



PeopleGrove

Six Steps to Scaling Experiential Learning Across Campus

Ensuring Every Learner Has the
Opportunity to Participate in the
High-Impact Practices that Matter Most

Knowledge and Success through the Power of Experience

When you ask alumni what their favorite part of their college experience was, very rarely will you hear about a great textbook they studied or the 500-person lecture class they took.

Instead, you'll likely hear about study abroad, a meaningful internship, a relevant class project or another experiential learning (EL) activity.

Experiential learning as a discipline has exploded in the past two decades. According to the Institution for Experiential Learning, research on the subject across dozens



of interdisciplinary fields has more than quadrupled since 2000.¹ From K-12 schools at the beginning of the educational journey through employers helping their employees upskill, everyone seems to be looking towards experiential learning as the way to truly serve learners.

But what makes this type of learning so enticing in today's market? What impact does it truly have on students? Why are there major gaps in access to these opportunities in higher education, and how can colleges and universities scale EL to many more students?

For guidance, we're looking towards one school who has been particularly successful in their approach to scaling experiential learning: Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). This e-book will outline the 6-step process VCU is following to achieve 100% EL student participation.

1. Institution for Experiential Learning, "This is Experiential Learning," 2020

The Articulation Gap

Experience, Reflect, Think, Act

The Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is rooted in the work of many 20th century scholars who studied human development and, specifically, how humans learn. These include thinkers such as William James, Carl Jung, and John Dewey. However, the ELT was truly synthesized by David Kolb. He defined learning itself as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”²

Kolb presents a four step model that can be repeated multiple times across hundreds or thousands of experiences: Experience - Reflect - Think - Act. Of course, the experience itself triggers the cycle. A learner is then asked to reflect on that experience and put the experience in perspective. The “Think” step asks the learner to draw concrete conclusions about what they’ve learned in the experience. And finally, the learner has to put into practice what they’ve learned to test their conclusions once more and re-starting the cycle all over again.³

As Kolb’s definition suggests, this type of learning should not be a passive process. A learner who actively participates in that transformation can reap the benefits of their experience at a far greater rate than one who simply assumes they are gaining knowledge just by participating in the experience

itself. This is perhaps the most difficult part of experiential learning since the process and the cycle seem so intuitive and simple. We go through small iterations of this cycle nearly everyday. And yet, without intentional reflection, abstract thinking, and courageous action; many learners immediately lose the potential learning benefits of an experience.

This process ultimately helps learners achieve two main goals. First, it helps learners find out just how they learn best.

One experience or action may produce better results for the learner than another. By leaning into those experiences, an individual has the opportunity to greatly accelerate their learning. Secondly, it helps learners apply and connect theoretical knowledge with real life.⁴ This is a significant problem in today’s educational ecosystem. Josh Domitrovich Ed.D, executive director of the Center for Career and Professional Development at Pennsylvania Western University, called this the “articulation gap” in a recent article.⁵

When done well, experiential learning has the potential to make lifelong impacts on learners. Not just in how they gain knowledge, but also how they tell their story. As long as those experiences are accessible and intentional in our systems.

The **Articulation Gap** happens when learners cannot apply and connect theoretical knowledge to real life.

2. Ibid

3. Institution for Experiential Learning, “This is Experiential Learning,” 2020

4. Ibid

5. NACE, “Elevating Career Development Within Your Campus Culture,” 2022

The Impact of Experiential Learning

The impact experiential learning has on learners in a higher education setting has been well documented. Gallup's "Big Six" study identified experiences that impact a student's confidence in their ability to be ready for the job market. It's no surprise to find extracurriculars and long-term projects on that list.⁶ Strada has also documented the impact of internships for students. One such study found that seniors who participated in an internship are more confident in their ability to communicate their skills and value to potential employers.⁷ And finally the NAFSA: Association of International Educators has thoroughly documented how study abroad gives students both the "soft skills" and global experience that is necessary in today's job market.⁸

However, even with the overwhelming evidence of the impact experiential learning has on students, these opportunities remain inaccessible for most students; especially those who come from traditionally underserved backgrounds.

Less than half of students report actually completing an internship by the time they graduate,⁹ and only 2% of students say they were able to have all of the Gallup "Big Six" experiences. Meanwhile, the Institution for International Education estimates that only 10.9% of undergraduates study abroad at some point during their degree program.¹⁰ And that was before the Covid pandemic prevented learners from participating in most of these activities for the better part of two years.

Many colleges and universities have recognized this gap and are making significant efforts to make these meaningful experiences more accessible. Even a quick Google search for "university strategic plan experiential learning" brings up dozens of institutions who have included experiential learning in their long term visions. But assessing what already exists and filling the gaps is not always as easy as it sounds.

Gallup's Big Six

Student response to these questions strongly relate to whether they felt their colleges prepared them well for life and might have bettered their chances of receiving their degrees on time.

1. I had at least one professor who made me excited about learning.
2. My professors cared about me as a person.
3. I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.
4. I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.
5. I had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I was learning in the classroom.
6. I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations.

