



**A Case for Change  
Experiential Education Integration at York University  
Summary and Recommended Actions**

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# **A Case for Change: Experiential Education Integration at York University Summary and Recommended Actions**

## **Background and Current Status of Experiential Education Integration at York**

The Experiential Education Pan-University Work Group established in June 2013, was mandated by the Provost to develop a high level strategy to assist the University leadership in making decisions about embedding experiential approaches in degree programs. Guided by the principles set out by the University Academic Plan (2010-2015) and the direction provided in the White Paper (2010), the Work Group has developed the recommendations in this document to guide the innovative use of EE and advance this institutional priority.

Experiential Education (EE) can be defined as a pedagogical approach that affords students the opportunity to apply theory to a concrete experience in a manner that advances the learning outcomes of a course or program. These learning experiences can occur either within a classroom or within the community and serve as a means by which students can reflect upon their learning, and potentially acquire a deeper understanding of their subject matter. See Appendix A for a compendium of EE strategies and definitions.

Research has shown that the integration of quality EE strategies into curriculum increases student engagement and, in doing so, improves learning. Over the last 15 years a growing body of research has documented various benefits to students who participate in experiential education programs and activities. The impact of embedding EE in a degree program can be realized in three distinct but intersecting categories: (i) academic performance and aspiration – which includes skills and attributes such as engaged learning, improved oral and written skills, higher grade point averages and increased likelihood of attending graduate school; (ii) citizenship – which includes attributes such as awareness of social justice issues, understanding the importance of the public good, working in teams, and exhibiting multicultural competence; and finally (iii) employability – which includes building skills and attributes that enhance students' chances of becoming employed.

Course directors have been increasingly challenged over the years to find ways to actively involve students in their own learning. Many who have been successful in doing so have employed various EE strategies. The opportunity for the course director to link theory to 'real world activities' through, for example, case studies, guest speakers or community placements brings relevance to the subject matter for the students and often a deeper level of learning. The teaching experience is enriched by this higher level of student engagement, increasing the sense of enjoyment and satisfaction for both students and faculty members.

We believe that York has the potential to become a leader in EE. We will be a destination for students who value opportunities to link theory with practice in ways that will enhance their learning and better prepare them for making valuable contributions to society. In pursuing this path, it will be important that the change process we embrace be consistent with York's values, that it focus on quality and uphold academic standards. By investing in experiential education we invest in ourselves – because the benefits of systematically embedding EE strategies into our degree programs extend not only to students, but also to faculty members, community partners and ultimately to the institution as a whole.

## **Current Status of Experiential Education at York University**

York has a long history of delivering experiential education within various Faculties. At York EE has traditionally been associated with professional programs such as Business, Education, Law, Nursing, Social Work, and more recently Engineering through the provision of placement, internship and (future) co-op opportunities. The Faculty of Science has offered internships in computer science for over fifteen years. The School of Nursing alone provides clinical placements for approximately 800 students each year and the Osgoode Law School has received several prestigious awards for the manner in which it has embedded EE in its degree program.

The pioneering efforts of the former Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies as well as the former Faculty of Arts developed and supported various types of EE activity including academic service learning, community based learning and internships. Much of this work now continues in Faculties such as Health and Liberal Arts and Professional Studies.

A recent survey (2011-12) of experiential education at York gives additional insight into the scope of its use across the continuum from in-course learning activities to co-op offerings. In total, surveys were distributed for 3,405 undergraduate courses taught by 1,527 individual faculty members. Responses were received for 1,909 courses or approximately 57% of the total.

The survey results showed that many course directors adopted in-course learning activities (36.4%) such as the use of guest speakers, simulations or case studies but few courses or programs incorporated other community focused (e.g. within-community learning activities, academic community service learning or community based research) or work focused (e.g. placements, internships or cooperative) approaches. Approximately one third (35.9%) did not utilise any form of experiential education. A proportion of course directors (15.2%) utilized some other form of experiential education that did not correspond to the survey.

Although this represents a good start, a more systematic approach is needed in order to transform course learning environments and degree programs. The implementation of EE should be planned, deliberated and coordinated at pan-University and pan-Faculty levels. Moving forward, the programs and courses in which EE will be embedded will be strategically identified. The EE approaches (course focused, community focused or work focused) will be decided based on the best fit with the disciplinary pedagogy, student needs, and interest of community partners, while at the same time being mindful of a faculty member's right to choose instructional methods as per YUFA and CUPE collective agreements. Quality assurance processes will ensure quality course development, along with educational development expertise and resourced support systems to facilitate coordination with and the cooperation of respected community partners.

