Experiential Learning Across the Curriculum

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As the focus of the next Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) at Georgia State University, we propose to incorporate experiential learning into all degree programs, with the ultimate goal of every student graduating with at least one hands-on, highly relevant, real-world course-based experience. Institutions nationwide are embracing experiential learning opportunities as high-impact practices that broaden student knowledge and skills. On our Atlanta Campus, we emphasize experiential learning through the current Signature Experience initiative (myexperience.gsu.edu). At our Perimeter Campuses, we expanded engaged learning through the QEP that had just been launched prior to consolidation. The effort is feasible, aligns with our Strategic Plan, and contributes to the pipeline that will help our students help themselves to successful academic and professional careers.

Experiential learning is a term that refers to engagement in the age-old process of “learning by doing”. Current conceptualizations of experiential learning have their foundations in modern education theory, laid by John Dewey in the 1930s and described by David Kolb in the 1980s. The central tenet is that knowledge results from a transformative experience, such that the learner has an experience, explicitly reflects on it, abstracts from it, and applies resultant conclusions to new problems. In such a student-centered approach, students are actively engaged in the process of learning.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) describes experiential learning as often implemented through first-year seminars and shared experiences, learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, internships, capstone projects, and more. Experiential learning often prepares undergraduates for future academic programs and professions. According to a 2014 report, 73% of employers “think that requiring college students to complete a significant applied learning project before graduation would improve the quality of their preparation for careers” (Hart Research Associates, 2015:2). In addition, employers say “they are more likely to consider a job candidate who has participated in an internship, senior project, collaborative research project, a field-based project...or a community-based project” (2015:2). As Georgia State strives to prepare students for seamless college to career transitions, increasing experiential learning will provide students with practical, discipline-relevant opportunities to apply knowledge and skills gained to complex urban and global issues. Furthermore, Georgia State aligns with the AAC&U goal to “make excellence inclusive” and prepare college students from diverse backgrounds to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century (Kuh and O'Donnell, 2013). Notably, then, minority students and other underrepresented groups, as well as students aspiring to enter nontraditional professions, have the most to gain from experiential learning (Cantor, 1995) and appear to gain the most. Engaging activities increase student persistence across all groups, but increase likelihood of returning for a second year in college for African Americans by almost 15% (Kuh, 2008). Graduation rates almost
doubled for students engaging in multiple engagement-focused courses, and students from underrepresented minorities cut their achievement gap from 17% to 3% (Kuh and O'Donnell, 2013). These reports suggest that experiential learning is especially appropriate for our minority-majority population at Georgia State. Also, given financial and cultural challenges faced by many of our students, we need to incorporate experiential learning in our required course work, rather than relying on electives or extracurricular offerings. This approach is also supported by a 2013 AAC&U report focused on making high impact practices essential components of undergraduate education, rather than merely optional.

Efforts in experiential learning already exist on all our campuses, making it feasible to infuse them further into all degree programs. Downtown, undergraduate curricular student experiences are structured through the Signature Experience initiative, as well as through co-curricular volunteerism, paid internships, civic engagement, and co-op programs. Over 62% of the 71 majors downtown already have at least one concentration requiring Signature Experience course work, and over 400 courses meet Signature Experience guidelines. Recently established faculty awards and mini-grants recognize and promote enhancement of efforts in offering these courses. Signature Experience initiatives like the Domestic Field Schools (DFS) have already shown remarkable success. For example, a pilot program in 2015 included 133 students in ten DFS courses, of which 93% reported that the experience affirmed academic goals; 97% would take another DFS course; 81% indicated growth in critical thinking or problem-solving skills, and 87% reported improved professional networking skills. Moreover, at the graduate level, courses, accreditation processes, and independent research endeavors all provide the real-world experience that helps to make students job-ready by degree completion, thereby meeting the goals of experiential learning.

On all five Perimeter campuses, the phrase “Engagement Drives GPC Education,” (EDGE) was the title of the last QEP, indicating interest and motivation toward similar strategies to enhance education. Focused on faculty development to enrich courses by adding more active learning (collaborative and problem-based) and community-based learning (service and research), this QEP was established on the interest of faculty to increase student engagement inside and outside the classroom. The first progress report for the QEP already showed increased engagement in restructured courses, improved perceptions of course relevance to careers, and heightened ability of students to connect content to real-world issues. Specifically at Clarkston, experiential learning is supported by the Office of Academic Community Engagement, with Mary Elizabeth Tyler-Boucebcie at the helm. These preliminary successes place our institution in good position to launch a comprehensive experiential learning campaign.

