

EXECUTIVE FELLOWSHIP

Capstone Project Guidelines



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1. Welcome to Your Capstone Project

Congratulations on joining the 2026–2027 cohort of the OneJustice Executive Fellowship! Over the next ten months, the Capstone Project will be your hands-on opportunity to apply what you're learning in the Fellowship directly to a real challenge or opportunity at your own organization.

What Is the Capstone Project?

A Capstone Project is a process culminating in a final memo containing strategic recommendations and an implementation plan. It applies everything you have learned to an unresolved issue, challenge, or opportunity facing your own legal aid organization. You take that issue and explore it through different non-profit management and leadership lenses: framing the problem, researching about it inside the organization and out in the sector, testing it against your organization's financial reality, and arriving at a recommendation your organization can actually act on. The Capstone Project's sequenced assignments build on each other to produce a final Capstone Memo.

What's in the Capstone Memo?

Every assignment you complete during the Fellowship becomes a section of your final Capstone Memo. Here is what it contains:

1. **Your Capstone Question:** A written, open-ended question about a specific unresolved issue/challenge/opportunity facing your organization — one your research, not your assumptions, will answer.
2. **Organizational & Environmental Context:** A short description of the conditions surrounding your capstone question — what you already know, off the top of your head, about what's happening inside your organization (staffing, programs, leadership, finances) and out in the sector and community (political, economic, and funding conditions), rather than anything you'd need to actually research extensively.
3. **Research Plan:** What you set out to learn by conducting research. There are two basic kinds of research you can plan to conduct: (1) Internal research: gathering information and data from within the organization about the organization's challenge/opportunity; and (2) External research: learning from the sector or partners (e.g., about best practices and how others in the nonprofit and private sectors are addressing this or similar issues, etc.,)
4. **Findings from Research:** Reporting what was learned from research (e.g., trends, patterns, best practices, etc.)
5. **Financial Context Analysis.** Your organization's financial picture — ratios, revenue model, and what it can realistically afford.

6. **Recommendation(s):** After conducting research and financials analysis, you will provide a preliminary decision and/or recommendation(s) for moving forward. This is the **strategic** layer — “**what we can do, and why**”.
7. **Implementation plan:** The concrete steps for carrying the recommendation out: what happens in what sequence, who is responsible, what resources are required, and by when. This is the **tactical** layer — “**How we can do it.**” The implementation plan may fall after you graduate.

These assignments produce two things. For you: leadership skills you can use anywhere, and put into practice on a real non-profit management problem. For your organization: a practical recommendation and implementation plan, based on research and financial analysis, that your Executive Director, board, or department head can act on — work meant to maximize the organization's impact on the community it serves.

Content Areas: Where Your Capstone Question Fits

A content area is the topic area your capstone question will fall under. There are six content areas, described in full in Section 4, and each one covers a different part of running a nonprofit organization: Boards & Leadership (governance), Revenue/Fundraising (resource development), Human Resources (people), Program Analysis & Redesign (programs), Pro Bono & Partnerships (partnerships), and Technology & Artificial Intelligence (tech infrastructure).

The Decision Making Check

The Decision Making Check is a quick three-step exercise that helps you align your Capstone Question with the influence and authority you already hold. Unless you are the Executive Director or equivalent position, your capstone question will land best when it points toward a decision you make together with your organization's leadership: in most legal aid organizations, choices that commit budget, add or restructure staff, or set fundraising strategy are made with the ED, the board, or a department head — and as the person who researched the issue and shaped the solution, you are the one who gives them what they need to make an executive decision. Running the Decision Making Check early keeps your capstone question both ambitious and achievable.

Capstone Project Objectives

By the end of the Capstone Project, you should be able to:

- Identify and clearly frame an organizational challenge or opportunity.
- Conduct both internal (organizational) and external (environmental/sector) research relevant to your capstone question.
- Apply nonprofit financial analysis to ground your recommendations in your organization's real financial picture.

- Synthesize research and analysis into clear recommendations (**Strategic** - “What we can do”).
- Build a realistic implementation plan with concrete next steps you can act on after graduation (**Tactical** - “How we can do it”).

Your Support System: Coaches, Peers, and Resources

You are not working through the Capstone Project alone. Support comes from four directions — the OneJustice Core EF Team, your Capstone Coach, Fellow peers, and written resources.