A significant increase in EE course offerings will require a concomitant increase in support services for development and ongoing maintenance. A concern voiced by many faculty members has been that often they do not have the level of support needed to confidently incorporate EE strategies into their courses. Others are unaware of the support that does exist. Community partners have repeatedly asked for the implementation of a coordinated partnering approach with the University that facilitates access and eliminates duplication of effort. If it is York's desire to grow and institutionalize the use of EE, a well-resourced and deliberate approach to planning and supporting EE will be required.

## A 2018 Vision for Experiential Education at York

The Provostial White Paper and the University Academic Plan have both pointed to an increasing role for EE at York. York has accomplished a great deal in the utilization of EE strategies but in order to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future, our approach to EE must adopt an increasing strategic and systematic focus.

Over the next five years EE must become an integral element of:

- A strong teaching culture that supports teaching innovation and creates an engaging learning experience for students;
- A quality student experience that incorporates a reflective approach linking theory and practice; and
- A value proposition that enhances the reputation of the university and distinguishes York in attracting and retaining students.

Based on the principles above, the EE Work Group has created the following **2018 Vision** for the integration of EE at York.

By 2018 York is emerging as a leader in Experiential Education (EE) in Canada. Colleagues share common language and Faculties have mapped a range of progressive EE strategies into all degree programs. Course Directors feel confident in their knowledge of how EE strategies can be used to deepen learning and engage their students. Students recognize the relevance of their education and appreciate that the institution is responsive to their desire for applied learning environments both in the classroom and within the community-at-large.

The affiliations that York has developed with its community partners are based on mutual respect and shared interests. Community partners have a clear path to connect with interested parties on campus wishing to collaborate. To facilitate this, an advisory committee comprised of both community and York leaders provides guidance on partnership building. As a result, global and local organizations are now actively recruiting York students for a variety of EE opportunities. York's vast alumni network has been incredibly helpful in establishing many longstanding partnerships.

York provides support to its Faculties, students and community partners through a shared service approach. Common administrative, technical and professional development support services for students and faculty are provided centrally, while Faculty-specific customized services are provided locally. Both Faculties and community partners appreciate the sophisticated pan-University relationship management system that has been established to match students with community EE opportunities.

York recognizes and celebrates the innovative work of its faculty, community partners and students. Stories about York's EE accomplishments are frequently showcased in the media enhancing the institution's reputation. Students are choosing York because of its engaging learning environments that link theory to practice. Parents and students recognize that York University provides an

excellent well-rounded education replete with opportunities to apply learning in a variety of workplace settings, better preparing graduates to become thoughtful, productive and involved citizens.

## **Recommended Actions**

What follows are recommended actions that will move us toward the 2018 Vision. This Vision is driven by the desire to create more and better learning environments through the use of experiential education strategies that meet the expectations of new and continuing students in both graduate and undergraduate programs.

*We believe that all students should have at least one exposure to EE while completing their degree programs.*

Once decisions are made by the leadership regarding the broad directions and priorities to be pursued, a business case will be developed outlining the resources and time that will be required for implementation.

### **Recommendation One: Encourage Faculties to develop a strategic approach to embedding EE within degree programs**

Experiential education is a vehicle for deeper and more engaged student learning, and it can satisfy a range of degree level expectations for a program, particularly expectations and outcomes that relate to applications of knowledge, the development of skills and competencies, and the development of autonomy and professional capacity.

The effective implementation of EE strategies requires that students are adequately prepared, whether activities occur inside or outside of the classroom. It is important that Faculty level leadership takes steps to ensure that degree programs contain a sequence of courses that enable students to first develop active learning strategies, and then progress to understanding and appreciating the use of critical reflection skills in deepening their understanding of the subject matter.

#### **Suggested Actions to Support Recommendation One**

- 1.1 Develop prototypes to illustrate the range and types of EE that are most relevant for specific programs.
- 1.2 Assist Faculties with the development of 'road maps' with targets identifying where EE can best serve each degree program. Encourage Faculties and Units to collaborate and strategically select which courses and the number of courses to be transformed.
- 1.3 Establish and communicate broadly a pan-University incentive program for academic units to participate in curricular/course re-design to embed EE.

### **Recommendation Two: Create a unified approach to engaging with all EE stakeholders**

Stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, alumni and community partners, do not currently have the information or support that they need to engage in EE strategies. Infrastructure needs to be built to support all stakeholders in learning about the range of EE opportunities and to ensure that the benefits of EE not only deepen student learning but also enhance community engagement (where appropriate).

