

# how-to guide to caring community youth capstone

MAKING  
CARING  
COMMON  
PROJECT



## GRADES

8–12

## IMPLEMENTED BY

Teaching staff, students

## TIME & RESOURCE INTENSITY



Responsibility; Ethical identity development; Moral reflection; Community engagement

## Overview

How can we inspire and teach young people to care about and take responsibility for others, to think clearly about and pursue justice, to stand up for important principles? Much research suggests that developing these key moral capacities is not achieved via one-shot class assignments or brief programs but through sustained commitment and reflection within the context of peer and adult relationships. Yet children rarely engage in either substantial ethical activities or reflection, guided by adults who stand for important moral values, or even dialogue about how to live those values day to day.

Shared experiences and rituals can tie together school and community as places that value care and commitment and play a vital part in fostering a moral identity in students. The Caring Community Youth Capstone supports young people's ethical development and builds a positive school culture where young people are responsible for creating a caring community. The Youth Capstone experience is comprised of essential principles and practices, but it is flexible so that educators may implement these elements in the ways that are best for their students. The key is to make the Capstone experience a valued part of school life, sending a message to students, parents, and the community that care and commitment have an important place at the school.

The Youth Capstone provides students opportunities to undertake a semester or year-long experience that involves activities that promote appreciation of others, a more complex notion of justice, and greater responsibility for the school community. This semi-structured, facilitated process is guided by an adaptable "curricula" comprised of a series of projects and activities, such as writing a biography of someone who has been invisible to you in your community, or developing a video game or board game that promotes perspective-taking and responsibility for others. The activities themselves are accompanied by a reflection component, such as brief readings, group discussions, and journaling. At the core and culmination of the experience, students will gather at a school ceremony or event where they display their projects or perform in ways that reflect their growth and accumulated knowledge.

### Key Elements of Youth Capstone

**Create a school ritual of ethical identity development.**

Promote community caring as a social norm. Works to create a caring, nurturing environment where it is understood as commonplace to prioritize the feelings and well-being of others. Adolescents become more prone to focus outward, toward the greater community.

**Key Benefits of Youth Capstone**

Helps foster the ethical and emotional capacities of all students – including those you may not notice day-to-day.

**Degree of Difficulty**

Youth Capstone is a semester or yearlong commitment that requires time and planning.

Sets a standard for youth in the school that says they are ethically accountable for the choices that they make. The activity also strengthens relationships within the school community and helps youth appreciate the importance of valuing the perspectives of others.

The Youth Capstone Guide document provides general suggestions for activities that may work well for your school. The general structure of each is as follows:

- *Location* – Activities take place in, or are grounded in, the school community.
- *Time* – A series of scaffolded activities that range in complexity take place throughout the year.
- *Leadership* – The project is facilitated by adults, usually teachers. It will sometimes involve partnership with adult mentors: relatives, coaches, religious leaders, and community leaders.
- Teachers leading the project will participate in reflective practice and low-burden professional development before, during, and after the Capstone.

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## CAPACITIES PROMOTED

Responsibility; Ethical identity development; Moral reflection; Community engagement



### Objectives

- To engage students in habits of caring and ethical reflection
- To create an overarching structure for ethical identity development activities in the school
- To create a strong school ritual and a narrative—a common school story about how the school acts as a caring and ethical community



### Time Required

- The Youth Capstone takes place over a full semester or school year
- 1.5 hour initial staff meeting
- The Youth Capstone activities are designed to be flexible and accommodating to the school community and needs, though several core elements should be common to all activities



### Materials Required

- Many of the Youth Capstone activities can be integrated directly as part of the standard curriculum or may supplement regular material during advisory periods. The activities are designed to adapt to the resources already available in the school.



### Advance Preparation

- Planning and design should take place prior to the academic year. The sooner in advance teachers can prepare, the better the experience is likely to be. If possible, youth capstone organizer or a small group of organizers should be appointed to coordinate with all teachers.



### Other Considerations

- The Youth Capstone is designed for middle and high school students, but may be particularly beneficial to students making transitions, such as incoming freshmen or graduating seniors.

# YOUTH CAPSTONE OVERVIEW

## PROCESS OVERVIEW

The Youth Capstone Project begins with reflective and exploratory activities that help students to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their community. Through this process, students recognize and value others and their community. Building on these exercises, students will identify a project that is tied to their school community. Finally, students will present their projects at a culminating celebration.

