

Discussion Paper: Engage All Students in Meaningful Experiential Learning For Consideration and Discussion

1 Purpose

Experiential Learning (EL) has long been in our sights as an institutional focus and viewed as a valuable component to a student's educational journey. This awareness is recognized in the development of the new StFX Student Experience and Opportunity Plan, which emphasizes the importance of EL as foundational to wholistic student success and well-being. The priorities presented in this document are informed by campus consultations throughout 2021-22, an environmental scan of EL at post-secondary institutions in Canada, and examining of best practices in EL.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to:

- Determine the state of play within StFX with regard to experiential and co-curricular learning.
- Explore best practices for EL at Canadian post-secondary institutions.
- Articulate a proposed approach to providing meaningful experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities for all StFX students, which include: (1) Ensure high-quality EL; (2) Expand Capacity and Reduce Barriers; (3) Scaffold Intentional Learning Experiences; and (4) Create and Maintain a Common Tool for Sharing Experiences.

2 What is Experiential and Co-Curricular Learning?

Sample Definitions

- Experiential learning is an approach that educators use to intentionally connect learners with practical experiences that include guided reflection. EL allows learners to: increase and apply disciplinary knowledge, develop transferable skills, clarify interests and values, strengthen career engagement and employability, and collaborate meaningfully with communities (Western University).
- A pedagogical practice whereby students gain new knowledge, skills and abilities due to the intentional application of classroom learning in a workplace or simulated workplace setting. Experiential learning opportunities are grounded in an intentional learning cycle and clearly defined learning outcomes. They engage students actively in creating knowledge and critically reflecting on their experiences, allowing them to understand how to transfer their knowledge and skills to future endeavors (University of Guelph).
- Experiential education is a philosophy and method that includes a variety of approaches in which educators intentionally engage with learners using direct and authentic or real experiences and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values and develop learners' capacities to contribute to their professions and communities. Experiential education connects UNB with our communities, helps create strong partnerships, and helps solve problems in creative and innovative ways (University of New Brunswick)

Common Elements

- Combines direct experience with focused reflection
- Builds on past knowledge and experiences
- Requires active involvement in meaning construction
- Encourages collaboration and exchange of ideas and perspectives
- Can take place in the classroom, in the community, or in the workplace

Definitions for StFX

Experiential learning occurs both inside and outside the classroom. It is defined as learning in which students apply knowledge and skills in authentic contexts. This type of learning requires preparation, experiences and guided reflection that challenges students to make meaning from their experiences. As such, EL empowers learners to enhance individual and collaborative skills such as critical thinking, adaptable problem-solving, and community building.

By engaging in EL at StFX, students will be able to articulate the knowledge they acquire through non-academic engagement; learning that expands their adaptability for the future of work, skills that empower them to define their unique pathway for individual success, and values that demonstrate social responsibility. In so doing, experiential and co-curricular learning will prepare students to take on roles as active citizens and flourish in an increasingly complex world.

For Consideration/Discussion: Developing a robust and representative definition of experiential and co-curricular learning at StFX will require alignment between curricular and co-curricular learning experiences. What partners and collaborators should engage in developing a common definition and approach to experiential and co-curricular learning at StFX?

3 What We Have Heard

In Fall 2021, the StFX Senate Quality of Life Committee hosted a series of campus-wide consultation sessions to inform the StFX Student Experience and Opportunity Plan. To facilitate deeper and more diverse connections across the campus community, providing meaningful experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities for all students emerged as a strategic priority. Recommendations included:

- Articulate common learning goals across all experiential and co-curricular learning experiences.
- Frontload experiential learning opportunities in first year, with opportunities for students to scaffold learning and engagement through all programs and years of study.
- Eliminate barriers for students to participate in tailored experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities, including Indigenous, Black, minoritized, 2SLGBTQ+ students, international students, first-generation students and students with disabilities.
- Create intentional student learning and engagement opportunities that meet the unique needs of non-traditional learners, including off-campus students, distance learners, mature students, and student athletes.

