

A Hammer in Search of a Nail: A Tale of Experiential Learning

Emmeline de Pillis
University of Hawaii

Vicki Whiting
Westminster College

Alison Mackey
Westminster College

Michael Glissmeyer
Westminster College

In this paper, we present a composite case study that explores trade-offs and tensions in the development and administration of Experiential Learning (EL) programs at broad-access universities. There are four main categories of trade-offs that must be acknowledged and negotiated: (1) quality vs. cost, (2) institutional versus individual goals, (3) institutional aims for the student experience versus students aims from participating in an EL program, and (4) providing “real-life” experiences vs. protecting vulnerable students from “real-world” inequalities. Unfortunately, the nature of trade-off is such that no matter what decisions are made, certain goals will likely be unmet, and some stakeholders will be unsatisfied. The downside of an Experiential Learning program—like any ambitious, under-resourced undertaking—is that time and effort may be wasted, and little achieved; the upside, however, is that implementing an EL program can force an institution to define its priorities.

Keywords: experiential learning, higher-ed administration, resources, trade-offs

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions continue to embrace Experiential Learning (EL) and its myriad forms: internships, mentor programs, lab work, community based projects, service learning, practice simulation exercises, and in class creative activities / skill development practice (Kuh, 2008). Additional research into vicarious observational learning (VOL) suggests an addition of insight in advance of action with regard to experiential learning (Hoover, et al., 2012). These programs emerge as a response to employer desires (Walker, 2016), commitment to the philosophy, or addressing the need for a competitive advantage in an era of declining enrollments (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017). Schools of Business have followed the adoption of EL programs as part of undergraduate curriculum. Often in business schools, the EL program is integrated into management departments. The management education community generally supports EL (Lund Dean & Forray, 2015). For management educators,

relevant activities outside the classroom can be an effective approach to reinforce classroom learning, and tie it to the “real world.” EL opportunities can be associated with improved learning (Burch et al., 2016), and positive career outcomes (Walker, 2016). Problem-based learning, a type of EL that presents ambiguous, realistic problems for students to resolve, can foster long-term retention of knowledge and skills (Hoidn & Kärkkäinen, 2014). Moreover, for administrators struggling with declining college enrollment numbers, Experiential Learning programs can appear to be a point of differentiation when trying to attract students. Images of students engaged in photogenic hands-on activities look appealing on websites and brochures.

However, EL is not a panacea. Experiential and “real-world” activities can be uncomfortable for students, causing defensiveness and possible disengagement (Lund Dean & Jolly, 2012). When offered with minimal guidance, experiential learning can be ineffective (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). Kayes (2002) suggests using conversational learning and more qualitative studies to enhance experiential learning. The consensus among proponents and practitioners of EL seems to be that successful implementation requires a great deal of care, customization, and calibration (Canhoto & Murphy, 2016; Ewing & Ewing, 2017; Kolb, Kolb, Passarelli, & Sharma, 2014; Rodgers, Simon, & Gabrielsson, 2017). Such individual customization of experiential learning can work with small groups of well-prepared students (Wiggins, Harding, & Engelbrecht, 2017) or those students with psychological hardiness and internal motivation (Cole, et al., 2004), but customization may be a challenge for broad-access institutions—institutes that educate a significant proportion of college students in the U.S. and have constrained resources (Barrow, Brock, & Rouse, 2013). Experiential learning opportunities can incur costs for administration, transportation, insurance, and relationship management with community partners.

THE CASE STUDY

In this paper, we present a composite case study illustrating core trade-offs and tensions inherent in administering an Experiential Learning program at a broad-access university. The incidents are real, but to respect the privacy of our informants, they are woven into a single narrative with names and minor details changed. In some cases a single incident is a composite of similar incidents at more than one institution. Our exemplar institution is Cut-Rate U, an underfunded, broad-access university.

Trade-Off 1: Quality Vs. Cost

CRU is a regional campus of a statewide university system that is increasingly dependent on tuition revenue; like most state systems, there has been decreasing financial support from the legislature. CRU administrators are tasked with attracting and retaining paying students, but have proportionally far fewer marketing and recruiting resources compared to the flagship institution. With little strategic direction or financial support from the system, CRU finds itself in competition with private institutions, community colleges, and even institutions within its own system for a shrinking pool of college-bound high-school seniors (Bransberger & Michelau, 2017).

In an attempt to offer a distinctive competitive advantage at low cost, CRU launched a campus-wide Experiential Learning program (CRU-EL). Because hiring a full-time director for this program seemed too costly, Administration chose the less expensive option of granting a faculty member a 2/3 course release to run the program, with no designated secretarial or administrative support. This limited the outlay to an affordable \$20,000 per year, the cost of staffing the CRU-EL Director’s courses with lecturers.

