

Experiential Education Focus Group

White Paper
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Committee members: Patrick Clarke (Chair), Pam Branin, Eric Brown, Brian Cottam, Briget Eastep, Jim Harrison, Steve Harrison, Doug Larson, Megan Lloyd, Earl Mulderink, Alla Paroiatnikova, Todd Petersen, Sage Platt, Jedd Webb, Lynn White

Introduction and charge of focus group

The Experiential Education Focus Group was created and charged with the task of exploring the possibility of implementing an *experiential education requirement* (EER) for all students. The group's charge from the Provost and the Academic Planning and Steering was to identify perceived benefits, challenges, logistics, and other general considerations associated with the development and creation of such a program. This white paper captures and organizes prominent themes which emerged from the discussion and from research of existing programs at other higher education institutions. Our intent is to provide recommendations that can be used to form a foundation for the next steps of program development.

The organization of this white paper begins with outlining the ideals of good practice, followed by a summary of values as well as a summary of existing models. This white paper concludes with a set of recommendations for moving forward.

Principles of good practice

Janet Eyler, Education professor at Vanderbilt University, offers the following explanation of experiential education “[It] helps students both to bridge classroom study and life in the world and to transform inert knowledge into knowledge-in-use” (24). Experiential education should also foster in students the capacity to master and use subject matter, deal with new complex situations, and develop skills for life-long learning. According to Dr. Eyler, the quality of the *experience* matters and should be interwoven with personal reflection and on-going feedback from those who help guide the student.

The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) identified eight principles of good practice, which seem to reflect Dr. Eyler's description. These principles guide experiential learning activities, which are transferrable across disciplines. NSEE promotes the “effective use of experience as an integral part of education, in order to empower learners” while fostering the common good. Primary to the mission of NSEE is that “both the experience and the learning are fundamental to the process and there is mutual responsibility between the learner and facilitator(s).” The eight principles of good practice, as articulated on the organization's website, are as follows:

NSEE Eight Principles

1. Intention – represents the purposefulness that enables experience to become knowledge, and as such, is deeper than the goals, objectives, and activities that define the experience.
2. Preparedness and Planning – participants enter the experience with sufficient foundation to support an effective experience, which should be flexible and allow for adaptation.
3. Authenticity – the experience must have a real world context and/or be useful and meaningful in reference to an applied setting.
4. Reflection – the element that transforms simple experience to a learning experience.
5. Orientation and Training – the full value of the experience must be accessible to both the learner and those helping to facilitate. All parties must be prepared with important background information about one another and about the context and environment in which the experience will operate.
6. Monitoring and Continuous Improvement – feedback is necessary to achieve learning intentions and quality objectives and that the structure of the experience be sufficiently flexible to permit change in response to the feedback.
7. Assessment and Evaluation – means must be provided to develop and refine specific learning goals and quality objectives...evaluation provides comprehensive data about the experiential process as a whole.
8. Acknowledgement – recognition of learning and impact occur throughout the experience by way of reflective and monitoring processes and through reporting, documentation and sharing accomplishments.

Values of an Experiential Education

The focus group believed that before we can begin the formal process of implementing an EER the development of a set of core values was crucial. These values could then provide vision for the emerging program. Though the focus group's list of values is not exhaustive; it provides a sense of perspectives from across the SUU campus. Members of the focus group felt an effective EER at SUU would:

- Foster outside classroom experiences;
- Provide mentoring opportunities for students, faculty and staff;
- Be interdisciplinary in nature;
- Allow for individual choice regarding experiential learning activities;
- Provide pre/post experience activities;
- Be comprehensive;
- Be embedded across campus;
- Provide mission fidelity to the institution;
- Make the SUU residential experience richer and more meaningful;
- Engage the campus community;
- Be intentional;
- Be collaborative (shared governance, less hierarchy);
- Have a sufficient foundation;
- Provide reflection and application related to academic course work;

- Provide a real world and authentic application;
- Develop appreciation of “Otherness”;
- Encourage self-actualization (optimizing one’s potential to maximize personal growth and accomplishment);
- Foster the development of critical and creative thinking and social skills;

