires students to draw on the knowledge and skills that they have developed in their academic program in front of coaches who are potential employers/professionals in their field. Students are in a demanding situation that helps simulate experiences they will have after they leave the academic environment.

This article extends previous discussions concerning outcomes assessment by describing our multi-stakeholder activities-based approach used to assessing student outcomes within a capstone course that also contributes to the preparation of students for their transition to work and career. We share the ways in which outcomes from the RTE are used to address faculty needs for curriculum evaluation and regional accreditation requirements, facilitate engagement with alumni and the local business community, and offer students feedback about their preparedness for the workplace. We offer suggestions for implementing an AC approach in management programs at other institutions.

Assessment centers

AC involving a series of individual and/or group activities have been used in business since the late 1950s (Spychalski, Quiñones, Gaugler, & Pohley, 1997). The hallmark of an AC “is its behavioral or performance-based exercises” (Waldman & Korbar, 2004, p. 153). Data are collected for assessment through these activities rather than or in conjunction with paper and pencil assessment. ACs are particularly valuable for assessing interpersonal skills and competencies (Bray, 2013) and have been used to help assess and develop leadership behavior (Fox & Talbert-Hatch, 2002), global leadership competencies (Herd, Alagaraja, & Cumberland, 2016), human resources functions, such as selection, promotion, and development (Spychalski et al., 1997), and student skills (Bartels et al., 2000).

A typical AC includes multiple activities over one to two days (Waldman & Korbar, 2004). The number and type of activities ranges widely based on the needs and purpose of the assessment. Eurich, Krause, Cigularov, and Thornton (2009) found that the majority of the companies they surveyed use between four and five activities in a single AC. Common activities include in-baskets, leaderless group discussions, role play exercises, interviews, analysis problems, presentations, fact-finding exercises, “day in the life,” and direct-report simulation, skills, and abilities tests (Eurich et al., 2009; Fox & Talbert-Hatch, 2002; Spychalski et al., 1997).

ACs have been used in higher education as a means of developing skills (Extejt & Forbes, 1996), in the evaluation of business majors’ career readiness (Riggio, Aguirre, Mayes, Belloli, & Kubiak, 1997), and as a predictor of early career success (Waldman & Korbar, 2004). Such ACs may be used for multiple purposes. For example, Hoover, Giamhatista, Sorenson, and Bommer (2010) used an AC pre-/post-test approach in an MBA course, first as learning exercises for developing skills among students who received

skill-specific feedback and at the end of the course as a means of assessing student outcomes with respect to their pedagogical approach. Waldman and Korbar (2004) research “connects academic ACs, learning outcome assessment and career success [by showing] how an academic AC can be successfully developed for the purpose of measuring student learning outcomes as well as practical, work-related competencies necessary for success in ‘real-world’ occupations” (p. 163).

Some schools find partnerships with local companies beneficial to the AC approach. For example, the interview portion of the AC was with an employers with a real job opening (Steuer, 1992). In one case, the Department of Organizational Leadership and Supervision (OLS), an undergraduate program in the Purdue School of Engineering and Technology at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, collaborated with Kroger Supermarkets. The joint AC program allowed Kroger to evaluate OLS up and coming leaders while affording OLS the opportunity to improve assessment of student learning and improve student awareness of that learning (Fox & Talbert-Hatch, 2002). In the RTE, we take full advantage of such connections.

Capstone courses

The transition to the workplace from an academic setting can be challenging to students, who need to present potential employers with confidence the knowledge and skills they have developed through multiple courses. While many students select major degree programs to gain knowledge and develop skills relevant for their desired careers, courses taken throughout their undergraduate studies may include those required to meet general education requirements, degree requirements, regional or professional accreditation requirements, and/or major and minor requirements. Students may not always see how all the courses required for their degree fit together and how over time they have gained the needed knowledge and skills for their intended career. While a capstone experience may tie some of these elements together, not all do so in a manner that blends knowledge and skills.

Academic capstone experiences and related assessment take on a wide variety of formats and structure. A capstone experience might be no more than a paper and pencil assessment (Payne, Flynn, & Whitfield, 2008) of knowledge learned that is completed in a few hours. A final project can serve as the capstone experience (Bousaba & Conrad, 2015) or a research project (Durso, 1997) may be designed for that purpose. A

required course, e.g. Strategic Management (Payne, Whitfield, & Flynn, 2002; Thomas, 1998), may also serve as capstone experience for a degree or major curriculum. Some capstone courses foster a specific pedagogical approach like problem-based learning and competition-based learning through a consulting experience (Desai et al., 2014).

A capstone course brings together elements of the degree in a culminating event that requires students to apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired (Extejt & Forbes, 1996; Fox & Talbert-Hatch, 2002; Kiener, Ahuna, & Tinnesz, 2014; Payne et al., 2008). This provides an ideal environment for students to integrate their skills into an event that helps their transition to the workplace (Extejt & Forbes, 1996). The students in the OLS program described above who participated in their program's AC reported that they were able to integrate and apply learning from all their academic studies (Fox & Talbert-Hatch, 2002). An AC experience may provide an opportunity for students to receive feedback, help students recognize and further hone the skills they have acquired, and build the confidence needed to make the transition to their professional lives (Waldman & Korbar, 2004).

All business programs need an effective way to assess whether or not students have acquired knowledge and skills from required courses (Bartels et al., 2000; Fox & Talbert-Hatch, 2002) and whether or not were necessary for employment. In the same way that a capstone course allows students to recognize their acquired knowledge and skills, a capstone course also allows faculty to assess student's learning outcomes (Riggio et al., 1997; Waldman & Korbar, 2004). Learning outcomes can then be used for internal curriculum evaluations and external accreditation requirements. The unique value of using an AC is its active nature that allows for assessment of skills rather than just knowledge.

