A Case Study Analysis: Student Perceptions of the SUNY Applied Learning Program

May 28, 2015

Proprietary to State University of New York (SUNY)

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February 2015, the State University of New York (SUNY) Chancellor Nancy L. Zimpher and the Business-Higher Education Forum announced a partnership to create over 100,000 new applied learning opportunities for SUNY students. This effort falls in line with Chancellor Zimpher's goal of ensuring that every SUNY student enrolled in an academic program has access to an applied learning experience prior to graduation.

To effectively scale-up SUNY's program, administrators must gain an understanding of student perceptions on applied learning experiences. To this end, SUNY has partnered with Hezel Associates, a research and evaluation firm based in Syracuse, NY, to conduct focus groups at Cayuga Community College, SUNY Oswego and Stony Brook University.

The three institutions were purposefully selected to showcase the diversity of applied learning experiences within the SUNY system. In total, Hezel Associates researchers conducted four on-site focus groups. Across all three schools, students participated in one focus group. At Cayuga Community College and SUNY Oswego, Hezel Associates facilitated one focus group, while at Stony Brook, two focus groups were moderated by researchers.

The Focus Group Protocol, found in the Appendix of this report, was used during all focus groups in this study. The protocol was designed to collect data to assess (a) if students are participating in SUNY's definition of applied learning and the strategies used and (b) students' perceptions of applied learning and understanding the outcomes of their experiences. Specifically, this study explored the following research questions:

1. Did student experiences meet the SUNY definition of Applied Learning?
2. What were the students' perceptions of their applied learning experiences?
3. How did learning outcomes differ from traditional educational experiences?
4. Do students have a preference in terms of learning approaches?

By addressing these questions, our study aims to inform policy and planning for applied learning programs within the SUNY system. With our analysis of data for each research question, administrators can infer potential program elements to replicate or modify, in order to meet student needs at other SUNY institutions.

In this report, Hezel Associates provides an overview of the SUNY Applied Learning Program, a description of the evaluation methods used, narrative descriptions of each focus group conducted, and a cross-case analysis that identifies key themes across all four focus groups. Finally, this report also addresses each of our research questions. Although explored more in-depth throughout the report, our analysis brought to light seven key themes grounded in students' perceptions:

1. Students valued the opportunity to turn theory into action through applied learning experiences.
2. Students developed their soft skills through applied learning experiences.
3. Students refined their career goals and tested different career paths.

4. Students grew their networks and many received full-time employment from their applied learning sites upon graduation.
5. Students were more prepared to enter the workforce as competitive job candidates after completing applied learning experiences.
6. Students thoroughly enjoyed applied learning experiences, but recognized the importance of the traditional classroom.
7. Students felt a sense of community on campus through their applied learning experiences.

This research finds that across three schools, the SUNY Applied Learning Model is being deployed consistently. As the case descriptions show from each institution studied, students have found tremendous value in their experiences. In fact, some students wished they had the chance for more applied learning experiences. The perceptions of SUNY students suggest that applied learning experiences will continue to play an essential role to help them become highly skilled and qualified in their respective job markets.

II. PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Within a system as large and complex as SUNY, defining an applied learning model can be challenging. But at SUNY, administrators have created a flexible model to meet the various needs of students, in terms of their career and educational goals. To guide applied learning strategies across the system, SUNY uses the following working definition: "Although the setting and context may vary for each applied learning opportunity, these traditionally include planning, training, monitoring, reflection, and evaluation, and can be credit bearing or not, at home or abroad."

Additionally, three "pillars" have been identified that encompass SUNY's approach to applied learning: SUNY Discovers, SUNY Serves and SUNY Works. Each pillar is described below, using definitions provided by SUNY administrators.

- **SUNY Discovers:** student research, entrepreneurial ventures, field study, and international experiences. While SUNY research has a proud history of breakthrough discoveries, inventions, and startups, our increased focus on applied learning has led to an unprecedented level of collaboration between SUNY students, faculty, and industry experts to enable commercialization of the best ideas and innovations born at our campuses.

