







## ESM 449: Communication Capstone

*"The art of communication is the language of leadership." - James Humes*

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 Office Hours: Thursdays, 4-5 pm  
 Class Time: Fridays, 9-11 am  
 Class Location: Bren Hall 1424

### I. Course Description








This ten-week, graduate-level practicum is a capstone experience designed to strengthen Bren Communication students' ability to **produce client-facing materials while building a professional environmental communication portfolio**. Students will work individually or in small teams to create deliverables such as infographics, story maps, one-pagers, articles, podcasts, strategic plans, videos, etc. Projects may be proposed by students, clients, or collaboratively developed. Students can also use this course to complete communication-focused deliverables for their Group Project (GP) clients. The course blends full-class meetings, client check-ins, and co-working sessions, concluding with a communication symposium where students present their work to the public.

### II. Eligibility

This course is open to Bren MESM students in the Communication Focus who have completed at least two communication courses and plan to graduate with the focus this year. First-year MESM students, MEDS students, PhD students, and non-Bren students are not eligible for enrollment.

### III. Learning Goals

By the end of this course, students will be able to:






-  Apply communication skills to create professional deliverables for a client
-  Synthesize technical information into clear, engaging, and impactful materials
-  Integrate feedback from clients and peers to refine communication projects
-  Manage professional relationships by meeting deadlines and maintaining communication
-  Present their communication work effectively in a symposium talk and client pitch
-  Compile a communication portfolio showcasing their cumulative work for employers
-  Identify areas for continued communication skill development beyond Bren

### IV. Proposal Process

Due to the tight timeline of the Capstones, all logistical work on project proposals, final selections, and student-client pairings must be finalized before the course. Projects may be proposed by students, external clients, or both. Students without a pre-identified project will have the opportunity to select from a pool of approved proposals. **All proposals must be submitted via the [2025 Communication Capstone Proposal Form](#) by March 7, 2025.** Between March 7 and March 21, the instructor will match students with projects that best align with their interests. Not all projects will be selected, but unchosen proposals may be considered in future cycles. **All Capstone teams (up to three students per project) will be finalized by March 21**, giving students and clients time to schedule their kickoff meetings before the first class. By class in week one, most students and clients will have already met and begun refining the project scope.



## V. Student Expectations

Students are expected to take full responsibility for their projects, maintain professional client relationships, and actively engage in peer feedback throughout the quarter. This includes:




-  **Full-Class Meetings:** Students are expected to attend all class sessions in ESM 449. If students anticipate missing more than two classes, they should discuss fit with the instructor. The three full-class meetings—project kickoff, mid-quarter progress presentations, and final portfolio workshop—are especially critical to have full class attendance. Other class sessions will be coworking sessions that provide structured time to advance projects, collaborate with peers, and receive instructor feedback, and students are strongly encouraged to use this time productively.
-  **Client Check-ins:** Students must meet with their client at least three times throughout the quarter at the beginning, middle, and end to receive feedback. After each meeting, they will submit a brief reflection on Canvas. Students are responsible for scheduling their client check-ins throughout the quarter. Students may include the instructor in one client check-in.
-  **Symposium Presentation:** During week 10, *students will give a 10-minute presentation on their project*, sharing their work and key takeaways with peers, faculty, and invited clients at UCSB. Students will also give a 5-minute presentation halfway through the quarter on project progress.
-  **Professional Commitment:** To maintain positive relationships with the Bren School, students are expected to maintain professional communication with clients, respond to messages promptly, and complete mutually agreed-upon project deliverables to the best of their abilities.
-  **Communication Portfolio:** Students will submit a communication portfolio at the end of the quarter, compiling their capstone project deliverables alongside other work from their time at Bren. The portfolio format is flexible; websites, documents, organized folders, GitHub repositories, or other structured compilations are all acceptable. In our last class, we will peer review portfolios.

## VI. Client Expectations

Clients play an integral role in student projects and are expected to provide guidance and feedback throughout the quarter. We ask the client to consider the following around student interaction:

-  **Communication:** We ask clients to be responsive to student inquiries and provide timely feedback. *Please remember that students are volunteers, not employees, and are balancing multiple academic and professional responsibilities.* A supportive and respectful approach will help ensure a positive experience for both students and clients.
-  **Symposium Participation:** Clients are invited, but not required, to attend the final symposium during finals week, where students will present their work in a celebration near their graduation!

At a minimum, clients should be available for three key check-ins for 30-60 minutes each, though additional communication is encouraged as needed. These three required check-ins are:

-  **Kickoff Meeting:** Between ~March 31–April 4, clients and students will scope the project based on mutual interests and the size of the team, setting clear expectations and deliverables.
-  **Midpoint Check-in:** Between ~April 28–May 9, clients will review progress, provide feedback, and suggest any necessary course corrections to ensure the project stays on track.
-  **Final Client Review:** Between ~June 2–6 clients will conduct a final review of student work products, request last-minute adjustments if needed, and formally accept the final deliverable.

