

October 2017

On Capstones: Carma Peña, MAPW Alumna

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Recommended Citation

(2017) "On Capstones: Carma Peña, MAPW Alumna," *MAPWriting*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mapwriting/vol2/iss1/9>

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Carma Peña



My graduation year is: Spring 2017

My MAPW concentration and support area are: Applied Writing and Creative Writing

My capstone project: “[Doorway to the Deep: Memoirs of Enduring Endometriosis and Embracing Life After Loss.](#)” As the title suggests this will be a memoir.

My capstone committee is: Dr. Anne Richards and Dr. Margaret Walters

On capstone planning: a) The planning process began in my very first class in the MAPW program entitled, “Writing Book Proposals.” Dr. Jim Elledge was teaching the class at the time, and presiding over the MAPW program as Director. While I had no idea what I would write about when I enrolled, eventually, through workshops with classmates and feedback from Dr. Elledge, I created a hybrid text combining the genres of memoir and self-help. The memoir portion chronicles my spiritual, emotional, and physical journey through a long history of endometriosis, while the corresponding self-help section of each chapter covers psychological issues that can attend endometriosis and infertility such as grief, loss, chronic pain, etc. Suggestions and recommendations for coping are offered to the reader consistent with my personal experience in dealing with endometriosis and infertility, and my professional experience as a mental health clinician for over ten years, and licensed in three states.

b) I wrote the proposal in Nov 2016, two weeks before the deadline, to allow my professors to make any changes they thought might be appropriate. In retrospect, I would not recommend waiting so late to start writing the proposal! The template is a bit more involved than what you expect even if or especially when you think your work is mostly or completely done as I was the case with me. Truthfully, I coasted a bit because I had already written both a book proposal and five chapters which more than met the minimum page requirement—all of which had been workshopped and on which I had earned A’s—and that did not even begin to tell the story! The lesson: start sooner than two weeks as you will also be creating the schedule to which you will need to adhere. So, think it through!

c) Communication with my committee was entirely email

for me. Not only do I work a demanding full-time job requiring fifty plus hours per week, I also travel for work, and I am a graduate research assistant. Therefore, hunting someone down in person was nearly impossible for me. I lived and died by emails, that said, I often had to email multiple times to ensure that the message was received or that my committee kept their deadlines. That was far and away the biggest stressor for me because of my inflexible work schedule. In order to mitigate that stress, my recommendation is two-fold: a) build time into the schedule you create for them to fall a little behind and it not to impact the work you do. In other words, don’t make your schedule or turn-around times too tight, and b) don’t be afraid to be professional, but persistent in getting the answers you need. Your committee is busy like you! If you are concerned that you are pestering your committee members, engage in a little meta-communication—ask them how they want you to communicate with them so that you both get what you need .

On capstone research: The research was EXTENSIVE. I have never researched so much on such a wide variety of topics, because I am dealing with an array of psychological issues as they arise from the memoir section. My committee did a great job of poking holes in weak areas and fortifying strong ones. Under their direction, the working bibliography expanded exponentially. I became appropriately cautious when using imply versus infer, learning when to draw conclusions and when to hedge because the research was not there to support my suppositions. Ultimately, I became appropriately confident in knowing how to create solid content that is well supported by a body of strong, peer-reviewed research.

My favorite part of creating my capstone was: Telling my story well. Anyone can tell their story, but it is very difficult to tell it in a manner that is meaningful, captivating, even life-changing. As a therapist, I have heard many stories that have changed my life. My hope is that something in my story, the things that I have faced, will help the women or caring partners of those who endure this debilitating condition called endometriosis for which there is no cure.

For those who are starting to think about capstone: Start early and find something which interests and about which you are passionate!