

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS IN HOMELAND SECURITY: FACILITATING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION COURSEWORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines pedagogical innovations in an asynchronous online homeland security course. Using an experiential learning framework, the authors revised a professional skills course in an undergraduate homeland security program to include career preparation through interview and resume preparation, learning from experts in the field, and online internships. Initial student feedback indicated that the field expertise helped them understand the career requirements and opportunities, particularly when paired with career preparation activities. The paper concludes with a discussion of plans for revisions based on student feedback and applications for pedagogical innovations in related homeland security courses.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the experiential learning incorporated into the online course, *Professional Skills in Homeland Security* (HLSD 280), offered as a core course in Embry Riddle's Homeland Security Bachelor of Science program. Experiential learning, or learning by doing, is a way for learners to understand and retain new information and concepts. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework underpinned the program's learning outcomes. This asynchronous online course prepares students for careers in the homeland security field through experiential learning. In this paper, we first situate the course within the context of the program, department, and institution. Next, we describe the experiential learning components of the course and assessment. The paper concludes by discussing plans for additional experiential learning curricula in Embry Riddle's homeland security program.

INSTITUTIONAL AND PROGRAM BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Department of Security and Emergency Services (SES) at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Worldwide (ERAU) houses the homeland security program as one of the flagship College of Arts and Sciences programs. The university currently enrolls 26,772 undergraduates and 5,936 graduate students, totaling 32,708 students. The worldwide campus is one of three ERAU campuses. The worldwide campus serves 21,935 of those students (16,769 undergraduate and 5,166 graduate students). In addition to the worldwide campus, students at the two additional residential campuses in Daytona Beach, Florida, and Prescott, Arizona, can enroll in the course.

SES offers two bachelor's degrees, Homeland Security and Emergency Services, and two master's degrees, Emergency Services and Human Security & Resilience. The department has seven full-time faculty. Total registration is 1,687 students, with 1,435 undergraduates and 252 graduate students (Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, 2021). ERAU is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges. Census Region 3: South, Division 5, based on the Florida residential campus and applicable to all three campuses.

As a member institution of the Coalition for Life Transformative Education (CLTE), which works to empower students to reach life-transformative outcomes, ERAU requires experiential learning. ERAU's project in experiential learning has been described as "a multi-faceted experiential learning program for second-year students in which participants engage in meaningful, high-impact activities related to their interests supported by faculty, staff, and peers" (Coalition for Life Transformative Education 2022, para. 1).

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The *Professional Skills in Homeland Security* course was developed to facilitate students' experiential learning through core coursework in homeland security. Students learn from high-impact professionals' experiences through interviews, which leads to students securing summer internships. Before applying to our partner organizations, they incorporate their course experiences into their CVs, resumes, cover letters, and mock interviews.

The course equips students with business and professional skills to begin a career in homeland security. The overarching characteristics of homeland security as a profession are introduced via principles of professionalism and individual personality profiles in the homeland security enterprise. A course goal is for students to successfully connect their personality profile results with the relevant characteristics of homeland security careers, thus discovering the career options they are best suited to pursue. Students learn from successful industry professionals' experiences during the class. Upon course completion, students are prepared for internships and careers.

Some students secure internships in the Beyond the Horizon ISSG (a Belgium-based think-and-do tank) by applying their course experiences to their resumes and cover letters and engaging in mock interviews before their actual applications. These students worked as research interns on various security topics and prepared reports and articles under the supervision of experienced experts.

The course has no prerequisites and does not fulfill a general education requirement. The Homeland Security B.S. program began in 2016, and the first iteration of this course was offered in 2017. The delivery format is asynchronous online. The course integrates the program outcome of recognizing the concepts of ethics and professionalism in the homeland security enterprise in an applied way to prepare students for careers in the field.

The department has an Industry Advisory Board comprised of experienced professionals who offer input and feedback about the skills and educational needs of the field. The department is working on expanding the membership to include homeland security experts from the government and private sector as the pandemic effects are beginning to subside. This course is an

essential step in developing these relationships. In addition to mentoring students to help them find an internship that fits their skills, we created a module titled *Learning from the Professionals* to provide students with the most recent job market information from high-level administrators of the largest companies related to this field.

As a worldwide campus serving many military students, this course is a foundational step in preparing students for their careers. This course offers them an opportunity to develop supplementary business and professional skills to begin a career in homeland security in which they learn about ethics, program management, leadership, and professionalism in the field. The course provides students with guidance in identifying agencies and organizations in their region and potential employers' areas of expertise. Thus, instead of placing a student in a traditional on-site internship experience, this offers flexibility to students with significant responsibilities beyond their studies.

Following the first offering of this course, which was modified significantly in January 2022, it is now included among the core courses of the Homeland Security B.S. program. The course is updated and consistent with recent developments in the homeland security area, market needs, and asynchronous online education requirements. To better align with the market needs and the nature of the homeland security discipline as a practice discipline (Ramsay & Tanali, 2018), the course includes more "doing" parts, as stated in Dale's (1969) cone of learning and following Bloom's (1956) educational learning taxonomy. We are aligning with accreditation requirements and preparing for accreditation (Council for the Accreditation of Emergency Management and Homeland Security Education, 2022).