- **SUNY Serves:** service-learning, community service, civic engagement, and volunteerism. More than 30,000 SUNY students are currently engaged in formal service-learning programs for which they earn college credit, while tens of thousands more participate in community service and volunteer locally, nationally, and around the globe.

- **SUNY Works:** clinical placements, in which more than 20,000 SUNY students are already enrolled; internships, in which more than 21,000 students participate; and cooperative education programs ("co-ops"), in which SUNY faculty and area employers have jointly developed curricula that integrate classroom instruction and on-the-job experience. Approximately 1,740 students are currently enrolled in co-ops across SUNY.

However, due to the complexity of academic programs, there are additional ways that students can participate in the Applied Learning Program. There are discipline-specific programs, like clinical preparation, STEM labs, economic development, or graduate research that might fall outside the scope of the three branches of applied learning.

The SUNY model described in this section briefly highlighted the complexity often found in applied learning programs, especially within a large and diverse system such as SUNY. The model being used by SUNY has been designed to give students and faculty the necessary flexibility to provide students with a rewarding and enriching experience, tailored to their specific needs.

III. EVALUATION DESCRIPTION

Hezel Associates used a qualitative approach to answer the evaluation questions and determine findings for this report. Data was collected by conducting four focus groups at SUNY Oswego, Cayuga Community College, and Stony Brook University. Each focus group was facilitated by a Hezel Associates researcher, using the protocol found in the Appendix of this report.

The Focus Group Protocol was used during all focus groups in this study to collect data to assess (a) if students are participating in SUNY's definition of applied learning and the strategies used and (b) students' perceptions of applied learning and understanding the outcomes of their experiences. The Focus Group Protocol was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. Did student experiences meet the SUNY definition of Applied Learning?
2. What were the students' perceptions of their applied learning experience?
3. How did learning outcomes differ from traditional educational experiences?
4. Do students have a preference in terms of learning approaches?

The protocol used was established prior to beginning data collection activities. Additionally, the study was approved by institutional review boards (IRBs) at Cayuga Community College and SUNY Oswego, and also by an independent board, Solutions IRB, contracted by Hezel Associates. Stony Brook University officials did not require the study to receive additional internal IRB approval.

Hezel Associates used a preordinate scheme to guide the qualitative analysis. This method parsed focus group discussions into bits of content, which were then fitted into the conceptual framework established by our research questions. Each excerpted bit was not only tested against the construct of interest, but also against the accumulating narrative of content associated with it, applying a condensed constant comparative method to isolate each construct and clarify how it is labeled or coded (Dey, 1993).

Our research team then used the SUNY model of applied learning to identify logical linkages among the named constructs. The patterns or threads, once developed, become themes that explain the semantic relationships among elements of the applied learning model, which may became informative to program staff for program improvement purposes. This recursive

approach managed and systematized the process of turning bits of information into descriptions and raising descriptions to low-level inferences. The ultimate goal was for Hezel Associates researchers to add value to the raw qualitative information collected from participants, while not leaping to unfounded—and potentially spurious—inferences.

To address the first evaluation question, Hezel Associates analyzed the narrative record from each focus groups for evidence that the applied learning activities of participants aligned with the preordinate elements of the SUNY model. Researchers then compared what the participants told us they experienced against the model and explored the extent to which they aligned. For evaluation question two, Hezel Associates was able to explore the narrative record of each focus group, and look for students' descriptions of the quality of the applied learning experiences they received, by each element and across the model.

The focus group protocol developed a set of prompts to elicit feedback to understand learning outcomes in an applied learning setting versus a traditional environment. This enabled Hezel Associates' researchers to address evaluation question number three. The narrative record then allowed us to summarize information by each site and conduct a cross-case comparison for the entire program. Analysis for question four was built on the findings of the first three questions.

IV. FINDINGS

This section includes case descriptions from each institution, including overviews of student experiences within the Applied Learning Program along with low-level inferences and findings from each school.

