

TEACHING

How Colleges Can Open Powerful Educational Experiences to Everyone

By Shannon Najmabadi | MARCH 12, 2017

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FULLERTON, CALIF.



Courtesy of Sheila Samperio

Sheila Samperio, a student at Cal State Fullerton, poses outside London's British Museum. She used university scholarships and her own savings to fund several "study away" trips.

She explained to her parents that she had spent a semester reading about the history of Vieques, and about social issues that the island's residents face, like limited access to health care. The trip would let her hear firsthand about the subject she'd spent months studying. "I read this," she told them. "Now I want to make sure this is true."

When Sheila Samperio told her parents about an unusual course that included a two-week trip to Puerto Rico, they stared at her blankly. The concept of study abroad was foreign to her father and mother, a day laborer and a housekeeper at the local Hilton hotel.

"Is this really a class?" they asked.

Ms. Samperio, now a fifth-year health-science major here at California State University at Fullerton, is the first in her

What Ms. Samperio described to her parents is a fundamental dynamic that makes experiential learning pedagogically powerful. These opportunities include study-away trips, internships, service learning, fieldwork, and collaborating with faculty members to investigate and answer research questions. Recognized as difference makers for students, these activities deepen learning by connecting the classroom to the broader world. And they are increasingly being championed by institutions looking to prove their value, lure students, and set graduates up for success.

But they are not equally accessible. They're sometimes seen as boutique offerings primarily available to those with the time, financial resources, and contacts to pursue them. Through these experiences, well-off students can get even further ahead of their peers: They gain confidence and a better understanding of their interests, make connections that lead to jobs, and develop skills that can apply to their future workplaces.

Meanwhile, their underrepresented peers, who stand to benefit most from participating, often have constraints of time and money that prevent them from taking part. Some may not even know that these opportunities exist. For those students, experiential learning is what one professor calls the "hidden curriculum."

While experiential learning attracts widespread interest from colleges, the thinking behind it isn't new. It is "the oldest idea in education," says Linda Bachman, director of experiential learning at the University of Georgia. "Learning by doing."

Such opportunities have long been a focus of colleges' undergraduate experiences. Students' study-away trips or fieldwork are proudly displayed in glossy brochures. And many institutions offer scholarships to help subsidize the costs and make the programs more widely accessible. Some institutions, like Elon University, have long required undergraduates to take part in an experiential-learning opportunity.

But the concept has received increased attention in the past decade, especially after the education researcher George D. Kuh published a report in 2008 that named 10 "high-impact practices" with unusually powerful effects on student engagement, retention, and success.

At least half of these activities are often considered experiential, including research, global or community-based learning, and internships. The others include classroom-based practices like writing-intensive courses and collaborative projects. Done right, they all involve faculty feedback and reflection from the student.

Since the report's publication, the acronym "HIP" and overlapping labels like "experiential learning" have become buzzwords. Mr. Kuh's report gave administrators a way to articulate the value of these experiences and argue for them to be encouraged in a systematic way. Now it's not just program directors talking about high-impact practices, Mr. Kuh says, but also system-level administrators and political leaders.

Among the colleges that have given these activities more emphasis are large public institutions like the State University of New York and California State University systems. Georgia has begun requiring its nearly 28,000 undergraduates to participate in at least one experiential-learning opportunity before graduating.

"We want to make sure all of our students have opportunities to connect what they're doing in the classroom to what they want to do with their lives beyond graduation, personally and professionally," Ms. Bachman says of the new requirement. "We know that students get more deeply engaged with what they're learning when they have a hands-on opportunity to practice."

Despite the heightened interest, first-generation, minority, and older students engage in these activities at lower rates than their peers do, according to data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, known as Nessie.

Nessie data from 2016 show that 68 percent of non-first-generation students participated in at least two high-impact practices by graduation, while 55 percent of first-generation students did. The difference is similar for black and Hispanic students, 55 percent of whom will participate in two HIPs compared with 63 percent of white students.

But it's the students in those demographics who reap the most gains from participating. While all students benefit, members of underrepresented groups show improvements in academic performance and persistence at rates that often surpass those of their peers.

There are many reasons that students don't participate in experiential learning. Cost is one of them. Students paying their own way through college or supporting other family members may rule out spending a semester in Europe or taking an unpaid internship. The amount of time these experiences take can also be prohibitive to those who are majoring in programs with strict requirements, who are on athletic teams, or who care for younger siblings, elder relatives, or children. Minority students, in particular, may be deterred by the fact that those who do participate in experiential learning tend to be less diverse, which can lead to feelings of alienation.

