

# Sociology Capstone Guide

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# AN OVERVIEW OF CAPSTONE OPTIONS

The capstone is an independent project on a topic of the student's choosing. There are a variety of formats which the capstone can take.

Currently, there are four general options:

- **Traditional Thesis Capstone:** A traditionally structured, 35-page, sociological paper. You might use qualitative or quantitative methods to test a hypothesis, describe some phenomenon, or you may explore theory surrounding an important sociological problem, or a combination of these. For more, see pages 3-6.
- **Community Based Research Capstone:** A collaborative research project between you and Colorado Springs community members, with the goal of generating forms of knowledge that challenge dominant power relations. For more, see page 9.
- **Applied Sociology Capstone:** You utilize your sociological research skills to collect and analyze data and to report the findings to a client or organization, so as to help them understand and resolve pragmatic concerns related to their work. For more see page 10.
- **Documentary Film Capstone:** You investigate a sociological issue, topic, or question *visually*, using the tools of film/video technique to delve more deeply into the subject matter than would be possible in the traditional written form. For more see page 10.

If you choose a Community Based Research, Applied, or Documentary Film Capstone, it may still be helpful to refer to some of the pages cataloged under Traditional Thesis Capstone. These include Developing a Qualitative Research Question (p. 3), Developing a Quantitative Research Question (p. 4), and Formatting Conventions (p. 6).

# Traditional Thesis Capstone

## Developing a Qualitative Research Question

*advice from Professor Vanessa Lopes Muñoz*

### **Part 1: Qualitative Research Questions aim to explain:**

1. How does (did) something happen (social processes) – for example, you may take a quantitative study (nurse midwives have high rates of burn-out) and decide to try to explain the underlying social processes qualitatively
2. What was the meaning to participants (meaning making)
3. What happened over time (changing social processes)

### **Part 2: Questions to consider when developing a research question**

1. Can my question be studied qualitatively? (see part 1)
2. Is there available data that can be readily converted into rich descriptive text (field notes, interview transcripts, documents) or images?
3. Do I have easy access to the group of people, setting, or documents that will provide me with this textual data?

### **Part 3: Ways to think about your “case” study**

1. Ask: What is this a case of? (i.e.; nurse midwives may be a case of carework, health occupations, fields with high burnout rates, gendered occupations, birth, alternative medicine, work-family balance). You may generate questions based on these different sociological areas of inquiry
2. Ask: Are there any unique elements of this particular case that I can use to contribute to the existing literature?
3. Ask: Would a comparison be helpful here? (Be careful because comparisons can sometimes introduce too many variables, and not allow you to obtain depth; helpful for content analysis, may be overkill for data creation, such as interviews or observations)

**Be Nimble** – begin literature searching early and read broadly. Having already taken courses that cover the conceptual topics related to your interests is very helpful. After you collect data, be prepared to return to the literature and possibly shift the framing of your paper depending on what you find in your data.

# Developing a Quantitative Research Question

## *advice from Professor Wade Roberts*

The enterprise of sociology revolves heavily around the idea that social life is *patterned*. Outcomes of concern (e.g., trust, income, life expectancy, identity, creativity, religiosity, economic development, poverty, etc.) all *vary* – over time (or not), across place, and across populations (or some combination of these three dimensions – e.g., the social reproduction of racial wealth inequality over time). Think for a moment – sociology often concerns itself with questions of social change or social reproduction (temporal (in)variation); spatial inequality and/or regional (policy-based) variation; and/or social differences/inequities across socially meaningful/consequential groupings or categories. We develop and draw on theories to highlight patterned outcomes and identify associated causal conditions, factors, and processes that account for those outcomes. Causal factors (e.g., race, class, gender) must *co-vary* with the outcome in some systematic way if they are to find support as causal factors. Thus, variation and co-variation are at the core of quantitative sociological investigations, where we test hypotheses by assessing co-variation among independent and dependent *variables*.