- Establish a centrally positioned EL Service “hub” to connect and support EL practitioners, develop resources for educators, students and partners; and amplify the work already happening at StFX.
- Implement a formal mechanism for to track and ensure high-quality learning associated with EL. Consider a Co-Curricular Record/EL Catalogue that captures the curricular and co-curricular learning experiences of all students.

Equity, Access and Inclusion

In 2021, the Presidents’ Advisory Committee on Anti-Racism was convened to examine concerns regarding systemic discrimination and to assist the University in gaining a better understanding of the experiences and concerns of racialized faculty, staff and students. The PACAR Interim Report 1 (October 2021, p.7-8) recommended a series of major categories of action, among which was the need to improve **access and success**:

Identify and address institutional barriers for (Indigenous, Black, and other) racialized students, faculty and staff which affect their sense of belonging, their representation in institutional practices and structures, their academic success, and their overall well-being in classroom and beyond from recruitment through to graduation (PACAR Interim Report 1 (October 2021, p.7-8).

Maximizing the engagement of students from historically-excluded communities can be accomplished by creating a variety of EL options. While some opportunities might be suitably targeted to students from specific historically excluded groups, diversifying the EL options available **to all students** will create additional avenues for students from historically excluded groups to make connections and acquire the skills they need to pursue future career-related opportunities.

4 Experiential and Co-Curricular Learning at StFX

EL at StFX takes many forms, curricular and extra-curricular, both inside and outside of the classroom environment, within the variety of programs represented at StFX and the associated pedagogical approaches that these contexts entail. EL opportunities occur at a range of scales or levels of intensity, from fully immersive research experiences, to project components of a single course, one-time field experiences, and active learning opportunities. The following Table defines and reflects some of curricular and co-curricular EL opportunities offered at StFX (Appendix A for definitions):

Co-Curricular EL	Community Engaged Learning (CEL)	Curriculum-Integrated EL	International Experience	Work Integrated Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Extended Orientation and Transitions Program •Mentorship •Career Preparation •Living-Learning Communities •On-Campus Work Experience •Supported Volunteer Experiences •Clubs and Organizations •Student Government •Student Leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Community-Engaged Projects •Field Experience/Field Placement •Knowledge-keeper guided learning •Service Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Case Studies •Fieldwork •Labs •Pitch Competitions •Simulations •Course-based research •Individual Research Projects •Research Assistanceships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Exchange •Study Abroad •Independent Study Abroad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Co-Op •Internship •Entrepreneurship •Professional/Clinical Practice/Field Experience/Practica •Service Learning •Applied Research Projects •Mandatory Professional Practicums

For Discussion: What kinds of experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities does StFX provide? Does this experiential and co-curricular learning model capture the breadth and variety of experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities available at StFX? What experiences are students having in these programs?

5 Towards an Experiential Learning Framework at StFX

As universities come under increasing pressure to educate students and prepare them for careers, it is imperative that the programs designed to help students – including experiential and co-curricular learning programs – be carefully planned, structured and assessed. If a program is not grounded in a substantive theoretical framework, or lacks sophistication in program design and assessment, the university is investing resources into a program without knowing if it is clearly impacting student success.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks informing the development of the StFX Student Experience and Opportunity Plan, all programs, resources and supports provided by StFX Student Services will be intentionally designed and grounded in the following evidence-informed frameworks to support student success and well-being.

Theory	Key Concepts	Alignment to Proposed Mentorship Program
Cultivate a Flourishing Campus	Cultivate environments that optimize emotional, psychological and social well-	EL will be based on common learning goals that support wholistic student success and