Many administrators have made the costs of experiential learning a focus of fund raising and private alumni gifts. "For students to participate in these opportunities," says Su Swarat, director of assessment and educational effectiveness at Fullerton, institutions "have to help them financially or make time arrangements."

At some institutions, that help can be considerable.

Sarah Saba is a piano-performance major who is also on the pre-med track at Furman University. Last year she was one of two students chosen from almost a hundred applicants for a campus fellowship that gave her funding and career

guidance to take on a summer internship in New York City. The South Carolina institution has made experiences like that a cornerstone of a \$47-million effort to distinguish itself, and its students, in the higher-education landscape.

Ms. Saba received help from alumni and administrators in revising her résumé, finding an internship, and preparing for interviews. Furman also supported her with an \$8,000 stipend to cover travel, housing, and living expenses for 10 weeks.

By the summer, she'd accepted a position with the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation and was connected to mentors who checked in with her frequently. "I was over the moon," she says. A news release from the university pictured her sightseeing in a kayak and attending the Broadway musical *Wicked*. She also practiced piano with a professor at Juilliard.

Without the program, Ms. Saba says, her efforts to apply for an internship in New York City — never mind paying to live there for two and a half months — "would have been a complete failure."

Ms. Samperio, of Fullerton, also received university funding for an experiential-learning opportunity, but her path was markedly different.

She stitched together scholarships and savings to go on faculty-led trips to Puerto Rico and Mexico, study abroad in Wales, and conduct research in Thailand. She tutored for \$11.50 an hour, and she often parked her car far from campus to save the few hundred dollars that an on-campus permit costs.

Fullerton has made a push to increase student access to experiential-learning opportunities, especially for those who are typically underrepresented in these programs.

Nearly one-third of undergraduates there are the first in their family to attend college, and the university is the second in the nation in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanics. When Fullerton rolled out a strategic plan in 2013, it named

narrowing "the achievement gap for underrepresented students" as one of its goals. The plan noted the positive effect that high-impact practices have on student engagement, retention, and graduation rates, and aimed to increase by 25 percent the number of students participating in experiential learning before 2019.

High-impact practices within the classroom have been a focus at Fullerton. But the campus has also expanded its experiential-learning offerings and found ways to accommodate students with various constraints. Short service-learning trips abroad, like the ones Ms. Samperio went on, are the "new and shiny thing that students are loving," says Dawn Macy, director of the Center for Internships and Community Engagement at Fullerton. Those programs fill a niche for those who want to do a study-abroad program but can't commit the time or money that a semester away entails.

Even on a campus committed to increasing access, like Fullerton, faculty members play a key role in guiding students to these opportunities. Finances and time are barriers. But many administrators say some students don't participate because they aren't aware of the activities or don't see value in doing so.

This is where professors can step in. At Fullerton, Ms. Macy says, some faculty members have taken a "holistic approach to helping students." They tell students about experiential-learning opportunities years in advance, help them budget, even assuage parents taken aback by the prospect of an adult child traveling abroad without family.

Ms. Macy's center will sometimes lead "Lunch and Learns" for faculty members to exchange tips about how to bring experiential-learning components into their courses. And, she says, no professor's presentation at these lunches sparks more curiosity than the one done by Julián Jefferies.

r. Jefferies, an assistant professor of literacy and reading education who leads two-week



Alicia Afshar for The Chronicle

Julián Jefferies, an education professor at Cal State Fullerton, helps students prepare for short study-abroad trips, including raising money and winning over their parents.

courses are held. It's a chance for parents, siblings, and grandparents to meet him and pepper him with questions: Will the students be supervised? How does this relate to what they're learning? How can we reach them when they're away?

Mr. Jefferies helps families think through what to do if the student is a family caregiver. He talks with parents reluctant to send an adult child, particularly a female, abroad alone.

"He really troubleshoots and does it in on a family level," Ms. Macy says.

During the semester, Mr. Jefferies helps students set up GoFundMe accounts, raise money, and develop monthly budgets. He guides them through the study-abroad process, down to reminding them to write thank-you cards to anyone who helps sponsor their travel.

On a brisk evening in February, Mr. Jefferies began his third-year class by lightly clasping his hands together and saying, "I bought the tickets." The 15 students, clustered around hexagonal tables, made soft cheering and whooping noises. In May

M trips abroad, gets more involved in the lives of his students than most of his peers do.