Cayuga Community College Case Description

At Cayuga Community College, focus group participants included nursing, communications and early childhood development students. The diversity of experiences found in this group showed the various applied learning opportunities at Cayuga Community College and the flexibility of the SUNY Applied Learning Model.

Students cited a wide range of examples of internships, which included a clinical preceptorship, where nursing students worked in various labs and gained real world expertise in health areas like pediatrics, neurology, or maternity care. Other students had the opportunity to visit London for a two-week course to study media and communications. Still others mentioned they had interned at local news stations and worked with Head Start, a national program that provides early childhood education, health and nutrition services and childcare support to low-income families. Some students even created and implemented a marketing plan for a local non-profit.

At Cayuga, all the students' applied learning experiences were for credit, but due to substantial differences in program structures, grades were given in different ways. In some cases, the grades were pass/fall, while for others a percentage was awarded for the course. In some cases the applied learning experiences were a program requirement. For instance, the nursing students were paired and provided information for the preceptorship, while communications and media relations students networked through professors to identify their internships.

The focus group also yielded information about the kinds of skills students believed they developed. Students mentioned that they gained critical professional on-the-job skills, like learning to budget time and improved professional communications. Many also observed that during their internships, they were able to apply theories learned in the classroom to practice, and became comfortable working in a variety professional of settings.

Nursing students noted that while they learned a lot in the classroom, caring for patients is much different, and requires on-the-job experience to deal with unanticipated events. Similarly, early childhood development students said that often there is no "playbook to simply reference" on how manage a classroom. In this instance, the nurses and childhood development students found common ground that often real-world and lived experiences are necessary to put knowledge learned into action.

Another interesting observation from focus group members was that they believed their internships allowed them to refine their interests and explore new career paths. Communications students explained that since they experienced so many different opportunities, they felt they could test the waters of a certain profession, and could identify what aspects of a career they liked. Students were also exposed to a variety of different cultures, and the chance to live overseas for a brief period of time showed the differences between American and British life. One student mentioned that learning should not be confined to a classroom, and that the hands-on experience is invaluable to learn about your future profession.

Since students were involved in such different programs, each had various kinds of reflection and monitoring activities. Some students had required journal entries, classroom observations, developed a lesson plan and required a specific number of clinical hours. Other groups had to keep a log, meet at certain times and create PowerPoint presentations. Regardless, in all instances, these for-credit internships included the reflection and monitoring component of the SUNY model.

In terms of evaluation, students received various types of grades. Nursing students noted that in order to complete their program, they must receive an "S," or Satisfactory, for all required course components during their preceptorship. Other students noted that their grade was pass/fail, with a final paper to hand in, along with updated resumes and job application materials, like a cover letter and reference letters.

Many noted that the classroom experience is also important, and that they need to have both experiences to maximize learning. Students enjoyed working on projects that did not have a rigid set of guidelines, allowing them to create their own course of study, all while making a positive impact on their community and exploring new career opportunities.

Students believed that the internships enabled them to make better career decisions, and to be more prepared to enter the workforce. One student noted that from her experience, she felt more valuable to employers. Others added they were able to build connections, and strengthen their resumes. All of the nursing students, and several each in communications and childhood

development, had already obtained full-time employment that will start immediately after they graduate. These students attributed their employment to their applied learning experience.

Focus group participants believed that because of particularly motivational and inspiring professors, they were able to learn about new career paths, better understand what they were qualified for, and refine their career goals. They also noted how in many cases, teachers were more than willing to tap into their networks and help students find positions.

SUNY Oswego Case Description

The positive, rewarding, and fulfilling experiences at Cayuga Community College were not unique in our study, as focus group participants at SUNY Oswego found their applied learning experiences critical to a positive educational experience. Their student experiences varied dramatically as well, from internships with Disney, iHeartMedia Inc., Terra Science and Education Foundation, on-campus internships with Career Services, and also opportunities to serve as a Teaching Assistant.

Members of the focus group were in agreement that their applied learning experiences where overwhelmingly positive. In fact, many students enjoyed the experience so much, they wished they could have taken on more internships.

