EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

A framework for impact

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Background

There is an appreciation in higher education that providing experiential learning opportunities for students enhances their learning and skills development and better prepares them for the world of work. Experiential learning also provides students with opportunities to engage directly in communities where they apply their learning in real-world contexts, develop key competencies (e.g., intercultural, leadership, communication), gain a deeper understanding of complex social issues and contribute directly toward community capacity building. These aspects have always been part of the core mandate for the University of Guelph – in both our curricular and co-curricular offerings.

Experiential education/learning (EL) has become an area of focus for the government. The Ontario Premier's Highly Skilled Workforce Expert Panel and the Business Council of Canada (BCC) both recommend that all postsecondary students should have at least one EL experience by the time they complete their postsecondary education. They stress that the global competition for talent is raising skill requirements and changing expectations for new graduates across all programs at institutions. In an economy marked by disruptive innovation, new technologies, and more diverse opportunities, experiential learning is key to providing the skills necessary for students to successfully transition to the labour market.

In light of these new and evolving pressures, an Experiential Learning Task Force was struck to review our present programs, identify gaps, and suggest strategies for improvement, which could include expanding capacity and identifying ways to facilitate collaboration and resource sharing across the university. The overarching goals are to improve student access to the EL that suits their learning needs and objectives and support faculty, staff, administrators and Departments/Colleges in successfully developing and offering experiential learning programs.
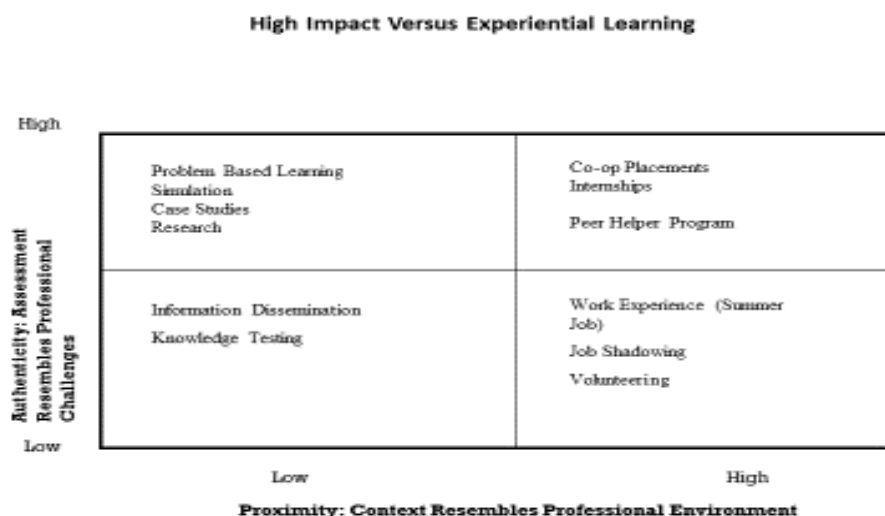
This report provides preliminary observations on the strength of our programs as well as the mechanisms and strategies meant to facilitate the development and growth of curricular and co-curricular Experiential Learning opportunities, both for undergraduate and graduate students.

Definition of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is first and foremost a teaching and learning strategy that facilitates a variety of learning outcomes for students. As noted in the MAESD UDC Experiential Learning Sub-Group: Position Paper, "while experiential learning and work-integrated learning are sometimes used interchangeably, experiential learning is generally understood to include various forms of "learning through doing" that do not always require a work setting." It is one specific form of high impact teaching. For the purposes of this report, experiential learning is defined as:

> *Experiential learning is a pedagogical practice whereby students gain new knowledge, skills and abilities due to the intentional application of classroom learning in a workplace or simulated workplace setting. Experiential learning opportunities are grounded in an intentional learning cycle and clearly defined learning outcomes. They engage students actively in creating knowledge and critically reflecting on their experiences, allowing them to understand how to transfer their knowledge and skills to future endeavours.*

Here, we distinguish between *active learning* - activities in-class such as small group seminars, discussions, role-playing, and group work, and *experiential learning*. While all experiential learning is active learning, not all active learning is experiential learning. Both practices enrich the student educational experience but they are different. As noted in the diagram below, experiential learning can be conceived of on a continuum of activities in which context resembles professional environment and assessment resembles professional challenges (authentic assessments).[1]

