Experiential Learning Throughout the Curriculum: An Assessment of One Program’s Integrated Approach and the Value to Stakeholders

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The School of Sports Administration (SPAD) at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Canada is the only sport management School in Canada that grants a Bachelor of Commerce degree. Historically, the program has offered a number of experiential learning opportunities, which differs significantly from the number of opportunities available to students in the University’s other business school, the School of Commerce and Administration. This difference in philosophy is a fundamental difference between the two programs and has contributed to some confusion and disagreement concerning curriculum changes.

As the SPAD program approaches 40 years since its inception, the professors in the program have decided to assess the importance, and effectiveness, of the various experiential learning opportunities available to students, and if this emphasis on experiential learning benefits students and industry. The study conducted has evaluated the learning objectives for each of the courses with a significant component of experiential learning, the perceived value and learning outcomes for the students, and the value of the deliverables offered to industry partners.

While this research was originally intended to be an introspective exercise designed to inform curriculum decisions, the preliminary results have shown that dissemination of the data could be beneficial to other programs interested in experiential learning, as well as advancing the theoretical foundations of research into experiential learning. As the SPAD program includes service learning, co-operative learning and internships, the breadth of experience within the program contributes significantly to better understanding the various advantages and disadvantages to each component. Additionally, the SPAD curriculum has been set up in such a way that the experiential learning opportunities each semester build directly off the relative success experienced by the groups of students in their experiential learning opportunities the previous semester. This downloads a great deal of responsibility on the students, as their performance drives the direction of future experiential learning opportunities.

As stated previously, this study includes the assessment of three components of the experiential learning curriculum: the learning objectives, the perceived value to the students, and the perceived benefit to the industry partner. The three stages of the research included a review of the learning objectives in each course offered within the program, a survey of fourth year students as they completed the final week of classes prior to graduation, and a survey of the industry partner with whom the student worked with during their learning experience.

Identifying the learning objectives was simply a matter of listing the learning objectives as previously identified within the syllabus for each course where an experiential learning component was identified by at least one student survey respondent. The students completed a self-administered online survey which allowed them the freedom to identify the courses which they believed offered experiential, practical, or industry specific experiences over their four years in the undergraduate program. The students then rated the value of each experience, and listed the values they perceived they gained from the experience, including what they learned. The students were also asked to identify what they would have liked to have experienced and how the experience could have been of greater value to them.

The final component to be measured was the perceived value to the industry partner involved in the specific learning experience. The roles taken on by the industry partner included internship supervisor, supervisor of a service learning experience, and client to student consultant group. The lead supervisor and contact person was asked to complete a self-administered online survey immediately following the learning experience. Each respondent was asked to identify the needs identified by the industry partner prior to embarking on the experience, then to rate the degree to which these needs were met. The respondent was then asked to list, and rank, the perceived benefits to the organisation in participating in the experience, as well as identifying any objectives they may have had. The industry partners were also asked to identify what benefits they perceived this experience had for the students participating.

The findings point towards an alignment between the learning objectives of the courses and the perceived value to the industry partners; however, there is evidence that there are some differences between the value of the
experience as perceived by the student and those perceived by the industry partners. It is also interesting to note that there are some aspects of experiential learning that are of greater perceived value to the students, which were not identified within the learning objectives of the courses and were not deemed to be as great of importance to the industry partner.