## VII. Grading

Grading for ESM 449 is based on the completion of key assignments, including client reflections, presentations, project deliverables, and a final communication portfolio. Each assignment is graded as complete or incomplete; as long as students submit genuine drafts, they receive full credit. Final letter grades will be calculated based on the percentage of completed work throughout the quarter:

- **10% Attendance:** Attendance credit is awarded for attending each scheduled class session, including co-working days. Students may miss one co-working session without penalty, but ask students to prioritize attending all classes. To make up attendance credit for excused absences like illness or emergencies, students can attend office hours for a casual check-in on project progress.
- **15% Project Reflections:** After each of the three required client meetings, each student will submit a brief reflection on Canvas summarizing progress and next steps. These reflections help track project development and ensure students receive structured feedback throughout the quarter.
- **15% Halfway Presentation:** Students will give a 5-minute mid-quarter presentation to the 449 class sharing their project progress, challenges, and next steps. This serves as a checkpoint to integrate peer and instructor feedback before finalizing their work with their clients.
- **25% Client Deliverables:** Students will produce at least one polished, professional-quality deliverable for their client that is mutually agreed upon. Deliverables should demonstrate strong communication skills, meet client needs, and reflect responsiveness to feedback.
- **15% Communication Portfolio:** Students will submit a compiled portfolio showcasing their capstone deliverable alongside other selected communication work from their time at Bren. The portfolio format is flexible, allowing for websites, documents, folders, or other compilations.
- **20% Final Presentation:** During week ten, students will give a 10-minute symposium talk presenting their project outcomes to peers, faculty, and invited clients. Presentations should effectively convey the goals, process, and impact of the project. This presentation is a celebration!

## VIII. Class Schedule

This is a 4-unit course, which equates to ~12 hrs/week. With 2 hours of class each week, students are expected to spend ~10 hours outside of class working on course deliverables. Below is a tentative schedule. Mandatory class days are highlighted. Slides will also be posted on Canvas upon completion.

#Week	Date	Slides	Class Topic	Assignment
Week One	April 4, 2025	<a href="#">Week One</a>	<b>Capstone Kickoff</b>	<i>Initial Client Meetings</i>
Week Two	April 11, 2025	<a href="#">Week Two</a>	Coworking Session	<i>Project Reflection #1 Due</i>
Week Three	April 18, 2025	<a href="#">Week Three</a>	Coworking Session	
Week Four	April 25, 2025	No capstone class this week due to MESM Public GP Presentations!		
Week Five	May 2, 2025	<a href="#">Week Five</a>	Coworking Session	
Week Six	May 9, 2025	<a href="#">Week Six</a>	<b>Student Presentations</b>	<i>Midpoint Client Meetings</i>
Week Seven	May 16, 2025	<a href="#">Week Seven</a>	Coworking Session	<i>Project Reflection #2 Due</i>

Week Eight	May 23, 2025	<a href="#">Week Eight</a>	Coworking Session	
Week Nine	May 30, 2025	<a href="#">Week Nine</a>	<b>Portfolio Peer Review</b>	<i>Portfolio Draft Due</i>
Week Ten	June 6, 2025	<a href="#">Week Ten</a>	<b>Capstone Symposium</b>	<i>Final Meeting &amp; Reflection</i>
Finals Week	June 13, 2025	Finals Week	No Class!	<i>Final Portfolio Due</i>

## IX. Frequently Asked Questions

- 1 How many students are allowed to work on each capstone project?**

Capstone teams will consist of 1–3 students per project. Students may work solo or in a group, depending on student interest, client needs, and project scope. If a student brings in their own client, they are not required to work in a team unless they choose to. Group size will be determined based on these factors during the project selection process.
- 2 Can I do a project for myself as the client, like starting my own podcast or Instagram page?**

No—Capstone projects must be client-driven to provide students with experience balancing creative or technical skills with real-world client needs. This ensures that students gain practice in professional communication, stakeholder collaboration, and meeting external expectations. While personal projects are valuable, they are not eligible for the Capstone. Students interested in pursuing independent projects outside of class are welcome to seek advice from the instructor.
- 3 What if I don't have a project idea, can I still do the capstone class?**

Students who do not have a specific project in mind will have the opportunity to choose from a pool of approved client proposals. Each year, the instructor works to secure independent clients for students who need a project. However, students are also encouraged to find a client themselves to ensure they select a Capstone experience that aligns with their interests and goals.
- 4 What if my client isn't responsive?**

Clients commit to being available and responsive throughout the quarter. However, if a client becomes unresponsive or difficult to reach, students should contact the instructor as soon as possible rather than waiting for the issue to escalate. The instructor can step in to help facilitate communication and ensure students receive the guidance they need.
- 5 Can I switch projects if I realize mine isn't a good fit?**