High Impact Versus Experiential Learning

	Low	High
High	Problem Based Learning Simulation Case Studies Research	Co-op Placements Internships Peer Helper Program
Low	Information Dissemination Knowledge Testing	Work Experience (Summer Job) Job Shadowing Volunteering

Authenticity: Assessment Resembles Professional Challenges (vertical axis)

Proximity: Context Resembles Professional Environment

Experiential Learning at Guelph

University of Guelph students, both undergraduate and graduate, currently have access to numerous experiential learning activities both connected to their academic program as well as co-curricular activities. Examples include:

1. In the curriculum

Students have access to a broad range of opportunities at the course, the major, and the program level. Examples include:

- Our extensive Co-operative Education program that spans more than 35 programs and enrolls just under 3,000 students
- Internships and practicums, both at the undergraduate and graduate level: (e.g.,Child Youth And Family and the Masters of Applied Human Nutrition)
- Courses designed as community and business based projects (e.g., MGMT4050:

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[1] Using concepts taken from the document *Enhancing Courses for Employability,* Friederika Kaider and Rachael Hains-Wesson.

Business Consulting)
- Service learning courses (e.g., UNIV3000: Civic Engagement and Service Learning)
- Field courses embedded in a community or professional setting (e.g., AGR250: Field Course in International Agriculture)
- Certificates that require a number of hours in an experiential capacity (e.g., Certificate in Global Citizenship; Certificate in Leadership)

2. Co-curricular

The University of Guelph offers a rich co-curricular learning environment that is grounded in eight learning outcome domains: Sense of Self, Diversity and Inclusion, Intercultural Maturity, Civic Engagement, Leadership, Life Skills, Engagement in Learning, and Communication. Examples of deliberate co-curricular experiential learning outcomes:
- The Peer Helper program, which is recognized as a zero credit on the official transcript
- Deliberate programming such as Project Serve
- Volunteer opportunities such as the Student Support Network
- Paid opportunities such as Residence Life staff.

There is potential to build further intentional EL opportunities, both within the curricular and the co-curricular environment. At the course level, instructors looking to add a service learning component to their courses often do not know how or where to begin. In our academic programs more generally, there is an interest in adding further practicums or co-op options, for instance in the arts and the humanities. At the graduate level, some of the professional Masters programs are looking to add work placement options to their programs. Beyond the curriculum, our Work Study Program and Summer Undergraduate Research Assistantship Program provide significant work experience on campus but are currently delivered without intentional learning outcomes associated to them.

In addition, while at the moment we record some experiential learning opportunities on the student transcript (e.g., co-operative education or the peer helper program) and others on the co-curricular transcript (e.g., varsity athlete or volunteer for the Student Support Network), in many instances, the learning remains unrecorded. Better recording of experiential learning opportunities could help students recognize transferable skills and increase the external visibility of such activities.

Challenges

The University of Guelph understands the value of experiential learning to students and offers a wide range of EL opportunities. To date, these activities have not always been well coordinated or profiled. Often times this leads to missed opportunities and/or a lack of appropriate recording or communication of experiential opportunities. Specific challenges include:

a. *Tracking*

There is currently no central tracking and compilation of all experiential learning offerings. While select program participation numbers are known (e.g., approximately 3,000 students presently participate in co-operative education), we know that this engagement is just the tip of the iceberg. It is

important that we track and monitor participation and learning in experiential learning activities to report on progress toward targets and allocate resources effectively. Given the diversity of these activities, and that most operate independently at present, there is no one simple way to track participation and establish metrics.

b. Recording

Generally, experiential learning activities are not recorded on any central university data system. Exceptions include co-op, practicums, peer helper participation, and certain courses. Some limited activities are also recorded on the co-curricular transcript. Formal integration, measurement, and validation of these activities presents a variety of data system, technical, and resource issues that would take time and effort to address. Complete recording is achievable, however. Like co-op work terms, curricular EL could exist in Colleague and be tracked at multiple levels. Co-curricular or independent experiential learning activities could also be tracked, either in Colleague or on another system. Not only would this allow for reporting and communication on the part of the university, it would enable students to better understand and articulate the skills acquired during their program. There are a number of system options and it is recommended that a thorough review be undertaken with resources directed to this project.

c. Partnerships

The delivery of experiential learning activities requires constant partnership development. Presently different units are creating administrative structures and separate data bases to support their programs. These relationships are important and need to be maintained and celebrated. Given this independent approach, however, contact with potential employers who could provide more opportunities are not shared with other departments or programs. Securing appropriate placements/projects takes significant time and trust building, and competition for partners will increase as participation rises.