However, students noted that finding internships was often a challenge, and required them to be proactive in their search for a good position. Among focus group participants, many had taken specific actions to identify opportunities, either by directly reaching out to employers through informational interviews, or by working with Career Services to help them build their networks.

Participants shared they had to "be aggressive" to find their internships. They felt that the process of finding an internship was a lesson in itself. In turn, it was not just the skills obtained, but also the process of finding a job that students benefitted from. Students mentioned that in order to find a position they wanted, they had to go out of their way to be motivated, communicate clearly with potential employers, and have a plan of what they wanted to do, all of which are valuable and important lessons for their careers.

Students took on a mix of for-credit and non-credit internships. For the credit courses, all individuals received a grade, some a pass/fail and others a formal letter grade. To receive a grade, some individuals wrote a paper, others completed assignments online, and others had specific requirements around job searching.

In terms of skills gained, all students agreed they were taught real-world, tactical skills to help prepare them for their career. Specific examples included public speaking, professional communication, or other on-the-job skills that are sometimes difficult to learn in the classroom.

One participant mentioned that he improved his communications skills during his interactions with coworkers and clients, and that although he thought he was a good conversationalist, the internship helped to refine his skills and be more "empathetic." Other participants noted that the internship allowed them to see more diversity and interact with people from different kinds of

backgrounds. Working with a non-profit, one student was able to interact with people from Russia, and coming from a small rural town, they appreciated the opportunity to meet and engage with someone from a different country.

Students mentioned that they preferred the hands-on approach to learning. They noted that applied learning feels more real and if they make a mistake, they can fix it and get feedback immediately. Students explained that they enjoyed the experience so much that sometimes they would just go and "hang out" at their internship sites to try and learn new skills.

The focus group also explored why some students did not seek an internship. For those working in career services, barriers emerged such as financial restrictions, lack of motivation, or fear of the process. Some students said that their peers see an internship as "too much work," or are "intimidated to find a job," both of which indicated that some students required more hand-holding and a push to seek out internships.

One of the key findings from this focus group was that they all agreed that hands-on activities are essential in order to apply theories learned in the classrooms. The students said that the internships were critical to helping them understand what they wanted to do in their career and refine their goals and priorities.

One obstacle for many was the financial burden of taking on unpaid internships. Many students commented they could not afford to take on an unpaid internship. The students said that, if possible, they would have preferred more on-campus opportunities, and also wanted more non-credit opportunities. They all were focused on the experiences, not as much the credit/not-for-credit debate. At SUNY Oswego, the students valued experience and connections over receiving credit for the internship.

Stony Brook University Case Description

Hezel Associates researchers conducted two focus groups at Stony Brook University. The same protocol was used as the previous two locations, and this case description discusses the findings from both focus groups. These groups consisted of participants from a variety of internship experiences, including event planning, marketing, design, human resources, student health services, video game development, and even political advising at the United Nations.

In addition, applied learning experiences included students in the Diversity Peer Education program, a program at Stony Brook that allows students to learn from their peers with diverse backgrounds to encourage inclusiveness on campus. Students also had the opportunity to participate in an engineering-focused internship that included a trip to China. Other Stony Brook students worked with medical teams, and some students had planned humanitarian trips to Nicaragua and Honduras. Another participant worked in the Asian Studies Center on campus to promote cultural awareness, focusing on Japanese culture and helping to organize events, raising money, and supporting students who wish to apply for study abroad opportunities.

Other students worked in Career Services, working on database management projects, while still others worked with a peer advisor co-op. The co-op helped Stony Brook student associations

book reservations and provided them access to on-campus resources for their organization. Additionally, focus group members worked in academic transfers and advising services departments at the University. This role required providing assistance to transfer students at Stony Brook. Finally, one participant worked as a student coordinator and teaching assistant in the Academic Success and Tutoring Center.

Student experiences at Stony Brook crossed a variety of disciplines and programs, all of which highlight the diversity of offerings and opportunities at the University. Interestingly, many participants noted that they took on internships outside their field of study, as a way to broaden their experiences. Students said they wanted to broaden their perspectives, and learn about potential new career paths, so they are sure they are entering a career they will enjoy. Many noted that, since their classes are so large, they wanted to find new experiences with smaller groups, and felt that internships were a great way to get engaged with the Stony Brook community in a smaller, more niche setting.