As Sample of Existing Models

- Elon University, which many consider a pioneer in developing required experiential education, has created a course driven program where students must take a designated experiential learning course sometime before they graduate. Courses are vetted before a committee to determine whether they meet and fulfill standards agreed upon by the campus community. If so, courses receive an experiential learning designation. Basically, for a course to receive the designation, it must provide an out-of-class experience and reflective activity. Over 90% of the reflective activities are the product of some type of journaling.
- University of Purdue - Calumet, requires every graduate to take two designated experiential learning courses. This requirement was a faculty initiative that was spurred by a task force similar to this one, but was ultimately unanimously approved by their faculty senate in the spring of 2007 to be implemented the next fall. To become a designated experiential education course, the instructor must submit an application that details the course design to an experiential learning review committee made up of representatives from across campus. The review is based upon NSEE's eight principles outlined above. To support the experiential learning requirement and participating faculty, Calumet has two administrative positions housed under Academic Affairs. In addition, Calumet received in 2006 a \$1.9 million Department of Education Title III grant designated to help them re-structure their institution, with the experiential learning requirement being a chock stone of their efforts. With the grant funding, Calmut has partnered with NSEE to provide conference, workshops, and development grants for faculty to create new experiential learning courses and to re-work existing courses. Calmut's vision is to have at least two designated experiential learning courses in every department and ultimately to transform how their faculty teaches. Their two biggest challenges are determining how to motivate faculty beyond monetary incentives to create and teach experiential learning courses and then how to give faculty credit for teaching experientially in their leave, rank, and tenure process. Like SUU, Calmut began this process and initiative simply to build upon the strengths identified within their institution.
- California State University Monterey Bay has a nationally-known and award-winning service-learning program at CSU-Monterey Bay requires all students to complete two service-learning classes to graduate. As explained at their web site, “CSUMB has integrated service learning in both its lower-division general education program, and as a learning outcome in each undergraduate major. As a result, CSUMB students take two service learning courses: (1) a lower division course that introduces them to concepts of service and multicultural community participation; and (2), a course in their major that addresses social issues more specific to their field and career aspirations.”

Benefits of an EER at SUU

Experiential learning opportunities are currently available to SUU students in several manifestations. A variety of internships and practicum experiences, undergraduate research, study abroad programs, service learning opportunities, entrepreneurial experiences, and curricular innovations (e.g., Partners in the Parks) have been, and are increasingly becoming a larger part of the educational culture at SUU. One of the major goals of implementing an EER is to make experiential opportunities available to every student thereby enhancing the overall value of an SUU education. In doing so, a number of foreseeable benefits can occur. An EER:

- Helps to inform and drive the processes and methodology of a liberal arts and sciences university;
- Reflects best practices in higher education and clearly establishes SUU as a unique institution in the state of Utah and western region of the country;
- Establishes clear criteria for the educational philosophy of Southern Utah University relative to the type of institution we are and the educational product we offer;
- Helps to synchronize all areas of campus relative to a set of common EER goals shared across disciplines, colleges, service areas, auxiliaries, etc;
- Helps to articulate common goals and objectives;
- Can enhance the SUU residential experience if living/learning communities are created allowing students of similar academic interests to live together and participate in out-of-class applications relative to their course of study;
- Enhances the first-year experience;
- Provides direction for a sophomore-year experience;
- Inspires students to make connections to the broader world and to become an informed and engaged global citizen;
- Stimulates the design of curricula that fosters more out-of-class application in a variety of forms, thus promoting a type of “value added” dimension to a greater number of courses;
- Prepares SUU graduates with skills, abilities and experiences linked to real world application, which reflect the current demands of the 21st century employment market where hands on experience and application are necessary;
- Advocates the concepts of interdisciplinarity and diversity within the curriculum;
- Creates mentoring and professional development opportunities for students and faculty;
- Encourages opportunities to partner with community and other external agencies and groups;

Challenges of Implementing and EER

The focus group identified several challenges relative to implementing a required program. Members of the group, however, were mindful that challenges are inherent with any new program and seemed optimistic the university would be able to address these issues over time. Some of the major challenges identified by this group include:

- An experiential education is more than just “checking off a box” or “meeting a requirement.” An EER at SUU should not be viewed as “extra-curricular” in nature, but as a philosophy which guides curriculum and reflects core values of the institution. If a model at SUU is ultimately developed which utilizes course work (which seems to be a common approach) to facilitate an EER, one challenge will be to develop courses fostering deep, reflective experiences. Equally, if not more challenging would be to secure the resources required to support, mentor, and solicit the feedback necessary for achieving “good practice.”
- Are SUU students adequately prepared for the requirements of an EER? Are there implications for recruitment, particularly with regards to the needs of the community (including the six counties for which SUU serves as a primary educational center)? Will “rural students” need more initial support to achieve the goals of an EER?
- Fair compensation and workload are two important challenges to implementation. Can the university’s current personnel manage an EER for all students?
- Limited resources; over time, funding for an EER would need to be established to prevent draining of resources from other areas of the campus.
- Campus buy-in from faculty, staff, and students will be a challenge initially. This could perhaps be minimized by affording everyone the opportunity to provide input, thereby creating a sense of ownership in the program.
- Though more of an opportunity than a challenge, there would seem to be a learning curve related to marketing an EER and attracting the “right kind of student.”

Considerations for funding and facilitating and EER @ SUU

There are a number of considerations related to the administration of such a large program. Who or *what* would be charged with the overall operation and day-to-day management? Following are some considerations discussed by the focus group:

- Would the administration be hierarchical or follow a shared governance model? If hierarchical, should there be a dean or director of experiential education and should that position report to the provost or associate provost? If a shared governance model is implemented, how would the program operate logistically and who would ultimately coordinate efforts?
- For each experiential track identified for the program, would there need to be a director, or other type of administrator, or administrative body, put in place to coordinate logistics, training, methodology, faculty training, dissemination of information, etc.?
- Funding would be crucial to the implementation of a program that would permeate the entire SUU educational experience. Where would the dollars come from? Would grant funding be the best solution or would this become part of the funding model for the campus? Would the experiential tracks be funded separately or as part of a larger entity? The focus group felt that whatever program emerges, it must be institutionalized and ultimately attached to the general funding model of the university.

- A faculty training and development program would have to be funded and implemented to help faculty design curriculum, to empower them to mentor and guide students, to assist them in the development of assessment skills relative to measuring the effectiveness of experiential courses, and to promote general professional development activities.
- Should a mandatory experiential education become a major component of the university's mission and require faculty involvement at all levels, the Leave Rank and Tenure system must accommodate and acknowledge the efforts and accomplishments of faculty who participate.
- There would be several opportunities for students to serve as peer mentors not only for their own leadership development and growth, but to help manage what is sure to be a fairly complex system with multiple tracks engaging thousands of students.

Recommendations for moving forward

Members of the focus group were very supportive of implementing an experiential education requirement and believe it is in the best interest of the university to move forward with the process of implementation. Though several recommendations were proposed by members of the focus group, two major considerations must be addressed: how much will an EER program cost (and how to fund it) and how best to administer a large scale program impacting the educational experience of literally thousands of students.

- Cost and Funding – The experiential tracks identified in the Provost's preliminary model seem to provide the necessary structure to capture and facilitate an EER at SUU. It would seem prudent that each track would need administrative oversight and support in order to develop and direct the activities of students; this is where the bulk of cost would be incurred. Following is a rough break down of assumed costs associated with starting a large scale program at SUU.

- \$160,000 per track would provide a salary package (base salary and benefits) for both a full-time administrator and administrative support staff, student wages, operating costs, and dollars for faculty involvement.

- \$80,000 salary & benefits package for director/coordinator x 5 = \$400,000

- \$32,000 salary and benefits package for administrative support position 5 = \$160,000

- \$15,000 student wages x 5 = \$75,000

- \$10,000 operating costs x 5 = \$50,000

- \$23,000 for faculty roles = \$115,000

Total cost of program \$800,000

This dollar amount is a rough estimate that does not take into account money and other forms of compensation already committed to existing experiential programs at SUU (i.e., study abroad administrative position is already in place, faculty are receiving release time for civic engagement and undergraduate research, etc.). Also, a phased in approach would allow more

time to secure full funding for the entire program. Phase 1, for example, could provide funding for areas already established, such as service & learning, study abroad (global engagement) and undergraduate research. Newly proposed areas, such as creativity and innovation, the outdoor track, and the leadership track, could begin with part-time administration, similar to the beginnings of the civic engagement and undergraduate research programs. Release time appointments may be ample compensation during phase 1 implementation for the newer initiatives. Once those areas are established, permanent funding can be secured for full-time administration.