Not surprisingly, it was a tough sell to get an academic unit to give up part of a faculty member’s teaching time even though Administration committed to replacing the faculty member’s courses with a lecturer. The Administration assured the academic units that the new CRU-EL Director’s course releases constituted the academic unit’s *only* obligation to the EL program. Ultimately, the College of Business (CoB) agreed to release a faculty member to be the CRU-EL Director.

The new CRU-EL Director immediately realized that without administrative support, the director could not reserve rooms, plan on-campus events, make purchases, use university channels to communicate with internal or external stakeholders, or do anything requiring university systems. The CoB staff had taken the Administration on their word, and refused to provide administrative support to the CRU-EL program. The CRU-EL Director could not reserve rooms or place purchase orders through the CoB staff; because room reservation and purchasing systems are controlled by the staff, this meant that these resources could not be accessed at all. CoB supplies, letterhead, and copy machine privileges were also off-limits. The CoB staff refused to pass along telephone messages for the CRU-EL Director if the messages pertained to CRU-EL business; they would only relay messages related to the CRU-EL Director's teaching duties. The CoB dean supported the staff's approach in these matters, as the college had in fact been promised that they would incur no additional resource costs, including staff time, when agreeing to have a CoB faculty member take on the CRU-EL Directorship.

In frustration, the CRU-EL Director approached the provost, to whom the director position had a dotted-line reporting relationship. The CRU-EL Director obtained in writing a promise of administrative support from the provost on behalf of one of his own staff members. However, when approached to initiate a purchase order, the provost's staff member also refused, declaring, "I don't do that." Although the CRU-EL Director now had the promise in writing from the provost, the provost was unwilling to contradict his staff member, thus leaving the program with no staff / resource support.

The CRU-EL Director then attempted to work around this limitation, with mixed results. For example, the CRU-EL program did not have its own letterhead, was not able to purchase official university letterhead, and was not permitted to use any other unit's letterhead. To thank a local restaurateur who had provided sandwiches for a meeting, the CRU-EL Director used personal resources to concoct official-looking letterhead. This then drew a complaint from the Alumni Relations Director, as the invented letterhead was not the approved university standard.

This director soon quit. At this point the Administration might have decided to set up the next CRU-EL Director with necessary resources. They could have made sure administrative support was in place, and that support staff were informed, fairly-compensated, and willing to support the needs of the CRU-EL Director. Mindful that not all power resides at the top of the organizational chart, the Administration could have acknowledged that administrative assistants wield considerable influence and have the power to stall an initiative, and that the minimal requests made from the CRU-EL Director were in line with the university's mission and goals, thus providing a modicum of support was in everyone's best interest. (French & Raven, 1959; Mechanic, 1962).

The Administration did not do those things. Instead, the Administration selected another faculty member as CRU-EL Director under the same constrained conditions. Fortunately, this individual was not dissuaded by the lack of financial or administrative support. Administration was delighted by the new director's can-do attitude...at first. The new director worked twelve-hour days, reviewing programs across campus and informing faculty and staff members throughout the university about everything they were doing wrong related to the EL program. Some of the recipients of this 'helpful' advice included individuals who had been building community relationships and running internships for decades. This caused ill will between the CRU-EL Director and some departments.

A prime example occurred when complaints surfaced about the campus career fair. Although the fair was not the director's responsibility, the EL Director swung into action by unilaterally setting up a competing career fair that the director believed better met the needs of the university. Additionally, the CRU-EL Director was not shy about letting employers know that the CRU-EL career fair was superior to the "official" fair run by Career Services.

Within a short time, and likely due to, at least in part, the actions taken by the EL Director, the Career Services Director quit. Because of the university's constrained budget, the Career Services Director position remained unfilled for many years.

Lack of adequate supporting and administrative resources can derail an EL Program even with a dedicated and determined faculty member appointed as EL Director. An experienced faculty member willing to work hard for minimal compensation might seem like an ideal pick from an administrator's

point of view. However, because faculty tend to be rewarded for research productivity, even in teaching institutions, the few faculty willing to neglect their research and do time-consuming service work are likely to be “true believers.” Their passion and commitment can come with a belief that their way of doing EL is the only way. They may interpret disagreement as a personal affront, or they may take it upon themselves to create programs such as a competing Career Fair. These well-intentioned behaviors can cause conflict and hard feelings across campus, and inflict long-lasting damage on previously stable programs—hardly a bargain from an administrative point of view.

