

# Developing a Quality Assurance Framework that Addresses Experiential Learning and Work-Integrated Learning: Lessons learnt from George Brown College

**Cory Ross and Dario Guescini**

## Abstract

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Throughout the College academic world there has always been a need for marrying the didactic classroom material with the applied learning and experiential approach. At George Brown College we stated boldly a commitment to ensure that every student would experience a quality field experience in our strategic path for vision 2020. In order to provide a student with a quality experience we needed to undertake a process that identified quality, currency and authenticity in our offerings. This paper speaks to the necessary quality framework that continues to be refined in our quest of delivering on the George Brown College promise with respect to experiential and work integrated learning.

Dr. Cory Ross

As Vice-President, Academic, Dr. Cory Ross leads George Brown College's core academic delivery, both in the classroom and in work integrated learning settings. He brings a wealth of experience to the role, including several years of leadership at post-secondary institutions. He is a Certified Health Executive (CHE) with the Canadian College of Healthcare Leaders. Cory was granted a fellowship from the U.K.-based Royal Society for Public Health. He is one of only 10 Canadians

Scholars for years have recognized the value of a balance between didactic education and participatory actualization of the knowledge acquired. As far back as 551 – 479 BC, Confucius's famous saying of

“ I hear and I forget  
I see and I remember  
I do and I understand”

rings true today.

Had Confucius lived in today's modern times he certainly would have helped to shape the College systems approach to experiential and work integrated learning. His insightful quote stresses the true value of a meaningful, quality experience in the world of our working marketplace. This essential piece to our student's academic journey is paramount in shaping and preparing them for the new workforce. It is imperative that we find the ying-yang balance between classroom delivery and WIL. Together, if balanced we know that the students will be well prepared for the workforce and will hit the road running in their respective fields. We believe wholeheartedly that this is a promise made to our students by all the Colleges in Ontario.

Ontario's publicly funded colleges were established to meet the needs of employers, respond to changing work environments, support the economic and social development of their local and diverse communities and principally, to assist Ontarians in finding and keeping employment (Ont. Colleges Applied Arts and Technology Act 2002;2017). In keeping with this mandate George Brown College has, since beginning operations in 1968, developed and maintained strong, longstanding relationships with employers and community partners in a wide variety of sectors allowing it to quickly and effectively respond to the labour market and applied research needs of the key sectors driving the city and the province's economy.

The College has a successful record of leveraging these partnerships in concert with its dedication to excellence in teaching and learning to meet the emerging needs in the economy and to ensure our students become workplace-ready graduates who are the candidates of choice for employers. For over five decades one key component of the college's success in this regard is the

to receive this prestigious designation. In 2016 Dr. Ross was invested as a Member Laureate in the Bethune Medical Development Association of Canada for his extensive work in Public Health, Medical Human Anatomy and eldercare in mainland China.

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Dario Guescini

Dario is a Certified Human Resources Leader (CHRL) and Industrial Engineer (Six Sigma Certified) with over twenty years of professional experience within higher education and multinational organizations.

Dario started his career at George Brown College as a part-time faculty member leading students in the Human Resources and Leadership fields.

Subsequent to being a faculty member, Dario served as Chair of the School of Hospitality & Tourism Management from 2013-2018.

Currently, Dario is the Director, Work Integrated Learning at George Brown College. The role was created to collaborate closely with senior leaders and other stakeholders to provide strategic leadership in developing a sustainable, college-wide experiential learning program. The mission of this program is to provide students with access to

provision of sector-specific, hands-on skill development through experiential and work-integrated learning experiences that help to build a seamless bridge between learners and employment.

In concert with the development of its 2020 strategy (GBC 2010), the college undertook intensive research and analysis of work integrated learning education from 2005 to 2010. This research confirmed the need to re-affirm work integrated learning as a fundamental component of the college's long-term vision. Work Integrated Learning, known as WIL, has been a pillar of our 2020 Strategy and an integral component of the College's position as "the" college that understands employment. Since 2005, we have made significant progress toward embedding WIL in academic programming. This progress includes confirming criteria/standards for program participation, refining terminology usage, and identifying tracking and reporting processes.

Our progress has occurred within a rapidly changing external environment. The provincial government's focus on experiential learning is increasing, employers are expressing heightened interest in WIL participation, and our post-secondary institution competitors are establishing processes and infrastructure to deliver and support innovative experiential learning opportunities.