- In-session instruction and Q&A: An overview of the Capstone Project and its assignments is introduced at the September kickoff session, with other sessions dedicated to going over other assignments, plus a full Capstone Work Day in April for additional support with drafting your Capstone Memo.
- Written materials for guidance: Guidelines, samples of assignments, and guidance for each component of the Capstone Project will be provided in the Learning Portal.
- A Capstone Coach matched to your Content Area(s): You will be assigned a OneJustice Coach that will facilitate sessions dedicated to brainstorming the capstone project.

The Capstone Project Journey

Your Capstone Project unfolds throughout the Fellowship. The following table gives you the deadlines for each assignment that build the Capstone Memo.

Assignments and Deadlines			
Step	Assignment	What Happens	Due Date
1	Draft Capstone Question	• Identify a real organizational issue (challenge or opportunity) that your organization is currently facing and that you'll explore; • draft your capstone question; • choose your Content Area(s)	10/15/26
2	Final Capstone Question	Submit a polished final version of your capstone question.	11/19/26
3	Organizational & Environmental Context	Write short descriptions/paragraphs of the larger environmental (e.g., political, economic, etc.,) and organizational contexts in which the issue revolves around. This assignment captures only information you already know (e.g., what's top of mind, anecdotes from colleagues, staff, board members, partners, funders, etc.,) not what you will spend extensive time researching - which will happen with assignments #4 "Build a Research Plan" and #5 "Conduct Research & Financial Context Analysis"	12/17/26
4	Build a Research Plan	Design your internal and external research approach. There are two basic kinds of research you can plan to conduct: (1) Internal research: gathering information and data from within the organization about the challenge/opportunity; and (2) External research: learning from the sector or partners (e.g., about best practices and how others in the	1/28/27

Assignments and Deadlines			
Step	Assignment	What Happens	Due Date
5	Conduct Research & Financial Context Analysis	nonprofit and private sectors are addressing this or similar issues, etc.,) Implement your research plan! Gather internal data and external/sector information tied to your capstone question. Analyze your organization's financial health using the nonprofit financial ratios and examine its revenue model and budget, then explain what those financials mean for your capstone question — what your organization can realistically afford, what constrains it, and how that shapes the range of solutions your recommendation can consider.	Feb – Apr
6	Draft Capstone Memo	Consolidate all previous assignments into a single Capstone Memo document. After you have done internal and external research, you should have the information needed to make a preliminary recommendation(s) for moving forward.	4/22/27
7	Final Capstone Memo	Finalize your Capstone Memo — this is where you answer your capstone question. Drawing on your research and financial analysis, provide the recommendation(s) that answer the question you set out to explore, along with the implementation plan with detailed steps describing how your organization can carry out recommendations (implementation of plan may take place after your graduation from the program).	5/06/27
8	Oral Presentation Day 1	Group 1 Fellows deliver their oral presentation to Fellow peers and OneJustice Staff. Each Fellow will have 5-10 minutes to present the essence of their project, plus 5-10 minutes for Q&A.	5/06/27
9	Oral Presentation Day 2	Group 2 Fellows deliver their oral presentation to Fellow peers and OneJustice Staff. Each Fellow will have 5-10 minutes to present the essence of their project, plus 5-10 minutes for Q&A.	5/20/27

Graduation: Half-Day Mandatory Graduation — Thursday, June 10, 2027 (9:30 am – 12:30 pm Pacific).

2. Program Logistics & Requirements

Time Commitment

From September 2026 through January 2027, plan to spend roughly 2–3 hours per month outside of scheduled sessions working on your Capstone Project assignments. Expect an increase of up to 10 hours per month from February–May as you conduct research, complete your Financial Context Analysis, finalize your Capstone Memo, and prepare your presentation.

Graduation Requirement

Capstone Project Memo Mandatory to Graduate

You must submit the written Capstone Project Memo (final version) and deliver the oral presentation to graduate from the Executive Fellowship program. Graduates will receive a Certificate in Nonprofit Management. Fellows who do not complete these requirements (absent an extension granted by OneJustice) will not be able to graduate. If you anticipate a challenge meeting a deadline, reach out to executivefellowship@one-justice.org as early as possible.

3. Crafting a Strong Capstone Question

Your Capstone Question sits at the center of your entire Capstone Project. Every assignment — your Organizational & Environmental Context, your Research Plan, your Financial Context Analysis, your Capstone Memo, and your final presentation — exists to help you answer this one question well.

A strong Capstone Question does two things. First, it names a real, current challenge or opportunity facing your organization. Second, it's structured to be open to explore multiple solutions: more than one answer is possible to an organizational challenge/issue, and your research helps identify which one(s) are realistic and achievable.