To be successful in expanding our EL opportunities we will need to build and maintain strong relationships with external organizations. Those organizations must have positive experiences with the university and our students, and continue to see the value of their own participation in our experiential programs. Failure to do this could result in organizations becoming frustrated when trying to recruit students, determine the appropriate contact person or field multiple requests from program coordinators. This lack of coordination may result in diminished trust and potential competition amongst programs. It also inhibits the ability to ensure that opportunities have long-term vision and are co-created with partners so that there is enhanced mutual benefit. A coordinated effort would need to maintain relationships at the departmental or program level but, at the same time, share and leverage partnerships. Such an approach would better support relationships that generate continued opportunities for students, help to facilitate greater coordination of affiliation agreements with external organizations across multiple academic units, and enable the leveraging of administrative support functions.

d.   Curriculum Development

Presently, faculty and program leads interested in embedding EL opportunities in their courses or programs are often at a loss on how or where to begin. Many are unaware that the University, through the Office of Open Learning and Educational Support (OpenEd) and faculty affiliates of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI), offer workshops around community engaged teaching and learning (CETL). Others who may be interested in embedding opportunities within their curriculum may not know where to turn for support. For instance, CECS is moving its COOP*1100course to an on-line course, creating it as a series of modules that could be used by students outside of the curriculum. The College of Business and Economics is planning to use modules from this course as well as other modules to create program opportunities for its students. These ideas could be shared more broadly with other programs and leveraged to increase capacity. Finally, challenges to work in this area include the administrative complexity of coordinating experiential learning programs include:
- compliance, risk management, and insurance requirements for academic placements (such as practicums and other experiential learning within courses), which are becoming increasingly complex;
- determination of quality partners, and on-going engagement;
- matching students to partners, follow-up on outcomes;
- assessing outcomes

e.   Graduate Growth

Traditionally, graduate programs have focused on research as the experiential component. With the introduction of course-based masters as gateways to the world of work outside of academia, there is an interest in some programs to embed EL opportunities. This will require the development of new work-placement opportunities.

Facilitating and Supporting Experiential Learning at Guelph

Efforts are needed to better coordinate our infrastructure so as to facilitate the continued growth and development of experiential learning activities for our students, enable compliance with insurance and health and safety requirements, and coordinate employer contacts and student placements. It is important that we establish a common vision for experiential learning at the University of Guelph, one that spans the curricular and co-curricular environments and is grounded in learning, personal development and skill development outcomes. Mechanisms are also required to track, assess, and promote sustainable experiential learning opportunities.

With the exception of co-op, experiential learning courses and programs operate largely independently of each other and do not benefit from shared resources or structures. Growth under the current system will be difficult and require additional resources in each location. Each program could work independently to grow itself, but there are several risks and duplications without greater coordination. A federated model is suggested in which a central hub would be developed to support the infrastructure needs of programs and enable partnerships locally and beyond.

Creating a coordinating federated structure would provide greater opportunities for partnership where appropriate while allowing programs to continue to operate independently when desired, but within a network and an infrastructure that facilitate growth and reduce duplication and risk.
Key advantages of a federated hub model include:

- Community relations - community partners looking for a myriad of opportunities will find the University of Guelph easier to work with.
- Student Awareness – increased promotion of curricular and co-curricular EL opportunities to students from all academic programs and levels.
- Faculty Awareness – faculty will become cognizant of opportunities and exemplars in EL as well as provided with supports finding community partners, thereby increasing and improving EL activites.
- Reputation – the ability to raise the overall profile will result in a stronger reputation in experiential learning, which is of interest to prospective students and their families, government, and the public in general.
- Risk Management – mechanisms can be created to keep all appropriate staff/faculty aware of regulatory or procedural changes, creating an overarching policy and tracking mechanisms.
- Innovation – better opportunities for sharing best practices across programs.
- Expansion – administrative efficiencies could be garnered which would facilitate program expansion and new program development.