While George Brown College was an early college leader towards establishing work-integrated learning in all programs, every Ontario post-secondary institution is experiencing strong competitive and ministerial pressures to provide quality experiential learning to all students. MTCU recently committed to ensuring that every student has at least one experiential learning activity by the time they graduate from a publicly funded post-secondary institution. The MTCU is guiding movement toward common terminology and making significant investments through initiatives such as the Career Ready Fund.

The federal government is also becoming much more actively involved in skill development and has invested in several WIL-related initiatives such as Future Skills Centre, Mitacs, the Youth Employment Strategy and the new Student Work Placement Program.

impactful industry-relevant learning opportunities, locally and internationally. Dario is a Fellow of the Ontario Hostelry Institute.

Employers and post-secondary institutions are working together to foster collaboration with all levels of government, including Cooperative Education & Work integrated Learning (CEWIL) Canada and the Business/Higher Education Roundtable which is seeking federal funding to make Canada the world leader in work-integrated learning.

Within the last year, George Brown College has moved WIL and experiential learning forward on many fronts. Career Ready funding of over \$700,000 is being applied toward several key initiatives including establishing a quality framework, creating a college community of practice, enhancing student participation, and advancements in the areas of supporting technical infrastructure and digitization.

Beginning in 2018 the college expanded this vision to include a wider variety of experiential learning opportunities for students, recognizing the significant benefits of fully integrating experiential learning into academic programming and the student experience.

This shift to broaden the scope of hands-on, sector-specific, work-related learning was informed by a number of factors including the larger educational contextual pressures from governments, competitors, students and graduates. This expansion ensured a more formal engagement with a wide variety of experiential learning activities and provides opportunities for George Brown College to celebrate and expand its provision of the most appropriate, innovative, sector-specific, job-focused training available.

The benefits of fully integrating experiential learning into academic programming and the student experience are significant. The following benefits were compiled by a University of Windsor's Taskforce (Experiential Ed 2017).

## Student Benefits

- Better job prospects – those who completed a co-op were 9% more likely to find full-time employment
- Improves academic and workplace performance and leads to higher wages
- Increases motivation and engagement, encouraging self-directed learning
- Facilitates the exploration of the relationship

between academic theory and practice, increasing clarity around academic and career goals

- Increases understanding and perceptions around workplace cultures
- Enhances professional networks
- Helps students better understand work realities and expectations
- Provides opportunity to gain career-related experiences, clarifying employment and career goals
- Builds leadership, technical, and professional skills
- Increases confidence, maturity, and self-management;
- Improves problem-solving, critical thinking, research, communication, and teamwork skills
- Develops skills to transition to the workforce
- In cases of paid placements, provides earnings to assist with financial obligations
- Builds citizenship skills

## Employers and Community Benefits

- Increases the diversity, energy, and enthusiasm within the workplace
- Engages post-secondary institutions in responding to identified community need
- Fosters additional collaboration with the academic institution
- Increases the profile of the community's opportunities and challenges
- Helps organizations find solutions to specific business or industry needs
- Attracts and hires motivated and enthusiastic new employees

## Educators/Institutional Benefits

- Attracts and retains high quality students
- Strengthens links between the institution and the business, government and community organizations
- Being used as an effective marketing and recruitment tool
- Enhances reputation of the institution within the employment community
- Aligns with government priorities
- Increases employability of graduates, thereby increasing institutional employment rates
- Increases alumni engagement as community partners

- Increases partnership opportunities and financial support towards experiential learning from community partners
- Increases educator satisfaction
- Helps faculty keep their knowledge current
- Provides opportunity to evaluate and improve curriculum

## Economic Benefits

- Reduces youth unemployment and underemployment
- Skills developed during work-integrated learning ensure a more proficient workforce
- Leads to more innovation given more experienced and skilled workers
- A robust, integrated Experiential Learning Quality Assurance Framework supports these benefits by advancing six key strategic goals:
  - Elevate GBC's positioning as a leader in the provision of WIL and EL in the college sector
  - Increase program and student participation in WIL and EL
  - Increase the quality of student experience in WIL and EL
  - Increase consistency and efficiency of WIL and EL activities and supports, including those relating to accessibility
  - Maintain high quality data tracking and reporting
  - Enhance stakeholder relationships (including students, host organizations, employers, government, GBC staff)

The college understood that in order to fully integrate experiential education into academic programming, a quality assurance framework for experiential education needed to be developed.

