



Capstone: What Matters Most

COURSE INFO

Mondays 4:30 - 6:50 p.m.

Stokes Hall 121N

Fall 2024

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Office hours by appointment

COURSE OBJECTIVE

The objective of the Capstone seminar program is to help students at a critical point in their educational journey to look both backward and forward. In this way, the goal of a Capstone seminar is to:

- *Review* your life and education up to this point a series of choices and commitments;
- *Preview* the reality of making long-term commitments in four key areas:
 - work and career;
 - relationships and family;
 - citizenship and societal responsibility;
 - spirituality, construed as the search for a larger framework of meaning.

This particular Capstone seminar will ask you to review and preview these commitments in light of a fundamental, hard-to-articulate question, which I will let the authors of *Life Worth Living* (one of the course's core texts) explain:

"There are countless ways to try to express [The Question]: What matters most? What is a good life? What is the shape of flourishing life? What kind of life is worthy of our humanity? What is true life? What is right and true and good? None of these phrasings captures it completely ... The Question is about worth, value, good and bad and evil, meaning, purpose, final aims and ends, beauty, truth, justice, what we owe one another, what the world is and who we are and how we live. It is about the success of our lives or their failure."

- Volf, Croasmun, & McAnnally-Linz, 2023

If this sounds somewhat daunting... that may be a good thing. It may mean you understand the importance of deep inquiry on these types of topics. In other words, you get the stakes. (And you are probably in the right class.) As you explore The Question this semester - through the consideration of dozens of just as important sub-questions - you will do so in the company of valuable conversation partners, namely your classmates. The community of the Capstone seminar is critical, as questions of meaning, love, and purpose are always more impactful when explored with people whose backgrounds, perspectives, and hopes differ from our own.

This Capstone seminar will likely be an intensely personal experience for you. You will be invited to reflect deeply and share authentically with your classmates in every class session. Of course, the extent to which you take these expectations to heart is up to you. Undoubtedly, the more you do, the more you will gain - and the better you will come to understand *what matters most* to you. Your life is too valuable to be guided by anything else. So, let's get to it!

EVALUATION

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| Preparedness & Participation <i>Attendance, reading checks, class participation</i> | 25% |
| Assignment: Life Story <i>Presentation of draft to small group; final draft submitted</i> | 15% |
| Assignment: Interview <i>2 sequential submissions: question list and reflection</i> | 15% |
| Final Presentation: Your Wonderful Life | 20% |
| Final Paper: What Matters Most | 25% |

CORE TEXTS

***Life Worth Living* by Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, and Ryan McAnnally-Linz (2023)**

What makes a good life? The question is inherent to the human condition, asked by people across generations, professions, and social classes, and addressed by all schools of philosophy and religions. This search for meaning, as the authors argue, is at the crux of a crisis that is facing Western culture, a crisis that, they propose, can be ameliorated by searching, in one's own life, for the underlying truth. Drawing from the major world religions and from truthful and courageous secular figures, the book (named after the authors' popular undergraduate course at Yale), offers a way into life's most pressing question, the one asked of all of us: how are we to live?

***How to Know a Person* by David Brooks (2023)**

As David Brooks observes, "there is one skill that lies at the heart of any healthy person, family, school, community organization, or society: the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel seen—to accurately know another person, to let them feel valued, heard, and understood." Brooks sets out to help us do this better, posing questions that are essential for all of us: If you want to know a person, what kind of attention should you cast on them? What kind of conversations should you have? What parts of a person's story should you pay attention to? Brooks draws from the fields of psychology, neuroscience and many others to present a hopeful and integrated approach to human connection.

***Defining Decade* by Meg Jay (2021)**


Meg Jay argues that twentysomethings have been caught in a swirl of hype and misunderstanding, much of which has trivialized the most transformative time of our lives. Drawing from more than two decades of work with thousands of clients and students, Jay weaves the latest science of the twentysomething years with behind-closed-doors stories from twentysomethings themselves. The result is a provocative read that provides the tools necessary to take the most of your twenties, and shows us how work, relationships, personality, identity and even the brain can change more during this decade than at any other time in adulthood—if we use the time well.


SCHEDULE

Legend

Prepare → *Read, watch, or listen prior to the class session:*


 Read (Book or Canvas download)

 Listen (podcasts)

 Watch (ie., Youtube, film)

Produce → *Complete and/or submit prior to the class session:*

 Journal (may be checked for completion, but not collected/graded)

 Writing assignment (formal paper to be collected/graded)


 Final Presentations

Ponder → *Questions to consider in advance of the class session*


Taking Stock

Week #1: Introductions, Invitation, and Inventory

Prepare:

-  Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Introduction

Produce:





-  Self-inventory from *Life Worth Living*

Ponder:


- Who is in the room and why are we here?
- What does this course invite you to consider?
- What were your reactions to the Life Inventory?