Potential Model for Supporting Experiential Learning

To facilitate the continued growth, development and coordination of experiential learning opportunities in a cost-effective and efficient manner, a coordinated federated campus infrastructure supported by a centralized hub is recommended. The hub would support departments and colleges with curricular experiential learning activities as well as university wide co-curricular opportunities.

As is the case now with co-operative education, academic and non-academic units would continue to determine their own experiential learning activities. These would be in keeping with a strong institutional vision for experiential learning – a continuum of opportunities grounded in institutional outcomes that span co-curricular and curricular settings to ensure high impact learning, growth and development. A coordinating body would provide the catalyst to move new projects forward and provide supports for current activities. Specific actions a hub could contribute include:
- Developing a central website to help students, prospective students, faculty, employers and other host organizations to review activities at Guelph
- Promoting and marketing all our programs to external partners, students and government
- Supporting the development of relationships with new external partners to generate more placements available to all experiential learning programs and courses
- Providing direction to faculty wanting to embed EL into their courses
- Assisting in the development of record keeping mechanisms
- Facilitating compliance with insurance and risk management
- Facilitating the development of a student recognition and articulation of acquired skills program

- Collaborating with other campus units offering experiential learning opportunities to leverage and share programs and learning
- Identifying eligible opportunities not currently viewed as experiential (e.g., work study, undergraduate research assistants) and work with partners to design these opportunities to be grounded in learning outcomes
- Providing targeted support to co-curricular experiential learning activities.

The proposed Experiential Learning Hub would provide a new cross-campus infrastructure for experiential learning. It would be a facilitating bod supporting curricular and co-curricular experiential learning activities delivered across the university. The hub would also connect to activities happening at Guelph-Humber and Ridgetown.   It would take advantage of administrative support from the existing Co-op and Career Services infrastructure. By creating an infrastructure for experiential learning programming, the EL Hub will act as a central resource to benefit all units with current experiential activities and assist new projects to move forward more efficiently. Academic and non-academic units will continue to determine what experiential learning activities they offer and the extent to which they work with the EL Hub.
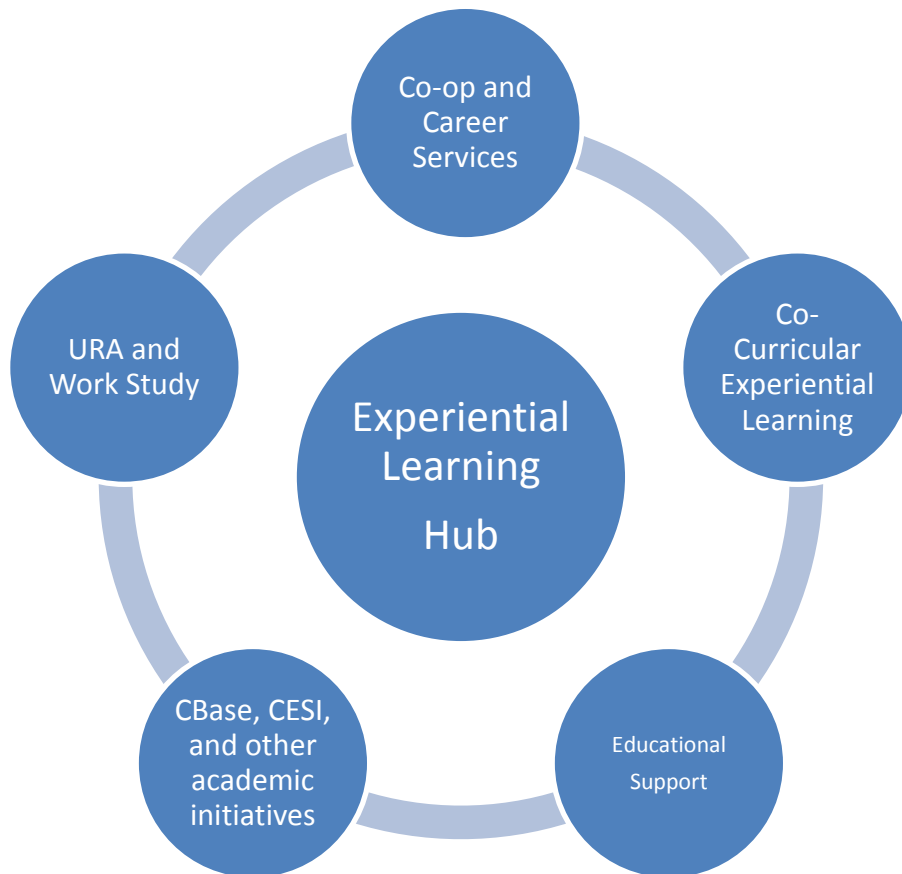
Given its integrated function, the hub would have a dual report to the Associate Vice-President Student Affairs and the Associate Vice-President Academic. It would receive some administrative support from Co-operative Education and Career Services.

