

# THE BENEFITS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR STRONG COMMUNITY-CAMPUS RELATIONSHIPS

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ASHLEY SPIERER  
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## Abstract

University departments across the country have caught on to the benefits of incorporating experiential learning programs into their university curriculum. Experiential learning can be considered anything from field work, professor facilitated internships, or service learning, connected to a student individual career interests. Previous programs created have proved that professionals getting involved in these programs, the students engaging, the university's reputation professors all reap benefits from these programs. Prime examples of experiential learning programs are within departments at Binghamton University: an integrated program between the Decker School of Nursing, College of Community and Public Affairs, and the School of Education, at American University's; Washington Law School and the undergraduate program of Global Environmental Change and at University of Pittsburgh's undergraduate psychology department. These campuses exemplify the potential benefits of providing programs that enable students to step into the workplace before graduation.

*Keywords:* Experiential learning; Community-campus relationship; Engage; Internships; Externships

*Binghamton Keywords:* Best Practices in Full-Service Community Schools; BU Decker School of Nursing; BU College of Community and Public Affairs; BU School of Education

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In order to increase the retention rates of Binghamton University students within the Southern Tier, specifically within Binghamton, NY a connection between the students and the area must be formed within the four to six years that a student spends at the University. As a Sean Lukasik, a representative from Pipeline for Progress, said, "*People engaged in their communities are more likely to stay.*" Experiential learning provides a basis to forming relationships and connections within an area while mutually benefitting all players in the campus/ community relationship. A community and a university working together can make learning turn into a reality. "Community-campus partnerships can transform knowledge by bridging the gap between theory and practice, providing opportunities for reflection and furthering new theory that can change both our knowledge and practice" (Sandy 36). Teaming the knowledge within a university and the practicality of a professional community can create a partnership that benefits

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the student whom receives practice, professors, university publicity, and the community whom receives a fresh perspective in the field.

Experiential learning implies "learning by doing," which entails participation on behalf of the student within the field that corresponds with his or her studies to ultimately decide on a future career. Experiential learning includes, field work, participating in professor facilitated internships, service learning, being involved in relevant organizations, interacting with professionals in the field of study, and several other engaging opportunities that are associated with a career interest. The advantages of utilizing experiential learning are revealed through the individual benefits it offers to each sector of the community campus relationship; the students, the components of a University, and community businesses, non profits, schools etc. Experiential learning meets the self interest of all areas of a community. In fact, upon analyzing the interests of each sector of the community, their interests mirror one another and transform from "self-to shared interest" (Sandy 34).

What is the role of a university in preparing students for the job market? What are students looking for upon graduating from a university? And, what is the role of the professor in this process? A university education is supposed to enhance and prepare a student for the real world. The "professional goals that both the student and the university hope to obtain include preparing the student for a job and career," the university also hopes to " foster deeper connections between students and the course material they are studying" (Domask 3). Being that the goal of the university is to enhance the connection between the student and the course material, it would seem obvious to encourage students to engage in hands on learning while at the university to better prepare for the "real world."

Students are seeking better jobs and employers are looking to hire students with prior experience. Students are gaining awareness of this expectation and their priorities have shifted from general areas of study to "specialized knowledge", majors that can lead directly into job opportunities. In "Fields such as Language, English, and Math there has been a 29 % decline although there has been a 410,000 increase in the number of degrees (DiConti 3). In order to prevent this decrease, the relevance to a profession must be expressed. There has also been an increase in students declaring career oriented majors compared to the decrease in broader liberal arts majors at universities. "UCLA's most recent survey, conducted in 2003 revealed that almost 71% of the respondents noted the ability to get a better job as a "very important" factor in their decision to pursue a college education."(DiConti 3). In conclusion if students are seeking out universities that will provide "better jobs", then preparing the students while in their college years would seem ideal.

Choosing a career oriented major does not necessarily prepare a student for the career of their choice. Instead, experiential learning prepares students by actually stepping foot, interacting, and engaging within the field that will prepare the student for the "real world." Integration of experiential learning is the next wave within higher education. "Colleges and universities can no longer afford the luxury of graduating students ill-prepared for a persistently changing workplace" (DiConti 1). Employers

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expect students to have hands on experience upon applying to their first job, and, in order for a university to attract future students, there needs to be assurance that those individuals getting an undergraduate degree are able to obtain jobs.