Developing a coordinated and collaborative approach among all parties will assist York in better serving student, faculty and community needs in a manner that will positively impact York's reputation.

#### **Suggested Actions to Support Recommendation Two**

- 2.1 Establish a centralized office to provide a coordinated approach to (1) identifying and working with community partners; (2) establishing a database (Client Relations Management) of community contacts; (3) developing standardized tools and frameworks for the administration of partnerships; (4) encouraging alumni engagement and (5) establishing a robust web site that can be accessed by faculty, staff, students, alumni and community partners to provide resource materials and to showcase EE initiatives.
- 2.2 Encourage the hiring of Faculty EE coordinators who will provide oversight for Faculty-specific initiatives, liaise with the central office and community partners, and support faculty members.
- 2.3 Establish an Experiential Education Advisory Group comprised of faculty, staff, students, alumni and community partners which will provide guidance to York in the implementation of its EE Integration Strategy. It is suggested that York alumni have much to contribute to ensuring the success of EE integration and should be involved in a significant manner moving forward.

### **Recommendation Three: Elevating the culture of teaching and learning through Experiential Education**

The implementation of an EE strategy could do much to improve teaching and learning generally by focusing attention on aspects of Quality Assurance such as well-developed course learning outcomes and curricular mapping. Much of the feedback received through the consultation process spoke to the need to create a more positive and supportive environment for teaching development more broadly as well as a role for EE in this culture shift.

#### **Suggested Actions to Support Recommendation Three**

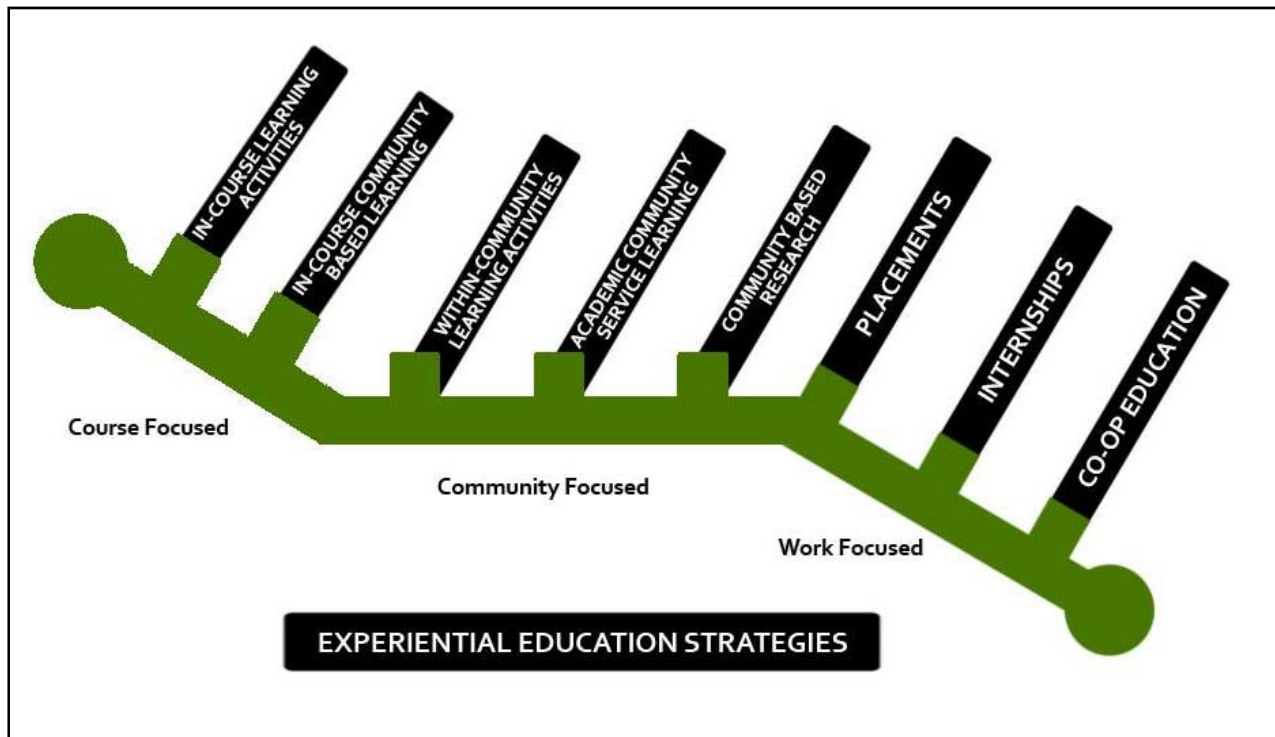
- 3.1 Establish professional development support for full-time and contract faculty members who will be involved in course redesign or creation for the purposes of embedding EE.
- 3.2 Require all *new* faculty members to participate in professional development activities addressing EE in their first year at York.

