



University Students' Council Standing Policy on
Experiential Learning Opportunities for Students Enrolled in
Non-STEM Faculties

Legislative History
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Introduction and Overview

"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand." - Confucius

A 2014 survey by the Canadian Council of Chief Executives asked executives of 100 of Canada's largest companies which qualities matter most in potential employees. They answered with "people skills" as number one, followed by communications skills, problem-solving skills, analytical abilities and leadership.¹ When considering new hires, these executives are most interested in strong soft skills, which universities are known for cultivating. However in experiential learning programs, students learn to apply these skills to future careers. In sixth place in the survey was industry-specific knowledge and experience, which further supports applied learning as a highly valuable pursuit with a positive correlation to students' employment prospects after graduation.²

When it comes time to find employment, graduates who have relevant work experience are ahead of their peers.³ The most recent National Graduates Survey released by Statistics Canada shows that bachelor's level graduates with co-op experience earn more than their peers, have higher employment and full-time employment rates, and are more likely to report that their debt was paid off two years after graduation.

Ryerson University's Learning and Teaching Office note that "research has also identified certain groups of students that have the most to gain from experiential learning," and that those groups include students who traditionally have not participated in internships and those aspiring to enter non-traditional professions. While "the first and foremost beneficiary of experiential learning is the student," "experiential learning can help institutions stay relevant to students by providing them with the necessary skills to transition to the workforce," and "can also be a boon to departments with few resources."⁴

Recommendations

1. Individual faculties and Western's central Experiential Learning Team should partner on the creation of an internship program for non-STEM students.
2. Experiential learning opportunities, including internships and co-ops, should be cross-listed and stored in a centrally-regulated database.
3. Western University should create a bursary program for students that would support extra-curricular experiential learning on an individual basis.
4. The University should incentivize the creation of courses that incorporate an experiential learning course component.

¹ <http://cou.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/COU-Experiential-Learning-Report-2014.pdf>

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ <http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/ExperientialLearningReport.pdf>

Recommendation 1: individual faculties and Western’s central Experiential Learning Team should partner on the creation of an internship program for non-STEM students

Principle: students across all faculties should be able to access and benefit from volunteer, co-op, work, and internship opportunities in order to enhance and complement their academic learning.

Concern: access and availability to experiential learning opportunities tend to be heavily concentrated in science, technology, engineering, and math-based programs.

Recommendation

Creating an internship program specifically for students enrolled in non-STEM faculties would allow the University to create a broader, more comprehensive experiential learning portfolio for non-STEM students. The robustness of an organized program could allow for the appointment of a program lead tasked with creating partnerships with community organizations interested in securing liberal arts students for placements.

While Western’s Faculties of Engineering and Science offer year-round faculty-specific internship programs as part of their organizational structure, the same cannot be said for the Faculties of Arts and Humanities and Music. Other internationally respected institutions, including McGill University and the University of British Columbia (UBC), offer Faculty of Arts internship programs to their students, with UBC stating that internships for arts students can “show you what [an] arts degree can do” while providing valuable work experience, practical skill development and hands-on training, and opportunities to network.⁵

Ontario Centres of Excellence’s TalentEdge program is another example of a robust internship program that does not exclude non-STEM students from consideration. TalentEdge provides current college and university undergraduate students in their final year of study to work on collaborative, industry-driven research and development projects. The program spans all disciplines, and fellowships may be academic or company-based.⁶

Institutions and organizations across the country view internship placements, as a subset of experiential learning opportunity, as a critical component of academic and professional development for STEM and non-STEM students alike. The University Students’ Council believes that the creation of a non-STEM internship program at Western would behoove the institution and carry hugely impactful benefits for all students pursuing arts degrees.

⁵ <http://students.arts.ubc.ca/involvement/arts-internship-program/students/>

⁶ <http://www.oce-ontario.org/programs/industry-academic-collaboration/talentedge/talentedge-internship-program>

Recommendation 2: experiential learning opportunities, including internships and co-ops, should be cross-listed and stored in a centrally-regulated database

Principle: a centralized electronic database will allow for an efficacious method of compiling, monitoring, disseminating, and tracking positions and opportunities between faculties.