Capstone courses can be difficult to assess (Payne et al., 2002) as one facet of these courses is to apply learning gained over multiple courses. In addition to course learning outcomes assessment, there are often requirements for outcomes assessment of the degree or major that the capstone serves. Student outcomes may include inherently difficult things to assess like critical thinking (Smith, 2013), and these assessments can be complicated when students may be or may not be motivated to retrieve and apply this past knowledge or may not have retained the knowledge learned (Payne et al., 2008). Students also need to see the assessment activity as relevant to their learning and personal goals to take a deep approach (Rust, 2002) to completing it. Despite the complexity of the

assessment process, capstone courses play an important role in assessing the curriculum that the capstone serves and provide a unique opportunity to evaluate skills in addition to knowledge (Payne et al., 2008).

Our capstone course

The capstone course in the management program at our university is designed to reinforce prior learning in the management core curriculum while introducing senior students to more sophisticated engagements with contemporary management challenges. The department views the capstone as a means of transitioning students from higher education to career. Current program learning goals for the management major include the ability to

- (1) Understand and synthesize the basic concepts and theories of management and human resource management that serve as a basis for high performance (PLG 1).
- (2) Apply theories and concepts of management and human resource management to develop strategies for improving the performance of people and processes in organizations (PLG 2).
- (3) Perform well on teams, provide leadership, contribute and collaborate to achieve team goals (PLG 3).
- (4) Demonstrate skill and competency in developmental performance feedback (PLG 4).
- (5) Apply theories and concepts of management and human resource management to develop strategies for dealing with organizational and interpersonal conflict (PLG 5).

Each of the program learning goals maps to at least one course taken in the management curriculum, with targeted outcomes assessment conducted within these courses. When the RealTest Event was introduced in the Spring of 2007, the senior course was designed as a team leadership curriculum. While the department always considered the senior course its "capstone," it was only after program review in 2012 that the senior course was redesigned to represent a truly culminating capstone experience. The original senior-level management course included the following learning objectives mapped to the program learning goals described above:

- (1) Arrive at conclusions/make decisions about how to plan and organize a team project (PLG1).

- (2) Arrive at conclusions/make decisions about how to motivate team members (PG1, PG2, PLG3).
- (3) Arrive at conclusions/make decisions about how to provide direction to a project team (PLG1, PLG2, PLG3).
- (4) Arrive at conclusions/make decisions about how to plan and organize a team project (PLG2, PLG3).
- (5) Arrive at conclusions/make decisions about how to respond and provide feedback to team members' ideas and opinions (PLG 4).
- (6) Arrive at conclusions/make decisions about how to provide written feedback on performance to team members (PLG 4).
- (7) Arrive at conclusions/make decisions about how to manage intra-team conflict (PLG 5).

Based on our 2012 program review, a new capstone course was designed to better serve our curriculum, with RealTest retained as an activities-based outcomes assessment process and developmental anchor. The current capstone course objectives mapped to program learning goals are:

- (1) Explain some of the distinctions in current literature between management and leadership (PLG1, PLG2).
- (2) Demonstrate an understanding of leadership theories to include trait theory, skills approach, style approach, situational approach, contingency theory, path-goal theory, and transformational leadership theory (PLG1, PLG2).
- (3) Apply management knowledge to analyze case studies and articulate solutions in a simulated business setting (PLG1, PLG2, PLG5).
- (4) Demonstrate the ability to actively participate in group problem solving, expressing ideas and opinions in a team environment, responding and providing feedback to group members (PLG3, PLG4, PLG5).
- (5) Demonstrate the ability to present yourself as a candidate for an employment opportunity.¹
- (6) Independently manage a group of peers in a management problem-solving assignment (PLG2, PLG3, PLG4, PLG5).

The current capstone course is offered annually during the 15-week spring semester. Throughout the semester, students draw on the learning and skills they have developed in their prior coursework to prepare for the RTE and extend their approach to management and leadership challenges. During the first half of the

semester, students read and discuss articles related to leadership as assigned by the instructor. During this process, students identify a potential first job for their career, work with the Career Services Office to update their resume, and prepare a cover letter for a job application. Each of these activities represents the final steps in a career development process that began in the first year.²

Following the RTE, during the second half of the semester, students take turns leading teams to complete projects. This is an opportunity for students to pull together the knowledge and skills they have learned and to extend their abilities to address simultaneously multiple program learning goals. Students are divided into groups of three with three projects the team must complete, and each team member takes a turn being the leader. The leader takes the responsibility for delegating work and ensuring the project is completed. If questions emerge during any given project, only the student leader for that project may contact the capstone instructor about content or issues related to project completion. This format is intended to simulate business hierarchy where the supervisor would contact the manager if a need arises.

Table 1 shows the course learning objectives separated by knowledge and skill. Two of the six learning objectives are knowledge-based and the remaining four are skill-based. The two knowledge learning objectives and the last skills objective are indirectly assessed during the AC process described here. The other skill-based learning objectives are assessed directly during the AC event taking full advantage of the interactive nature of the event and overcoming some of the inherent challenges of assessing capstone courses.

Table 1. Course learning objectives by knowledge and skill.

Knowledge	Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain some of the distinctions in current literature between management and leadership. • Demonstrate an understanding of leadership theories to include trait theory, skills approach, style approach, situational approach, contingency theory, path-goal theory and transformational leadership theory. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply management knowledge to analyze case studies and articulate solutions in a simulated business setting. • Demonstrate the ability to actively participate in group problem solving, expressing ideas and opinions in a team environment, responding and providing feedback to group members. • Demonstrate the ability to present yourself as a candidate for an employment opportunity. • Independently manage a group of peers in a management problem solving assignment.