- 3.3 Ensure that all students understand their EE options and are fully supported in pursuing these opportunities.
- 3.4 Strengthen the importance of teaching (including EE) in the tenure and promotion standards.
- 3.5 Promote the scholarship of teaching and learning by encouraging evaluative research on all EE strategies to measure the impact on student learning outcomes and retention.
- 3.6 Recognize and celebrate EE achievements through events, awards, publications and other venues.
- 3.7 Reduce or eliminate real and perceived barriers to EE adoption by addressing and resolving policy issues associated with such topics as intellectual property, copyright, ethics and associated course fees.

## Appendix A: Establishing a Common Language for Experiential Education

Using a common language to flag the various types of experiential education is important for faculty, students, administrators and community partners so that the various stakeholder groups can talk to each other and understand the range of possibilities that EE can provide to enhance student learning. The following operational definitions have been utilized to facilitate the reading of the discussion paper that informed the consultation process.

The range of EE strategies have been displayed on a continuum which spans those learning approaches that can be used in the classroom to EE strategies that take place in the community. We have likened this continuum of activity to building a subway line where both students and faculty members understand and appreciate the choices they have regarding the types of EE experiences that can be employed. When integrating experiential opportunities within degree programs, care must be taken by administrators and course directors to ensure that students are adequately prepared to engage with experiential opportunities in the community.



### **Course Focused EE: Within the course or classroom**

**In-Course Learning Activities** This experiential education strategy takes place in the classroom/course and allows students to apply theory and course content to concrete experiences that encourage reflection and conceptualization. These concrete experiences include, for example, the use of guest speakers, role playing, skits, case studies, simulations, workshops, and laboratory courses. A variety of in-course learning activities may be integrated throughout the course.

**In-Course Community Based Learning (CBL)**. In-Course Community Based Learning (CBL) is a form of experiential education that is interactive with the community but takes place within



the course or classroom<sup>1</sup>. Community partners<sup>2</sup> are invited into the classroom to present pre-defined problems, questions or areas of research interest. Students work with problems/issues provided by the community partners, applying their developing knowledge and skills and reflecting on how the actual experience relates to or informs their learning. In-course CBL can vary in length, from a brief experience of a few weeks to a maximum that covers the duration of the course.

### ***Community Focused EE: Linking courses to the community***

**Within-Community Learning Activities.** This experiential education strategy offers students opportunities to engage with the community and the world beyond the classroom. Such experiences allow students to connect course material with the context outside the classroom through observation, reflection and practical applications in order to develop a deeper understanding of concepts learned and to perceive their relevance. Examples of such activities include: interviews with professionals in a particular field, participation in community events, observations of lived experiences that correlate with topics under study, and visits and field trips to sites that are of particular relevance for certain disciplines. Within-community learning activities are *for credit* and may be part of the course assessment strategy.

This type of learning activity can also include international experiences such as participation in exchange programs and in York U Abroad courses which offer students the opportunity to explore content and develop skills in a context uniquely suited to stimulate and deepen learning. Under this model, travel to a foreign site and planned excursions and field activities offer students opportunities to learn in an authentic and memorable context in order to deepen learning through guided observation in the new context, reflection on it and practical experimentation. Examples include the learning of foreign languages, the development of intercultural competence, and experience with social and cultural phenomena in authentic settings.

**Academic Community Service Learning (Academic CSL).** This is a form of experiential education where "students engage in activities that address community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote intentional learning goals" ([www.nsee.org](http://www.nsee.org)). Another commonly accepted definition comes from Bringle and Hatcher (1996: 222):

"[A course based], *credit bearing* educational experience in which *students participate in organized service* that meets community needs, and reflect on the service to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic or social responsibility."

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<sup>1</sup> Technology may enable community partners to remotely connect to the classroom (e.g. via Skype etc).

<sup>2</sup> Community partners can refer to small scale local entities from the public or private sector to large scale local, national, trans-national, entities such as corporations, government and non-governmental organizations.