Trade-off 2: Institutional Versus Individual Goals

The CRU-EL Director who replaced the “true believer” was aware of the institutional constraints limiting the effectiveness of the EL Program. These constraints did not dissuade this individual from taking the EL Director position however because he was in pursuit of assessment experience for the personal goal of having a well-rounded CV. Given the focus on building his resume, this new CRU-EL Director requested neither resources from administration nor admiration from colleagues. What the EL Director did want, though, was evidence of the EL program’s goals, so that the program’s success could properly be assessed, and the success of the program could be used for his career development.

Despite best efforts, however, the CRU-EL Director was unable to get the provost to commit to a goal for the program. At first, the stated goal was to improve students’ employment outcomes. However, the director discovered that the institution did not track graduates’ outcomes and had no plan to do so. Next the goal became “career readiness,” but again, there was no plan to measure this outcome either. Career readiness assessments cost money, and the administration did not have money to spend in the manner. The next goal of the EL program became increasing enrollment and retention. However, the understaffed Institutional Research office made it clear that they could not take on the extra work of tracking the progress of students who did and did not participate in EL activities. Nor would they agree to share access to the raw data.

Finally, the provost told the director, “All you need to do is get us through accreditation. Your predecessor didn’t document anything and left a mess. You need to go back and assess all of our experiential learning projects.”

“You mean the projects I didn’t do, that were never documented?” the disbelieving director asked. By this point he was convinced he was being set up to fail.

The provost was not trying to frustrate the director. The problem was that the provost could not get a straight answer from the president. The president, with few resources and under pressure from the community and the local media to “do something” about enrollment, had staked his reputation on the EL program. An assessment of its performance relative to a measurable goal could only bring bad news. Keeping things vague allowed him to claim victory.

The unwillingness of the university to establish goals for the program despite the EL Director’s best efforts created frustration for all parties. The University wanted to draw attention to the EL program believing that marketing materials and campus visits highlighting students engaged in active learning would be attractive to potential students. The administration’s goal of simply highlighting the fact that the university embraced an experiential learning approach as part of a recruiting effort conflicted with the EL Director’s desire to establish measurable goals in order to perform a creditable job of assessment that would confirm the impact his work had in contributing to the university’s mission, as well as provide evidence of his success in the role of EL Director for career advancement opportunities.

In an ideal world individual goals would consistently align with institutional goals, and goal attainment would be tracked. In the case of EL programs, the lack of data related to assumed program outcomes (student employment opportunity, career readiness, and increased enrollment and retention) results in frustration for those who want to know what works for students. However, the same information deficit can provide breathing room for leaders in difficult circumstances. One way to lower this tension would be to reframe an under-resourced EL program as akin to an athletics program: The objective return on investment may be negative, but it carries intangible benefits such as the goodwill of important stakeholders.

Trade-off 3: Institutional Aims for the Student Experience Versus Students Aims

CRU made the strategic decision to require EL as a graduation requisite for all business students. To fulfill this degree requirement students were required to enroll in different classes designated as “EL” courses. These courses covered a variety of EL experiences ranging from internships, international study abroad trips, practicums where groups of students acted as consultants to an organization, and Service Learning based classes. At the direction of the administration, the CRU-EL Director worked with the faculty curriculum committee to get certain courses designated “EL.” The administration was convinced that the CRU-EL program, of which “EL”-designated courses were a component, would attract students and boost enrollment and retention. This curriculum requirement was heralded in the university’s accreditation documentation as evidence of program attention to student learning outcomes. Finally, CRU administration believed that EL courses were a necessary component to remain current in course offerings since EL programs garnered significant attention at higher education conferences.

To support the administration’s commitment to EL, the CRU-EL Director then planned a series of networking and mentorship events, as well as fairs focused on drawing attention to options for international trips and Service Learning projects. All of these events were conveniently located on campus so that students could easily determine which EL courses they would like to pursue in order to fulfill the EL graduation requirement. Community members, faculty members offering trips and sponsoring Service Learning projects signed up, as did students. However, when the events took place, only a tiny fraction of the students showed up. When the faculty asked their students why they had signed up but didn’t attend, the answer was generally along the lines of, “I signed up because you wanted me to, but I was too busy/something came up/I forgot. Getting students to attend these events was the least of the problems that arose as CRU implemented to EL degree requirement. Problems also arose in internships, international trips, and Service Learning projects.