The realtest event

The department uses two methods of direct assessment for curriculum effectiveness and student growth relative to management program outcomes: course-specific outcome measures throughout the curriculum and the RealTest Event. The RTE, begun in 2007 and later modified in 2010, currently involves three activities: a managerial “Problem-Solving Presentation,” a “Leaderless Group Discussion,” and a “Mock Interview.” As noted above, the RTE takes place as a one-day program of assessment and networking activities embedded in the capstone management course for graduating senior management and leadership (MGT) majors. The activities necessary for developing and administering the day are divided between the department chair and the capstone course instructor(s), with assistance from the Dean’s Office, the Career Center, and Alumni Development. The Department uses written feedback provided by coaches for two of the three activities (“Problem Solving Presentation” and “Leaderless Group Discussion”) in its program assessment process. The Career Center and the College use the third activity (“Mock Interview”) to evaluate professional development goals.

At the beginning of each spring semester, a work-study student is assigned to RTE by the Dean’s Office (“lead work-study student”) and works with the capstone course instructor to confirm previous and potential new coaches and prepare necessary materials for RTE. Once coaches have confirmed their attendance, the capstone instructor assigns them tentatively to activities. Often, returning coaches are assigned to the same activity unless they request a change. To the greatest extent possible, coaches are assigned based on expertise. For example, someone working in Human Resources would be assigned to the mock interview. It has been important to have “extra” coaches since it is common that some must cancel at the last moment or do not show up. The capstone instructor also assigns the student rotation for the three activities. This complex task may be adjusted at the last minute based on cancellations and other unexpected events.

The lead work-study student, under supervision of the capstone instructor, prepares folders that will be provided to each coach during the day’s orientation/training period. These folders are customized, with coaches receiving only the materials they will need for their activity (e.g. only mock interview resumes of students they are interviewing).

The RTE day and debrief

The RTE day begins an informal continental breakfast for all RealTest participants. This is the first time students meet alumni and members of the local business community who have agreed to serve as assessors (referred to as “coaches”). At the conclusion of the meal, students are excused to make their final preparations while coaches participate in an one-hour orientation for their assigned activity. During this orientation, a member of the faculty or Career Center provides each coach with their folder that includes a description of the preparation assignment given to students and its assessment criteria (refer Appendix A) along with information about expectations with respect to coaches’ written and oral feedback on student performance. After training for their role, coaches are escorted to their assigned rooms by available department faculty and sophomore/junior student workers.

During the day, there are three one-hour sessions for each activity. Typically, two mock interviews are done in the one-hour session time to accommodate the individual nature of this activity. Each coaching team facilitates two of their three one-hour sessions prior to lunch with students rotating throughout the day between the three activities.

Following the first two morning sessions, the participants’ network over lunch. Each table has every other chair designated as ‘STUDENT’ or ‘COACH’ so that participants are encouraged to engage in conversation. One member of the faculty, administration, or career staff also sits at each table. There is a short program at the beginning of lunch that includes introductions of all faculty, administration, career office, and alumni development staff plus acknowledgement of support staff who have contributed to the organization of the event. A member of the Alumni Association speaks and the Dean of the College of Business addresses the group. During lunch, students and coaches discuss career interests and advice, their morning experiences, or other topics of interest. After lunch, the last activity rotation takes place followed by a closing reception for additional networking. Coaches turn in their written feedback for all three sessions of their activity at the concluding reception.

Planning for the next year begins with a debrief meeting following each RTE. The de-brief and future planning meeting are attended by the capstone course instructor(s), the department chair, support staff from the Deans Office, and the lead work-study student assigned to the event. The group discusses areas of RTE success and concern, with attention to both

logistics and content.³ At the start of the subsequent fall semester, a “Save the Date” email goes out to prior coaches with follow-up emails later in the fall semester.

RTE activities and links to management program objectives

As noted above, RTE activities address learning objectives in the management program and professional development expectations of the College of Business and the University. Each of the three RTE activities and its relationship to relevant outcomes is described below. Feedback forms for each activity are provided in Appendix A, and assessment from the RTE used in our most recent Program Review is shown in Appendix B.

Problem-solving presentation

Problem-solving presentations are conducted in teams of two students each, with each pair of students assigned one of several possible cases (senior undergraduate or MBA-level management cases). Students are instructed to prepare a 40-minute presentation that addresses the key elements of the case, their analysis of the issues, and a recommended course of action. Teams are required to have a powerpoint presentation along with the oral presentation. The students’ presentation is delivered in a conference room to two or more coaches. Coaches evaluate the students’ performance as a team and individually. Coaches assess students on statements rating them as strongly agree, agree, agree somewhat, and not really (refer to Appendix A). After the presentation, coaches ask questions and provide students with oral feedback.

Related Program Goals: Apply theories and concepts of management and human resource management to develop strategies for improving the performance of people and processes in organizations (PLG 2).

Performance Criteria: Define problem, recognize cause, explain cause, apply theory, realistic solution, familiar with information, clarity, non-verbal communication, and PowerPoint quality.

Leaderless group discussion

For the leaderless group discussion (LGD) exercise, groups of students are presented with a managerial problem-solving case study to discuss. There are no assigned roles; therefore, it is considered leaderless. The LGD is made up of approximately five students. The student sit in a semicircle and the coaches sit so they can see the participants. The students are provided a short case to read at the start of the session. Once all the students are ready, the discussion begins (about 10 minutes). Students then have 30 minutes to discuss

the case. Each student has an individual observer assigned to evaluate their participation. Ideally, then, there are five coaches for five students; however, fewer coaches are possible if necessary. Coaches observe students and assess each student on 10 statements rating them as strongly agree, agree, agree somewhat, and not really (refer Appendix A). After the leaderless group discussion concludes, coaches provide students with feedback.