In order for the program to run successfully and benefit all the players in community campus relationship, effort must be put in on all sides. We must create ways to "take students out of the classroom and put students face to face with individuals whose lives are devoted to creating new approaches to solving problems, then students can personally see the changes that individuals, small organizations, and communities can make" (Domask 15). Learning material from a text or reading about an industry does not provide the same experience as seeing and being engaged in the process. A major aspect in ensuring successful experiential learning in higher education is that all players of the community/campus relationship are reaping benefits, including the professors facilitating the experience. Time is an issue with professors; in fact, is a "precious commodity", and when sacrificed, it can impact their own research and priorities that are attached to their career. Experiential learning creates a new approach to education.

According to Dr. Joseph Damask in order for educators to be successful in their teaching they must be connecting the academic setting with practitioners (and other stakeholders), strengthening interdisciplinary curricula, linking students to work experience and job opportunities, and engaging and empowering students (Domask 2). Making these connections benefits the professor by enabling them to teach within their expertise. The work is then left to the students and the professionals in the community to teach and the professor to facilitate reflection and to ensure the student is gaining the proper experience. Universities also gain publicity from students who are leaving the workplace highly experienced.

As students are putting to practice what they are learning in the textbook, the employers. Employers learn from the fresh ideas students offer and can prepare their future employees before they enter the workforce. "We gain from intellectual assets of the academic institution by learning new information from students and obtaining greater access to academic research....students make us better professionals and they ask us the kind of questions that we have forgotten about." (Sandy 36). For example students who engage in activity within local schools positively influence those in their environment, "it is great to have the college students come because then these kids will think about going to college. It shows that college is possible – Community Partner" (Sandy 35) while they are also gaining professional experience.

From the steps other universities have taken, the need of the student, and the demands of employers, experiential learning is imperative, whether or not it is offered within the students' particular university. Boise State University notices the demand for experiential learning "to better meet industry demand we developed and implemented a new degree program in Networking and Telecommunications in the Spring of 2000. The program's goal is to produce graduates who are not only technically proficient, but who understand the diverse business functions and organizational drivers that dictate technical situations"(Minch and Tabor 52). Creating programs such as the one at Boise

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State this are beneficial to not only the campus, but to the overall economy of the community that the students are studying within, assists in retaining talent to the specific area.

The university wants to have well prepared students, the students want to gain career oriented experience before graduation, and the employer expects to see experience prior to graduation therefore implementation of experience within the years students are at Binghamton University is necessary. Richard Florida discusses in his book *Cities and the Creative Class* the important of keeping young talent within an area, there must be an attraction factor; a good quality of life and jobs available.

Forming relationships and sense of comfort is a crucial factor in the decision to live and work within a community. A majority of Binghamton University students live in other areas of the state and country and are familiar with different lifestyles. However there needs to be a combined effort on behalf of the university and the community to increase the retention rate, experiential learning is a great first step.

Lifestyle factors are imperative in keeping the creative class put in an area. Students need to be exposed to the benefits of the low cost of living, the local lifestyle factors, and the companies within the area. With experiential learning in action the during the student's university years, he/she will learn the skills to work within their specific field within surrounding companies and will also become familiar with the surrounding community . The relationships formed will expose the students to the quality lifestyle Binghamton can offer firsthand from individuals who live in the area and as result student comfort levels will rise. If within this economic downturn, Binghamton and the greater Southern Tier can prove to provide a quality lifestyle and, the students become aware of this through experiential learning all aspects of the community campus relationship will flourish.

### **II. BEST PRACTICES**

A local example of students engaging in experiential learning directly related to their professional interests is taking place is on our campus. Liz Anderson from the School of Education, Sue Terwillinger from the Decker School of Nursing, and Laura Bronstein at College of Community and Public Affairs, have collaborated to create an Binghamton University's Best Practices in Full-Service Community Schools that enables graduate students in those three fields interested in pursuing careers in pediatrics, to work within two local Binghamton elementary schools. Each graduate student is matched with a supervisor at the elementary school and with an advisor in their specific university department. They meet in a seminar once every two weeks, and have one to one discussions with an advisor in their specific field of study on the progression of the 16 hours a week they are spending at the elementary schools. There are also pre and post interviews of the graduate students and the elementary school staff to audit and enhance the program.