	being; Recognize and focus on the student strengths	well-being across fall factors of flourishing
Support Mental Health as a Continuum	Wellbeing exists on a spectrum; Integrate effective upstream, midstream, and downstream approaches to support wholistic student success.	EL will be intentionally planned to support students as they transition and and through university life
Recognize and Respond to Social Determinants of Health	Apply an intersectional lens; Provide culturally relevant programs and services; Address the specific needs of diverse student populations	Intentional EL opportunities will be designed to support the unique needs of students from historically-excluded groups; Ensuring high-quality EL will require expanding and eliminating barriers to access and opportunity
Promote Agency through Wholistic Student Engagement	Recognize relationship between academic success and quality of life outside the classroom; create personalized pathways to student success	EL will be designed to support common learning goals across curricular and co-curricular learning environments and connect theory and practice
Harness a Developmental and Proactive Approach	Create facilitated and guided transitions; Focus on the first-year experience and intentionally scaffold student learning across all years of study.	EL will be intentionally frontloaded and scaffolded throughout a student's educational journey as they transition in, through and out of university life

Sample Learning Outcomes

All Departments within StFX Student Services will intentionally cultivate student learning across the five factors of flourishing, allowing students to deepen their understanding of their personal strengths, and connecting these strengths to learning opportunities where they gain transferrable skills that will become the drivers for their future careers and lives.

By engaging in experiential and co-curricular learning at StFX, programs will encourage students to:

Be a(n)	By
Critical Thinker	evaluating options for curricular and co-curricular engagement that gives them permission to be curious.
Future-Focused Planner	achieving their objectives by learning to set realistic goals, increasing their motivation toward success.
Adaptable Problem Solver	applying their strengths to remain hopeful as they move through challenge.
Community-Minded	deepening their understanding about their skills, values and beliefs, leading to authentic connections.
Engaged Citizen	understanding the elements of successful collaboration and applying them in their curricular and co-curricular activities.

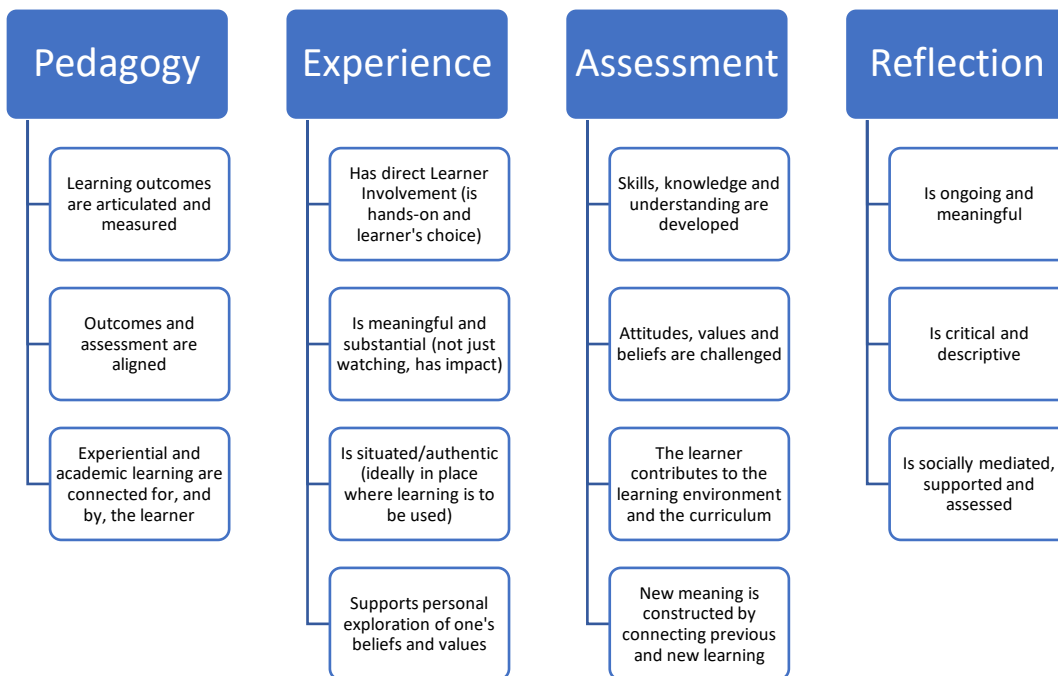
Innovative Leader	leading themselves with integrity while defining their personal vision for the future.
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Note for Discussion: What do we want students to be able to know, do and value as a result of participating in experiential and co-curricular learning?