Capstone Question Recommended Structure

Example of a polished capstone question:

“What revenue model would allow Valley Legal Aid of L.A. (“VLALA”) to reduce its dependence on the three government contracts that fund most of its budget over the next three years — while increasing unrestricted funding and without adding to current staff workloads?”

If possible, when you write your own capstone question, replace the general phrases with your organization's actual details: include the real number of contracts or funders, the actual percentage of the budget they cover, and your own timeframe. For example see below a polished version reframed as “The three government contracts that fund 68% of our budget” is stronger than “most of our funding.”

Example using org details/numbers:

“What revenue model would allow VLALA to reduce its dependence on the three government contracts that fund 68% of its \$4.2 million budget by fiscal year 2030 — while growing unrestricted funding from 6% to 15% of revenue and without adding to current staff workloads?”

Three general phrases became specific:

- “most of its budget” became “68% of its \$4.2 million budget,”
- “over the next three years” became “by fiscal year 2030,” and
- “increasing unrestricted funding” became “from 6% to 15% of revenue.”

How to state and structure a Capstone Question

Criteria 1: Start your sentence with “How” or “What model/structure...” to allow the capstone project to explore more than one solution.

In our Capstone Question Recommended Structure example, “***What revenue model would allow ...***” invites exploration into multiple solutions rather than pointing to a pre-determined solution — it asks you to compare models.

Avoid questions that lead to yes/no answers to avoid any that leads to only one solution. For example, avoid a capstone question such as “Should we hire a development director?” since it pre-determines a single solution (e.g., development director) and/or leads to a yes/no answer.

Criteria 2: Integrate the organization’s problem/issue into the capstone question.

To reframe the example “Should we hire a development director?”, provide the problem that is hidden underneath the surface. In this example, the assumption maybe that insufficient fundraising capacity would be the problem the organization is facing, which needs to be surfaced in the capstone question. The development director hire can become one option your research can weigh alongside other options (e.g., a grants consultant, a board fundraising committee, etc.) instead of being the only solution to focus on.

How to reframe the capstone question: Surface a core issue, challenge, or opportunity your organization is facing, limit yourself to surfacing no more than two main issues/challenges/opportunities. In our example of a polished capstone question, they are:

- 1) *“dependence on the three government contracts”, and*
- 2) *“that fund most of its budget over the next three years.”*

Later in your other assignments (e.g. internal or external research, Capstone Memo, etc.), you may list out other challenges you identify.

Criteria 3: Include possible success factor(s) in the capstone question, preferably at the end of the sentence. Introduce success factors with “**while**,” “**without**,” or “**so that**,” and then name those success factors.

In our example of a polished capstone question, the success factors are:

- 1) “...**while** increasing unrestricted funding” and
- 2) “**without** adding to current staff workloads.”

In other words, follow this structure when creating your capstone question:

“What/How” __can__ [Insert your org's name]... [insert the challenges/issues/ opportunity facing your org]... “While”.. “Without” “So that” __[Insert success factors]...__.

The Decision Making Check

A note for non-Executive-Director Fellows or equivalent positions. The Decision Making Check is a quick, three-step exercise that aligns your capstone question with the influence and authority you already hold. In most legal aid organizations, choices that commit budget, add or restructure staff, or set fundraising strategy are made with the ED, the board, or a department

head — so unless you are the Executive Director, your question will land best when it points toward a decision you help shape rather than one you make alone.

This is about focus, not limits: non-ED Fellows can and should take on organization-level questions. Running the check early lets you keep the full scope of the issue while making sure your version of the question ends in something you can deliver — a proposal, an analysis, or a documented case the right decision-maker(s) can act on. The research, the analysis, and the recommendation are yours to own; your work is what equips your ED, board, or department head to make an informed executive decision, and it is how your Capstone Project turns into real change at your organization.

The Decision Making Checklist

- **Step 1:** Name the decision your capstone question leads to.

Every capstone question, even one that starts with an open-ended “How,” is ultimately asking someone to decide something — whether to hire a role, restructure a team, commit new funding, or change how resources are used. Before you go further, ask yourself: ***what specific decision would my organization need to make, and who would actually make that call?***

Consider the following Capstone Question example:

"How can VLALA reduce its dependence on the three government contracts that fund most of its budget by fiscal year 2030 — while growing unrestricted funding and without further stretching the attorneys to serve Legal Permanent Residents seeking naturalization citizenship?"

The decision this question leads to: which revenue streams to grow in place of the three government contracts, and/or assumption(s) of how much budget and staff time to redirect. That's not a small, single-program decision — it affects budgeting, staffing, and priorities across the entire organization.

- **Step 2:** Identify who actually holds that decision making power.