Week #2: Our origin stories

Prepare:

-  Brooks, D. - *How to Know a Person*, Chapter 16: How do your ancestors show up in your life?
-  Brooks, A. & Winfrey, *How to Build the Life You Want*, Chapter 5: Build your imperfect family
-  Brooks, D. - *How to Know a Person*, Chapter 15: Life Stories
-  [Kelly Corrigan Wonders podcast interview with Jennifer Wallace on *Never Enough*](#) (52 min)

Produce:

-  Life story (draft of assignment #1; to be shared with peers in small groups)

Ponder:

- How do your ancestors show up in your life?
- What are the cultures that animated your communities of origin (family, school, neighborhood, etc.)?
- What can you gain from your own narrative thinking and listening to the stories of others?

Week #3: *A formative education*

Prepare:

- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 1: What's worth wanting?
- 📺 [Rich Roll Podcast interview with Lisa Miller, PhD on The Awakened Brain](#) (*selected excerpts TBD*)
- 📖 [Boston College - Journey Into Adulthood](#)

Produce:

- 📝 Assignment #1: Life Story

Ponder:

- How are you different as a senior than you were as a freshman? To what do you credit the change?
- How has your BC education influenced your operative modes of being (autopilot, efficiency, self-awareness, transcendence)?
- What ideas, people, or experiences over the last three years have "awakened" your brain?

Tackling the Question

Week #4: *Considering the sub-questions: Affect, Circumstances, and Values*

Prepare:

- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 4: How does a good life feel?
- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 5: What should we hope for?
- 📻 [Kelly Corrigan Wonders podcast interview with Claire Danes & Kate Bowler on Life Worth Living](#) (can start at 24:36)
- 📖 Liang & Klein - *How to Navigate Life*, Chapter 4: Values Archetype

Produce:

- 📖 Journal entry: Reflect on the "Your Turn" questions for *Life Worth Living* chapters 4 and 5.

Ponder:

- What feelings characterize a genuinely good life?
- What should we hope for? And where should we set the horizons of those hopes?
- How do your actions reflect your values? How does your budget reflect your values?

Week #5: *Considering the sub-questions: Responsibility, Citizenship, and our Moral Center*

Prepare:

- 📖 Volf et al., *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 3: Who do you answer to?
- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 6: How should we live?
- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 7: The Recipe Test
- 📺 [President Obama's Eulogy of John Lewis](#) (8 min)
- 📻 [Civics 101 Podcast](#) - pick any episode (and come prepared to share)

Produce:

- 📖 Journal entry: Reflect on the "Your Turn" questions for *Life Worth Living* chapters 3, 6, and 7.

Ponder:

- How big is your forest? In other words, to who or what are you responsible?
- What is worthy of your own "good trouble"?
- What has informed your own civic education?

Week #6: *When life is hard*

Prepare:

- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 9: When we (inevitably) botch it
- 📺 [Brene Brown clip: "We need to talk about shame"](#) (2 min)
- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 10: When life hurts (OPTIONAL)
- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 11: And there's no fixing it
- 📖 Khazan - "The Joy of Underperforming" from *The Atlantic*
- 🎧 [NPR Interview with Katherine May on *Wintering*](#) (7 min)

Produce:

- 📖 Journal entry: TBD

Ponder:

- TBD

Week #7: *Putting it into practice*

Prepare:

- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 13: It turns out we have some work to do
- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Chapter 15: Making it stick
- 📖 Brooks, A. & Winfrey - *How to Build a Life*, Chapter 8: Find your Amazing Grace

Produce:

- 📖 Journal entry: TBD

Ponder:

- TBD

Knowing and loving others

Week #8: *The art of seeing others*

Prepare:

- 📖 Brooks, D. - *How to Know a Person*, Chapter 3: Illumination
- 📖 Brooks, D. - *How to Know a Person*, Chapter 6: Good Talks
- 📖 Brooks, D. - *How to Know a Person*, Chapter 7: The Right Questions
- 📖 Brooks, D. - *How to Know a Person*, Chapter 17: Wisdom

Produce:

- 📖 Journal entry: TBD

Ponder:

- TBD

Week #9: *Friendship*

Prepare:

- 📖 Jay - *The Defining Decade*, p. TBD
- 📖 Brooks, A. & Winfrey, *How to Build the Life You Want*, Chapter 6: Friendship that is deeply real
- 📖 Beck - "How Friendships Change in Adulthood" from *The Atlantic*
- 📖 Dr. Marisa G. Franco: [How to Make Friends As an Adult](#)

Produce:

- 📖 Journal entry: TBD

- 📖 Assignment #2: The Interview - question list only

Ponder:

- TBD

Week #10: Romantic relationships

Prepare:

- 📖 Jay - *The Defining Decade*, p. TBD
- 🎧 NYT's Modern Love Podcast - [A Millennial's Guide to Kissing](#) (18 min)
- 📺 Gottman Institute - [The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse video](#) (2 min)

