The Capstone Experience

Steven M. Hash, a Community and Environmental Studies graduate from Holyoke, Mass., discusses his senior Capstone project, which involved designing a local interpretative hiking trail. The Capstone project, which involves extensive research and presentation, is the culmination of each student’s academic experience and part of the Liberal Education Program at Colby-Sawyer College.

Describe the subject of your Capstone project and why you chose to focus on this subject.
The primary focus of my Capstone is the design of an interpretive trail for an existing hiking trail in the conserved land at Spring Ledge Farm in New London, N.H. The interpretation of this trail will include flora identification for common native species, defining wetlands and their major functions, the importance of conservation easements for rural landscape preservation, and various natural features of northeast forests. I chose this project because I believed it would be the best way to display the culmination of my environmental education. Furthermore, conveying information pertaining to the environment is becoming increasingly important in the contemporary world, as new importance has been placed on keeping the environment healthy.

What kinds of research did you conduct for this project, and how will you present it in the Scholars Symposium?
Initial research focused primarily on understanding the features that make the natural landscape so important and interesting, using Tom Wessels’ Reading the Forested Landscape. Next, a natural feature inventory was conducted based on the information compiled from Wessels to gain an understanding of important features on the Spring Ledge property. The flora chosen to include on the trail is based on knowledge acquired throughout my environmental education at Colby-Sawyer, and focused on commonly occurring native species. Global positioning system (GPS) points were taken of all points and brought into a geographic information system (GIS) to create a trail map with all points, as well as roads, cultivated fields at the farm, building footprints, and potential parking for reference. My presentation will have a poster format, and focus on the points to be included in the interpretive trail. By far, the most interesting portion of my project was just getting out and experiencing the Spring Ledge Farm property and the natural landscape found there. Nature is home to amazing sights just a short walk away if you open your eyes to them.

What did you learn through your Capstone project, and in what ways is it a culmination of your learning experiences at Colby-Sawyer?
Coming into Colby-Sawyer I was very skeptical about what I could actually do with my degree upon graduation. If anything, my project showed me that I received a comprehensive education with a sound understanding of important environmental issues. I believe that this project allowed me to utilize my overall, interdisciplinary education to its fullest. Furthermore, it allowed the opportunity to leave a permanent mark on the New London area that I have come to call home.

What was most fun and rewarding for you in the process of creating your Capstone?
How could anyone dislike walking through the woods looking for insanely interesting occurrences they find absolutely stimulating? I am a born and raised New England boy who loves the woods in all their splendor. My whole project was fun.
What did you find most challenging and difficult about the project?
I guess the most difficult part of my project was dealing with weather conditions; GPS points are not nearly as reliable on a cloudy day versus a clear one, and hiking in the rain is no fun. Therefore, finding a balance between other academic responsibilities and favorable weather conditions to work on my Capstone was the most difficult.

What do you hope will be the lasting value of your Capstone project, both for you and others?
I hope that the New London Recreation Department will include a PDF version of my trail pamphlet on their website. If not, pamphlets will be made available at Spring Ledge Farm and the trailhead kiosk. I hope trail users find the information in the trail pamphlet timeless, and that people use it for decades to come.

http://www.colby-sawyer.edu/academic/capstoneprojects/hash07.html