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Engaging College Students in Experiential Learning Opportunities within Extension

Abstract

Providing experiential learning opportunities within Extension for college students generates benefits for multiple parties. As two campus-based faculty and two Extension county-based faculty who have collaborated to increase public health student engagement through endeavors within Extension, we have gained perspective on this topic. We describe a continuum of relevant experiential learning options, from classroom experiences through full internships. We also provide input on associated best practices. Extension faculty across the nation are encouraged to use and adapt these tools to ensure success in offering experiential learning opportunities to college students.

Keywords: [experiential learning](#), [internships](#), [best practices](#)

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Introduction

Experiential learning is at the core of Extension. For college students, experiential learning consists of many different opportunities, including internships, project-based education, and service learning activities (Association for Experiential Education, n.d.). Given Extension's close connections to the community and priority populations, Extension is a natural fit for college student experiential learning opportunities (Condo & Martin, 2002).

Offering experiential learning opportunities within Extension for college students has many benefits. For the students, benefits include the potential to gain a greater understanding of academic coursework and to apply knowledge to real-world situations (Eyler, 2009; Jacoby, 2015). Extension county-based faculty benefit through increased capacity to meet community needs, and campus faculty benefit through supplying students with new approaches to deepen learning (Wilken, Williams, Cadavieco, & Walker, 2008). The community benefits through support for solving community-based issues and through expanding programs (Jacoby, 2015). Overall, experiential learning provides opportunities for students to transition from college to a professional environment, connects education and employment, increases capacity to implement projects, and trains the future workforce (Eyler, 2009; Hesser, 2014; Jacoby, 2015).

This article presents a continuum of experiential learning opportunities for college students and best practices for success that can be applied in and adapted to Extension programs across the nation.

Experiential Learning Opportunities

The opportunities for college student experiential learning within Extension vary by scope and commitment. They can range from class assignments to special projects, practica, and internships. A special project is a small, contained activity that can involve independent work or field supervision. A practicum is a limited-duration field experience with supervision by field staff where the student both observes and participates in professional tasks. Practica differ from projects as students are required to be in the field and have more opportunities to observe the job in the natural setting. An internship parallels a real job, focusing on application of skills and knowledge in the work setting. On-site professionals serve as preceptors and oversee an intern's work assignment and performance as a supervisor would in an actual employment setting. As compared with other experiential learning opportunities, internships are more independent, require more work output, entail higher expectations, and can involve compensation in the form of academic credit and/or financial stipend (Oregon State University College of Public Health and Human Sciences, n.d.). Table 1 presents a continuum of experiential learning opportunities in Extension, the related time commitment involved, and examples of tasks that can be completed.

Table 1.

Continuum of Student-Engaged Experiential Learning with Extension

Type of experiential learning opportunity	Duration/level of commitment	Examples
Class requirement experience	Student: 1–2 hr per week	Attend committee and/or staff meetings.
	Extension county-based faculty: Minimal time commitment	Interview discipline-specific professionals.
		Develop section of grant proposal.
		Organize information booths and activities for outreach events.
Special project (1–2 credits)	Student: 3–6 hr per week	Pilot test survey instruments.
	Extension county-based faculty: Mid-level time commitment (0.5–1 hr per week)	Develop or research assessment tools.
		Conduct focus groups.
		Conduct literature reviews for grant or program development.
		Pilot test assessment tools.
		Gather feedback from clientele for program improvement.

Practicum (1–4 credits)

Student: 3–12 hr per week

Assist with outreach project.

Extension county-based faculty: Mid-level time commitment (0.5–2 hr per week)

Develop and implement discipline-specific activity for a community event.

Facilitate evidence-based curricula.

Conduct qualitative research related to discipline.

Full internship (8–12 credits)

Student: Varies based on program, 24–40 hr per week

Participate in discipline-specific activities such as collecting samples, summarizing policies, or developing a program plan.

Extension county-based faculty: High-level time commitment (3–8 hr per week)

Participate in staff and community meetings.

Lead a discipline-specific project in the community.

Conduct participant assessments according to protocols.

Participate in professional development activities, such as conferences and coalition meetings.

As the continuum implies, one topic area can be applied across the types of experiential learning opportunities. Using a walking program as an example, a student could

- develop an evaluation plan for the walking program (class assignment),
- develop a social media plan for the walking program (special project),
- hold focus groups with participants in the walking program (practicum), and/or
- create neighborhood walking maps and curriculum materials (full internship).