George Brown College's Quality Assurance Framework for Experiential Learning (EL) is situated in the context of larger system-wide academic quality assurance mechanisms. The EL Quality Assurance Framework was developed in a manner that ensures compliance with the requirements of: The Ontario College Credentials Framework (Govt of Ontario 2018). Ontario College Program Standard and Descriptions, Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS 2016) Standards and Requirements and the institutional College Quality Assurance Audit Process (CQAAP) the college undergoes

every 5 years.

The aim of the EL Quality Assurance Framework is to ensure the experiential learning at the college:

- Is authentic and substantive
- Is sequenced to ensure adequate preparation and self-reflection
- Supports the application of theory to practice
- Aligns with program learning outcomes and is assessed accordingly
- Includes supports for all stakeholders
- Is subject to ongoing review and improvement (which includes feedback from all stakeholder groups)
- Is a required component of all programs of study

The college's initial EL Definitions and Criteria were created in adherence to the following considerations:

- The desire to define, document, evaluate and showcase experiential education in its various forms at the college
- Ensure consistency and quality of the experience for all stakeholders in similar EL and WIL across the college while supporting programs' ability to employ sector-specific language and requirements
- Avoid privileging some types of experiential learning over others – their value is based on the pedagogy of the program and the requirements of the sector/field
- Categorize diverse EL experiences as simply as possible and allow room for EL experiences that have yet to be developed
- Develop quality assurance criteria for each category that are relevant and robust
- Define student, college staff and host organization/sector partner responsibilities and supports as well as those for George Brown College staff and communicate them to relevant stakeholders in a timely fashion

It is important to note that, in support of inclusivity and access, the experiences captured in this framework are course-based and are undertaken by every student in a program. A central concern, particularly in educational institutions such as colleges that were specifically designed to provide access to their immediate communities, can be the uneven distribution of

experiential learning opportunities. Critics argue that these inequities, particularly in paid WIL experiences, both reflect and reinforce larger labour market inequities (Attfield, J., & Couture, I. 2014) Co-curricular experiential learning and WIL opportunities are often available only to a select group of students. While these experiences are valuable to many stakeholders, and should be supported and scaled up where possible, they do not reflect all students' learning experiences at the college. To avoid this issue, data collected for QA purposes will primarily come from experiences accessed by all students in a given program of study.

For the purpose of this Quality Assurance Framework, experiential learning will be used as an umbrella term that includes a wide variety pedagogic practices that are designed to assist, provide, and effectively integrate sector specific learning experiences. These experiences can occur in a variety of settings including but not limited to workplaces, simulation facilities, labs, shops, and studios in both educational, workplace and practice settings. Experiential learning is:

“The process whereby students come to learn from experiences in educational, workplace and practice settings and integrate the contributions of those experiences in developing the understanding, procedures, and dispositions required for effective professional practice, including criticality.” (Billett, 2015), (Shade & Jacobson, 2015).

### George Brown College Experiential Learning Criteria:

- Experiential Learning (EL) experiences that are captured and tracked in George Brown College's EL quality assurance framework adhere to the following criteria:
- The experience counts towards course credit and/or credential completion.
- The student is in a workplace, simulated workplace, or participating in real-world, sector-specific activities or research.
- The student is exposed to authentic demands that improve their job-ready skills, interpersonal skills, and transition to the workforce.
- The experience is structured with purposeful and meaningful activities linked to course outcomes.
- The experience includes student self-assessment



and evaluation of the student's demonstration of specific learning outcomes by the college.

Experiential Learning experiences that meet these criteria are organized into three categories: Work Integrated Learning (WIL), Course-Based Experiential Learning and Course-Based Experiential Learning with Industry/Sector Partner Participation. Each category contains a number of unique sector-specific experiences that meet common criteria and quality assurance standards.

The College continues to refine the definitions and measurements used to track progress toward achieving WIL in 100% of programs. The College's long-standing focus on experiential learning is reflected in GBC's current 2016-2019 Academic Plan and will continue to be a focus as we build our 2022 Strategy and 2030 Vision.

The focus of the next phase of WIL development will begin to answer the question of how much WIL is necessary and where in the program do we strategically sequence WIL so that the student derives the best benefit from their experience.

Together, if balanced we know that the students will be well prepared for the workforce and will hit the road running in their respective fields. We are living in most exciting times and Colleges are responding to the changes in the working marketplace. We are at the cusp of really understanding the value of the symbiotic relationship between the experiential approach and the classroom learning. Ontario Colleges are on the verge of setting the standard for Work Integrated Learning. Our prediction is that the Colleges will lead in this area and will set the new legacy for generations to come. We are certainly living in most interesting times.

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