### Core Components:

- Students strengthen their ethical understanding and awareness for others
- Students engage in a community-building project individually or in small groups
- All students have at least one adult to facilitate and support them through the project, while also encouraging them to take ownership and responsibility for themselves and the school community
- Students share their projects with the school community

### Flexible Ongoing Components:

- External community member mentors
- Self-reflection exercises/journal log

### Sample Curriculum Plan

Week 1	Introduce Youth Capstone Show Previous Projects
Week 2	Identify Core Values Activity
Week 3	Circle of Concern Activity Interview Someone New Activity
Week 4	Project Planning and Proposal
Week 5	Project Planning Advisor Meeting
Week 6	Midpoint Reflection Project Work
Week 7	Project Work
Week 8	Presentation Planning
Week 9	Project Presentation

## ADVANCED PREPARATION .....

The Youth Capstone program must be designed prior to the year or semester in which it will take place.

### **When to Conduct the Program**

This guide is designed with flexibility in order to accommodate the unique needs and resources of varying schools. It is up to the project organizer at each school to make detailed choices based on what works best for the context.

- ✓ The program should be conducted over the course of a semester or year.
- ✓ The program is designed for middle and high school students and should be a year long in duration. School might consider using the Youth Capstone for students making transitions, such as incoming ninth graders or graduating seniors.
- ✓ In schools, the activities are well-suited to advisory periods, English, social studies or civics classes, and service learning time.
- ✓ Activities could also take place in out-of-school time programs or as part of community service projects.

### **Planning Activities**

The Youth Capstone Project is comprised of several sequential activities, some of which are recurring. These include reflection exercises and activities that help students understand and value the perspectives of school community members. We suggest the following preparations:

- ✓ A Youth Capstone Organizer should be designated. This may be a small group or an individual such as a teacher, counselor, or principal. The Youth Capstone Organizer will be responsible for communication and coordination among teachers whose students will be participating in the Youth Capstone.
- ✓ Have at least one preliminary meeting with teachers and with students to review the timeline and activities. Allow time for questions and be sure that all teachers are on board and have a clear understanding how to implement the Youth Capstone. You may also want to inform parents about the project during a parent night or school mailing.

Note: Specific activities may require advance preparation and will be outlined as part of the guide document for the activity.

## IMPLEMENTATION

### **How to Use This Guide:**

The following guide provides a set of six suggested steps for implementing the Youth Capstone Project at your school. Each step provides a broad overview of each stage of the project. Note that many of the steps may include several activities over the duration of one or several weeks, while other steps may only have one single activity. Several suggestions and examples are provided; however, your school will ultimately have to decide the specific structure and activities for each step during the planning phase.

## **STEP ONE: INTRODUCE THE YOUTH CAPSTONE PROJECT**

### **Explain the project and purpose**

- ✓ Realize important values such as caring and respect
- ✓ Strengthen school community
- ✓ Consider highlighting stages of the Youth Capstone Project:
  - Explore your own values and beliefs
  - Understand and value others' values and beliefs
  - Get to know your school community through activities that expand your circle of concern; for example, by creating a biography of someone you don't know
  - Plan a school-based project that makes your school a more caring and ethical place; for example, by developing a social media page where students share positive messages or starting a new school group to connect incoming freshmen with senior mentors
  - Share your project and experience with your school

### **Show or give examples of previous projects**

- ✓ Give examples of a range of projects, but emphasize that students will be creating their own project
- ✓ Here are a few project examples. Please see the Supplementary Guide for a list of additional project examples.
  - Initiating a new student group that connects incoming students with mentors
  - Videotaping various school community members about what constitutes a just and caring school community.
  - Creating a work of art for the school that expresses values such as caring and justice
  - Creating a video game that promotes caring and enables students to take the perspectives of diverse community members

### **CONSIDER THIS**

Invite older students to explain the Youth Capstone Project and share the projects they chose.

## Explain the main project activities and timeline

- ✓ Consider highlighting the following:
  - Reflective and exploratory activities with themes of self, other, and community
  - Choosing and planning a school-based project
  - Working with an adult supervisor or mentor
  - Presenting the project at a celebratory culmination event
- ✓ If you choose to use a timeline or calendar of deadlines, hand this out to students to give them a more concrete sense of project responsibilities and expectations for student involvement.
- ✓ Share any other relevant details such as where and when they will work on the Youth Capstone.
- ✓ Allow time for students to ask questions.

### CONSIDER THIS

For additional guidelines and specific activities to support this stage of the project, please see the Supplementary Guide. This document provides a timeline with specific activities to follow.