Related Program Goals: Perform well on teams, provide leadership, contribute and collaborate to achieve team goals (PLG 3); Apply theories and concepts of management and human resource management to develop strategies for dealing with organizational and interpersonal conflict (PLG 5).

Performance Criteria: Demonstrate leadership, participate, make suggestions, articulate, listen, support, provide constructive feedback, resolve disagreement, non-verbal communication, and attentive.

Mock interview

For the mock interview, students are tasked to identify prior to the RTE a specific employment opportunity of interest using the Career Center resources or other position listings. Students must provide the detailed job description for the position to the instructor. Students then prepare a cover letter and adjust their resume to target the specific job opportunity. Coaches, provided with the job description and student’s cover letter and resume, conduct the mock interview interaction as a simulated “real” job interview. Ideally, two coaches are assigned to each interview and receive the position ad and the student’s cover letter and resume. The coaches then conduct a 20-minute interview for the position. Following the interview, students are provided feedback. Coaches evaluate the students as *excellent*, *average*, or *needs work* based on a number of criteria. This is the only individual event and only 30-minutes in length per student. Therefore, two interviews are completed in each of the three one-hour time blocks during the day.

Related Program Goals: Professional Development Expectations at the College of Business and University

Performance Criteria: appearance, eye contact, handshake, posture, knowledge of position, ability to speak to qualifications, tone/confidence, and clear career goals.

Value of the realtest event for stakeholders

In addition to collecting assessment data for program development purposes, in 2017 we collected survey data from participants, coaches, and alumni to explore value

perceptions of the RealTest Event to the various stakeholders. Data in these surveys were collected for evaluation of the RTE and a separate, unrelated student research project. As such, some questions on the surveys served dual purposes to minimize the length of the survey. We highlight the results relevant to our considerations herein and provide the complete surveys in the Appendices in following sections.

Student participants

Sample

Surveys were distributed in class three days after the 2017 RTE to the students who participated. Twenty-four surveys were completed out of the 27 participants in the class, which was 56% women and 44% men.

Procedure

Surveys were anonymous with students given the option of not completing the survey. The survey took an average of 10 to 15 minutes to complete. There were two sections of the survey: in the first section, students rated statements about RTE and in the second section students rated statements about their experience for each of the three activities and overall. All statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale. Statements and results are shown in Appendix C.

Findings

Students' responses indicate very favorable reactions to the RTE overall, indicating that they view RTE as having contributed to their personal growth (100%, agree and strongly agree), increase their self-awareness (96%, agree and strongly agree), and an excellent networking opportunity (87%, agree and strongly agree). Students also felt that the experience helped them improve their skills and become more confident (84%, agree and strongly agree) and positively prepared them for entering the business world (96%, agree and strongly agree). Students evaluated the interview as the most helpful activity in providing an opportunity to practice and refine their skills while the problem-solving presentation was most helpful for them to learn their strengths and weaknesses.

Alumni and local business coaches

Sample

Coaches who participated in the 2017 RTE were surveyed, with a total of 15 surveys from the 21 participating coaches available for analysis.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed to coaches during the 2017 RTE and were requested to complete the anonymous survey and

return it at the end of the event. The survey took an average of 10 minutes to complete. The survey had two sections: in the first section, coaches rated statements about RTE generally and in the second section coaches identified the activity they coached and rated statements about the activity. All statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale. The second portion of the survey was on the back of the page, with only eight coaches completing this portion of survey statements intended to assess the efficacy of each activity related to leadership development, preparing participate for business, and similar themes. At the end of each section, space was provided for additional comments. Statements and results are shown in Appendix D.

Findings

Coaches were unanimous in their agreement (agree and strongly agree) that the RTE fostered personal growth and development in students; provided an excellent opportunity to network; and, was an excellent preparatory experience for student entering the business world. All agreed, and 96% of coaches strongly agreed, that the RTE gave students an opportunity to improve their skills and instill confidence.

RTE alumni

Sample

Eighty-four (84) management students who participated in the RTE in the last four years (2013–2016) were asked for feedback on the experience. Twenty-four (24) alumni completed the survey resulting in a 28.5% response rate.

Procedure

The survey was available through Survey Monkey, with invitations to participate sent to each alumni's University email as well as an alternate email, when available. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The survey included eight statements about the RTE that alumni rated on a five-point Likert scale. Alumni were asked to rank order the effectiveness of the three activities and respond to an open-ended question. Statements and results are shown in Appendix E.

Findings

Alumni found that the RTE contributed to their personal growth (96%, agree and strongly agree), increased their self-awareness (76%, agree and strongly agree), and helped improve their skills in a way made them more confident to enter the business world (80%, agree and strongly agree). Alumni agreed (80%, agree and strongly agree) that RTE provide exposure to realistic business challenges in an environment where they were able to

effectively practice and refine their skills and that RTE positively prepared them for entering the business world (96%). As one recent graduate commented,

“The RealTest was a great, and very useful, experience. I think it gives a good opportunity to take a look at yourself and your skills and apply them to realistic situations. Also, getting to interact with those outside of the normal day to day people I saw in class was a much more real environment, as we often get comfortable around the same faces but need to maintain those practices in front of the fresh audience. All in all it is a great activity to participate in.”