### **The Process**

1. I often start by contemplating possible outcomes (dependent variable(s)). This requires being familiar with the topic/literature (think back on the courses you've taken). I also keep in mind the possible levels of analysis at which I might approach the topic (see next section).
2. I then draw on the literature to identify causal factors that might help account for variation in the dependent variable(s).
3. During this process, I also search for existing data on which I might test my hypotheses. I do this by keeping an eye on the literature I'm reading (what data do they use? Is it accessible?), searching ICPSR, searching the internet for data sources, or determining whether I could survey a population to which I have access.
4. I arrive at a feasible project based on a somewhat iterative process – letting the literature inform/hone my question(s), but also balancing that against the reality of feasibility. Put simply, many great projects never get done because the data just don't exist or would be too arduous/expensive to collect. Going back and forth between the literature and knowing the existing data helps you arrive at an interesting, yet feasible research project.

### **Level of Analysis**

Keep in mind that you can approach quantitative theses at a number of levels and your research question(s) would reflect this. Which level you choose depends in large part on your question(s), but also the availability of data (see feasibility/adaptation below). Common levels of analysis include:

- Cross-national
- State-level
- County-level
- Tract-level (common to GIS-based projects)
- Individual-level (common to survey-based projects, either collected on your own or using an ICPSR data set).

You'll often find that for any topic of interest, one can tackle one's interest at more than one of these levels. It typically just requires a tweak of the question.

### **Kinds of Quantitative Questions/Design**

Quantitative research questions tend to focus on causal relationships among variables across a large number of cases. While we can use quantitative methods to test hypotheses about mediating variables (mechanisms), the approach is not well suited to unpacking *process* (e.g., the unfolding of interactions) or complex meaning-making. Those concerns are better left to qualitative approaches. Some examples of quantitative research question(s) (as always, analyses should be informed by theory):

- **Standard:** Do X1, X2...X4 help account for variation in Y?
- **Standard + effect size/explanatory power:** Which factors matter? Matter the most (account for more of the variance in Y)?
- **Standard + emphasis on unique effects:** Does X1 have an effect on Y, even after controlling for X2? (e.g., is there an independent race effect, even after controlling for SES?)
- **Mediation and structural equation modeling:** Does X1 account for variation in Y? Does X2? Does X2 *mediate* the relationship between X1 and Y (i.e., is it a mediating variable)?
- **Interaction effect:** Does the impact of X1 on Y differ depending on the value of X2? In other words, is X1's effect contingent on X2?

### **Feasibility and Adaptation of Qs/Interests**

**Feasibility:** This has to be an overriding concern when considering thesis topics and questions. Quite simply, do you have access to the data you would need to address your question(s)? That might mean having access to a population you can survey, data from existing sources (e.g., Census data; state-level data), or existing secondary data sets (e.g., ICPSR data sets).

**Adaption:** Ultimately, you may need to adapt your interests/questions in light of feasibility and/or availability of data.

**In practice:** What does this mean in practice? As you read the literature, keep an eye on the data used in studies. Is this data publicly available? Could you replicate that data through a survey of CC students/faculty/staff? It also means you will need to

spend time perusing data sets to see what is out there. What data sets seem promising, topically-speaking? What variables do they offer? Do they capture your concepts of interest (either through existing variables or possible composite variables)? Will the data be adequate to address your questions? Keep in mind that it is rare to find the perfect data set. Compromise/adaptation is almost always necessary.

### Recent Examples of Quantitative Theses

- Alina Drufovka – digital/usage divide; Current Population Survey Supplement
- Chandler Hartnett – mortgage lending discrimination (race); redlining (neighborhood composition); Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data
- McKenna Asakawa – Sense of belonging at CC; in various domains; race/class; CC survey
- Nicole Hansen – Sexual assault rates across campuses; % frat, FBS school, inst. support score; Sexual assault survey data; other data sources
- Ann Fenley – organizational dimension of urban inequality – payday lenders; ACS data
- Hannah Wear – Social Disparities in Blood Lead Levels: Biologically Embedded and Spatially Patterned; NHANES
- Jordan Savold – The effects of social context and demographics on Behavior and Performance at a Charter Middle School (honors program).