This course and the program are delivered remotely and asynchronously and thus were already adapted for COVID-19. Students did not experience any disruptions. Students applied for online internships, and we conducted online interviews with industry professionals.

COURSE ASSESSMENT

ERAU's Office of Academic Assessment, the program chair, and student feedback are triangulated in assessing the course. The course outcomes include distinguishing between personality types, evaluating conflict resolution strategies used in the workplace, working collaboratively in teams, developing and delivering professional cover letters and resumes for an internship/position, interviewing skills, identifying an internship that matches students' interests and personality types, applying the concepts of ethics in the homeland security enterprise, understanding and utilizing principles of effective program management and leadership, and developing a research plan. Each year, several of the program outcomes are assessed per the annual assessment plan, and adjustments are made accordingly.

The host agency Beyond the Horizon ISSG rates and provides feedback for interns. For example, they offered a "satisfactory" grade for one of our students and informed us that the student's performance and work ethic exceeded their expectations. They also published the student's article in their peer-reviewed journal and gave the student a certificate of accomplishment as well as a little parting gift.

FUTURE PLANS

For the *Professional Skills in Homeland Security* course, there is a plan to extend the network for possible agreements of students' internships in private and governmental settings. Student feedback is collected from end-of-course surveys and will be incorporated into future planning efforts. Also, subsequent development courses of *Emergent Topics in Homeland Security* (HLS 405) and *Critical Thinking in Contemporary Problems* (SSES 110) will include experiential learning for the students.

In the 2022 redevelopment of the *Emergent Topics in Homeland Security* course, students will participate in service learning by participating in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) *Get Involved* projects. Per the DHS webpage, "homeland security starts with hometown security, and everyone—individuals, parents, business owners, and community leaders—has a part to play" (Department of Homeland Security, 2022). Students will work in groups based on their goals and interests and participate in at least two projects they find most interesting. Then, they will explain their planning processes. After completing the tasks, they will share their service learning experiences with other groups.

The *Critical Thinking in Contemporary Problems* course has a direct approach to teaching and applying critical thinking to contemporary problems. Students learn the conceptualization of critical thinking, evaluate the barriers to critical thinking, analyze the ways to develop critical thinking, and apply strategies to develop critical thinking (i.e., asking relevant questions, red teaming techniques). In addition, students will participate in an online co-operative education internship for a one-module topic to experience the critical thinking process of a research center as applied to a contemporary problem, such as the 2022 war in Ukraine.

The *Professional Skills in Homeland Security* course will include professional interviews based on student feedback. We currently include interviews conducted with two professionals. Mr. Adam Montella, Senior Vice President of Planning and Analysis at the Olson Group, Ltd., is an internationally recognized subject matter expert, speaker, and writer on numerous topics relating to emergency management, homeland security, physical security, and supporting technologies. Mr. Mehmet Dagci is an L7 Senior Manager at Amazon. Mr. Dagci is a veteran Navy captain who has planned and practiced exercises and operations under NATO command. After transitioning from military to civilian life, he transferred his work ethic, leadership, and management skills to Amazon. He was rapidly promoted to L7 (equivalent to lieutenant general in military ranks). Adam and Mehmet shared their journeys and evaluations of resumes and cover letters from both job candidates' and recruiter's perspectives.

Student reflections highlight the impact of these experts:

Mr. Montella's interview definitely changed my outlook on feeling limited within the security field. It seems to be much more open than I once thought, which is quite a relief. I, too, will have to work on my cover letter. I feel like it needs some more skills and other information to make my application more enticing.

One of the great takeaways I saw from the professionals was never stopped growing your professional career and education, you can see throughout Adam tells his story that he is growing his profession throughout the years from 9/11 to the now COVID threats, to me, this means you have to stay highly flexible always. He states you have to be a generalist with many different types of skills, not just skilled in one single task.

I have collected a lot of useful information from these professionals.

I enjoyed the videos included in this assignment. I noticed the idea of open-mindedness and flexibility within your field, as well as the true importance of personal growth, which will ultimately be an invaluable tool when it comes to establishing a solid career path. The videos highlight that career options over exceed our original thoughts and opportunities are open in places you maybe originally would not have thought.

As a result of this feedback, additional government professionals will be added to talk with students. This is in addition to the current roster, which includes partners from private companies such as Amazon and The Olson Group, Ltd., and a research center, Beyond the Horizon ISSG.

CONCLUSION

The *Professional Skills in Homeland Security* course was created to facilitate students' experiential learning through core coursework in homeland security. Students valued learning from highly successful professionals' experiences from Amazon and Olson Group Ltd. Course preparation translated into opportunities for students selected for competitive internships at Beyond the Horizon ISSG (a Belgium-based think-and-do tank) and the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency by applying their course experiences to their job search and preparation. Experiential and applied learning are crucial for student success in career goals.

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