In a traditional sense university students are helping the school by providing assistance to the school teachers, social workers, and nurses in need of extra hands; but

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this program is also providing a unique advantage. The innovative research that is taking place at the University is being applied to the elementary schools via the graduate students. At the university they are studying the benefits of integrating social work, education, and nursing. The graduate students are able to put this innovation to practice and provide a new perspective to the school system. Although there may be obstacles the graduate students are able to experience what it is like to be in a school setting first hand. The beauty of this program is the passion and time these three women have engaged in the program. "This is my passion" Dr. Terwillinger says. But like most professors the same issues arise; finding the time to integrate experiential learning into the curriculum.

Two departments, at the graduate and undergraduate level at American University located in Washington D.C. provide strong examples of the benefits of experiential learning. At the graduate level there is a supervised "externship" program within the law school, and at the undergraduate level Dr. Domask a professor at the school of International Service has lead a semester of experiential learning on students interested in Global Environmental Change. Externships are various experiential learning opportunities, offered by universities and colleges to provide students with experiences in their field of study

At the graduate level, the supervised externship program has created strict guidelines to ensure that the experiential learning is beneficial to all players. Students are free to choose their placements, but must receive department approval. In order for the student to be approved to work, they must "supervised" by an attorney in the workplace and must be engaged in substantive legal work" also within the area of assignment the workplace must agree to give a work load that is equivalent to a beginning lawyer. There is a list of resources available to help students find prime experiential learning in the area such as the externship fair, externship database, posted listings (on bulletin boards), or a career specialist that can meet with you one on one to discuss plans . The department demands students to participate in the externship program to decide which specialty they prefer. While working students have the choice of either being supervised by a faculty member at the university or enrolling in seminar to ensure proper reflection. Within the seminar students engage in writing, discussion and group meeting to discuss the progress of their experience. The companies benefit by receiving hardworking employees who are working entry level proving their capabilities for future employment. These experiences can help a student determine what field of law they prefer, build confidence in their abilities, make connections during their college years, and receive academic credit

At the undergraduate level the program runs differently. Experiential learning which can refer to any type of "learning by doing" is utilized to the fullest. This program is a semester of experiential learning including a three day per week seminar component, a two day per week internship component and an optional independent research component. The rationale of this program is to combine multiple forms of educational approaches, all of which are experiential, to expose students to various practioners in their various fields of study. This program integrates students into the professional area of their desire to experience day to day roles within the field. Although this is an extreme approach at experiential learning it is interesting to see how much

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students benefit and take from the experiences.

A more traditional approach to experiential learning can be found at the University of Pittsburgh's psychology department. They have created a course that can be worth 1- 3 credits depending on how many hours the student chooses to dedicate per semester. Upon receiving permission from the psychology department (proving that the work is course material relevant, or career oriented) the students must complete two site evaluations, and daily journal entries to reflect on their work (write down questions and observations). "The purpose of this course is to provide practical experience related to other course work in the department and to help students decide upon possible career paths." Without spending time within a field how can a student decide where their interest lies?

### **III. RECOMMENDATIONS**

At the undergraduate level experiential learning is not mandatory and involves an initial time commitment on behalf of the professors. Including that students who are better prepared for the workforce are more likely to be hired, which in turn attracts other students to attend the university, concludes that incentives to teachers should be provided to ensure that experiential learning is being incorporated into the curriculum at the undergraduate level as early in the university years as possible. The responsibility to heavily encourage experiential learning should be within each specific undergraduate department to exemplify the reality of studying within this specific field. A strong database of local opportunities that are career oriented in each department should be available to relay that engaging in the community is easily possible and beneficial to all players in the economy. As the expectations for experience at the undergraduate level escalate, formulating a mandatory experiential learning course in each major would help foster the community/campus relationship.

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