## Formatting Conventions

Traditional Thesis Capstones are modeled after sociological journal articles and adhere to all of the following formatting conventions. Other capstone options that include a written portion should also adhere to these conventions when appropriate; you should discuss the format best suited to your specific project with your thesis advisor.

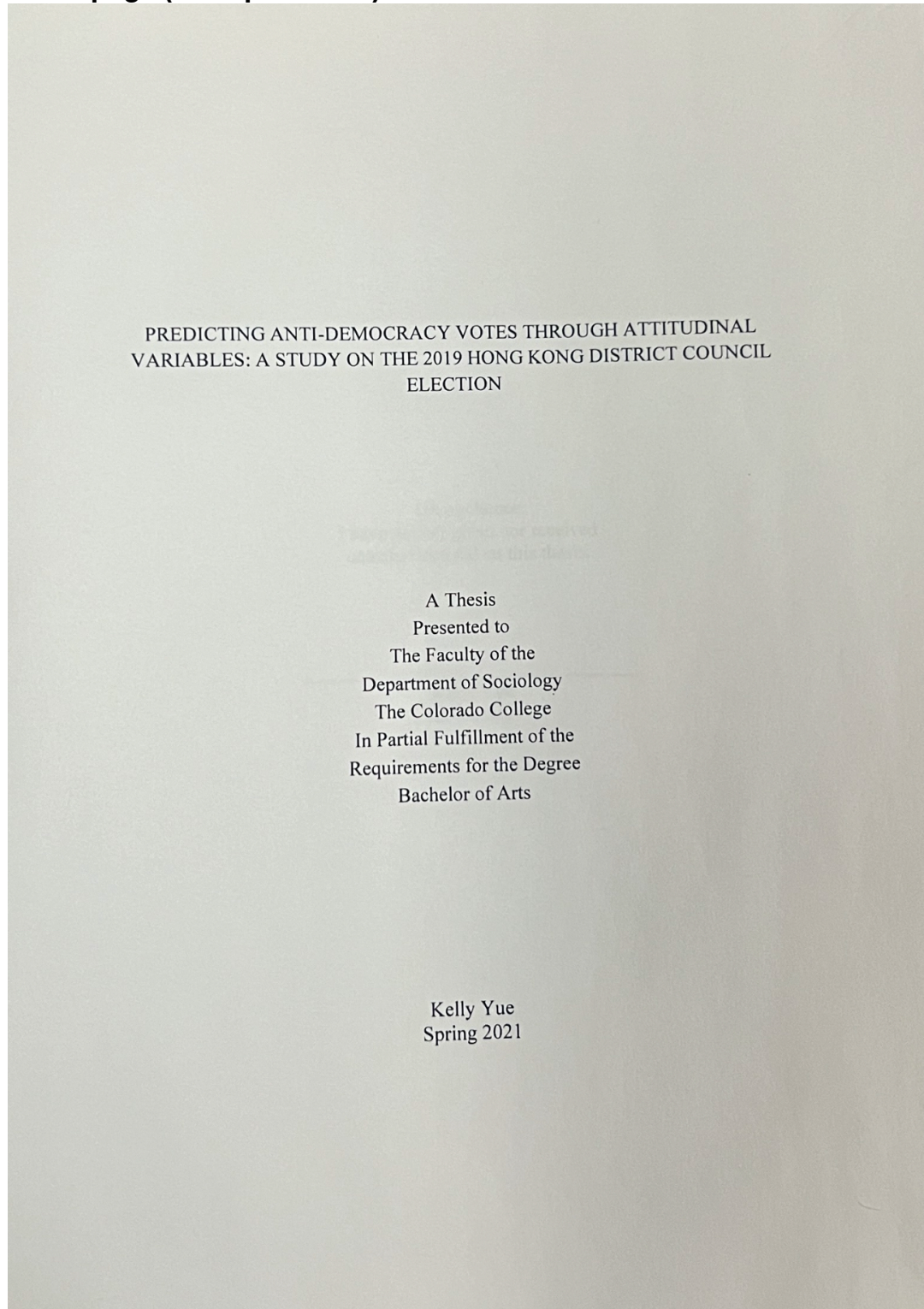
Traditional Thesis Capstones are limited to **35 double-spaced pages** of text, using a **10 -12 point font**. This page limit does not include front matter, abstract, tables, graphs, appendices, or works cited. All other pages should be numbered.