Class assignments, special projects, and practica often provide an earlier connection between students and Extension faculty and can be a gateway to an internship. Internships have the largest collective impact but require the most time of students and Extension faculty. For example, two undergraduate student interns worked collaboratively with an Extension faculty and a middle school teacher to pilot an intergenerational walking project whereby middle school students worked with senior citizens to identify safe walking routes in a low-income neighborhood. The interns used an existing project plan to cofacilitate six sessions with the middle school students and seniors. After each session, the interns evaluated the session and revised the next lesson on the basis of theory, evidence-based practice, and participant feedback. The interns practiced outreach as they organized a community event to highlight the intergenerational project and communicated with stakeholders about how walkability contributes to the health of a community. They also implemented an evaluation tool (developed by graduate students) for program improvement. Overall, the internship was

mutually beneficial. It honed the interns' skills in program planning and community organizing, expanded Extension's capacity for implementing population-based approaches in the community, and increased community awareness of issues surrounding walkability.

Best Practices

Best practices can ensure student, faculty, and community success. On the basis of a review of relevant literature and our experiences working with interns, we have identified several best practices for Extension internships (Rogers, Mason, & Cornelius, 2001; Torock, 2009; Wilken et al., 2008).

In 2012, there was a noticeable increase in participation in public health internships within the Oregon State University Extension Family and Community Health program, jumping from an average of one intern per year to nine (K. Elliott, personal communication, January 19, 2018). This increase may be attributed in part to college-level initiatives to incorporate a variety of experiential learning opportunities into the classroom, nurture relationships between campus and field faculty through structured in-person and virtual meetings, and recruit public health practitioners into Extension faculty positions (Braverman, et al., 2014; Oregon State University, 2012). Additionally, there are dedicated internship coordinators for each of the undergraduate and graduate programs, a required capstone experience, and a required preinternship seminar for undergraduates.

Marketing experiential learning opportunities is also important to ensure that positions are filled. Marketing can highlight Extension programs and encourage students to reach out to a site. County-based and campus faculty can work together to advertise the opportunity through social media, electronic mailing lists, office binders, websites, and guest speakers/panelists in classes. In addition, offering housing and stipends can reduce the financial barriers to participating in off-site experiential learning opportunities. Lastly, the Oregon State University undergraduate and graduate public health internship coordinators have manuals that can be used to help address internship-related issues, such as workplace attire, office policies, and schedules (the undergraduate manual is available online at https://health.oregonstate.edu/sites/health.oregonstate.edu/files/h410-internship-manual_.pdf).

Additional best practices by timeframe are described in Table 2.

Table 2.

Best Practices for Engaging College Students in Experiential Learning within Extension

Time frame	Student	Extension county-based faculty	On-campus faculty supervisor/coordinator
Beginning of project or internship	Research the specific Extension site and projects. Establish specific professional goals for experiential learning opportunity.	Meet with student to discuss the learning opportunity and whether it will be a good fit. Develop goals, objectives, and a plan with the student for meaningful	Provide student with Extension office contacts. Discuss with site supervisor the program expectations, open channel of communication, and

Have a clear understanding of professional interests.

Have a realistic assessment of personal ideal work environment.

Develop a written agreement of understanding of the experience.

Provide student and site supervisor with clear instructions, requirements for the learning opportunity, objectives, and project ideas.

During project or internship

Demonstrate strong written and verbal communication skills.

Be proactive, ask questions, and provide input on projects.

Demonstrate professionalism at the Extension site and in the community.

Have a clear sense of strengths and weaknesses.

Show initiative and potential to learn new skills.

Seek out leadership opportunities (e.g., leading meetings or special projects).

Provide initial orientation and weekly student/site meetings.

Display and encourage professionalism.

Offer diverse opportunities for the student (e.g., job shadows, coalition meetings, trainings).

Encourage student to enhance leadership skills through various activities.

Encourage student to participate in presentations and community meetings.

Provide feedback on performance.

Conduct exit interview with student.

Provide and promote ways for student to enhance his or her skills and leadership.

Discuss and reinforce professional practices with student and site supervisor, including conflict resolution skills.

Encourage student participation in professional development opportunities; provide suggestions.

Provide an evaluation for the site supervisor and student to complete both separately and together.

After project or internship

Keep in touch with the site supervisor.

Explore opportunities throughout academic career.

Add student to electronic mailing lists.

Keep site supervisor and student informed of any successes achieved from student's work (e.g., grant funded, project plan implemented, evaluation tool used).

Stay in touch with Extension faculty.

Share upcoming trainings, class assignments, and activities with Extension faculty.

Seek feedback.

Conclusion

Experiential learning will continue to increase due to student demand for electives that increase student learning, skills, and employment opportunities. Using a continuum of experiential learning opportunities in combination with best practices to match the needs and time constraints of both the student and Extension faculty will facilitate success. Extension faculty are encouraged to use and adapt the continuum and best practices to suit their program needs.

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