## STEP TWO: LEARNING ABOUT ONESELF

### Identifying personal core values and establishing a vision for a positive moral self

- ✓ Explain that the Youth Capstone is an experience that helps guide students to think about what a caring and ethical community is and that helps students build that community. Engage students in discussions about what it means to be a young adult.
- ✓ Use classroom discussions, journaling, or other activities that encourage students to reflect on their own values. These activities may be completed during advisory periods or academic classes. Reflections can also be completed as take-home assignments. Below is a list of possible questions or themes you might consider:
  - *What does it mean to be morally responsible for your actions?*
  - *Who is in and out of your circle of concern—the people you think about and care about every day—and how can you expand your circle of concern beyond your immediate friend group?*
  - *What do you see as your ethical responsibilities as an adult?*
  - *What are your ethical roles and responsibilities as a student?*
  - *What ethical values do you think the school stands for?*
  - *What ethical values would you like the school to stand for?*
  - *How do your ethical values align with the values of the school?*

- *How can you support the collective or shared ethical values of your school such as caring, honesty, and respect?*

### STEP THREE: LEARNING ABOUT THE SCHOOL

In this step, students will get to know individuals in their school community who they might not know.

#### Broadening students' circles of care and creating opportunities for moral action

- ✓ Activities in this stage of the project should encourage students to get to know perspectives other than their own and beyond their group of friends. This may mean extending themselves to get to know individuals or groups beyond the classroom and grade level.
- ✓ Encourage students to be curious about others' perspectives, interests, and experiences. Consider using role plays, interviews, or other activities that foster an awareness and understanding of others. Please see the Supplementary Guide for additional activities and guidelines.

#### CONSIDER THIS

If your school has already developed a strong school community or students are isolated in some way, consider expanding the Capstone to include the wider community outside of the school. Projects should still be tied back to the school community in some way.

### STEP FOUR: ENACTING A COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECT, PART I

#### Students choose and plan their projects

- ✓ Each student chooses an issue to work on individually or in pairs or small groups. Mentors assist students in choosing and developing a meaningful project.
- ✓ Projects may be large or small in scope. There are a number of websites that offer support on designing and carrying out great projects that engage students with their community. Please see the Supplementary Guide for a list of websites.
- ✓ The key to a Youth Capstone community-based project is that it is designed to help students further explore who they are and how they can become more responsible members of their communities. The project should be designed to meet two key criteria:
  - Offer students an experience of caring about other people and creating positive change in their community.
  - Offer students the autonomy to make choices about how they carry out their own project.

### STEP FIVE: ENACTING A COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECT, PART II

#### Students engage in carrying out their project with support and ongoing reflection



- ✓ Set up times for students to check in with their advisor and/or mentor.
- ✓ Students should complete a midpoint reflection to consider what they have learned thus far as well as to reflect on any challenges that have come up.
- ✓ Give students the time and independence to work autonomously, but make supports such as resources or additional meetings available.

## STEP SIX: CELEBRATORY PRESENTATION

### Presenting the culminating Youth Capstone Project

- ✓ Approximately one month prior to the end of the Youth Capstone Project, students should begin preparing a final presentation. Explain that the aim of the presentation is to share their project with others and to respond to the following reflection questions:
  - *What is my significance and role as a member of the greater community?*
  - *How has my identity as a responsible and ethical community member grown?*
- ✓ Explain that students may use the products that they have created throughout the course of the program for their final presentation, as well as documentation of their accomplishments and contributions to the community.
- ✓ A presentation may take any format, but must be presented before members of the school community (e.g., a school assembly, family night event). Presentation formats might include a speech, a video, a website/e-portfolio, or artwork accompanied by an explanation.
- ✓ A class discussion can provide a starting point for students to begin thinking about their presentations. Questions could include:
  - *How has taking part in the Capstone experience changed the way you think and act?*
  - *How has taking part in the Capstone experience changed the way you feel about your school and/or your community?*
  - *When you think about the people in your school and community, who do you think of?*
  - *How have you taken a role in changing your school and/or community?*
- ✓ Students, parents, mentors, and any other participating community members should be present at the final ceremony.

### Final Reflection

- ✓ Developing the skills and habits for self-reflection is a vital part of the Capstone experience. After the presentations, give students the opportunity to evaluate their work, either orally or in writing. Pose questions to help them address both the quality of their work and the quality of the care and commitment they showed over the experience.