All Traditional Theses must follow ASA style guidelines. You may want to refer to:

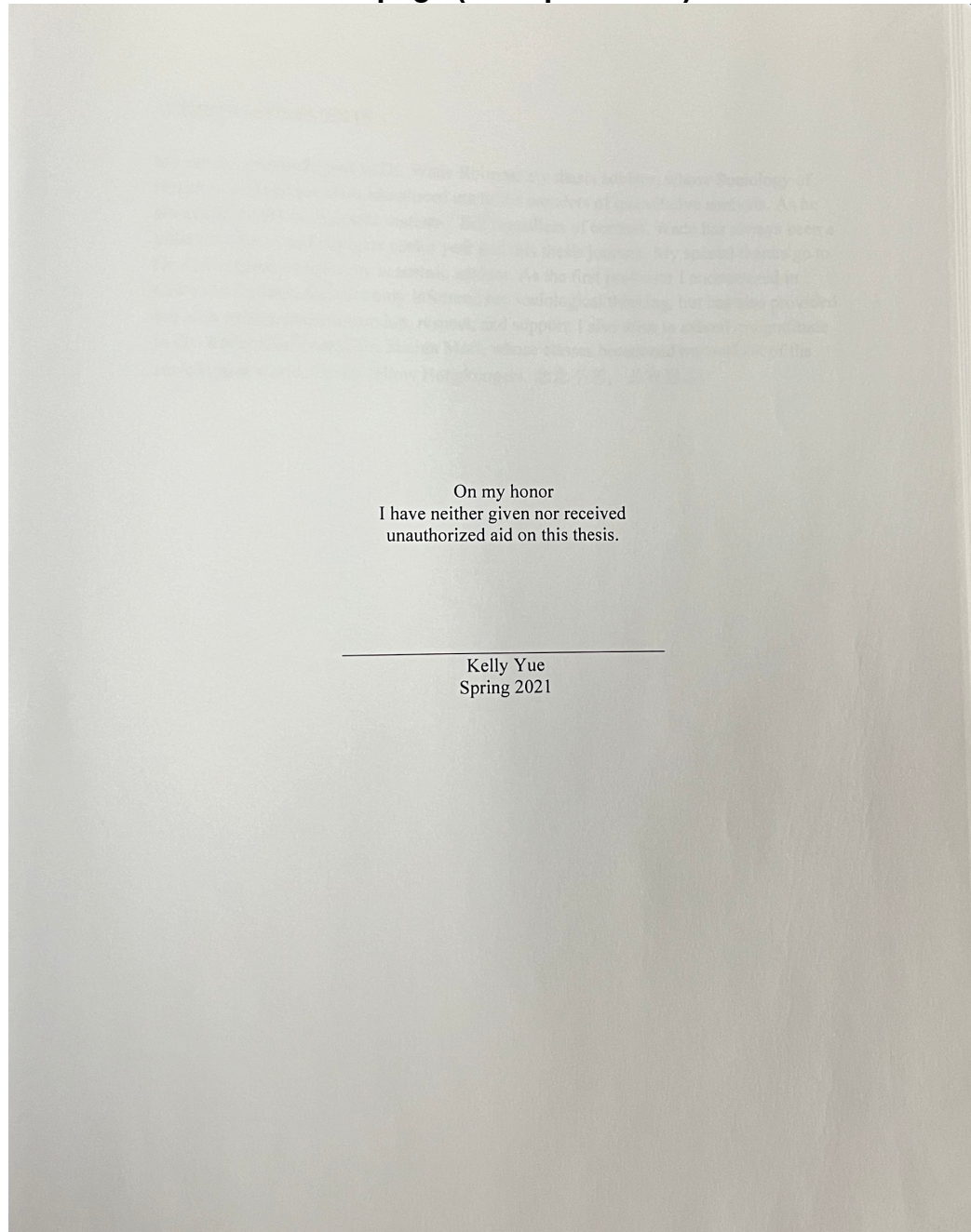
- Sociology Department Webpage > Resources for Students > ASA Reference Format Guide (under “Senior Capstone”)
- [Purdue OWL](#)’s ASA Style Guide

