BESPOKE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR STUDENTS AND FACULTY ALIKE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the benefits that experiential learning affords both students and organizations where there is sharing and participating in "real world learning." Mount Royal University Calgary, Alberta, seeks to incorporate experiential learning opportunities in most undergraduate degree programs, for example, the Department of Economics, Justice and Policy Studies, and the Department of Child Studies and Social Work. Experiential Service learning is geared toward improving student engagement and leadership. In the summer of 2021, students collaboratively developed a policy paper on how police could improve their capacity to investigate and combat cyber crimes. The policy paper was developed during COVID-19, which required creativity associated with remote learning. Drawing on literature that highlights experiential learning, this paper highlights the experience of students in Justice Policy Studies who benefitted by integrating critical course content and collaborating with community stakeholders.

Keywords: experiential learning, reflection, justice, and policy studies

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INTRODUCTION

Located in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, Mount Royal University (MRU) is a publicly funded undergraduate university primarily serving students from the greater Calgary and surrounding Rocky View County areas. As with all publicly funded post-secondary institutions in Alberta, MRU is regulated under the authority of the Post-Secondary Learning Act, SA 2003, c P-19.5, with its educational programs subject to review and audit by the Campus Alberta Quality Council—the arms-length quality assurance agency tasked with reviewing and recommending Alberta degree programs to the Minister of Advanced Education for approval (Campus Alberta Quality Council [CAQC], 2017).

Data from early 2021 noted that of MRU's nearly 15,000 students, ≈10,500 are full-time, ≈75% are from Calgary, ≈23% are from other regions in Alberta and across Canada (primarily from Western Canada), with only ≈2% being classified as international students (Mount Royal University [MRU], 2021). Nearly 6% of MRU's students self-identified as Indigenous Canadian, which is ≈1% higher than the national average (Statistics Canada, 2018). Specific to staffing,

MRU has ≈1,600 employees, including ≈690 administrative staff, ≈100 managers, along with ≈390 full-time faculty, ≈280 contract (part-time) faculty, and another ≈170 credit-free instructors (MRU 2021a). MRU offers 12 undergraduate degrees through one of its five credit courses along with dozens more credit-free certificates and diplomas provided by its Faculty of Continuing Education and Extension (MRU, 2021).

Six academic departments within the Faculty of Arts offer eight majors, 27 minors, and seven honors programs (MRU, n.d.a; MRUn.d). To graduate from the Bachelor of Arts program or any other undergraduate degree program offered at MRU, students must complete 40 courses (totaling 120 credits), with a typical 48-hour course constituting three credits (MRU, n.d.b). Over half the degree programs at MRU offer experiential learning opportunities, typically involving completing one specialized credit course and a multi-month (commonly 480-hour) intern work position. Though students do not need to be paid for their work as an intern, more often than not, they are. Highlighting the critical role experiential learning plays in student learning is the fact that the Students' Association of Mount Royal University (SAMRU) offers its undergraduate members an "Experiential Learning Fund" that can be drawn on in cases when a student wishes to complete an internship but would be economically challenged if they did not get paid (Students' Association of Mount Royal University [SAMRU], 2022).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN ECONOMICS, JUSTICE, AND POLICY STUDIES

Faculty of Arts students majoring in policy studies must choose to complete either an honors or internship stream for the fourth and final year of their degree. The honors stream requires students to complete a set number of advanced policy studies classes, write an undergraduate thesis, and maintain top-level grades in all coursework. While requiring the same number of credits, students in the internship stream must complete a special internship course and a ≈480-hour internship placement. Though most domestic students have little trouble finding an internship position, this is not true for most international students or students having learning accommodation needs, which was an issue, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. To facilitate these students completing the requirements of the internship stream, ad hoc and bespoke experiential learning programs were piloted during the summers of 2021 and 2022. These programs required policy studies internship students to complete either a policy paper or exploratory research project focused on a contemporary criminal justice challenge supervised by a faculty member from justice studies.

