



## Possible Capstone Projects: A Typology

### 1. Action Research

**Action research** is research-based work done in response to an immediate problem, often by or in close collaboration with practitioners as part of a community of practice (such as a community-based organization or student group). The specific products of action research may vary considerably, depending on the goal of the process and the immediate problems or priorities being addressed; whatever their form, however, they tend to share the characteristic of being **immediately useful to practitioners** and/or client populations. Examples of action research products include:

- Curricula (e.g., for community empowerment or educational enrichment)
- Marketing/Communications pieces (e.g., for community activation/education, mission/values/strategy clarification, or to support fundraising and advocacy efforts)
- Community Asset inventories (e.g., in the form of publicly available datasets or maps)
- Best Practices analyses (e.g., presented as portfolios or white papers)
- Procedures Guides (e.g., to inform regular operations or special projects)
- Project Plan (e.g., timelines, best-practices-informed activity descriptions, assets to be activated, and cost-benefits or SWOT analyses for new strategic initiatives)
- Program Evaluations (e.g., of a specific initiative or from a particular perspective or in comparison to established best practices; products may include evaluation *plans* and/or *evaluation results*)
- Grant(s) Proposals (that frequently integrate one or more already-executed action research products for the sake of supporting future efforts)

Generally speaking, the questions answered/products delivered by this type of capstone should be **primarily determined by the project's partners**, and not by the student researcher (unless they are already part of the community of practice). Determinations of methodology, data-gathering, analysis, and communications of results can be more or less collaborative, depending on the situation. For purposes of the Certificate, documentation of the academic sources/research methodologies integrated into producing the final product(s) is especially important; this may require assembling an annotated bibliography and/or explanatory essay, to be submitted separately to Chicago Studies.

### 2. Applied Academic Research

**Applied academic research** directly or indirectly addresses a pressing social/policy question or challenge of practice **from within a particular discipline** (e.g. history, literary criticism, economics). Its forms of inquiry and primary products are shaped by disciplinary constraints, and usually take more or less traditional academic forms, e.g. research papers, theses, journal articles, academic presentations. However, in more participatory designs, collaboration with non-academic actors may significantly

influence question selection, types of data considered, and interpretation of findings. For purposes of the Certificate, the development of a detailed plan for the intentional, meaningful **communication of results to relevant non-academic publics** is an especially important consideration with this kind of project. This could involve making a lesson plan/pedagogical resources for teaching the material covered by the research in a non-University setting, or producing a more targeted (i.e. more digestible) version of the key findings for particular audiences, such as a 'zine or policy white paper.

### 3. Civic Journalism

**Civic journalism** leverages existing media and publications platforms to inform (and ideally activate) the broader public about social/policy issues. By its very nature, this work necessarily involves partnership not only with one or more community actors/informants, but also an **ongoing partnership with an established media/publication outlet** and its audience(s). The topics and sources considered, and especially the forms of final products (e.g. one or more long-form pieces; a series of thematically-connected shorter articles) may thus be significantly determined by editors/publishers, in addition to the student's and their partners' interests. For purposes of the Certificate, such projects should ideally involve the **direct engagement of Chicagoans as informants** (via interviews, etc.) as well as secondary literature academic research related to the topic and (optionally) research on past journalistic/press coverage/angles on the issue at hand. If not cited explicitly in the final products, the connections to the larger research enterprise should be documented in an annotated bibliography/essay connecting the author's justifications for their choices in the published piece with their reflections on the research, to be submitted separately to Chicago Studies.

### 4. Creative Expression

**Creative expression** pieces speak to and seek to spark conversation (and/or activism) about **the lived realities of persons and communities impacted** by social/policy issues. Although the specific product(s) produced will be determined by the student artist/author's particular medium/expertise, the creative process should be *significantly* informed by **first-person narratives** of persons who participate in whatever social world the creative piece explores, optionally complemented by ethnography and/or relevant historical/archival research. For purposes of the Certificate, the documentation of this contextual research enterprise (through a separate annotated bibliography/essay connecting the finished work to the research) and especially the cultivation of appropriate off-campus audiences for the work are extremely important. Ideally, performance/exhibition choices should reflect both accountability to the project's sources (e.g. through a performance/exhibition at a CBO whose clients informed the work) and also the strategic identification and targeting of audiences whose exposure to the work might contribute to positive social change (e.g. through a performance/exhibition for potential funders or policy-makers). The development of this performance plan should be participatory, and may also include opportunities for discussion/talk-backs with audience members and/or featured informants (or complementary exhibitions of archival materials, for historical projects), when practicable.