Produce:

- 📖 Journal entry: TBD

Ponder:

- TBD

Pursuing Purpose

Week #11: Career and Vocation

Prepare:

- 📖 Jay - *The Defining Decade*, pages TBD
- 📖 Brooks & Winfrey - *How to Build the Life you Want*, Chapter 7: Work that is love made visible
- 📖 Liang & Klein - *How to Navigate Life*, Chapter 9: Work (and the world)
- 📺 [Burnett - Designing Your Life Tedx Stanford](#) (25 min)

Produce:

- 📖 Journal entry: TBD

Ponder:

- TBD

Week #12: Young alumni panel

Prepare:

- 📺 *It's a Wonderful Life*

Produce:

- 📖 Questions for panelists (due Friday before)
- 📖 Assignment #2: The Interview (final draft)

Ponder:

- TBD

Week #13: What Matters Most / Final Presentations I

Prepare:

- 📖 Volf et al. - *Life Worth Living*, Epilogue
- 📺 Foster Wallace - [This is Water](#) (10 min)

Produce:

- 😊 Final Presentations (1/3 of students to present)

Ponder:

- TBD

Week #14: Final Presentations II / Wrap-Up

Produce:

- 🗣️ Final Presentations (2/3 of students to present)

Ponder:

- TBD

EXAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment #1: Life Story

“The ability to craft an accurate and coherent life story is yet another vital skill we don’t teach people in school. But coming up with a personal story is centrally important to leading a meaningful life.”

- David Brooks from *How to Know a Person*, p. 217

This will be a 6-7-page writing assignment inspired by David Brooks’ chapter on “life stories” - and the importance of crafting and telling our stories in a way that allows us to be known by others. First drafts of these stories will be used in a sharing activity during week #2. Further details TBD.

Assignment #2: Interview

“If I’m going to get to know you, it’s not because I have the magical ability to peer into your soul; it’s because I have the skill of asking the sorts of questions that will give you a chance to tell me about who you are.”

- David Brooks from *How to Know a Person*, p. 87

This will be a 6-7-page writing assignment inspired by David Brooks’ chapter of “asking the right questions” and his perspective that asking good questions is a moral practice essential to seeing others for who they are. Further details TBD.

Final Presentation: Your Wonderful Life

Drawing inspiration from *It’s a Wonderful Life*, present [for no more than 5 minutes] on one of the prompts below. The goal of this presentation is to share a part of yourself with the class, reflect deeply on at least one of the 4 primary themes of the course [work and career; relationships and family; citizenship and societal responsibility; and spirituality/the search for meaning], and to further your thinking about *what matters most* - in preparation for your final paper... and life, of course. Following your 4-minute presentation (creativity encouraged), you will have a few minutes to entertain questions from the class. The prompts are (choose only one to answer):

- ***“Strange, isn’t it? Each man’s life touches so many other lives. When he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?”*** George Bailey comes to a point where he feels his life has had little meaning. Yet, as the film points out, his actions have had a profound impact on his community. Tell us about a community that is important to you and how it has impacted you, including what it has taught you about *what matters most*.

And how have you impacted the community, in return? What would this community look like without you in it and what does that tell you about who you are?

- ***"I'm at the end of my rope. Show me the way, God."*** Explore an instance in your life where you felt like George Bailey, facing a difficult decision or moment of crisis. How did you navigate through the challenge? Were your decisions guided by a particular spirituality, moral code, or vision of *what matters most* to you? What other factors played a role? Did someone in your life serve as Clarence did by holding up a mirror to your life and/or offering needed perspective?
- ***"No Man Is A Failure Who Has Friends."*** In modern life, the pressure to be "successful" permeates many aspects of our life - school, work, relationships, and more. In what aspects of your life do you feel those pressures most acutely, and why? Where do you feel most immune from the pressures to succeed and to what do you credit? *It's a Wonderful Life* seems to argue that the only version of success that matters is the kind that derives from close relationships/friendships. In your opinion, *what matters most* when it comes to measuring the success or failure of a life?

Final Paper: What Matters Most

Write a 12 -15 page reflection paper that synthesizes your answer to the question: *What matters most?*

Your paper should include:

- A clear answer to this question (summarized in a sentence or two), evolving as it may be.
- Consideration for how your answer impacts different dimensions of life, such as the 4 primary course themes [work and career; relationships and family; citizenship and societal responsibility; and spirituality/the search for meaning].
- References to course materials and concepts, with a focus on those that most informed your thinking about the question.
- Reflections on salient personal experiences that contributed to your take on the question.
- Musings on how your answer to the question will be further shaped, strengthened, and tested as your adult life unfolds in ways that will delight, surprise, and challenge you.

Papers will be evaluated on: clarity of writing and organization, integration of course materials and concepts, depth of insights drawn from past personal experiences, and originality regarding future-oriented reflections.