With this in mind, the recommendation is that the University seeks to secure \$320,000 for phase 1, which would establish the administrative structure for service & learning and global engagement since those two areas seem the most developed of the five proposed tracks. The amount would also provide funding for faculty development and involvement, and make available dollars to support release time for individuals selected to develop the newer tracks. The additional \$480,000 would then be secured over time relative to the development of the program.

Funding sources may include 2nd tier tuition increases, redistribution of general fund resources, and/or a program fee(s).

- Administration – Though members of the focus group were divided as to how best to administer an EER program at SUU, most agreed that a single administrative structure would be needed to assist and support a large scale, multi-faceted program comprised of multiple tracks. All members of the focus group agreed the structure/entity would need to be directly aligned with the Provost office with the administrator in charge having a direct reporting line. Two main ideas for administrative oversight include:
 - Creation of an office of experiential education with an administrator (dean, executive director, assistant provost) overseeing the efforts of each track and supervising the coordinator/director. This type of position would be a new entity on campus, would be an ex-officio member of the deans' council, and report directly to the Provost.
 - Align the experiential education tracks with existing support programs such as academic advising, first-year seminar, convocations, etc., and create a university college model with a dean or other senior level administrator at the helm. It was discussed that advising, first-year seminar and convocations, among other programs, would fit naturally with and support the purposes of the experiential tracks.

With these two major considerations presented, the focus group recommends a task force be organized to begin the formal and intentional work of designing a phased in approach for an EER program, which could begin as early as fall semester, 2010, but may take some additional time. It is recommended that the task force:

- Assess the overall impact of a campus wide EER model and make determinations regarding logistics, administration, funding, etc.
- Continue to examine the experiential tracks which emerged from the SWOT analysis, clarify the purposes of each, modify and recommend as needed, suggest administrative strategies specific for each track, and establish protocol and procedures for students, staff and faculty to engage in the program.
- Examine mechanisms of delivery and means of documenting EER activities.
- Consider a rewards and recognition system with considerable attention being given to the Leave, Rank and Tenure process.
- Establish assessment strategies, which would include both quantitative and qualitative measures, and formative methods. The hiring of assessment personnel would bring expertise needed to develop an effective model.
- Consider student development models and research to help determine how to best educate and engage students.
- Survey key constituents, including faculty, students, staff, community members, etc. Survey results would give voice to a wider audience and help guide the implementation process. Lynn White, a psychology faculty member and Director of Undergraduate Research, has offered her time and expertise help coordinate this effort.
- Consider how an EER ties into all components of the Academic Road Map, including faculty work load, faculty development, interdisciplinarity of programs and degrees, salary equity, and alternative forms of course delivery.
- Propose a timeline for implementation with a recommended phase in approach (i.e., Year 1, Year 3, Year 5).
- Continue to research the body of literature and effective models at other institutions.
- Present a working plan by spring semester 2010 to provide a specific time line for program implementation and a budget for program operation.
- Establish a permanent governing body to oversee the full implementation of the program over the specified time period established by the task force.

Conclusion

An Experiential Education Requirement at Southern Utah University would make the on-the-ground activities at SUU match the current mission and vision statements of the campus, which are laden with experiential education language. Experiential education is completely compatible with a liberal arts and sciences education and could be implemented together. SUU has a history of providing experiences to its students which enable them to better compete in the work environment, excel in graduate and professional school, and to be inspired to think globally and engage civically. However as an EER takes

shape, it will need to be aligned with all facets of the university to become a hallmark of the SUU experience. Time, patience, funding and the capacity to endure a longitudinal implementation are required to realize the vision of such a program.

Work Cited

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