Generally a four-pronged approach will address the goal of every student graduating with real-world experience in a course led by a faculty instructor, as described further in the next section. As below, they would address curriculum adjustments, faculty support, student awareness, and program evaluation. Thus, the overall goals of this QEP could include the following:

1) Provide access to experiential learning for all Georgia State students by
incorporating Signature Experience courses into curriculum requirements for all programs of study;
2) Provide faculty with support to design new or adapt existing courses to include experiential learning;
3) Raise student awareness about experience learning opportunities and their potential benefits on academic and career services;
4) Replicate and extend studies from other institutions showing that experiential learning enhances student learning and success.

**Classes, Programs, Activities, Organizational Structures, Etc.**

The classes, programs, activities, and organizational structures for the Signature Experience initiative already exist on our Atlanta Campus. In addition, Perimeter College had launched the EDGE program in 2013, indicating that our Perimeter Campuses are also poised to engage this effort in full force. To reach the goal of all students having access to, if not requirements for, at least one Signature Experience course as part of their curriculum toward on-time graduation, we would need to scale-up from the existing strong foundation. As explored below, four key elements could lead to programmatic success: 1) curriculum adjustments to work toward incorporating Signature Experience courses into all of our concentrations, in all majors, on all campuses; 2) faculty development to encourage buy-in, as well as design, implementation, and evaluation of existing and new Signature Experience courses; 3) a student awareness campaign to pique interest and engender maximal engagement with Signature Experience courses among undergraduate and graduate students from all backgrounds and in all disciplines, and 4) carrying out a comprehensive evaluation plan.

With regard to curriculum adjustments, the first step would be to continue a baseline assessment of courses that already include a Signature Experience component on the Downtown campus and extend that analysis to all Perimeter campuses. Then analysis of majors and concentrations to determine which ones lack Signature Experience offerings would follow. From this needs-assessment, target course goals could be set and faculty development initiatives set in place to address the needs. Another approach to identifying need could mirror the practice in the Perimeter EDGE initiative, which was to target courses with high DFW rates, and work with faculty instructors to include active teaching and learning techniques in those. Likely this goal would launch first and be completed within the first year.

Second, the major responsibility to carry out this QEP would fall to faculty instructors, who would therefore need full support and pedagogical resources to make it successful. Minimizing barriers to developing and sustaining Signature Experience courses could take the form of discipline-specific workshops and working groups to share best practices for adopting and evaluating engaged learning practices, such as those already offered on a small scale in the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Supporting heightened investments of time and effort could take the form of careful scheduling to allow focus on new Signature Experience courses when they launch,
especially the first time. Faculty who are already successful in these domains should be recognized (e.g. awards, departmental accolades, opportunities for co-authorship on publications), and perhaps tapped as leaders in offering the discipline-specific workshops. Opportunities for financial support should be sought whenever possible, e.g. education and training grants that include curriculum design or assessment, etc. These activities could launch immediately, based on baseline information already available on all campuses, but likely could be the main focus in years 2 and 3 of the QEP period.

Third, with regard to student awareness, a strong campaign could start with Academic Advisors. We have already offered several advisor workshops to elevate their awareness of the Signature Experience initiative, have added notes about Signature Experience courses into the Academic Guides they use to help students with course planning, and added notes into GoSolar course descriptions available to students and advisors. Moreover, advisors report that students respond well to print postcards, faculty recommendations, and integration across courses to share messaging so those strategies should be considered. Emphasizing Signature Experience opportunities and their benefits during freshman orientation programs and in freshman learning communities will help students discover experiential learning earlier in their academic careers. Finally, a social media campaign highlighting faculty, student, and community partnerships in various Signature Experience courses would likely reach a large portion of the target population. Roll out of a student campaign might begin immediately but its long-term effects may not be observable until summative assessments in years 4-5 of the project.

Fourth, in order to evaluate progress in these three areas toward the overall program goals, an evaluation plan would likely include mixed-methods qualitative and quantitative approaches to assessing progress. Surveys already exist both from the Signature Experience initiative downtown and the EDGE QEP at Perimeter for student evaluation of courses and engagement, faculty surveys to assess attitudes and practices, department leader surveys to assess course offerings, and course instructor surveys to look for any legal affairs or risk management concerns. These could readily be adapted for the purposes of this QEP.