No—once assigned, students are committed to their project out of respect for the client relationship. However, project scope and expectations can be re-negotiated during the kickoff or midpoint meetings to ensure feasibility and alignment. If concerns arise, students should check in with the instructor for guidance on how to navigate conversations with their clients.
- 6 What kinds of deliverables are allowed?**

Capstone deliverables vary widely. Past projects have included infographics, short films, podcasts, articles, story maps, audience engagement strategies, social media campaigns, and more. This is not a restrictive list—students and clients are encouraged to explore creative and impactful communication formats that fit their goals. To get inspiration, students can browse past Capstone projects on the [Bren website](#) and reach out to the instructor to brainstorm potential project ideas. Clients and students are also welcome to propose multiple projects for consideration.

- **7 Will there be funding for software, travel, or other expenses?**

Clients are expected to cover all project-related costs, including travel, printing, and specialized materials. However, the Bren Communication Lab offers shared resources, including gear rentals (e.g., photography, video, and podcasting equipment), reference books, and editing software on lab computers. If students need additional software, reference materials, or new equipment that could benefit a broad group of future students, they may request a purchase for the lab. These requests are considered case by case, and funding is limited, so there are no guarantees. Students should email the instructor ([alexandra\\_phillips@bren.ucsb.edu](mailto:alexandra_phillips@bren.ucsb.edu)) and the lab manager Jimmy Benjamin ([jamesbenjamin@umail.ucsb.edu](mailto:jamesbenjamin@umail.ucsb.edu)) as early as possible with any requests for purchases.

- **8 What happens if I miss a required class or the final symposium?**

Attendance at all full-class meetings (Weeks 1, 5, and 9) and the final Capstone Symposium is mandatory. If a student has an unavoidable conflict (e.g., illness, job interview, emergency), they must notify the instructor as soon as possible to discuss options. For missed class meetings or coworking sessions, students can attend office hours to make up for participation.

## **X. Communication Lab Access**

Students are encouraged to use the Environmental Communication Lab (Bren Hall 1016) throughout the course for co-working, collaboration, and client meetings. The lab includes computer workstations, whiteboards, large tables, rentable creative equipment, and environmental communication resources. Students interested in borrowing camera, video, podcasting, or other equipment should contact Jimmy Benjamin ([jamesbenjamin@umail.ucsb.edu](mailto:jamesbenjamin@umail.ucsb.edu)). If there are materials needed for your project that we do not have in the communication lab, additional purchases may be possible but are not guaranteed. While the lab is undergoing some construction, it remains available for use outside class hours. Student feedback is also welcome to help improve the space for future environmental communication students.

## **XI. Inclusion Statement**

Every student has a unique background and perspective. As a classroom, we should strive for an inclusive atmosphere that respects this diversity. Everyone must adhere to the [Bren School Code of Conduct](#) (pg 31-34) and the [UCSB Code of Conduct](#). While taking this class we ask students to:

- Give feedback that is kind, thoughtful, and constructive
- Share your perspective while remaining open to different viewpoints
- Listen actively during discussions and presentations
- Communicate respectfully: challenge ideas, not people, in disagreements
- Foster inclusive conversations: make space if you speak often; push to engage if you are shy
- *Respect project ownership: students who bring in clients may choose to work independently*

## **XII. Accessibility Statement**

Students with disabilities may request academic accommodations for assignments online through the UCSB Disabled Students Program at <http://dsp.sa.ucsb.edu/>. Please make your requests for accommodations through the online system as early in the quarter as possible to ensure proper arrangement; for certain accommodations, DSP requires at least 10 days notice.

### **XIII. Generative AI Policy**

Generative AI can be a useful tool, but it may not be used to complete client deliverables, reflection assignments, or portfolio materials in ESM 449. Students may use AI programs like ChatGPT for brainstorming, outlining, editing, and literature exploration, but all submitted work must reflect their effort and expertise. If there is evidence that AI was improperly used to complete assignments, students will receive a written warning. Repeated violations will be considered academic dishonesty and may result in disciplinary action following a campus report.

### **XIV. About the Instructor**

[Alexandra A Phillips](#) is an assistant teaching professor in environmental communication at the Bren School at UC Santa Barbara. Here, she runs the communications focus for the Masters of Environmental Science and Management program. She also researches the effectiveness of science communication to students, the public, and policymakers. Although Alex is an oceanographer and geoscientist by training, she is also a professional photographer and graphic designer passionate about making environmental science communication more beautiful and impactful. She holds a BA in biology from the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara and a PhD in Geochemistry from Caltech. Before joining the Bren faculty, she completed a postdoc at the Large Lakes Observatory and worked as a professional science communicator at the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis. Alex was also the first AAAS congressional fellow in climate science, where she spent a year on environmental policy for US Senator Alex Padilla.