Focus group participants explained that they learned about internship opportunities through friends, graduate assistants, or professors in their respective academic departments. Many students had peers already participating in internship programs, and recommended they learn more, while others identified positions through the campus Career Center and through email distribution lists. To coordinate the internship between Stony Brook University and the internship site, students typically filled out an application, which was then approved by a faculty advisor and their site supervisor. Like at other institutions highlighted in this report, many of the students were extremely proactive to find their internships and worked with the University to assure they could receive credit for the experience.

Students indicated that they participated in for-credit internships, and many noted they did more than one internship, with some being non-credit. Students did receive some compensation for their work, explaining that once they reached an hourly threshold, they were paid an hourly rate. Some said that they would be willing to take on more opportunities, but that financial barriers caused them not to take on additional internships.

For their internships, students across both groups said their progress was monitored through weekly meetings with their supervisors to keep them informed of their progress. Some reported having to fulfill a required number of hours in the semester. In addition, several students participated in regular reflection activities and many maintained a journal to record their experiences. The journals were typically open ended questions, with no particular structure or guidance. A few of the students reported that their reflection activity was to complete a final paper or presentation describing what they had learned during their time at the internship.

In regards to evaluation criteria for the internship, the process varied among the students. Of those who completed journals, most were unsure as to whether the entries were evaluated. Some reported feeling as though the journals were "busy work" because they did not receive feedback. Only one student reported receiving feedback on the journal and was glad to have his supervisors' encouragement. Aside from journal entries, a few participants reported having a mid- and end-of-year evaluation, or a final paper. Some students had periodic quizzes tied to

their internship. For evaluation purposes, the students all received either a pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory grade.

When students were asked about what skills they gained during their internship, they mostly emphasized soft skills and interpersonal communication. A common theme that arose was interpersonal communication. Students reported having increased confidence approaching others, working in teams, engaging in public speaking, giving presentations, interacting in an office environment, and business etiquette. Another important skill that was mentioned was knowing how to read people, particularly clients. Students felt they had a better understanding of how to decipher what a client wants and how to deliver those needs.

Students also said they learned critical life-skills such as tolerance, inclusiveness, and patience. Through peer-to-peer communications, they grew in their confidence, refined their beliefs and learned how to effectively communicate sometimes challenging, yet important topics effectively. One student noted that in her role as an academic advisor, she learned that each student's situation is unique. In her role, she needed to provide customer service tailored to the individual, all designed to resolve their issue as efficiently and effectively as possible.

One participant noted how he learned how to "think on his feet," to resolve a crisis with a client. For those who traveled to foreign countries, the internships helped build their confidence and command of a foreign language, through immersion and having the chance to connect with likeminded peers. Overall, students were largely pleased with their personal development in life and the workplace as a result of their internships.

In addition to soft skills, several students discussed the technical skills they acquired or improved upon during their work experience. For example, one student discussed working with electronic medical records and obtaining study approval through the institutional review board. Another participant reported he learned general technical skills, such as using Microsoft Excel and database management, which do not relate to a particular career path but can be applied in multiple areas. One focus group member believed she did not obtain a new skill, but acknowledged that her internship gave her the opportunity to apply skills she already gained in a real world setting.

When participants were asked how the internship impacted their learning style, they agreed that having work experience outside the classroom is invaluable for their professional development. Students recognized the importance of supplementing their academic education with hands-on experience to gain a range of transferable skills, leading to an advantage when pursuing a career in the future. One student stated, "Experience speaks louder than academics."

Another member noted that when working for a company, incentives and motivations are far different than in the classroom. He explained that at his company, "everything counted," and how important teamwork was to achieve company goals and objectives. From his internship, he felt a better sense of accomplishment from his work and more rewarded by contributing to a team, especially when compared to being in a classroom.