Conclusion

ACs are used for a variety of purposes in business settings, and in higher education, as noted above, have been used to develop skills, evaluate career readiness, as a predictor of early career success, and to measure student’s learning outcomes and necessary work-related competencies. Coupled with capstone experiences, ACs provide a meaningful and student-centered approach to establishing a variety of outcome-related evaluations of graduating students.

The emphasis is on the outcomes of these experiences for one stakeholder group: students. In this article, we extend prior insights by describing the benefits derived from the capstone/AC experience by the department, alumni, and the local business community. We highlight the ways in which the RealTest Event—as a capstone MGT experience built on an AC model—is a valuable tool that serves a variety of stakeholder needs. Students receive professional feedback about their skills and abilities as they prepare to make their transition to the workplace. Faculty received external feedback about student learning outcomes that allows continuous improvement of the design and delivery of program curriculum along with data for regional accreditation requirements. Alumni and local business community members benefit by reconnecting with their alma mater, providing service, and finding students to fill open positions in their organization. The experience also creates connection within multiple university groups—students, faculty, administration, career office staff, and alumni development—through engagement in a purposeful community event. As schedules and work demands for each stakeholder group increase, events like RTE represent an efficient and effective use of everyone’s time and resources.

For others interested in implementing such an approach, we believe there are three key factors that have contributed to the positive outcomes we experience with the RealTest Event. The first is department buy-in. Our small department of eight agreed over 10 years ago that RTE would be an “all department” experience, that it would serve our

majors, that we would include it in all sections of the capstone course for the major, and that all faculty needed to have a sense of ownership whether or not they were directly involved in delivery. Everyone in the department agreed to these assumptions, and all department members show up for the RTE breakfast, lunch, and/or closing reception to interact with and encourage students, network with alumni, and support the engagement of the local business community.

The second important factor also relates to the department. The department agreed to use the coaches’ honest feedback about student performance in the RTE as outcomes data for assessment and curriculum review. It is not enough for members of a department to simply agree to hold the event and support it on that day; the commitment needs to extend to the design of the AC approach and the use of data derived from it. As noted above, based on the outcome data, changes were made to the curriculum and the design of the event also has changed. For example, in the early years, students participated in an email inbox exercise. Based on feedback from coaches and our analysis of student performance, the department decided that a leaderless group discussion would be more appropriate for our program because it would produce outcomes data more clearly linked to our program learning goals.

The third factor is the availability of institutional resources. The most significant monetary cost for our RTE is food for breakfast, lunch, and the closing reception. These costs are covered by our Dean’s budget. In addition, there are resources of personnel allocated to the RTE including a work-study student, the Dean’s assistant, and several Dean’s Office staff who assist with logistics.⁴ Elsewhere in the University, the RTE receives support from the Alumni Development Office and the Career Center. The Alumni Development Office assists with identifying alumni to serve as coaches, solicits a lunch speaker, and commonly gives away swag at the closing reception. The Career Center provides pre-RTE assistance to students preparing their mock interview materials, helps train the coaches during orientation/training, and has agreed to use the assessment results to improve student support.

Notwithstanding the above, the time and resources invested in the RealTest program have created value for students as well. The AC format provides a series of real-life activities for students as they prepare to transition to the workplace, and students see it as a valuable element in their education, often showcasing it when talking to incoming students and parents. In sum, the RealTest Event is a concrete example that we point to when asked to provide data-driven evidence of effectiveness related to student knowledge and skills, and the efficacy of our management program.

Notes

1. This capstone course learning goal maps to our College's and University's career development learning objectives.
2. Students develop an initial resume in freshman seminar during the fall semester of their first year. Throughout their studies, students are invited to participate in a number of career exploration opportunities and internships. As seniors, students are encouraged to adapt the resume and cover letter as needed when applying for different positions.
3. For example, one year too much food was ordered for the number of people in attendance at breakfast, so a note was made to recalculate the food required per person. Relatedly, because we use rooms all over campus to ensure the right fit between the activity and the assigned room, coaches and students are not able to acquire refreshments once they leave the breakfast area. So, during one of these debrief meetings we determined that we needed to deliver water to each location and began to do so the next year. One year we noticed that despite having a good gender distribution in our original invitation email, we did not have many women in attendance as coaches. We then followed up with the Alumni Development Office to identify additional women coaches that we could add to our list. After discussing specific concerns, we estimate the number of students that will need the capstone course the following year so that we may identify the number of rooms that will be needed, select the date (a Friday in March) and reserve the desired rooms. In addition, the coaches list is reviewed to see what refinements can be made. Coaches who have not responded to our outreach for a few years are removed and we seek the assistance from faculty and the Alumni Development Office to identify regional alumni and local business leaders that can be added to our coaches list.
4. Not mentioned is support from colleagues in other departments, which we view as necessary resource for the RTE as well. RTE student participants must be excused from non-management classes for the day, and colleagues, both inside and outside the College, have readily made this accommodation.

Notes on contributor

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Appendix A. Feedback Forms

Problem-Solving Presentation Assessment Criteria
 Leaderless Group Discussion Assessment Criteria
 Mock Interview Assessment Criteria

Team	
1	The problem area was clearly defined.
2	The student recognized a variety of possible causes of the problem.
3	The student made clear how each of these potential causes might contribute to the problem.
4	The student used ideas from her/his management studies in developing recommendations for addressing the problem.
5	The students' recommendations were realistic.
Individual	
6	The student was familiar with the information in the presentation.
7	The student was clear in her/his expression/explanations.
8	The student's non-verbal expression was effective.
9	The student utilized PowerPoint effectively to support/enhance the presentation.
10	Student handled questions effectively/confidently.
Leaderless Group Discussion	
1	Demonstrated leadership at some point in the discussion by suggesting what the group's approach should be to completing its tasks or how an issue might be resolved.
2	Participated in discussion of what the group's approach should be to completing its task or to resolving an issue or question.
3	Suggested ideas that were relevant and useful to what the group was discussing.
4	Effectively articulated ideas and observations.
5	Listened actively to others' ideas and suggestions.
6	Provided encouragement/support to other members of the group.
7	Responded constructively in raising concerns about others' ideas.
8	Cooperated to enable the group to resolve points of disagreement.
9	Demonstrated appropriate non-verbal communication.
10	Maintained attention throughout the discussion.