Proposed Program Structure

A. Ensuring High Quality EL

Drawing on the work of McRae, Pretti & Church (2017), learning activities become EL when they involve all four elements of the Pedagogy, Experience, Assessment, Reflection (PEAR) Framework. This promotes an institution's ability to communicate the value of EL activities, which ultimately increase potential success in funding applications, tracking statistical data, and setting benchmarks for the diverse depth and breadth of EL activities happening across campus.



Key aspects of a quality experience (McRae and Johnston, 2016).

For Discussion: How do we define 'meaningful experiential learning' at StFX? What criteria can we use to determine if a program, event or activity provides a meaningful learning experience?

B. Expand Capacity and Reduce Barriers

Participation rates in experiential learning are currently unevenly distributed, with notable under-representation of international students, first-generation students, Indigenous students, students who self-identify as a member of a historically-excluded group, and students with disabilities. Accordingly, the need to consider the needs of historically excluded students has been identified as a priority in advancing experiential learning for all students (Dunn et al., 2016; Peach et al., 2015). Some of the population-specific barriers are noted below:

- **Barriers for International Students:** Visa regulation, work-culture concerns, English proficiency, limited access to networks, discrimination, and lack of recognition for skills and experience they have developed internationally (Jackson et al., 2017; Tran and Soejatminah, 2017; Wall, Tran and Soejatmina, 2017).
- **Barriers for Indigenous Students:** Subtle and overt racism and discrimination (Gair, Miles, Savage, and Zuchowki, 2015).
- **Barriers for Students from Low Socioeconomic Background:** Financial challenges (e.g., resources for transport, attire, student fees, etc); scheduling challenges due to employment commitments (Cooper et al., 2010).
- **Barriers for Students with Disability:** Perceived capabilities; feeling undervalued or devalued; discrimination; invisible barriers (e.g. anxiety); physical and/or environmental barriers (Cooper et al., 2010).

For Discussion: What barriers prevent students from historically excluded groups from participating in experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities at StFX? How can we advance a more equitable approach so all students can participate in meaningful experiential learning opportunities?

Case Example: International Student Learning and Engagement

A recent article published in *University Affairs* (2021) identifies actions post-secondary institutions can take to increase access and opportunity for international students to participate in programs, services and supports outside the classroom. These include:

- Preparing, facilitating and developing environments where domestic and international students can learn and connect across experiences and cultures.
- Including diverse lived experiences in continuing to innovate cultural intelligence competency development for all staff, students and faculty.
- Sharing data across institutional functions (recruitment and enrolment data, financial aid, academic progress, employment rates) to create, assess and evaluate evidence-based support programs with a goal of continuously improving support for students.
- Collaborate actively between faculty affairs and student affairs to meet international student needs in all aspects of their student life, as well as providing opportunities for students to earn curricular credits, while navigating and learning to succeed.
- Build relationships with students to listen and hear their stories of challenge and success. Create safe ways to source narratives from student leaders and vulnerable students seeking support, as well as students who are not engaged in student success initiatives.

Further Reading:

- [The Future of Internationalization is Outside the Classroom](#) (University Affairs, 2021).

C. Scaffold Intentional Learning Experiences

Learning can be sequenced as a student moves through their educational experience. Effective experiential and co-curricular learning models are built with this in mind. Participants have identified the need for StFX to frontload experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities in first-year, and intentionally scaffold complementary learning experiences through all programs and years of study.

One way in which StFX might accomplish this goal is in the incremental development of common learning outcomes throughout each year of study. The following is an example of how student learning can be sequenced as a student moves through their university experience. [Using Bloom’s Taxonomy](#), we can help students successively develop their knowledge and skills as a student reaches towards graduation.

First Year	Second Year	Third/Fourth Year
Students will develop effective study and time management habits to be successful in daily academic life.	Students will differentiate the needs of successfully prioritize and complete tasks. Students will apply study, time management, and organizational skills dependent on the context of the task.	Students will engage in a cycle of continued evaluation of study, time management and organizational skills to identify areas of improvement and develop new or revised approaches to engage in increasingly complex tasks.