Now take the decision(s) that need to be made, which you just identified in Step 1 and ask: *Is this decision mine as a Managing Attorney to make? — or does it belong to the ED, the board, or another senior role?* Decisions about organization-wide revenue strategy and budget commitments almost always sit with the ED, the board, and Development leadership — even if, for example, a Managing Attorney is the person closest to the problem, or the one who understands the underlying need best.

The Identified decision maker: The decision from Step 1 — which revenue streams to grow in place of the three government contracts, and how much budget and staff time to redirect — belongs to the ED, the board, and the Development team. If you're a Managing Attorney overseeing an immigration program, for example, more than likely this decision isn't yours to

make right away; even though you may understand the unmet need for naturalization services better than anyone else at the organization.

- **Step 3:** If you don't have full decision-making power, reframe the Capstone Question around what you can do.

If the decision fully belongs to someone else, that doesn't mean the capstone question is off-limits — it means your version of the capstone question needs just a slight editing. You can almost always research, document, model, or build a case, even when you can't make the final call yourself. Ask: *What version of this question ends in something I can actually hand off to the person who does decide?*

For Example:

A Managing Attorney's Draft Capstone Question:

"How can VLALA reduce its dependence on the three government contracts that fund most of its budget by fiscal year 2030 — while growing unrestricted funding and without further stretching the attorneys who serve Legal Permanent Residents seeking citizenship?"

A Managing Attorney's Refined Final Capstone Question:

"How can VLALA's immigration program meet more of the unmet need for naturalization assistance among Legal Permanent Residents in our service area, given the program's dependence on the three government contracts that fund most of its budget — while keeping our attorneys' current caseloads manageable and so that the ED and Development team have a documented client demand, cost, and staffing case for growing unrestricted funding to act on before fiscal year 2030?"

Here is how the refined question has taken into account each of the three Decision Making Checklist steps — and how it stays in the Managing Attorney's lens rather than the Executive Director's:

- **Step 1:** The capstone question is framed from a Managing Attorney's lens — with a focus on the immigration program, rather than the org itself. The program's dependence on the three government contracts appears as the financial condition the program operates under ("given the program's dependence..."). An ED-lens version would have asked how VLALA should restructure its funding model organization-wide.
- **Step 2:** The decision-maker was identified, and it is not the Fellow. By writing/framing the capstone question with "so that the ED and Development team have a documented client demand, cost, and staffing case"— the Managing Attorney signals that the organization-wide funding call stays with leadership. The revenue issue is present as context, not as something the Fellow is claiming authority to decide on.

- **Step 3:** The capstone question is framed around what a Managing Attorney role can actually produce/do. What the capstone question commits the Managing Attorney to produce is named in its closing: a documented client demand, cost, and staffing case.

4. Choosing Your Capstone Content Area(s)

As introduced in Section 1, a Content Area is the subject your Capstone Question is about. A capstone question can fall under one or more of the six below. Choosing the right Content Area(s) helps you scope your Capstone Project appropriately and connects you with a coach whose expertise matches your Content Area(s). OneJustice staff will match you with a coach after you submit your draft Capstone Question.

When you submit your draft Capstone Question, choose up to three Content Areas that it falls under. Later in the year you may find that your question touches more areas than you first chose. That is normal.

The example questions below are written in generic form so they work for any organization. When you write your own, follow the guidance in Section 3 and replace the general phrases with your organization's actual details — real numbers, percentages, and your own timeframe.

Content Areas	What It Covers	Example Capstone Question	Challenges / Opportunities / Issues	Success Factor(s)
Boards & Leadership	Board composition, structure, and governance; board–staff/ED relationships; officer roles and succession; committee structure; community and stakeholder governance questions.	What case-tracking and board reporting model would allow [organization]'s consumer debt program to give the board reliable data on the collection defense cases it turns away each year — while keeping current case coverage intact and so that the board and ED have documented turn-away data to set practice-area priorities on?	The board has no data on how many consumer debt collection defense cases the program turns away, so practice-area priorities are set on anecdote.	While keeping current case coverage intact; so that the board and ED have documented turn-away data to set practice-area priorities on.
Revenue / Fundraising	Revenue diversification and concentration; fundraising strategy and capacity; grant and contract management; donor cultivation; board engagement in fundraising;	What funding model would allow [organization]'s eviction defense team to keep its current representation capacity if the single city right-to-counsel contract that funds it is reduced or not renewed — while keeping current caseloads covered and so that the ED and Development team have a costed funding plan to act on?	The eviction defense team is funded by a single city right-to-counsel contract that may be reduced or not renewed.	While keeping current caseloads covered; so that the ED and Development team have a costed funding plan to act on.