Appendix B. Direct Assessment of Management Major Learning Goals

- 1 Professional appearance of candidate/dress.
- 2 Non-verbal communication: eye contact.
- 3 Non-verbal communication: handshake.
- 4 Non-verbal communication: posture.
- 5 Knowledge of company/position requirements.
- 6 Communication skills: candidate's ability to speak to his/her relevant qualifications.
- 7 Communication skills: tone of voice and level of self-confidence demonstrated by candidate.
- 8 Communication skills: clarity of candidate's ability to communicate his/her career goals.

Assessment of program learning goals was conducted using two activities from the RealTest Event and selected course materials. Detailed outcomes appear below.

Learning Goal #1: Management/Human Resource Management Concepts and Theories – Understand and Synthesize

The first program learning goal, relating to an understanding of concepts and theories of management and human resource management, was assessed through an essay assignment in MAN XXX that required students to address five basic management theories provided by the instructor, including a description and complete explanation of the concepts involved.

Competency Item	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Fails to Meet Expectations
Defines and explains fundamental components of management/HR theories	Correctly defines and explains all elements of each theory	Correctly defines and explains all elements of at least three theories	Fails to correctly define and explain all elements for fewer than three theories

Results

Number of Students Exceeding Expectations	Number of Students Meeting Expectations	Number of Students Failing to Meet Expectations
10 (36%)	12 (43%)	6 (21%)

Comments/observations: 79% of students met or exceeded expectations with regard to this program learning objective. However, while most students were able to demonstrate an adequate or superior ability to define and explain components of a limited selection of basic management theories, the essay nature of the assignment may not accurately reflect student knowledge or retention of the broader array of concepts and theories of management and human resource management. Expected change to be made as a result of assessment findings: Should this program goal be retained, exam materials from MAN XXX will be used for program assessment.

Learning Goal #2: Management/Human Resource Management Concepts and Theories – Application

The second program learning goal, the application of theories and concepts of management and human resource management to improve performance, was assessed using elements from the RealTest Exercise Problem Solving Presentation (PSP) and a case study from MAN XXX that asked students to use a familiar

problem-solving model to develop strategies for improving the performance of an organization's people and processes.

Problem Solving Presentation

MAN 4XX

Comments/observations: Results from the RealTest Exercise Problem-Solving Presentation indicate that 82%

Competency Items	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Fails to Meet Expectations
Define problem, recognize cause, explain cause, apply theory	Average score of 10.2 or above on 12 point scale	Average score of 8.4 > 10.19 on 12 point scale	Average score below 8.4 on 12 point scale

Number of Students Exceeding Expectations (%)	Number of Students Meeting Expectations (%)	Number of Students Failing to Meet Expectations (%)
15 (56%)	7 (26%)	5 (18%)

Number of Students Exceeding Expectations	Number of Students Meeting Expectations	Number of Students Failing to Meet Expectations
3 (11%)	12 (43%)	13 (46%)

Competency Item	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Fails to Meet Expectations
Identifies appropriate theory and applies it correctly to support strategy for performance improvement	Identifies appropriate theory and provides explanation for its application to proposed strategy	Identifies appropriate theory but exhibits limited discussion of how it applies to proposed strategy	Fails to identify theory used and/or little or no discussion of theory with respect to proposed strategy

of students met or exceeded expectations. These results are complicated, however, by the team-based nature of the activity whereby two individuals worked together on the presentation. The low score for meet and exceeds expectations (54%) on the course-based assessment, well below the standard, suggests that students need additional practice and reinforcement for providing the theoretical and conceptual basis for proposed performance improvement strategies. Assessors reading the essays noted that while students appeared readily able to offer appropriate strategies for performance improvement, they employed little to no theoretical or conceptual framing for their proposed strategies. Some of this may be explained by the nature of the assignment, which placed significant emphasis on a problem-solving model and did not ask specifically for theoretical justification.

Expected change to be made as a result of assessment findings: In classroom discussion and via exemplars in MAN 3XX and MAN 3XX, additional emphasis will be placed on identifying applicable theories and concepts for performance improvement. A revised assignment in MAN 4XX will be used for program assessment.

Learning Goal #3: Teams and Team Leadership

The third program learning goal, to perform well on teams, provide leadership, contribute and collaborate to achieve team goals, was assessed using elements from the RealTest Exercise Leaderless Group Discussion (LGD) and a team project in MAN 4XX, which asked students to provide an assessment of their team leader following the conclusion of the project. Leaderless Group Discussion

Competency Items	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Fails to Meet Expectations
Participate, make suggestions, provide constructive feedback, attentive	Average score of 3.4 or above on 4 point scale	Average score of 2.8 < 3.39 on 4 point scale	Average score below 2.8 on 4 point scale

Number of Students Exceeding Expectations (%)	Number of Students Meeting Expectations (%)	Number of Students Failing to Meet Expectations (%)
21 (78%)	5 (18%)	1 (4%)

MAN 4XX

Competency Item	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Fails to Meet Expectations
Demonstrates leadership, contribution, and collaboration in accomplishment of team goals	All team members rated performance at 9 out of 10	All team members rated leader performance at 8 or better out of 10	Fails to meet a minimum of 8 out of 10 from all team members

Number of Students Exceeding Expectations (%)	Number of Students Meeting Expectations (%)	Number of Students Failing to Meet Expectations (%)
13 (46%)	12 (42%)	3 (12%)

Comments/observations: With respect to team performance, 96% of students met or exceeded expectations for assessed elements in the RealTest Exercise Leaderless Group Discussion and 88% of students met or exceeded expectations for the MAN 4XX assessment.

