

Experienced Based Learning/Innovative Curriculum
Strategic Planning Task Force
Jan 2008

Executive Summary:

There is widespread agreement on the value of experiential learning, of using the information we receive to create a plan or idea, then testing what we have created by actual physical action. Our students, past and present, overwhelmingly view experiential learning, especially when connected to faculty and their research, as attractive and important. Although the term “experiential learning” has become tainted for some faculty, they have clearly demonstrated the value they place on actively applying disciplinary knowledge and skills. Faculty have made enormous investments of time and effort in senior capstones, undergraduate research, and many other forms of learning beyond the traditional lecture or discussion course. This reflects a value increasingly shared by the wider community of research universities, as well as those who rank universities.

There is already considerable experiential learning taking place at Case, both on campus and through off-campus experiences. Recent Case initiatives and plans (e.g. PCUEL, SAGES) have embraced both the richness of opportunity and the widespread acknowledgement of the value of experiential learning. This is true both in the classroom setting as well as through out-of-classroom educational experiences (for example involvement in research and scholarship, internships, co-op, and community service learning). These plans have emphasized increasing the availability of such non-course experiences and the expectation of student participation (for example, senior capstones). These seem to reflect a shift to place greater value and emphasis on these types of learning experiences.

The members of the task force are of a consensus that it is both valuable and strategic to continue to emphasize the value of experience-based learning, indeed to make it ever more ubiquitous by creating expectations (if not further requirements) of students, by fostering a culture in which students expect and demand it of faculty, and by rewarding faculty who enrich the learning culture through innovation and excellence. Experience-based learning and curricular innovations should be unquestioned parts of Case Western culture and hallmarks of the Case Western college experience, as they are hallmarks of some of our professional education programs. Moreover, our students and alumni tell us the same thing. They looked for experiential learning when deciding where to apply. They seek out opportunities to do research, to connect with faculty, and especially to connect what they are learning through the “formal curriculum” to real problems and questions – whether that is scholarly research, the poverty and health of our neighbors, the warming of our climate, or the challenges of a globalizing society.

In order for experiential learning to become a distinguishing feature of Case Western it must become ubiquitous and celebrated in all disciplines. It should be disciplinary, and also multi- and inter-disciplinary. It should begin in the first semester of freshman year and extend through

graduation. It should come in great variety from brief in-class vignettes to multi-year projects and extended off-campus or out-of-country engagements. It should be exciting and dynamic. Fostering learning-by-doing must become a focus of faculty innovation alongside, and where possible, synergistic with faculty research. The term the task force often used was Doing-the-Discipline to reflect the desired strong connection between experiential learning and disciplinary literacy. At the same time we must figure out how to let our students loose on the world, equipped with a broad array of skills and knowledge, to demonstrate their creativity, their leadership and their willingness to engage with society.

The good news is that we are already doing many of the things we want to do. Moreover, this is a great place to do them. In every direction there are natural partners and settings – the cultural institutions of University Circle, the medical research centers, the science and history museums, the lamentably impoverished city, its neighborhoods and schools, the natural environments. Few if any other research universities can claim such richness and diversity of resources and opportunities.

Toward achieving the goals we have set out the task force presents the following among its recommendations:

- Provide significant resources for the development of learning experiences, across a spectrum of settings, formats and structures that includes traditional courses but is not limited to them, but that is nonetheless wherever possible connected to curriculum. Such resources should include salary and administrative support for faculty and staff engaged in such innovation, including the possibility of leave similar to research sabbaticals but focused on teaching.
- Make innovation and excellence in teaching, particularly when aligned with the goal of making experiential learning increasingly pervasive, significant factors in merit-based salary increases.
- Establish a Center for the Learning Experience, perhaps incorporating UCITE and SOURCE, to act as an incubator, facilitator and promoter of innovation and excellence in teaching and learning, and to provide the infrastructure to support the level of activity which distinctiveness will require, and excellence demand.
- Make a commitment to excellence in education and an interest in educational innovation significant criteria in faculty hiring especially when recruiting senior faculty and senior academic administrators (Deans, Provost and their direct reports)
- Provide salary support for faculty outside the traditional undergraduate college and schools to participate in this endeavor.
- Make the support of these goals a cross-cutting priority of the capital campaign.

It is vital that the process of achieving the goal of increasing the extent and intensity of experiential learning be placed in the context of achieving the research ambitions of the university and its faculty. Creating and maintaining the types of learning experiences that will make Case a destination for its curriculum are more demanding of faculty time than traditional teaching. While we can look to better utilize less research-productive faculty, we should not

seek to build a model that requires a large cadre of faculty who don't engage in research.
More teaching time will require more faculty to do the teaching.