Content Areas	What It Covers	Example Capstone Question	Challenges / Opportunities / Issues	Success Factor(s)
	communications, and development.			
Human Resources	Staffing structure and capacity; recruitment and retention; supervision and management practices; compensation and benefits; staff culture and well-being.	What supervision and caseload model would allow [organization]'s immigration and naturalization program to reduce attorney turnover — while keeping current cases covered and so that the ED has a documented staffing proposal to consider?	Attorney turnover in the immigration and naturalization program is straining case coverage and supervision.	While keeping current cases covered; so that the ED has a documented staffing proposal to consider.
Program Analysis & Redesign	Service delivery models; client intake and case management processes; internal operations, workflows, and organizational systems; program effectiveness and outcomes, data infrastructure; expansion, consolidation, or redesign of a program area.	What intake and case-handling model would allow [organization]'s record clearance program to complete more expungement petitions each year — while shortening the wait between client screening and filing and so that the ED has a documented workflow and staffing proposal to approve?	Expungement petitions are prepared one at a time, leaving clients waiting between screening and filing.	While shortening the wait between client screening and filing; so that the ED has a documented workflow and staffing proposal to approve.
Pro Bono & Partnerships	Centered on pro bono attorney engagement, volunteer partnerships, or other external legal-service partnerships.	What volunteer recruitment and supervision model would allow [organization]'s pro bono program to handle more consumer debt and disaster response cases — while keeping supervision time manageable for program attorneys and so that the ED has a documented volunteer capacity plan to act on?	Volunteer attorney capacity is underused while the program turns away consumer debt and disaster response cases it lacks the staff time to place and supervise.	While keeping supervision time manageable for program attorneys; so that the ED has a documented volunteer capacity plan to act on.
Technology & Artificial Intelligence	Focus on technology systems, cybersecurity, or an AI-assisted tool (for example, a new case management system or fundraising database).	What case management and data system model would allow [organization]'s public benefits program to track client eligibility, service, and outcome data across its service area — while protecting client data and so that the ED and leadership have a documented cost-and-	The program's current case management system cannot track eligibility or outcome data, so leadership cannot estimate unmet need or measure program impact.	While protecting client data; so that the ED and leadership have a documented cost-and-benefit case before any new system is purchased.

Content Areas	What It Covers	Example Capstone Question	Challenges / Opportunities / Issues	Success Factor(s)
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benefit case before any new system is purchased?

Capstone Questions Covering Multiple Content Areas

Example Capstone Question	Content Areas It Falls Under
How can [organization]'s housing pro bono program reach more tenants before their eviction response deadlines pass — while keeping current staff caseloads manageable and so that the ED and Development team have a costed proposal for handling the added cases?	Program Analysis & Redesign; Pro Bono & Partnerships; Revenue / Fundraising
What staffing and technology model would allow [organization]'s public benefits program to clear its intake backlog over the next 18 months — while producing cleaner data for grant reporting, without increasing current staff workloads, and so that the ED has a documented staffing and system proposal to act on?	Human Resources; Technology & Artificial Intelligence; Program Analysis & Redesign
How can [organization]'s consumer debt program meet more of the collection defense demand it currently turns away — while keeping current case coverage intact and so that the board and Development team have a documented case for funding the program beyond its current sources?	Boards & Leadership; Revenue / Fundraising; Human Resources

Capstone Question Assignment Self-Check Before You Submit

- ☐ My capstone question names a real, current issue, challenge, or opportunity my organization is facing.
- ☐ My question starts with “How” or “What model/structure...” rather than yes/no framing (Criteria 1).
- ☐ My question surfaces the organization's underlying problem (Criteria 2).
- ☐ My question includes one or more success factors, preferably at the end of the sentence, introduced with “while,” “without,” or “so that” (Criteria 3).
- ☐ My question follows the recommended structure: “What/How can [my organization] ... [the issue] ... while / without / so that ... [success factors]?”
- ☐ Where possible, I replaced general phrases with my organization’s actual details — real numbers, percentages, and my own timeframe.
- ☐ Decision Making Checklist Step 1: I have named the specific decision my capstone question leads to.
- ☐ Decision Making Checklist Step 2: I have identified who actually holds that decision power— me, or the ED, the board, or a department head.
- ☐ Decision Making Checklist Step 3: If the decision is not mine, my question is reframed around what I can actually do, and it ends in something I can produce and hand off — a documented case, analysis, or proposal the decision-maker can act on.
- ☐ I have chosen up to three Content Areas my question falls under.