

Stakeholder Summary

Direct connections with community organizations create better experiential education outcomes

By blending theory and practice, it is believed that experiential education helps students develop valuable skills that are directly applicable to careers in their field. A new study by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) examines several types of experiential education and finds that programs that connect students directly with community organizations to work on real-life projects result in stronger engagement and better outcomes. However, these types of programs require significantly more work for both students and instructors and need institutional commitment and support.

Project Description

Community Service Learning and Community-Based Learning as Approaches to Enhancing University Service Learning looked at three types of experiential learning. Community service learning (CSL) sends students into the community by either providing a direct service or taking on a project designed by a community organization. Community-based learning (CBL) brings community partners into the classroom to present real problems, projects, questions or research to engage directly with students. Other in-course learning activities (ICLA) such as role playing, skits, guest speakers, case studies and laboratories were grouped together.

The study examined 485 students at York University over a two-year period enrolled in a variety of introductory and upper-level courses across disciplines who engaged in some type of experiential learning. The students were surveyed at the end of their term to measure their engagement, depth of learning, perceptions of the course and educational outcomes. Faculty who permitted their students to participate in the study also took part in focus groups on their experiences.

Findings

Students recognized the benefits of CSL and CBL for their ability to improve engagement with the material and create strong educational outcomes. But they also rated the course experience lower than ICLA programs because of the increased workload and a lack of clarity on the goals and standards of the course. Clearly defining the standards in course outlines and managing expectations on workload may help manage these concerns. Designing CBL and CSL courses for upper-year students may also help students make clear, direct connections between their work in the community and their career path.

Faculty found that all experiential learning courses required more work for the instructor, but offered a deeply rewarding and personally transformative student learning experience. They also said that implementing new community partnerships for experiential education was often “messy” and challenging. The increased faculty workload of these courses could be offset through professional development and operational support for course design and implementation. Providing support and

incentives for experiential learning can increase the number of these courses and improve the capacity for instructors to foster and maintain positive community relationships.

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