

# ED404948 1997-00-00 Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Linking Classroom and Community. ERIC Digest.

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**ERIC Identifier:** ED404948

**Publication Date:** 1997-00-00

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**Source:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education Washington DC.| BBB32577 \_ George Washington Univ. Washington DC. Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

# Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Linking Classroom and Community. ERIC Digest.

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This review of the literature focuses on experiential learning in higher education. This review is, in fact timely, as there is renewed academic interest in experiential learning. While the literature suggests that experiential learning is a necessary and vital component of formal instruction in colleges and universities, controversy nevertheless exists among scholars and educators about its place and use. These issues include:

- \* A need for educated workers and citizens who can meet the challenges of a new world economy and order;
- \* An increased understanding of learning theories and cognitive development;
- \* More non-traditional learners with multitudes of learning styles and needs;
- \* A changing American workplace which requires people to effectively interface with each other and understand their roles as team players;
- \* An economic necessity for higher education to more closely interface with business and community; and
- \* Administrative and faculty concerns about their roles in selection and control and evaluation of the learning process.

This review of the literature provides the academic community with an understanding of the current state-of-the-art practices in experiential learning, with suggestions for program design and development and operation.

## IS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING A NECESSARY AND APPROPRIATE

INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION?The current literature suggests that experiential learning is a necessary component of formal instruction in colleges and universities for several reasons. First, faculty are concerned with optimizing the chances for their students to more easily enter their chosen professions or meet their desired goals upon graduation from the college program due to decreasing

job markets and increasing competition among college graduates across most all fields of study (CAEL 1990; Gettys 1990). Rosenbaum cites a mutual concern among teachers and employers about the effectiveness of preparing our future generations for the American workforce at all levels technical and professional (1992).

Second, the typical college student is becoming more complex. More nontraditional learners are opting for college study, and demanding more varied modes of learning (Kerka 1989). Also, student recruitment, retention and completion rates are a major concern of most college faculty. Seibert, Hart and Sypher (1989) and Baker, et al. (1991) document the benefits of experiential learning for student career decisionmaking and for development. Interestingly enough, students tend to continue their education into graduate schools at a significantly increased rate, after participating in experiential learning as part of an undergraduate program according to O'Neill (1992) and Gregory (1990).

## IN WHICH PROGRAMS DO WE FIND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING COMPONENTS?

Experiential learning as a formal part of college and university curricula extends across the range of subject areas and disciplines. As college faculty recognize a need to provide experiential learning opportunities into their courses and programs to make learning more relevant for their students, more and more literature is emerging, spanning the disciplines from the social-sciences programs to the arts and humanities. Hence, these programs exist across the broad spectrum of higher education today including English literature, history, psychology, communications, etc., not just in the terminal or occupational areas. Experiential learning activities include cooperative education placements, practicum experiences, and classroom-based hands-on laboratory activities. College educators find experiential learning a valuable adjunct to traditional instruction in these disciplines. The experiences outside of the classroom provide the increasingly growing numbers of non-traditional learners with valuable opportunities to apply theory to practice (Rolls 1992).

## AND WHAT ABOUT THE PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL PROGRAMS?

Disciplines in the professional and technical disciplines including education and the health careers and social work are using experiential learning instructional techniques to provide students with the competencies necessary to pursue successful careers upon graduation (Baxter Magolda 1993; Hightower 1993).

These experiences, in turn, allow learners to develop skills and amass job experience which gives them an edge on the competition for initial employment upon graduation. In many cases, the accreditation organizations supporting the disciplines have specific requirements for such experiential learning activities.

The need to provide college students with opportunities to reinforce social and ethical values has caused college faculty to consider ways to incorporate service-learning activities into the formal curriculum (Stanton 1988). Usually in the form of volunteer service, these activities allow students to apply classroom learning to real-world community needs and simultaneously serve their neighbors. Disciplines spanning the curriculum have used service-learning activities.

## HOW CAN WE LINK CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY FOR ECONOMIC

DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING? The literature reveals some not-so-obvious outcomes of experiential learning as well (Cantor 1990). Through development of cooperative education programs, colleges and their faculty and students are brought closer to their communities. Through these newly formed linkages proactive economic development outcomes emerge. These include better educated and trained students as potential employees, technology transfer from faculty to entrepreneurs via business development consultation, and the like.

Finally, through this review we will highlight, discuss and describe the ways that faculty are using experiential learning activities, the issues surrounding its use, and faculty and administrative practices requisite to development and operation of such experiential learning activities. These include selling the concept within a faculty governance structure, developing program objectives, marketing the program to the community as well as the student, administration of experiential learning activities, and program evaluation.

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This ERIC digest is based on a full-length report in the ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report series 95-7, *Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Linking Classroom and Community* by Jeffrey A. Cantor.

This report was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education in cooperation with the Association for the Study of Higher Education and published by the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the George Washington University. One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183.

This publication was partially prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002008. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the department.

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**Title:** Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Linking Classroom and Community. ERIC Digest.

**Note:** For the full report, see HE 029 965.

**Document Type:** Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

**Available From:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, The George Washington University, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 10036-1183 (\$1).

**Descriptors:** College Faculty, College Instruction, Cooperative Education, Economic Development, Educational Attitudes, Experiential Learning, Higher Education, Literature Reviews, Outcomes of Education, Practicums, School Business Relationship, School Community Relationship

**Identifiers:** ERIC Digests

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