**Traditional Theses must include:**

- **A title page (Example Below)**



- **An honor code statement page (Example Below)**



- An abstract page. An abstract is a brief summary (150-300 words) of your research question, the methodologies you used, and your main findings. It is a single-spaced paragraph.
- ASA style headings (most theses use three levels, refer to resources above)

Additionally, most Traditional Theses include:

- a Table of Contents



- an Acknowledgments Page, where they thank their advisors, other faculty, and anyone else who has assisted them with their theses.

## Community Based Research Capstone

### Overview:

Community based research (CBR) is a collaborative partnership between academic researchers and community members. It often takes place in a non-academic setting and involves community members in some or all phases of the research process (e.g. design, implementation, analysis, dissemination). There are several approaches to CBR, though central to all of them is the goal to generate forms of knowledge production that challenge dominant power relations.

### Requirements\*:

*\*These requirements were generated collectively with students in the Fall 2019 CBR course.*

#### **Methodology:**

It is recommended for students to complete the CBR **course** before thesis. In addition to describing your methods (e.g. interviews, focus group, observations, survey, etc.), a CBR thesis should include a **methodology and/or epistemology** section that describes the specific CBR approach and why it's appropriate to your project. This could include—but is not limited to—any combination of the following: Participatory Action Research, Community Based Participatory Research, Community-engaged research, Feminist methodologies, Indigenous methodologies, etc. Students should complete a **positionality memo** early in the research process and update it throughout the thesis process.

#### **Community Partner:**

Student must have some previous engagement with their **community partner**. Obtain a **letter of support** from the community partner outlining your collaboration by the start of the first thesis block. Include the following in your agreement: project timeline; community partner's role and participation; deliverable to community partner—this may be different from or a modification of the thesis you produce for the sociology department. Work with a partner local to the **Colorado Springs** region in order to maintain ongoing relationships between the sociology department and the community. For this reason, theses that build on previous students' projects/partnerships are encouraged (exceptions with justification, accommodations made for students not returning to campus due to COVID-19). **Thesis blocks** should be planned strategically in collaboration with your community partner, as well as your own academic planning.

*Have questions? Ask Professor Florencia Rojo for more information about this capstone option.*

## Applied Sociology Capstone

**Description:** Applied sociology is the utilization of sociological research skills to collect and analyze data and to report the findings to a client/organization, so as to help them understand and resolve pragmatic concerns related to their work. The research questions and product are delineated by the organization, and are often refined in conversation with the researcher.

**Final Products:** The final product is a user-friendly report for the organization, including many of the major parts of an academic paper – Introduction, Methods, Findings, Conclusions, Recommendations, and any Appendixes as appropriate. A standard Literature Review and Reference List is also required, but is usually not included in the report provided to the organization, unless they request it.

**Prerequisites:** Because short term, most of these types of projects are quantitative in nature, so completion of Quantitative Sociology is highly recommended. If appropriate to the organization's needs, Qualitative Sociology is a possible option. A student need not have a pre-existing relationship with an organization, although that can be helpful. If not, connections can be made through the faculty and/or the Collaborative for Community Engagement. Taking the Half Block, Community Based Praxis course, can also be helpful.

*Have questions? Ask Professor Gail Murphy-Geiss for more information about this capstone option.*

## Documentary Film Capstone

**Description:** A documentary film capstone project is one in which a student investigates a sociological issue, topic, or question *visually*, using the tools of film/video technique to delve more deeply into the subject matter than would be possible in the traditional written form. Students should take advantage of the opportunities afforded by using images, movement, and sound to provide sociological insights for an audience of non-sociologists.