While cash is an impediment for some students, he says, it's not the chief barrier to participating in things like study abroad. The more entrenched obstacle is one of culture.

Before trips, he'll often invite students and their family members to a potluck in the large, windowless classroom where his

the group will fly to Puerto Rico to do research and work with students at a local university, as Ms. Samperio did two years ago.

"This feels so surreal," a female student said.



Blanca Rojas

Luis Castro, one of Mr. Jefferies's students, interviews a resident in Vieques, Puerto Rico.

Mr. Jefferies is a champion of these experiences, and he repeatedly praises the support he gets from Ms. Macy and others. But he's blunt about the fact that these programs require extra work from faculty members. In an interview in late February, he said he'd been in a "bureaucratic haze" over planning the Puerto Rico trip, figuring out insurance, signing travel requests, and sending barrages of emails.

More critical than coordinating logistics, though, is the mentorship Mr. Jefferies provides students. He leads a learning community for first-generation students and teaches a course at every grade level so they can stay with him all four years, as Ms. Samperio did. He will engage in freewheeling conversations about their goals outside whatever course he happens to be teaching them.

Starting freshman year, Mr. Jefferies impresses on his students that experiential learning is something that's valued by employers, and that college is "not just about getting good grades in your classes," he says. Internships, study abroad, and research are part of what he calls a "hidden curriculum," one his students often don't know how to navigate.

"No one tells you that you should have an internship, that you should study abroad," he says. "You don't learn in class how to do a CV."

Making experiential-learning opportunities successful demands a substantial commitment of faculty time and resources. And so it may seem that smaller institutions, with lower student-faculty ratios, have an inherent advantage. But there doesn't have to be a trade-off between scale and quality, says Jillian Kinzie, associate director of the National Survey of Student Engagement Institute, at Indiana University at Bloomington.

Colleges are best served when they offer opportunities that align with the ethos of their campuses, she says. Buy-in from faculty members and administrators is greater when proposals conform to the institution's mission, and it can lessen the lift needed to get students involved. A vocational college can focus on internships or fieldwork; a university with a philanthropic bent may find the most success with its service-learning programs.

Rather than start an experiential-learning "arms race" with other institutions, Ms. Kinzie says, colleges should focus on equity of access and the quality of the activities they do offer.

It helps to be intentional: to create a thoughtful definition of what experiential learning is, and to collect data to ensure that students are indeed benefiting from it. At the University of Georgia, where experiential learning is now required, administrators plan to use some of the preliminary numbers they've collected to spot patterns and close resource gaps. Once there's data, decision-makers can say, "Ah, we see that, for instance, humanities students might benefit from more internship opportunities," says Ms. Bachman. "Or we definitely need more support for study abroad that aligns with the STEM disciplines."

Resource-strapped institutions may find that the most effective way to deliver the benefits of experiential learning is to embed them in the everyday college experience. Mr. Kuh, whose 2008 report listed 10 sample activities, says athletics and on-campus jobs can be designed in a high-impact way. Interaction with peers and faculty

members, and opportunities to make meaning of the experience, should be built in. Athletic teams can re-examine their coaching philosophy, for example, and work-study students can be prompted to reflect on how to transfer classroom knowledge to the job.

Fullerton has taken this vein of thinking a step further. They've brought features of high-impact activities into large introductory courses, and they track the time students spend doing each.

Professors in those courses have amplified or created ways for students to do fieldwork, receive feedback, go to office hours, or do other practices deemed to have a positive impact on student success. Administrators at Fullerton say the effect on students' learning has been powerful.

"Instead of changing their path into the high-impact practices," says Amir Dabirian, Fullerton's vice president for information technology, "we put the high-impact practice in their path."

One wall of his seventh-floor office is covered in neat notes about which courses have brought high-impact practices into the curriculum; he calls it the "Wall of HIPs." He and others say this approach lets students encounter these practices earlier than they would in an internship or study abroad, which typically happen in junior or senior years.

Fullerton has found that having students participate in high-impact practices has helped increase the graduation rate and lessen the achievement gap between underrepresented students and their peers.

Still, "it's a long-term plan," Mr. Jefferies says. Colleges must cater to the student body they have and "can't just throw money at this issue."

Mr. Jefferies admits that he gets worn down by the work and is happy to be taking a sabbatical next year. But he adds that the benefit of these experiences for students makes the effort worth it.

"I'm giving them explicit cultural capital," he says, "and I'll keep on doing it."

Shannon Najmabadi writes about teaching, learning, the curriculum, and educational quality.

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