Students noted that applying classroom skills in a real-world environment "shapes you," and internship are where individuals can show off what they have learned. Many students noted that since Stony Brook classes are often very large, it can be hard to get to know the professors and students, whereas with their internships, they enjoyed being on a small team. They also felt less pressure to perform, as the course was simply a pass/fail, and could really enjoy the experience and use their internship as a way to build their resume.

For one student, their internship also included a mentor, an experience that she enjoyed as it was a way for her to work with a peer to refine goals and learn about new opportunities. Participants also noted that with internships, they had to be self-motivated. Students said that often their classes were highly regimented, but their internships gave them more freedom to explore new opportunities and more personal accountability.

In order to improve the program, students recommended expanding the Career Center and communicating the types of internships available. Others noted that the departments are underfunded and understaffed, leading to high workloads. However, those that reported high workloads also noted they were motivated to work hard. They expressed that they put in the extra effort because they valued the professional experience.

Participants truly appreciated the opportunity for their internships, and many took on internships outside their field of study. Participants hoped that their internships and the programs they participated in not only continue, but expand. They desired that other students at Stony Brook could have similar enriching experiences.

Many students wished their programs got more attention on campus. Additionally, the non-traditional students in the group were thankful that they still had the opportunity to participate in an internship, and that the program really helped them grow professionally beyond the classroom.

Overall, the students in Stony Brook focus groups found their internships to be enriching, invaluable experiences. Most of them indicated that the programs should be mandatory, stating that classroom experience by itself is not sufficient. They stressed the importance of engaging in diverse experiences to become well-rounded individuals. One student noted that the internships are a necessary component for Stony Brook to rise in institutional ranking; the internships are the tool that will enable students to achieve successful careers and give back to the SUNY Stony Brook community.

Interestingly, at the conclusion of the focus group, one student mentioned that by talking about her experience during the focus group, she realized how important the experience was to her, describing the reflection as a rewarding experience. Students mentioned that they grew professionally in the program, both as an individual and collectively as a community across the college. Another student added that his internship connected him with individuals, making him feel more connected to the on-campus community. And even for commuter students, the internship made them feel more connected and engaged on the campus.

V. CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Based on our analysis of all three case studies, seven major themes emerged. These themes expand the findings in the case descriptions, and help show students' perceptions of applied learning across the universities studied.

1. **Students valued the opportunity to turn theory into action through applied learning experiences.**

Across all three institutions, students cited that they enjoyed turning theories learned in the classroom into real-world and practical skills. The focus groups showed a wide variety of skills that students learned, whether it was learning to properly use a camera, using Photoshop, or practicing patient care, students believed that these experiences were critical to their professional growth.

2. **Students developed their soft skills through applied learning experiences.**

One essential attribute of a competitive job applicant is communication skills. Students noted that they learned how to improve communications in a professional setting. For instance, one student improved his ability to show more empathy. Additionally, the structure of many of these programs, and the reporting requirements, forced students to interact with supervisors, ask for help, and discuss needs. These skills will be extremely beneficial to them as they advance their careers.

3. **Students refined their career goals and tested different career paths.**

Focus group participants suggested that their applied learning experiences allowed them to refine their career goals. The experience also let them explore new opportunities and test their career paths. Many students noted that while on the job, they were exposed to new areas in their field and got to experience what the day-to-day would be like in their future jobs. Although internship experiences varied, across all focus groups students consistently shared that they were able to learn about new career paths and opportunities from applied learning activities.

4. **Students grew their networks and many received full-time employment from their applied learning sites upon graduation.**

Many students were offered full-time employment at their internship sites, or they were able to leverage the connections made during these experiences to find employment. In either instance, this finding shows the power of internships to help students network, build professional connections, and find positions within their field. Students were surprised at how easy the process was to find a position in their field. This was in part due to the efforts students made to network and build connections during their internships.

5. **Students were more prepared to enter the workforce as competitive job candidates after completing applied learning experiences.**

Many participants believed that due to the on-the-job training they received during their internships, they became more qualified candidates for job opportunities. Students felt that they had advantages over their peers graduating from similar programs without an internship. Students attributed the skills they learned during their internship as helping their resumes stand out in an often crowded field, and gain an advantage to enter the career field they wanted.