Finally in the interests of providing thorough consideration of Signature Experiences as a QEP topic, we offer several pitfalls and limitations. First, setting an assertive goal of 100% of curricula on all our campuses offering at least one Signature Experience course may seem unattainable. Yet even if we make significant progress toward this goal, we serve our students better. And we suspect that the current estimates of numbers and types of courses containing Signature Experiences are low, given current methods of assessment (e.g. electronic surveys of faculty leaders). Also, we cannot create any delays in degree completion as we encourage experiential learning, so including the courses as part of the regular curriculum is the best approach to serving our students maximally. Second, faculty support is imperative in this endeavor. Faculty are the cornerstone to offering Signature Experiences in courses, as they have the knowledge, expertise, leadership, and position to carry out this task. Yet many faculty members already suffer with high workloads and little opportunity for salary raises or
other means of recognition. Thus, workload adjustments, recognition strategies, and means to ease the burden on these key players is highly challenging but critical to success of the initiative. Third, the clear majority of Signature Experience courses on the Atlanta campus to date are at the 3000-4000 level, as are most experiential learning opportunities nationwide. Yet data suggest that the earlier students experience real-world relevance, authentic problem-solving, etc., the fewer times they switch majors and the more quickly they graduate. Thus, concerted effort will need to be made to offer numerous Signature Experience courses at the Perimeter Campuses for early career undergraduates and to add them at the lower course levels downtown. Lastly, of course it would be helpful to provide funds for this initiative, particularly in the area of faculty support. Yet overall this proposal is relatively inexpensive, given that so much of the infrastructure already exists, e.g. a high number of these courses, faculty and staff are already invested, an Office of Special Programs exists downtown and an Office of Academic Community Engagement exists in Clarkston, etc. Moreover, queries of the student data warehouse have already been implemented, providing some critical baseline data and involvement of Institutional Research staff members.

Relevance to GSU Mission and Strategic Plan

Experiential learning is included explicitly in the mission statement of our institution. The updated strategic plan states “Georgia State’s urban campus embraces experiential learning, providing students a wealth of practical experiences in Atlanta, Georgia’s capital and the center of the Southeast’s largest and most internationally connected metropolitan area.” This clear emphasis on the central role of experiential learning in our approach to maximizing academic and career outcomes for our students underscores the opportunity to elevate its position to that of our next QEP. Moreover, the breadth and depth encompassed by the Signature Experience initiative provides a mechanism to address every one of the five Strategic Goals of the university. Most specifically, Goal 1, Initiative 3 places experiential learning in the context of seamless college to career transitions. Additional elements of Goal 1 on becoming a national model for all undergraduates to succeed are addressed by the approaches inherent in experiential learning models that welcome individuals with a wide variety of “learning styles” to excel. Signature Experiences encourage many different forms of experiential learning in the classroom that should be dictated by discipline-specific needs. For graduate students, the focus of Goal 2, experiential learning is the norm, as the curriculum already transitions students into the workplace. With regard to Goal 3 on research, enhancing opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to contribute effectively to faculty research endeavors will occur if we adopt Signature Experiences as the central focus on the next QEP, given that research courses are among our most popular offerings to date already. For Goal 4, note that two categories of Signature Experiences, Arts and Cities, focus on challenges to cities and highlighting the arts and media, which is the focus of this goal. Goal 5 on globalizing the institution is also already encompassed in Signature Experience programming in the research, internship, study abroad and fieldwork courses listed under the Global category. City and Global are two of the six categories of Signature Experience courses, comprising 3 and 12
percent of the courses, respectively, as of 2015. By working with the Global Studies Institute and the newly formed Urban Studies Institute, we can continue to increase the number of global and cities experiential learning opportunities, possibly through the Global and City Scholars Programs or other academic programming. Generally, emphasis on experiential learning for all graduates contributes to all of our strategic goals.

**Research Literature**

**Works Cited**


**References for Further Reading**


Additional Information

Experiential learning can take many forms and address any content area. Therefore, a QEP on experiential learning could fold into its structure numerous other potentially excellent ideas for strategies to enhance our student success, such as global initiatives, digital literacy, service learning, and/or community engagement. Moreover, an experiential learning focus provides immense flexibility for faculty members and administrators to tailor the offerings to suit the needs of their curricula and their students. As defined to date, Signature Experience courses simply require active teaching and learning via sustained non-traditional experiences, with a final product evaluated by a faculty instructor. It is therefore feasible for every program on all our campuses to incorporate such critical teaching and learning styles into all curricula. On the other hand, please note that Signature Experience courses could be the mechanism through which other QEP topics are addressed. Either way experiential learning is good for our institution.