In contrast with Community Based Learning (CBL), where community partners bring the actual problems/issues into the classroom, Academic CSL takes students into the community as part of the learning experience. Students may engage with Academic CSL by providing direct service such as helping at a food bank or by taking on a project defined by a community organization such as assessing how well a given recreational program fits with the developmental needs of toddlers. Again, the real-life situation provides the concrete experience for students to apply their developing knowledge and skills and to deepen their understanding by reflecting on their learning. Academic CSL is often used as a strategy to address not only course-based material but also to help students develop an awareness of the value of civic engagement. Community partners may participate in the evaluation of the students and may benefit from the work of students in the form of service and/or project reports, presentation, or recommendations. The duration of an Academic CSL experience can vary from being very brief, for example, a few weeks to a maximum of the duration of the course (whether the course is a single term of 12 weeks, or two terms of 24 weeks).

*Note: There are forms of Community Service Learning that are co-curricular in nature. They often include volunteering opportunities for students. In these forms, CSL is not-for-credit. For our purposes, we are addressing only academically oriented CSL.*

**Community Based Research (CBR).** Students are given the opportunity to work on a research project that is part of a course and has been co-created and developed through the collaboration of a community partner and a researcher (e.g., course director). In contrast to traditional research on the community, CBR has the characteristic of being community situated. It is: practically relevant to the community; collaborative and action oriented<sup>3</sup>.

The Community Based Research project is normally completed within the duration of a *full-year 6.0 credit course* (i.e., 24 weeks).

### ***Work Focused EE: Skill development in the workplace***

**Placements.** This experiential education strategy permits students to develop competencies and skills in organizational environments that augment the theories/concepts learned in academic course settings. Students engage in activities where they practice the discipline or course specific competencies; *they receive course credit for doing so but (generally) are not paid.* Placements have been associated with but are not restricted to professional programs and are also known as fieldwork or field placements (e.g. Social Work, Communication & Culture, Anthropology, Disaster and Emergency Management), practica (e.g.Nursing) or praxicum (e.g. Law).

Students apply theories and concepts from their course work in a practice-based environment and reflect upon their actions. The placement experience may be full-time or part-time and requires that students periodically return to class to share their experiences and make meaning of their time 'in the field'. Students are evaluated (e.g., report, sponsor evaluation, self-evaluation, etc.) on their placement performance as part of their final grade in the course. The length of placements typically last the entire duration of a course.

**Internships.** Similar to placements and co-ops, internships permit students to develop competencies and skills in organizational environments that augment the theories/concepts

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<sup>3</sup> As indicated by the Center for Community based research (<http://www.communitybasedresearch.ca>)

learned throughout their degree and/or certificate programs. *Internships are (generally) zero credit, paid one-time work assignments.* They may be either full or part-time and are generally associated with academic programs (degrees, diplomas or certificates) that include a practice, service or professionally oriented application.

Internships are supervised experiences in which a student has documented intentional learning goals that are shared by the employer, the faculty supervisor and the student. Learning is assessed via the student creating an end of term work report<sup>4</sup>, which is reviewed by the faculty supervisor, and the employer's evaluation of the student. Students receive a transcript notation - typically a pass/fail is assigned by a faculty supervisor.

Specifically, York Internship Programs are optional and provide students with the opportunity to engage in a four, eight, twelve or sixteen month paid work term after their third year of studies.

**Co-operative Education Programs.** Co-op programs provide students with the opportunity to integrate their classroom learning with hands-on work experience related to their field of study in which they alternate periods of full-time work with their academic terms. According to the Canadian Association for Cooperative Education (CAFCE; <http://www.cafce.ca/en/coop-defined>), a co-op program is one which alternates periods of academic study with periods of work experience in appropriate fields of business, industry, government, social services and the professions in accordance with the following criteria:

- “each work situation is developed and/or approved by the co-operative educational institution as a suitable learning situation;
- the co-operative student is engaged in productive work rather than merely observing;
- the co-operative student receives remuneration for the work performed;
- the co-operative student's progress on the job is monitored by the co-operative educational institution;
- the co-operative student's performance on the job is supervised and evaluated by the student's co-operative employer; and
- time spent in periods of work experience must be at least thirty per cent of the time spent in academic study.”

Co-operative education programs can be *either for credit or zero credit* endeavours, and are generally noted on the transcript and degree. Co-operative student positions are most often 4 to 8 months in duration, with a commitment of 12-16 months in total over the course of the degree. Given the alternating nature, co-operative education programs tend, in most cases, to necessitate alignment with a trimester system.

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<sup>4</sup> Best practices dictate that critical reflection about the concrete activity informs the report.