6. Gallup, "Six College Experiences Linked to Student Confidence on Jobs," 2019

7. Strada, "From College to Career: Students' Internship Expectations and Experiences," 2023

8. NAFSA: Association of International Educators, "Developing a Globally Competitive Workforce Through Study Abroad," 2020

9. Strada, "From College to Career: Students' Internship Expectations and Experiences," 2023

10. Inside Higher Ed, "Study Abroad Numbers Continue Steady Increase," 2019

Six Steps to Scaling Access to Experiential Learning



A REAL Strategy

In 2016, leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) began to evaluate student engagement with EL opportunities and immediately noticed gaps. For example, underrepresented minority students, Pell Grant recipients, and male students were not participating in credit-earning internships compared to other peer groups. VCU also identified that they had significant information gaps as well. By looking at data self-reported by students, such as first-destination survey (FDS) data, VCU saw encouraging signs that identified gaps were closing as they learned many students were participating in EL opportunities outside the classroom. But learning that after a student graduates and takes the FDS wasn't enough. VCU wanted to be able to identify participation numbers while the student was still enrolled so they could intervene if necessary and provide a student with EL access.

To accomplish this and scale access, VCU's Relevant, Experiential and Applied Learning (REAL) initiative partnered with Student Opportunity Center (SOC), now a part of PeopleGrove, to implement a strategy that guaranteed every student would participate in at least one EL opportunity during their enrollment at VCU. With the graduating class of 2026, VCU is on track to achieve 100% student participation in experiential learning.

Under the leadership of Dr. Erin Webster Garrett, Associate Vice Provost for VCU REAL, the university is working with PeopleGrove on a six-step approach to scale opportunity for learners that includes: (1) Mapping the Existing Ecosystem, (2) Identifying Goals and Priorities, (3) Defining, Counting, and Tracking Opportunities, (4) Designing Campus Wide Operations, (5) Filling Participation Gaps, and (6) Evaluating Progress and Iterating.

01

Mapping the Existing Ecosystem

The first step is to figure out exactly what experiential learning opportunities already exist on campus and collect data on those opportunities.

- How many students are participating?
- Is there any data on their effectiveness towards learning goals?
- Are there identifiable gaps based on trackable student demographics?
- Which department or program offers these opportunities?
- Are they hosted by the campus specifically or do they happen outside of the institution's purview?

In this phase, it's helpful to take a broad definition of EL opportunities. Anything where students "learn by doing" should be considered and mapped. It doesn't yet matter whether or not the opportunity follows a specific format or strictly adheres to the ELT model presented above. By taking that broad approach at this step, it allows you to get the widest picture possible.

VCU was able to identify 18 different types of EL activities happening across campus when conducting this audit. They included everything from capstone projects to service-learning to general career exploration and development. Mapping the ecosystem also allowed the REAL team to create baseline measures off of which they could track progress.

This holistic picture gives an institution the perfect starting point to build strategy.



18 different types of EL activities

- Internship
- Co-operative education (Co-ops)
- Practicums/clinical placements
- Field experiences
- Project/performance-based learning
- Capstone
- Research
- Independent Study
- Interprofessional collaboration
- Integrative learning
- Global Learning
- Labs
- Entrepreneurship and innovation
- Career exploration and development
- Service-Learning
- Civic learning and engagement
- Leadership education
- Living learning communities

02 Identifying Goals and Priorities



Ultimately, this will be a cross-campus initiative so an institution should strive to bring decision makers from crucial departments to the conversation.

With the ecosystem mapped, an institution can now set measures of success and understand where they need to concentrate their efforts.

In this step, it is vital to make sure to assemble the right team. Ultimately, this will be a cross-campus initiative so an institution should strive to bring decision makers from crucial departments to the conversation. Career services, academic affairs, student affairs, and even alumni relations can have a role to play in a project like this and their leaders should be at the table. And of course, given how vital this initiative is, cabinet and presidential involvement should be pursued. After all, as we noted above, experiential

learning is probably in your university's strategic plan so leadership will most certainly care about an initiative like this.

After setting their goal of 100% participation from students in EL, the team at VCU assembled the REAL Council made up of different working groups including student outreach and curriculum development. Business and industry leaders were also a part of this Council. These external stakeholders can not only be an important source of EL opportunities, but can provide important insight on trends in the working world that could impact how EL opportunities are structured.

03 Defining, Counting, and Tracking Opportunities



Building a framework like this not only guides the collection of effectiveness data and puts those numbers in perspective, it also is a very clear way of communicating with students.

With the ecosystem mapped, goals set, and a team in place; the strategy and tactics work can begin. This phase asks an institution to take a good, hard look at EL across campus and make some tough decisions.

- Is the institution offering the right EL opportunities?
- Is the data being collected the right metrics?
- Is what's in place effective?
- Where are the gaps and how can those gaps be filled?
- How can student access to EL opportunities be more streamlined?