Concern: any expansion of experiential learning programs should occur in an organized and centralized fashion in order to maximize the efficiency of tracking student participants and their opportunities.

Concern: separate stewardship of opportunity clusters creates an environment where access to certain opportunities is restricted to students of certain faculties and community partners lack a single gateway to experiential learning teams.

Recommendation

Western lacks a central database through which students can access all freely available internships that are processed through faculty offices and count for academic credit. While other pieces of infrastructure give students a measure of access to job opportunities posted by community partners, the current system places non-STEM students in faculties without internship offices at a disadvantage. For example, students with credible transferrable skills in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities are denied access to internship providers who list their opportunities with another faculty (such as Information and Media Studies) as opposed to on Western's universally accessible employment portal, CareerCentral.

The University of Waterloo has successfully adopted a centralized database for summer, volunteer, part-time and full-time co-op placements. *JobMine* allows students to login, input their personal information, and access placements based on criteria they choose. This *JobMine* portal also stores the student's resume and cover letter to facilitate the application process.⁷

⁷ <https://uwaterloo.ca/jobmine/students/jobmine-help>

Recommendation 3: the University should create a bursary program for students that would support extra-curricular experiential learning on an individual basis

Principle: all students irrespective of financial ability and home faculty should be able to access and pursue extra-curricular learning.

Concern: unpaid extracurricular learning experiences restrict students' capacity to earn income that might be necessary in order to pay tuition, fees, and living expenses.

Concern: non-STEM programs often lack academically sanctioned co-curricular placements that enable them to learn in an immersive, stimulating environment, forcing students to turn to extra-curricular activities such as field trips, which come with additional costs.

Recommendation

The number of co-curricular experiential learning opportunities available to non-STEM students is arguably lower than the number of placements available to STEM students. The creation of a bursary program or project grant initiative, which would see the University incentivize extra-curricular experiential learning applicable to academic study, could mitigate the dearth in faculty-offered opportunities by empowering students to create opportunities of their own.

Ryerson University's Faculty of Arts offers Student Project Grants, the purpose of which are to "provide financial support for student-initiated extra-curricular projects and activities that promote experiential learning and student engagement."⁸ Funded projects include trips to penitentiaries to learn about Canada's criminal justice system and Ottawa to learn about politics and governance, student participation in an Engineers Without Borders national conference and a Rwandan literacy program, and cultural events on Ryerson's campus. While not offered directly by the institution, each of these funded projects represents an enriching experiential learning opportunity students may never have had a chance to pursue without a grant program.

Another example is the University of Winnipeg (UW), which offers a grant called the Experiential Learning Fund in order to allow students to participate in a breadth of activities that complement their in-class academic pursuits. In 2013, the UW's president created the fund with the goal of advancing "for-credit experiential learning at the University of Winnipeg." In 2016, \$30,000 will be awarded to support student experiential learning opportunities that range from service learning and field trips to practicum experiences and co-op placements.⁹

⁸ <http://www.ryerson.ca/arts/sec/students/student-project-grants/index.html>

⁹ <http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/eln/experiential-learning-fund.html>

Recommendation 4: the University should incentivize the creation of courses that incorporate an experiential learning component

Principle: wherever possible, curricular experience should not be limited to strictly theoretical and/or in-class components.

Principle: faculty should be actively engaged in the process of creating more experiential learning opportunities for students enrolled in non-STEM faculties.

Concern: the vast majority of courses offered at Western do not actively incorporate an experiential learning component.

Recommendation

The community engaged learning grants offered by Western University's Student Success Centre reflect only one type of experiential learning that takes place in curricular or academic settings.¹⁰ While these grants are a fine example of what an experiential learning grant can look like, they are limited in their utility and capacity to stimulate growth in the number of courses that include experiential learning components.