**Final Products:** The student will complete a documentary film, usually 15-20 minutes in length. In addition, students will produce a written 1-2 page introduction explaining the purpose of the film, an 8-10 page literature review of the relevant sociological

literature, a 1-2 methodology section justifying the methodology (for example, an explanation of how interview subjects were selected and what biases/shortcomings might result from that selection, etc.), and a complete bibliography.

**Prerequisites:** It is helpful, but not required, for students to have taken Basic Filmmaking and/or Documentary Filmmaking in the CC Film and Media Department. If students have not taken either of these classes, they must have previous experience with film/video production. Sociology students cannot count on any assistance from the Film and Media Department (including, but not limited to, use of equipment, editing labs, studio space, and faculty or paraprof expertise/consultation). Students should also, of course, have taken the relevant sociology classes in the subject area that the film intends to address.

*Have questions? Ask Professor Gail Murphy-Geiss for more information about this capstone option.*

## GETTING INSPIRED

### How to Have a Good Idea: Some Ideas from the Research on Ideas

*advice from Professor Emeritus Kathy Giuffre*

**Work from your area of expertise:**

“Acquire knowledge relevant to the problem.  
Creativity is always based on mastery,  
practice, and expertise.”

*Keith Sawyer. 2012. Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p.88*

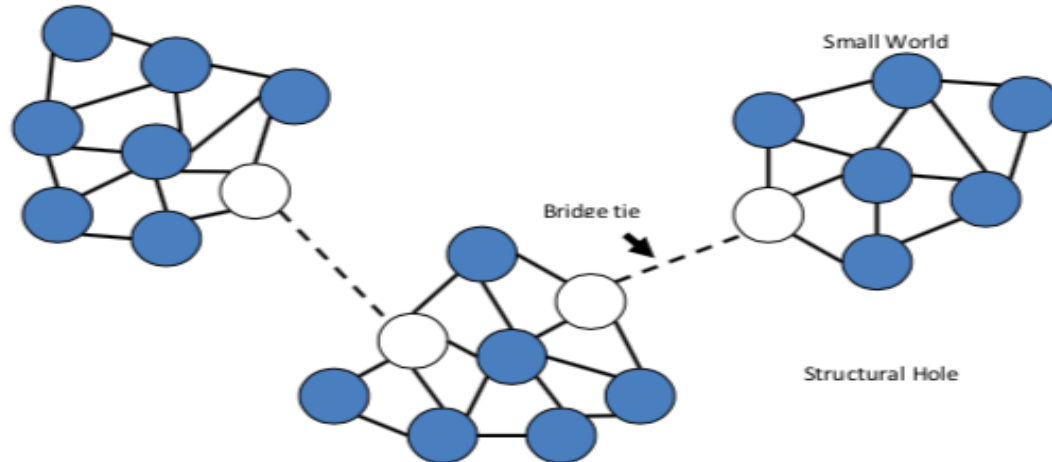
Think about classes that you have had, ideas in those classes that excited you, readings that intrigued you, volunteer work you have done, areas of interest in which you have a long-standing involvement and commitment – and go more deeply into those areas.

For example: If there was a reading from a class that you really liked, look at its bibliography and start reading those sources.

Great theses based on long-standing areas of interest and commitment:

- **Helen Feldman**, “A Movement Divided: Implications of Opposing Discourses in the Anti-Human Trafficking Movement”
- **Madeline Frost**, “Speaking of Women: Gendered language and Discursive Struggle in Domestic Violence Work”

**Think about making connections between different intellectual areas:**



Small worlds are worlds of people, but more importantly, they are worlds of ideas. Make connections between different classes, areas of interest, etc.

*Ronald Burt, “Structural Holes and Good Ideas”, American Journal of Sociology 2004 (110), 349-99. Small World*

A great thesis that drew from making connections between two different intellectual areas: **Rebecca Celli**, “Both Feminine and Authoritative: Gender Biases in Professional Film Criticism”

**Brainstorm lots of ideas:**

The Constant Probability of Success Model:

“Geniuses are wrong in a similar proportion to everyone else; they generate more wrong ideas than average folks simply because they generate more ideas overall.”