Expected change to be made as a result of assessment findings: None

Learning Goal #4: Developmental Performance Feedback

The fourth program learning goal, to demonstrate skill and competency in developmental performance feedback, was assessed using a performance appraisal feedback interview role-play in MAN 3XX. During the exercise, students play the role of a supervisor providing performance appraisal feedback to an employee and the role of employee is played by a faculty member. Audio recordings of role plays were used for program assessment purposes.

Competency Items	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Fails to Meet Expectations
In order: (1) establishes rapport; (2) provides positive feedback; (3) moves to elements for improvement using "I" with examples and details along with negative consequences of problem behavior; (4) establishes performance improvement plan	Covers all four elements and in the correct order.	Covers at least three of the four elements.	Fails to cover at least three items.

Number of Students Exceeding Expectations	Number of Students Meeting Expectations	Number of Students Failing to Meet Expectations
6 (38%)	8 (50%)	2 (12%)

Comments/observations: 88% of students met or exceeded expectations with regard to this program learning objective. While the majority of the students demonstrated adequate or superior understanding of the basic considerations in developmental performance feedback, only slightly more than one third of the sample population was able to do so in the correct order. Expected change to be made as a result of assessment findings: In MAN 3XX, more time will be spent covering the sequential nature of developmental feedback and students will have additional opportunities to practice this skill in MAN 2XX and MAN 3XX.

Learning Goal #5: Organizational and Interpersonal Conflict

The fifth program learning goal, to apply theories and concepts of management and human resource management to develop strategies for dealing with organizational and interpersonal conflict, was assessed using elements from the RealTest Exercise Leaderless Group Discussion (LGD)

Leaderless Group Discussion

Competency Items	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Fails to Meet Expectations
Active listening, resolve disagreement, constructive feedback	Average score of 3.4 or above on 4 point scale	Average score of 2.8 < 3.39 on 4 point scale	Average score below 2.8 on 4 point scale

Number of Students Exceeding Expectations (%)	Number of Students Meeting Expectations (%)	Number of Students Failing to Meet Expectations (%)
14 (54%)	10 (38%)	2 (8%)

Comments/observations: 92% of students met or exceeded expectations with regard to this program learning objective as measured by elements in the RealTest Exercise. However, given the absence of course based assessment to glean students' command of theories and concepts in this area, the results should not be considered to indicate a superior level of accomplishment.

Expected change to be made as a result of assessment findings: An appropriate course-based assignment will be developed for MAN 4XX.

Appendix C. Student Participant Survey

RealTest experience Survey

To assess how students feel about their experience in the RealTest, I am surveying student participants. This is part of my senior's honors research project. While you are not required to respond to this survey, your answers would be of great value in understanding the student experience during the RealTest. Your responses will be kept confidential and will only be reported in summary form. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey. Please check the box below that best represents how you feel about each of the following statements. Resulting means are presented in the table with n in parentheses.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Answer
Participating in RealTest has contributed to my personal growth.	58%(14)	42%(10)				
My experience with RealTest has helped increase my self-awareness.	38%(9)	58%(14)	4%(1)			
I feel as if I have enhanced my abilities as a leader from partaking in the RealTest Experience.	29%(7)	46%(11)	25%(6)			
I found that the feedback from coaches about my individual accomplishments and areas for improvement contributed to my development as a leader.	26%(6)	52%(12)	22%(5)			1
Receiving feedback helped me to pin point what makes me more or less effective relative to the goals I want to attain.	26%(6)	52%(12)	17%(4)	5%(1)		1
Man 466 has helped to improve my knowledge and conceptual understanding of leadership.	67%(16)	29%(7)	4%(1)			
I was able to effectively apply my knowledge on the topic of leadership to the activities during RealTest.	42%(10)	54%(13)	4%(1)			
RealTest provided me with an excellent networking opportunity.	35%(8)	52%(12)	5%(1)	8%(2)		1
Participating in RealTest was an individual experience but it also required teamwork and collaboration to succeed.	70%(16)	30%(7)				1
The RealTest experience helped me improve my skills in such a way that helped me to become more confident.	38%(9)	46%(11)	17%(4)			
My overall experience with RealTest was beneficial and positively contributed to my preparations to enter the business world, upon graduation.	58%(14)	38%(9)	4%(1)			

RealTest Activities Survey

For each activity please rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest, 5 being the highest), the level at which you agree with each of the following statements. The means are presented in table with standard deviation in parentheses.