Internships are a powerful learning opportunity if done right (citation). These internships provide real-work experience, networking opportunities, and in the best case, open the door for a student to transition into a desirable full-time career. CRU has some examples of students securing dream internships with Fortune 50 companies such as Sony and Nike. Unfortunately, these internships constitute the minority of internship experiences at CRU. Since an internship is a requirement, and for the most part students are left up to their own networks and initiative to secure an internship, the majority of internships involve a student continuing to work at their current job, with their supervisor giving them an insignificant project or a slight opportunity for an experience in additional responsibility to qualify as an “internship”. Formally, these internships are written up to seem impressive for grading evaluation, though informal conversations with the students tell a much different story. The most often heard story is that the low-level job that was helping to pay their college tuition was the same job that qualified for their internship requirement. Unfortunately, sometimes when a student manages to land an internship with a highly desired company, they show up for their internship only to learn that they are free labor for mundane tasks such as data input or running errands for a busy manager.

CRU’s EL requirement designated courses that included two-week trips to foreign destinations to observe cultural and work environment differences in addition to the traditional formal Study Abroad or Semester-at-Sea coursework. These international trips were led by faculty who were responsible for making all travel arrangements, including tours of foreign manufacturing plants, and meetings with foreign dignitaries. While appearing to provide meaningful international learning experiences based on the trip itineraries, the reality of these trips was often much different. One faculty member decided that she would never lead another international trip after her experience in arranging and leading a Central Europe international tour for 30 upper-division undergraduates. This faculty was thrilled to learn that a member of CRU’s Board of Directors had a connection to an executive at Munich’s BMW plant. After weeks of exchanged emails and coordination, the faculty member secured a personalized tour of the BMW factory that emphasized German work practices. The tour concluded with a formal business lunch with BMW’s top brass in the executive boardroom. Unfortunately, the night before the meeting, some of the American students took advantage of Germany’s relatively liberal alcohol laws. The hungover undergraduates showed up late to catch the bus for the tour, where they were distracted or worse, turned green and ran out to the bathroom. This embarrassed both the German contact at the company the CRU

Board of Director, the faculty member's desire to lead international trips, and ruined the opportunity for future students.

Practicums and Service Learning projects suffered from the same inconsistent experience for students and the university. Certain practicums and Service Projects resulted in meaningful engagements where student learning was significant, and sense of purpose and accomplishment was high for both the students and the hosting organization. Unfortunately, these programs had an equal opportunity of failing to achieve learning goals either because the organization did not provide a project of depth and breadth to challenge the student's abilities, or because students did not take the project seriously because they felt they were simply checking the EL graduation requirement box.

Had the administration consulted the student surveys available on the website of the Institutional Research Office, they would have found that students were asking for more available course sections to enable faster graduation, more convenient parking, onsite childcare, and better housing and dining options. Students were not asking for more experiential learning, were indifferent to it when the course was offered, and often resented having it "forced" on them. Students who were aware of the extent of resources required to run the EL coursework expressed frustration that administration had started up a new program while not fixing basic issues like availability of required courses and campus maintenance.

Trade-off 4: "Real-life" Experiences Vs. Protecting Vulnerable Students from "Real-world" Inequalities

It was a major victory when the most upscale hotel in town took on two interns from CRU. When the interns compared notes at the end of the semester, however, they realized that they had had very different experiences. While "Carol" had been rotated through all of the positions in the hotel, learning every aspect of the business, "Jane's" requests to get front-desk experience had been rebuffed. Instead, she had been stuck in housekeeping, spending her entire semester changing sheets and cleaning toilets. Jane complained to the director, who followed up with the employer.

The hotel manager admitted that the interns were treated differently, but for a good reason: the hotel had a large international clientele. If their customers saw a person of Jane's ethnicity at the front desk, the manager explained, they would assume that the hotel was dirty and poorly-run, and the hotel would lose business.

"Now, that's not *my* opinion of course," the manager hastened to add, "but we have to be sensitive to what our customers want."

Community-based learning experiences can provide insights into the world of paid work, but they can also expose students to favoritism, harassment, and discrimination. In this case, treating two interns "equally" by placing them in the same site resulted in very unequal outcomes for them. Jane will graduate with a less-valuable internship on her resume, through no fault of her own. Community members who had contributed their valuable time felt disrespected and unappreciated when they showed up to give a talk to an empty room. This damaged relationships with important community stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Experiential learning, done right, is not cheap; to have the desired effect it requires sustained, focused, evidence-based action from university leadership. But universities are complex organizations whose stakeholders have multiple and conflicting agendas. Experiential Learning requires effort on the part of faculty and staff whose own incentives may not be aligned with EL. We hope the tradeoffs detailed above are helpful to administrators in setting up or reconfiguring EL efforts.

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