For Discussion: What intentional experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities should be part of the first-year experience? How can we begin to scaffold student learning and engagement through all years of study?

Case Example: Queen's University Major Maps

In 2015, Queen's launched the [Major Maps](#), the first of their kind in Canada. Led by the Career Services team in Student Affairs, the maps were developed in collaboration with faculties and departments, students, and staff from across the university.

Each map lays out a timeline with program information, career options, and job skills tied to each degree program. The maps help students navigate the opportunities available at Queen's by providing advice on academics, extracurricular activities, networking, international opportunities, and career development. Students, advisors, professors, prospective students and their parents have all found the maps to be an indispensable tool for program and career planning.

In addition to their popularity at Queen's, the Major Maps have been recognized across the sector as an innovative resource that has made a real impact in helping students with program choice and career planning.

D. Create and Maintain A Common Tool for Sharing Opportunities

Part of the challenge is that StFX lacks an institution-wide inventory of EL opportunities and partners (and an institution-wide mechanism for collecting reliable data on unique student participation in EL). Relatedly, staff consulted remarked that they lacked an understanding of who is doing what and where, and that gaps existed in communication between departments, staff and students with regard to available opportunities. Many participants commented on the siloed nature of this work and the lack of connections and community across units involved with EL.

A new EL platform emerged as a strategic area of focus to manage, track and promote EL opportunities. This platform must build on our EL framework and allow students to search and apply for diverse experiences related to their personal, academic and professional goals. It should also provide one central place for community and industry partners to post EL positions. By connecting stakeholders and managing opportunities, a centralized platform will support scaling up EL across campus and assessing high quality EL.

A Co-Curricular Record or Transcript (CCR) is an official document validating a student's achievement and involvement through a specific postsecondary institution's defined cocurricular programming. The CCR provides diverse opportunities for students to develop transferable skills identified to enhance learning, and employability skills beyond what is recognized on the student's academic transcript. Students are encouraged to use their CCR to reflect on, articulate, and showcase these skills to employers.

For Discussion: In addition to creating and maintaining a Co-Curricular Record (CCR)/Experiential Learning Catalogue, what other strategies we could use to engage students in experiential and co-curricular learning opportunities at StFX? Could participation and demonstration of learning be tied to other outcomes or achievements (ex. X-Ring)?

Sample Supporting Actions

To operationalize the priorities identified above, we can start to identify SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) actions. The following provides some sample actions StFX could consider in order to advance the priorities identified above (for consideration and discussion):

Priority 2	SAMPLE ACTIONS
<p><i>Facilitate guided learning opportunities for all students that proactively advance common learning goals across living and learning environments. Cultivate agency by engaging students in the process of discovering their strengths and personalized pathways to success.</i></p>	<p>1. Frontload dedicated co-curricular and experiential learning opportunities in first-year to support student orientation and transition, strengths-based learning and essential skills development</p>
	<p>2. Develop an integrated Experiential and Co-Curricular Learning Framework to scaffold intentional student learning and engagement opportunities through all years of study.</p>
	<p>3. Leverage mentorship to provide student employment opportunities, with a priority for students from historically-excluded groups.</p>
	<p>4. Develop a digital Experiential Learning Catalogue/Co-Curricular Record (CCR) as a tool to help students thoughtfully select co-curricular engagement opportunities, integrate their campuses experiences, communicate the development of skills, and reflect on their development in the areas of meaning and purpose.</p>
	<p>5. Cultivate signature spaces and events on campus that engage alumni, the Antigonish community, students, faculty and staff in spirited and sanctioned events that inspire a sense of connection.</p>
	<p>6. Develop with our partners innovative and creative experiential and co-curricular learning experiences that provide students with a range of transferrable skills that allow them to be agile, adaptable and engaged members of their community.</p>
	<p>7. Enhance and extend our current student leadership programs with increased opportunities for students to gain leadership experiences both at StFX and within the Antigonish community.</p>