6. **Students thoroughly enjoyed applied learning experiences, but recognized the importance of the traditional classroom.**

Although students did enjoy their applied learning experiences occurring outside the classroom, they also said that the traditional classroom plays an important role. Students felt that there is a time and place for lecture-style education, but that their internships and other hands-on experiences were essential to put theory into practice. For many students, the belief was that you need both the traditional classroom and an internship, lab or clinical placement experience to truly learn and build confidence within your field. Additionally, many aspects of students' applied learning activities took place within the classroom, such as the critical element of reflection and defining their learning outcomes.

7. **Students felt a sense of community on campus through their applied learning experience.**

Many participating students expressed the sentiment that it was nice to give back to the community during their applied learning experiences. Additionally, since many students were part of very large classes, they enjoyed being in smaller groups and really getting to know their peers throughout the internship. Many felt that it was nice to not always be in a lab or large lecture, and that the internship gave them a different perspective. Many students enjoyed taking an internship outside their field of study, in an effort to round out experiences and contribute back to their community.

VII. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on our qualitative analysis, the following section specifically addresses the four research questions guiding this study.

Research Question 1
Did student experiences meet the SUNY definition of Applied Learning?

Evidence collected through the focus groups suggests that, for all three institutions, the SUNY definition of applied learning is being met. The basic elements of the model, planning, monitoring, reporting, evaluation and reflection, were all identified in the focus group record as being in place at each institution. Students' responses indicated that due to the diversity of programs and needs of each student, these elements of the model can be deployed in various ways, all while meeting the proper criteria. In fact, the flexibility of the model has shown to be advantageous to meet needs of a complex group of students. As administrators look to provide more opportunities to students, this agile model should allow the SUNY system to meet the needs of even more students.

Research Question 2
What were the students' perceptions of their applied learning experience?

Student perceptions of their applied learning experiences were overwhelmingly positive. As each case study shows, the students truly valued the opportunity, and wished that all of their peers could benefit from similar experiences. In fact, many students wished they could have participated in more internships. Students valued the opportunity, especially as it relates to their ability to refine career goals. As the case descriptions noted, many students were able to find employment from their applied learning experience. Qualitative analysis showed that student perceptions were highly positive, and the experience gave students an invaluable experience.

Research Question 3
How did learning outcomes differ from traditional educational experiences?

Focus group participants clearly noted that improving soft-skills was a major difference between applied learning and classroom experiences. Students pointed out that although they could read theory and understand strategies, they needed applied learning opportunities to test theories and implement lessons learned. However, outcomes certainly were not limited to just soft skills. Students were able to learn critical skills like using Excel, database management, or industry-specific skills critical to professional success.

Research Question 4
Do students have a preference in terms of learning approaches?

Students observed that although they enjoyed their non-traditional learning experiences, the classroom still played a critical role in their programs. Qualitative analysis indicated that a blended or hybrid model seemed to be the preference for many students. Many students noted that there is a time and place for classroom experience, but the applied learning strategies are

critical to developing skills that are difficult to gain in the classroom. This finding may be crucial for the SUNY system, as online and distance learning continue to be integral to students' academic experiences.

Our study aimed to understand four critical questions related to the applied learning programs within the SUNY system. We thank all those involved with this study, the planning, funding, and all the students for sharing the honest and candid feedback. As the program continues to grow and scale, it is our hope that this report serves as a way to inform stronger policies and programs as it relates to applied learning within the SUNY system.

APPENDIX

SUNY Applied Learning Evaluation: Focus Group Protocol

Format   Qualitative research to assess program implementation and perceptions of impact.

Timeline   Data collection will be conducted at SUNY Oswego, Cayuga Community College and Stony Brook University. Each session should last 1 hour.