Summer 2021 Pilot Summary

The first summer of the ad hoc and bespoke experiential learning program was in 2021. During this initial period, four policy studies students from the Faculty of Arts and one communications student from the Faculty of Business and Communications Studies participated in the program. Over the summer, these students collaboratively developed a draft policy paper outlining how police could improve their capacity to investigate and combat cybercrimes (MRU, 2021b). Considering this first experiential learning program was initiated and launched within a matter of weeks, with the supervising faculty member needing to develop the learning outcomes and

student assessment from scratch over two weeks, understandable challenges were present; in particular, the students were unsure what was expected of them, how the single major assignment would ultimately result in individual grades, and how they should manage their time.

Notwithstanding the expected challenges experienced during the initial program, the final report completed by the students was comprehensive, well-researched, and creatively designed. Recommendations by the students for greater structure—*especially having a highly detailed course outline that included noted deliverables within a set timeline*—were well received and used to develop the 2022 summer program. To this end, all the students from the 2021 summer program enthusiastically reported that the experience (as disorganized as it was at times), significantly contributed to their overall learning experience (MRU, 2021b).

Summer 2022 Pilot Summary

In the summer of 2022, only one international student from policy studies participated in the program. Reflecting on the experience and feedback from the 2021 program, a detailed course outline articulating the project and an assessment rubric and timeline were provided and reviewed. This student undertook a project examining the feasibility of Calgary Transit implementing body-worn cameras for their public safety officers (peace officers). Because the supervising professor pre-arranged the project with the director of security for Calgary Transit, consultation meetings could be scheduled in advance of the student beginning the project, and the report template was also developed in advance of the program.

The second summer program was significantly improved over the initial delivery in 2021. While it is important to note that the supervising professor provided further attention to the student's learning needs due to their only having to supervise one student, it is suggested that the ease of their second delivery resulted from greater preparedness rather than having fewer students to supervise. To this end, the 2022 project ultimately resulted in the student gaining the opportunity to consult with and present to senior city officials—all of whom expressed how impressed they were with the student and the exploratory report presented to them.

DISCUSSION

As noted by Donahue (1999), Schwartzman (2001), and Yardley et al. (2012), the structured integration of academic learning with focused work term placements (experiential learning placements) can provide meaningful educational, social, and economic benefits to the students, public and private sector organizations, and the communities involved. Students who undertake experiential learning programs feel more "job ready" and confident in beginning a career when compared to students who completed their degree entirely by coursework (Spanjaard et al., 2018). Equally, organizations that support students engaged in experiential learning programs can gain crucial new insight specific to their operations and goals (George et al., 2015). In short, universities and colleges having experiential learning opportunities as part of their respective degree programs can be confident, knowing their students will be more prepared for the workplace and their external stakeholders more connected with the institution.

All of the students who participated in the ad hoc internship programs during the summers of 2021 and 2022 agreed that equality (reciprocity), community (collaboration), and reflection were core elements of their real-world learning experience, which in turn enhanced their understanding of the social justice and criminal justice challenges being explored. Equally, by first reflecting on the works of established educational scholars such as Donahue (1999), Fox (2013), George et al. (2015), Hobson and Morris-Saunders (2013), Schwartzman (2001), Spanjaard et al. (2018), and Yardley et al. (2012), to name a few, the professor tasked with organizing and delivering the ad hoc summer internship programs noted they were able to effectively support their students engage with city of Calgary stakeholders and other educators at MRU (especially library staff) in a manner that best supported their scholastic, social, emotional, and professional growth.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the two experiential learning experiences discussed in this paper were small and ad hoc, they nevertheless resulted in positive feedback from faculty and students. Professional degrees such as policy studies, justice studies, and social work, to name a few, unquestionably benefit when faculty engage in applied practice and equally when students are allowed to apply their classroom learning to real-world problems. The two clear takeaways from these two summer programs were the benefits of (a) concise and well-developed expectations, instructions, timelines, and clear articulation of student assessment measures and (b) project planning replete with the identification and cooperation of external stakeholders. It is recognized that there are gaps in the information where more research is needed to discuss the challenges associated with remote learning during COVID. This program's most meaningful measure of success is the students' feedback. During both summer internships, the students noted they felt more prepared to secure work in their chosen field upon graduation, gained critical new professional skills, and appreciated the opportunity to have a narrative of their summer experience they could tell possible future employers during interviews; views that are reflective of the findings of Hobson and Morrison-Saunders (2013).

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