## 5. Organizing Campaign

**Community organizing** seeks to build collective power for otherwise marginalized or voiceless persons by building coalitions. A **campaign** is a series of collective actions, planned and undertaken by a group of activists and organized citizen-participants, that are designed to effect a social or policy change (often through a combination of education/consciousness-raising, advocacy, and protest/disruption of the status quo). As collective projects, organizing campaigns necessarily involve a high degree of participation from community partners, especially in co-determining key issues around which to organize and the methodologies employed. For purposes of the Certificate, a student organizer must take on a significant role in **strategizing for and implementing a campaign**, either as part of or in close partnership with allied community organizations and/or directly-impacted individuals. Such campaigns should be structured to ensure the effort can outlive the student's direct involvement, including sharing of leadership, individual and collective reflection structures, and a documentation/accountability plan. This should include an individual reflection piece addressing the major questions raised by this experience, the ways the actions in the campaign charted provisional answers to those questions, the dynamics of engagement and dialogue, etc. Such a piece (which might take the form of a letter to an incoming organizer who is about to start getting more deeply involved in the campaign) should be shared, not only with Chicago Studies, but also with fellow organizers.

## 6. Organizational Perpetuation (*Sistematización*)

**Sistematización** refers to a collective or dialogic reflection process whereby a group or movement **democratically (re)constructs its own history**, often in the face of oppression or other social opposition, for the sake of preserving and perpetuating its inspiration to act for change. Such a process may involve elements of oral history/archival research, as well as critically-informed examinations of praxis, outcomes, and legacy, all undertaken in view of a strategic horizon of future development/activities. To be done authentically and well, this necessarily engages the full spectrum of group members/movement participants, and as such should be deeply participatory. In this kind of project, the student organizer acts as a **convener and facilitator**; their role is primarily to catalyze (and then resource/support) a group process of self-reflection, although they may also play a significant role in documenting the collective narrative (and perhaps contextualizing it with substantiating research). Examples of *sistematización* projects include:

- In an organizing campaign (e.g., using semi-structured interviews/dialogues with other participants to capture its founding inspiration, some key moments of its history, and the experiences of persons at various positions within it)
- In a CSRSO (e.g., combining input from focus groups of members with action research-derived lists of best practices to create an operations manual, then critiquing current practice in light of other models or from the perspective of marginal voices)
- In a programmatic intervention (e.g., using client/participant phenomenologies or new theoretical perspectives to interrogate “official” program design/evaluations, then reinventing programmatic or evaluative structures in dialogue with the “new” interlocutors)

For purposes of the Certificate, the student organizer should prepare a thoughtful methodology for this process and conversation-facilitation guides for proposed sessions, ideally in collaboration with Chris or another external mentor, so that the conversations are responsive to internal group dynamics but also well-structured pedagogically. In addition to any organizational perpetuation resources that are produced from the process, the student should also prepare a reflective case study (with appropriate citations) that documents their learning and explicates how the process, its products, and/or their interpretations of these relate to their previous academic and direct-engagement experiences, to be submitted separately to Chicago Studies.

## 7. Programmatic Intervention

**Programmatic interventions (programs)** are structured experiences designed to **positively impact participants** through education and other forms of empowerment. They are usually developed and executed by “experts” and/or a community of practice, and often rely on models and research into established best practices to determine their activities and optimize/assess their outcomes. Most programs require **significant organizational support** (e.g., an existing CSRSO or community-based organization) to be successful; such organizational partners should be deeply involved in program design, participant recruitment, and assessment/evaluation. For purposes of the Certificate, a student program designer should prepare a written program proposal/methodology (including a context/best practices analysis, timeline, recruitment plan, budget, evaluation plan, and replicability assessment) for the intervention. This should be sufficiently detailed to ensure its replicability, should this be deemed viable, and must be shared with all organizational partners. Additionally, the program designer should write a short reflection essay explicating the connections between programmatic elements and the lessons learned from the student’s previous academic and direct-engagement experiences, to be submitted separately to Chicago Studies.