Process   Participants of the focus group will be determined by SUNY administrators and each participant will receive a $25 gift card for their attendance, given at the completion of the focus group. Each focus group will consist of 8-10 individuals and will be facilitated by a Hezel Associates researcher. The facilitator will follow the provided script for gathering consent and introducing the focus groups. The session will be recorded, and those wishing not to be recorded will be asked not to participate.

      Participants will be asked to sit in a circle, whenever possible, with the facilitator included in the circle. A note taker will sit outside the circle and track responses. The recording device should be placed in the center of the circle. The note taker should help setup the room, draw a picture of the layout, and give each individual a number to track comments. They should not participate in the discussion. The focus group facilitator should use this protocol as a guide, while following up on individuals' responses. The facilitator should not take notes.

Instructions We are conducting focus groups with participants of the SUNY Applied Learning program in order to gain further insights on students' perceptions and experiences in the program. The information will be used to inform improvements to the current strategy and as part of a final report for SUNY administrators. Responses will not be attributed to any individual, and we encourage to provide honest responses to all questions.

Focus Group Introduction

Hello, this is Pat Fiorenza from Hezel Associates. I'll be moderating today's focus group. So first, a big thank-you for your participation today, and we're really looking forward to today.

Let's start off by getting all the housekeeping out of the way, and then we can get to know each other a bit…

So first, a little background of why you're here today:

1. Hezel Associates is an independent research firm specializing in education, and we've partnered with SUNY to research the Applied Learning program and find some ways to improve the program, and double-down on what is working.
2. That's why you're all here today, as participants of the program, we want to learn from you and your experiences – and your insights will help inform the report we are currently writing. We're also conducting 2 additional focus groups at [locations].
3. As a reminder, all your responses will be kept confidential, and aggregated for the report. No personally identifying information will be reported. And we will make every effort to protect your identity when we present our findings.
4. As researchers at Hezel Associates, we value the integrity of our research and findings, so we appreciate – and expect – honest answers about your experience, both good and bad.
5. Last thing – we are recording this session, but we do not publish or use the audio in any capacity other than to assist in our note-taking.
6. Are there any questions?
7. So if everyone is good with that, I'd need you to sign our consent form and we can continue on.
8. As you're reviewing that, I wanted to touch on a few ground rules for the conversation today, here's my goals as your facilitator:
   a. Everyone will have a chance to speak, and say what's on their mind. But as your facilitator, I might have to cut people off to hear from all and maintain a balance in the discussion.
   b. Please speak loudly and clearly for our audio device.
   c. It's great to piggy back off comments and build on others, making it applicable to your experience, in fact – that's encouraged!
   d. If I feel like you haven't been heard, I may give you a prompt.

Great – so now that housekeeping is out of the way. Let's do a quick ice-breaker before we get into the session. Tell me your name and one fun fact / hobby about yourself. I'll go first. (Note to facilitator: don't go around the circle, have them volunteer to talk, don't want to establish a group norm of going around the circle).

Thanks for your participation, now let's get into the questions:

Focus Groups with SUNY Applied Learning participants – Questions

1. Tell me more about your experiences with Applied Learning at SUNY, what did you do?[1]

2. Great, so now let's take a little step back - tell me a little more about how the process worked? Can you walk me through it start to finish? [1,2] *(Additional questions below to keep note of, probe a little more if you need to hear more)*

   a. Interesting, tell me more about how you coordinated your experience with SUNY and your project site? [1] (planning).

   b. What kinds of work skills did you develop?[1] (training)

   c. How are you monitoring your plan? Are there any reporting requirements?[1] (monitoring)

   d. What kind of reflection activities took place?[1] (Writing a paper, taking notes, journals, etc.), (reflection)

   e. Was your experience graded or evaluated in any way? If so, how?[1] (evaluation)
      i. Did you receive any kind of credits?[1]

3. How did your experience impact your learning style? How did your experience compare to being in a classroom? [3]

4. Say you had one minute to tell your schools president what you thought about your experience, what would you say? [2,4]

5. Based on everything we discussed today, what's been the most important to you? [2,4]

   a. Potential follow up (if time allows/needed): What would you recommend to improve Applied Learning in the SUNY system? [2]

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