Advisory Committee

In recognition that the Hub would be a partnership with various stakeholders, and to ensure transparent and shared decision-making, a representative Advisory Committee with terms of reference should be created. This group would provide direction on EL priorities and assist in communication and outreach. The Advisory Committee would include "advocates" from departments and programs. It will be important to clarify the roles of the EL Hub and the academic and non-academic units. Examples include:

	EL Hub	Academic/Offering Unit
Program development	Provides consultation to academic units for course and program development	Create and develop courses and programs. Consults with EL Hub as interested.
Program delivery materials	In collaboration with Open Ed, creates and maintains repository of learning materials including templates of supporting materials.	Can access repository and use templates and materials and adapt as needed.
Risk management	Creates risk management templates and procedures, liaising with Department of Environmental Health and Safety to ensure all practices are up to date. Proactively communicates any changes to relevant contacts across campus.	Ensures own program(s) adequately addresses risk management. Receives updates on risk management practices from EL Hub. Can use and adapt template risk management templates and procedures.
Employer and community organization outreach	Creates and populates a directory of organizations interested in offering experiential learning projects and tracks number of students, and from which program, participating with each community organization.	Can access contacts and projects through the central directory. Provides central contact for organizations looking to establish programs with Guelph students. Continues to maintain its own relationships
Experiential learning website	Creates and maintains a central website as a "common front door" promoting experiential learning to students and employers/hosts.	Updates EL Hub when there are additions or changes to experiential learning activities in unit.

Examples of concrete deliverables

- In collaboration with Open Ed and existing EL programs, expand and coordinate a network of faculty and program coordinators
- In conjunction with Open Ed, provide a repository of materials to aid faculty with curriculum development. Any changes to curriculum would go through the normal governance process.
- Coordinate and distribute experiential specific risk management materials and updates (with Environmental Health and Safety)
- Develop and maintain a central one-stop website promoting experiential learning to students and employers/hosts
- Record and report on experiential learning opportunities at Guelph
- Engage in outreach to local organizations to secure projects for experiential learning project-based courses
- In collaboration with CIP and other units, support international EL opportunities

Resources Required

Initially, the Hub will require two staff positions (a director and an administrative support position) and receive administrative support from CECS . Reporting to the Associate Vice-President Student Affairs and the Associate Vice-President Academic, the director will support coordination of efforts and capitalize on shared functions and processes. Working with the Advisory Committee, the director will lead in the development and maintenance of cross-campus structures including a central website that includes information on the breadth of activities and a directory of community partners. While some of the administrative aspects could be supported by CECS such as the Receptionist (responding to questions), the Office Coordinator (technology system administration, office administration), Web developer, and the Employer Services Team (additional employer outreach and support), given the significant administrative tasks, it is expected that an administrative assistant would also be needed.

Proposed Action Plan

1. Receive approval of the proposal: Spring 2017

2. Establish Advisory Committee to replace the present Task Force : May-June 2017

3. Hire Director and administrative staff: Summer 2017

4. Launch an experiential learning website: September 2017

5. Undertake an inventory of Experiential Learning Opportunities: Summer-Fall 2017

6. Create Curriculum Maps: Fall 2017 - Winter 2018

7. Review present work opportunities on campus to move to intentional learning outcomes: Fall 2017