Statement	Overall RealTest		Leaderless Group	Problem Solving
	Experience	Interview	Discussion	Presentation
Provided me with feedback which critiqued my performance and directed me toward specific strengths and weaknesses.	4.19 (.66)	4.09 (1.04)	3.50 (1.20)	3.91 (1.12)
Provided me with the opportunity to practice and refine my skills.	4.52 (.66)	4.50 (.89)	4.05 (.82)	4.30 (.62)
Created an environment within which learning and behavioral changes can occur.	4.33 (.64)	4.09 (1.00)	4.18 (.72)	4.17 (.64)
Demanded me to take initiative and responsibility.	4.52 (.50)	4.27 (.75)	4.23 (.79)	4.61 (.49)
Allowed for discovery and learning from and with each other.	4.57 (.49)	4.14 (.99)	4.41 (.58)	4.41 (.65)
Activity allowed for leadership skills to be practiced.	4.24 (.81)	3.68 (1.06)	4.32 (.82)	4.04 (.91)
Required a conceptual understanding of leadership to succeed.	4.43 (.73)	3.86 (.97)	4.32 (.76)	4.39 (.77)
Allowed for feedback which helped me learn about my strengths and weaknesses in a number of leadership skills.	4.43 (.66)	4.14 (.92)	4.00 (1.00)	4.36 (.71)
Allowed for exposure and relationship building with business professionals.	4.52 (.85)	4.23 (1.13)	4.05 (1.07)	4.14 (.87)
Allowed for interactions that expanded my horizons and afforded me an opportunity to learn.	4.52 (.66)	4.29 (.82)	4.14 (.89)	4.38 (.58)
Induced reflection on behaviors, personal values, and desires.	4.43 (.85)	4.32 (1.00)	4.14 (.97)	4.27 (.81)
Challenged me to focus on topics such as goals, personal mission, and experiences.	4.14 (.94)	4.05 (1.11)	3.91 (1.00)	3.91 (.95)
Was a means for providing me with information, support, and challenge necessary to meet my developmental needs.	4.29 (.82)	3.95 (1.07)	4.18 (.89)	4.27 (.86)
Required an application of my knowledge on the topic of leadership.	4.38 (.65)	4.09 (.90)	4.05 (1.15)	4.30 (.69)
Provided an environment where students can be fully engaged in "doing their best" for outside observers/business professionals.	4.67 (.47)	4.27 (1.01)	4.45 (.72)	4.59 (.65)

Appendix D. Alumni and Local Business Coaches Survey

RealTest experience Survey

To assess how coaches feel about the student experience in the RealTest, I am surveying coaches. This is part of my senior's honors research project. While you are not required to respond to this survey, your answers would be of great value in understanding the student experience during the RealTest. Your responses will be kept confidential and will only be reported in summary form. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey. Please check the box below that best represents how you feel about each of the following statements. Resulting means are presented in the table with n in parenthesis.

Statement	Response				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Participants in the RealTest experienced activities in which fostered personal growth and development.	64% (9)	36% (5)			
The activities in the RealTest provide an opportunity for participants to become more self-aware leaders, better preparing them to lead others.	43% (6)	50% (7)	7% (1)		
Providing students with coaching and constructive feedback on their individual accomplishments greatly contributed to their leadership development.	79% (11)	21% (3)			
Feedback was given to students in which gave them an awareness of what made them more or less effective relative to the specific goals they want to attain.	86% (12)	14% (2)			
The students possessed knowledge and conceptual understanding on the topic of leadership which aided in their performance during RealTest.	36% (5)	43% (6)	21% (3)		
RealTest activities required students to effectively apply their knowledge of leadership in order to perform well.	43% (6)	43% (6)	7% (1)	7% (1)	
The RealTest provided students with an excellent opportunity to network with business professionals.	86% (12)	14% (2)			
Participating in the RealTest required individuals to demonstrate teamwork and collaboration to succeed.	43% (6)	29% (4)	21% (3)	7% (1)	
RealTest activities provided students with the opportunity to improve their skills in ways in which instill confidence in the individual.	93% (13)	7% (1)			
The students participation in RealTest acted as an excellent preparatory experience for their entrance into the business world.	86% (12)	14% (2)			
I had the opportunity/ability to instill knowledge to the students.	86% (12)	7% (1)	7% (1)		

Additional Comments:

Appendix E. RTE Alumni Survey

RealTest Survey

While you are not required to respond to this survey, your answers would be of great value in understanding the student experience during the RealTest. Your responses will be kept confidential and will only be reported in summary form. Resulting means are presented in the table with n in parenthesis.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Weighted Average
Participating in RealTest acted as an excellent preparatory experience for entering into the business world.	40% (10)	56% (14)	4% (1)			4.36
Participating in RealTest contributed to my personal growth.	36% (9)	60% (15)		4% (1)		4.28
My experience with RealTest helped increase my self-awareness.	32% (8)	44% (11)	16% (4)	4% (1)	4% (1)	3.96
The RealTest provided exposure to realistic business challenges in an environment where I was able to effectively practice and refine my skills.	32% (8)	48% (12)	16% (4)	4% (1)		4.08
The RealTest experience helped me improve my skills in such a way that helped me to become more confident to enter the business world.	48% (12)	32% (8)	16% (4)	4% (1)		4.24
I found that the feedback I received from coaches about my individual accomplishments, strengths, and areas for improvement contributed to my development as a leader.	40% (10)	28% (7)	24% (6)	4% (1)	4% (1)	3.81
The feedback I had received during RealTest helped me to pin point what made me more or less effective relative to the goals I want to attain.	16% (4)	60% (15)	16% (4)	4% (1)		3.92
The RealTest activities provided me the opportunity to effectively apply my knowledge on the topic of leadership to realistic business challenges.	24% (6)	60% (15)	16% (4)			4.08

RealTest Survey

Rank each RealTest activity on how helpful you found it to be in developing your leadership skills.

Statement	1	2	3	Total	Score
Mock Interview	56.52 (13)	17.39% (4)	26.09% (6)	23	2.30
Problem Solving Presentation	22.73% (5)	50% (11)	27.27% (8)	22	1.95
Leaderless Group Discussion	13.04% (3)	34.78% (8)	52.17% (12)	23	1.81

As an alumnus of Western new England and RealTest, do you have any recommendations for improving the experience to better prepare you for the workplace?