This is also an opportunity to categorize the EL opportunities in certain ways to make tracking effectiveness easier and more defined. The

VCU REAL team developed a taxonomy with four levels based on the structure of the EL opportunity. A Level 1 is an opportunity that incorporated at least one "learn by doing" activity but did not contain reflection or mentoring. A Level 4 opportunity is far more intentional with how reflection and mentoring are incorporated and what outcomes can look like at that level. VCU even set a goal that students participating in 300 or 400 level courses would be required to complete a Level 2 EL opportunity or above.

Building a framework like this not only guides the collection of effectiveness data and puts those numbers in perspective, it also is a very clear way of communicating with students. For those learners unfamiliar with the importance of EL, the taxonomy shows them what they should participate in and why.

04 Designing Campus Wide Operations



Leveraging one cohesive system that consolidates and defines EL opportunities for students and administrators ensures that the project remains collaborative and campus wide.

This is where the vision starts to become reality. An institution is ready to begin implementing changes that increase the access students are seeking. But the challenge at this stage is to ensure that the team continues to take a campus-wide approach.

Once the ecosystem is mapped, goals outlined, and metrics defined, it would be very easy for team members to return to their departments and act on an individual level rather than the campus-wide level. After all, that's been the typical pattern in higher education for years. However, if an institution is truly going to make a meaningful change

and scale their work, the initiative has to remain a collaborative effort. But keeping it so will take intention and work.

Technology can play an important role in making that happen. Leveraging one cohesive system that consolidates and defines EL opportunities for students and administrators ensures that the project remains collaborative and campus wide. At VCU, they leveraged technology to consolidate over 2 million EL opportunities across 4,000+ different sources to open up access to these opportunities for their student body.

05 Filling Participation Gaps



Often, this may require an institution to get creative with how students lost in these gaps find and complete EL opportunities.

As this system is implemented across campus, it is absolutely essential the team ensure the identified participation gaps are filled. Often, this may require an institution to get creative with how students lost in these gaps find and complete EL opportunities. For example, an institution might discover that students with a certain major complete EL opportunities at a far lower rate than their peers. To solve this problem, the team might consider working with the faculty in that department to incorporate EL into the classes; thereby guaranteeing completion for those in the major.

In other cases, it may take specific and intentional marketing and communication to

fill these gaps. At VCU, Student Outreach is one of the six working groups that make up the REAL Council. Their main task is to raise awareness of the technology where the EL opportunities can be found.

A final tactic that can be effective in this phase is engaging with student leaders, particularly those who oversee affinity groups or chapters tied to traditionally underrepresented students. Organizations or clubs that support these students can be incredibly helpful in educating their members about the importance of EL and ensuring the team hits its completion goals.

06 Evaluating Progress and Iterating

As the team begins to implement the strategy and sees initial success, there will always be opportunities to learn and iterate. The project team should meet regularly to look at the data available, celebrate successes, and learn from instances where efforts have fallen short.

This process allows the team to identify and set new goals. It may reveal new participation or information gaps that the team didn't previously know about. New sources of EL

opportunities may also present themselves during an evaluation process.

Even at 100% participation, a goal VCU is on track to reach with the graduating class of 2026, there are always new opportunities to ensure learners are well on their way to making the most of their time on campus and connecting what they are learning in the classroom with potential careers.

The project team should meet regularly to look at the data available, celebrate successes, and learn from instances where efforts have fallen short.



Experiences Make Us Who We Are

As presented in a 2023 Inside Higher Ed article,¹¹ learners possess a number of different types of intelligence. Each one has developed its own distinct measurement and taxonomy over the last century. First there was the intelligence quotient — the IQ. But this went beyond the ability to recite facts and dates in an attempt to measure one's reasoning ability. More recently, emotional intelligence (EQ) has entered the discussion as a measure of how well an individual understands themselves and relates to those around them.

The authors of the article argue that Experiential Intelligence (XQ) adds an important dimension to the discussion. Someone who has this type of intelligence is adept at translating their lived experience into learning and wisdom to benefit them not just their career journey, but on their life journey as well.

"It [XQ] is about cultivating an intentional awareness of how you view opportunities, perceive challenges and tackle

goals based on prior experiences. XQ offers a pathway to understanding why we think and behave in certain ways as a function of how we are influenced by our past experiences."

Our experiences are perhaps the most important element of our personal and professional formation. We tend to look back with fondness and appreciation at chapters in our life where our experiences were most impactful. For colleges and universities, the true fulfillment of their promise lies in offering meaningful experiential learning opportunities that empower students and create tangible, long-term effects. Higher education institutions genuinely pave the way for their students' success beyond just earning a degree by delivering on this commitment to real-world application.

The result: grateful, thriving alumni.

11. Inside Higher Ed, "Unlocking Students' Experiential Intelligence," 2023

“VCU’s REAL initiative ensures that all VCU students engage in transformative, career-building activities that connect classroom knowledge to real-world experience, that create novel approaches to complex problems, and that contribute actions that benefit our educational, professional, and civil communities.”

Dr. Erin Webster Garrett

Associate Vice Provost for Relevant, Experiential and Applied Learning (REAL), Virginia Commonwealth University