*Dean Keith Simonton. 1988. Scientific Genius: A Psychology of Science*

Keep an “I wonder” file on your computer: “I wonder why...”, “I wonder how...” etc. Don’t worry about whether all the ideas are good – they won’t be. Most of them will not be very good at all. But the more ideas you have, the more likely you are to have a great one.

### **In Conclusion:**

1. Think more deeply about what you know.
2. Think about connections between lots of things you know.
3. Think lots.

## **Finding Past Sociology Capstones**

Looking at sociology capstones (previously known as theses) from years past can be very helpful for deciding which option to pursue, developing a research question, honing your methods and data, structuring your lit review, and more. There are two main ways to look at past capstones/theses. Hard copies of capstone papers are in the Sociology Seminar Room next to Lisa’s office. Ask Lisa for access to this room and talk to her if you would like to check one out.

You can also look at past capstone papers on Digital CC. See below for information about accessing previous theses on Digital CC. Not all theses are available in the seminar room or on Digital CC – students have to submit their thesis to the library and to the department in order for it to be available, so be sure to submit your thesis when you’re done!

### **Accessing Digital CC**

Digital CC has been updated and there are now two versions. Old digital CC contains folders of capstones from 2011-2020, New Digital CC is a database, allowing you to search capstones by topic, author, or year.

[Click Here](#) to access Old Digital CC

[Click Here](#) to access New Digital CC

# NUTS AND BOLTS

## Capstone Process and Timeline

There is a meeting first block each year for all senior sociology majors. All of the professors advising capstones will attend the meeting and discuss their research areas and the methodologies they typically use. Students will receive a form where they will write their intended research areas and methodologies and rank their top three advisor preferences. These forms are due third week of Block 1.

Students will also receive an add/drop slip for their capstone blocks, which are also due by third week of block 1. The capstone blocks you select during block 1 are not set in stone, but you will need to consult with your advisor before changing them. You should meet with your advisor before your first capstone block. You should also begin looking for literature before your capstone block begins. Create a full, ASA-format citation for each article you read when you read it and put it in a separate works cited document – **this will make your life significantly easier at the end of your thesis.**

If you need IRB approval for your capstone research you should also work on that before your first capstone block begins. Check out the CC IRB page <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/irb/> and email Amanda Udis-Kessler (audiskessler@coloradocollege.edu) with any IRB-related questions.

All capstones are due at **5pm on 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday of your second thesis block**. After you have received your graded thesis back from your advisor and made edits, you should submit your thesis to the sociology department and to Tutt Library (see the “Submission” section for more information).

## Capstone Funding

If there are any costs associated with your capstone, the department expects you to cover the first \$100 on your own. If your project incurs costs greater than \$100, the department can provide funding. Talk to your advisor and the department chair if you need thesis funding.

Additionally, the **O'Connor Grant** can provide up to \$500 for social justice work. If your capstone research includes direct involvement in social justice work, talk to your advisor, the department chair, and the staff assistant about applying for O'Connor funding. You will need to write a proposal that includes a detailed description of your proposed project, an explanation of its link to issues of social justices, a budget outlining the uses to which the funds will be put, a copy of your transcript, and a supporting letter from your advisor. There are four opportunities to apply for the O'Connor Grant throughout the year: **first Mondays of blocks 2, 4, 5, and 8.**

There are also several funding options through the Office of the Dean. There is the **Academic Opportunities Grant**, which provides up to \$500 for students enrolled in thesis, capstone, or an independent study. There is also the **Keller Family Venture Grant** which provides up to \$1000 for an individual student. More information about these funding opportunities is available on the website of the Office of the Dean.

## Submission

After you've received final feedback from your advisor and edited your capstone accordingly, you should submit it both to Digital CC and to the Sociology Department.

**Digital CC:** Instructions for submitting your thesis to Digital CC are available on the Tutt Library website – these can be found at [www.coloradocollege.libguides.com/DigitalArchivesSubmission](http://www.coloradocollege.libguides.com/DigitalArchivesSubmission).

**Sociology Department:** Email a copy of your thesis to the Administrative Assistant (Marcella Mills) at [mmills@coloradocollege.edu](mailto:mmills@coloradocollege.edu).