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Collaborative Community Engagement: Experiential Learning Opportunities for College Students via Extension

Abstract

Extension is known for developing practical applications through research and demonstration of new and improved practices that positively affect end users. However, Extension has much to offer to all learners, including matriculated students, through experiential learning opportunities. A successful multidisciplinary effort involved students, faculty, and stakeholders in engaging communities as equal partners in determining issues and developing solutions. The students (many for the first time) experienced firsthand the power of engaging with communities and being a part of solutions. Engagement is fully realized and most successful when reciprocity is an everyday practice.

Keywords: [experiential learning](#), [engagement](#), [students](#), [reciprocity](#), [community problems](#)

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Introduction

Experiential learning is critical to student success as it encourages students to apply course concepts to actual problems in the field, thus increasing their skills and value to potential employers upon graduation. National studies have shown that students who have engaged in some form of experiential learning have increased graduation and retention rates and improved academic performance (Kuh, 2008); experience cognitive, moral, and psychosocial growth (Eyler & Giles, 1999); and have growth in interpersonal skills, confidence, self-efficacy, moral reasoning, and personal and social responsibility (Eyler, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999). At Oregon State University, the role of experiential learning in student success is readily apparent (Table 1). On average, 6-year graduation rates from 2004 to 2007 increased by 19% for students who had had one experiential learning experience and 27% for those who had had two or more such experiences (Oregon State University Office of Institutional Research, 2017).

Table 1.

Experiential Learning and Its Effect on 6-Year Graduation Rates at Oregon State University
(2004–2007)

Multiple experiential learning

Period	One experiential learning experience			experiences		
	No. of students	Graduating	% increase in 6-year graduation rates ^a	No. of students	Graduating	% increase in 6-year graduation rates ^a
2004	725	509	10%	47	39	23%
2005	1,328	1,067	19%	151	128	24%
2006	1,909	1,606	24%	251	234	33%
2007	2,339	1,942	22%	329	298	30%

Note. Experiential learning = undergraduate research, service learning, internships, study abroad. Data reflect only experiential learning recorded on student transcripts as a credit-bearing activity; more students participate in experiential learning annually without credit than are reflected in these data.
^aComparison of students having experiential learning experience to those not having experiential learning experience.

By its nature, experiential learning often involves many forms of community engagement, and Extension uses community engagement to design and deliver programs on a daily basis. Torock (2009) provided a five-stage process by which Extension educators can use experiential learning as a way to improve program design and delivery. These stages—focus, action, support, feedback, and reflection—parallel the best practices for experiential learning established by the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) (National Society for Experiential Education, 2013). Non-Extension faculty also can blend Extension outputs and outcomes, such as impact statements, case studies, jointly coauthored student papers, or Extension-related internships, into their university courses to engage students in Extension-based experiential learning practices (Curtis & Mahon, 2010).

The idea for the collaborative community engagement project described here arose from the knowledge that Extension, as the most engaged mission of the land-grant university system, has much to offer in terms of experiential and service learning opportunities for university students. In many cases, off-campus Extension faculty routinely conduct needs assessments and help communities solve pressing problems. Without adding more to their workloads, these educators may be able to host students who could learn how to engage in and help with the processes of assessing and solving community issues. Having extensive Extension and experiential learning expertise, we set out to develop, test, and implement this approach to facilitating experiential learning.

Experiential Learning Projects

Every year, the College of Agricultural Sciences at Oregon State University offers a 1-year noncredit leadership academy course in which students evaluate their leadership strengths and areas for growth as well as set goals for long- and short-term leadership development. The academy requires students to connect their academic coursework to leadership in the field. In fall 2016, a multidisciplinary team of on- and off-campus faculty requested that field-based Extension faculty submit proposals for projects in which they were directly engaging community members to solve a problem and were willing to have students participate in the process. Nine

proposals were received. These were provided to the academy course students, who discussed the options and selected specific projects they would like to be involved in as individuals or teams. Students were directed to choose projects for which they would be comfortable applying the four types of reflection the NSEE has adopted as critical for student learning: continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996). The students chose two projects and self-identified the group to take on each project. The two projects were the *juntos* program (audience: community parents and students) and the agritourism program (audience: farmers). *Juntos* means "together" in Spanish; the *juntos* program worked to empower families around education and provide them with knowledge, skills, and resources for helping school-aged family members complete high school and gain access to college. The agritourism project related to activities on working agricultural enterprises that provide enjoyment for visitors and, in turn, generate supplemental income for the enterprises.

Extension faculty whose projects were selected were invited to present to the students the requirements of the projects and describe what the students' roles would be. With funding provided by the university, the students worked with Extension faculty to schedule one-on-one sessions with community members and received training on how to engage diverse community members. The students set specific schedules to travel and interact with stakeholders, listen, plan, and learn together with the community in solving specific problems. They devised methods of engagement with stakeholders that involved online, phone, and face-to-face contact and arranged on-site trips. Toward the end of the term, the students invited the community members they worked with to campus as a way to show the community members their learning environment and assist the community members in learning from them—further contributing to cocreation of knowledge and reciprocal engagement (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012). The students presented posters and listening sessions to campus communities (students, administrators, and faculty) to communicate what they had learned and reflect on the overall engagement process. They also discussed obstacles they faced and described ways they overcame problems.

Outcomes/Impacts

Student presentations highlighted learning outcomes and how those outcomes had affected the students' lives, their career choices, and the communities they worked in. The students experienced firsthand the power of engaging with communities and being part of solutions. Their experiences exhibited a transformation in understanding how Extension works. For example, they helped underserved students understand financial aid and scholarship processes and posed important questions to farmers to consider, questions Extension faculty had not thought to ask.

Outcomes from the project suggest many opportunities and implications for Extension. Long term, students are one of our regularly underserved audiences. By involving them in our programs, we foster their learning but also help expand our influence and outreach to communities. Likewise, Extension educators can formatively apply the four types of experiential learning reflection—continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized—to create effective programs that resonate with their audiences. A limiting factor for implementing experiential learning opportunities in Extension is funding, either in the form of stipends or housing or both. Although students in our project were not paid stipends or housed, the funds they did receive from the university helped them afford transportation, food, supplies, meeting rooms, and meals for the groups they were engaging.

Beyond the previously mentioned advantages, a project such as ours offers some unique benefits to Extension. Arguably, stories of students and communities using this approach and achieving positive outcomes can be applied as means for seeking funding to support student engagement through Extension. Furthermore, funding

opportunities also can come through program fees, donations, and direct investments by universities to make such endeavors a priority for future Extension programs.

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