Ryerson University's Faculty of Arts offers an exemplary experiential learning grant that helps "faculty develop, disseminate and sustain forms of course-based experiential learning." The grant program is "designed to provide faculty members with resources to enable them to undertake, evaluate and report on forms of experiential learning in their courses."¹¹ While the Student Success Centre's Experiential Learning Team is in place to support faculty members in establishing course-based experiential learning opportunities for students, Western rarely incentivizes the creation of curricular experiential learning opportunities. This is in spite of the fact that course-based experiential learning requires a fundamentally different approach to curriculum design on the part of the instructor, who is expected to offer a "creative investment."¹²

The University Students' Council believes that recognizing innovative pedagogical practices including curricular experiential learning warrants recognition and institutional support. In 2015, the USC created the President's Medal for Innovation in Undergraduate Teaching which is bestowed upon a faculty member who excels in pedagogical innovation, following in the footsteps of institutions such as Ryerson University. Research outlining the merits of experiential learning compels Western University to assume a leadership role in encouraging faculty to create non-traditional academic environments, for the betterment of the student experience.

¹⁰ http://www.success.uwo.ca/experience/community_engaged_learning/cel_grants.html

¹¹ <http://www.ryerson.ca/arts/for-faculty/grants-awards-support/>

¹² <https://www.whitman.edu/Documents/Newsroom/Hanover%20Research%20-%20Best%20Practices%20in%20Experiential%20Learning%20at%20Liberal%20Arts%20Institutions.pdf>

Appendix 1: Guidelines for Selecting and Pursuing Experiential Learning Opportunities for non-STEM Students¹³

These experiences ought to:

- Be based upon clear, well-articulated and measurable objectives;
- Incorporate meaningful learning and working dimensions;
- Include learning about other communities, how to enter them, be an active participant and contributor, and be accountable to them;
- Contribute to the development of life skills;
- Foster personal growth;
- Promote engagement and networking; and,
- Provide cross-cultural exposure and learning, and allow for the exploration of the world.

¹³ <http://www.questu.ca/experiential-learning.html>

Appendix 2: Experiential Learning Outcomes

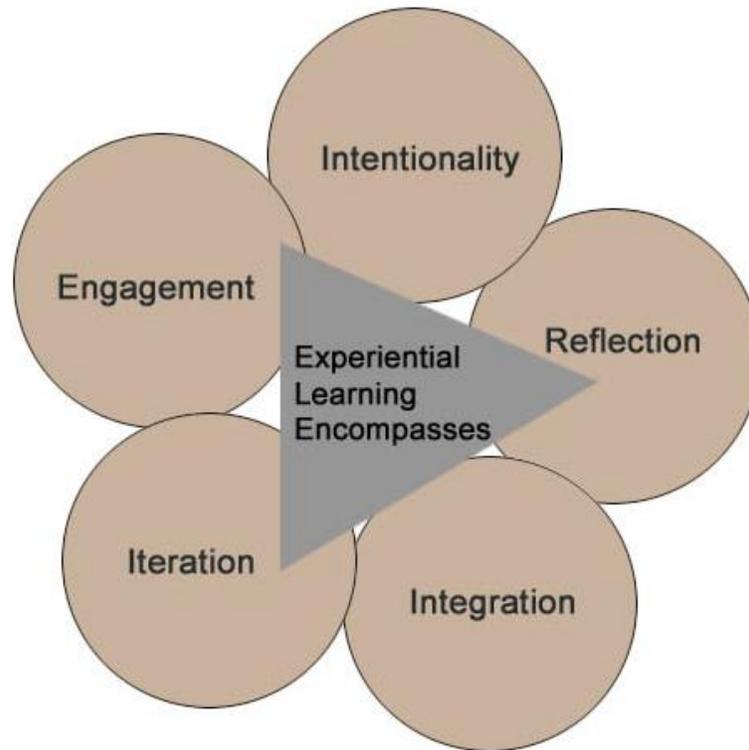


Figure 1. Core experiential learning outcomes as identified by Ryerson University.

Appendix 2: Table of Experiential Learning Methods

Method
Capstone course
Case study
Charrette
Clinical placement
Competition
Conference
Co-op
Creative practice
Debate
Exhibition
External project
Field camp
Field experience
Field study
Field trip
Independent study
International course
Internship
Laboratory
Placement
Practicum
Problem-based learning
Production
Research project
Service learning
Simulation
Simulation (computer)
Simulation (performance-based)
Student exchange
Studio
Thesis
Tutorial
Workshop
Work-study

Table 1. Experiential learning activities provided at Ryerson University.