

SKIDMORE COLLEGE

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT UWW: SOME GUIDELINES FOR FACULTY

Background

Since its inception in the early 1970's, the University Without Walls has been a pioneer in designing degree programs for non-residential adult students. An important feature of UWW philosophy has been a recognition that learning can occur outside the classroom; and UWW has always been ready to consider awarding credit for college-level experiential learning that occurs on the job, in volunteer activity, through self-study, through training or other formal programs, or through other kinds of real life experience. This is very much in keeping with the philosophy of the residential college, which aspires to blend theoretical with practical learning in the education of residential students.

Over the decades of its operation UWW has refined its methods for identifying and crediting experiential learning. While such nationally recognized bodies as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) have developed useful generic statements on experiential learning, UWW has put into practice its own procedures that combine flexibility with the close scrutiny of experts to evaluate this type of learning.

Perhaps the critical component in UWW's evaluation of experiential learning involves the engagement of members of the Skidmore faculty. All UWW students have faculty advisors from one of the appropriate Skidmore departments. Since all proposed degree programs require approval of the faculty advisor, this person is instrumental in the process of evaluating experiential learning as well. In cases where proposed experiential learning lies outside the student's area of focus and hence outside the area of the faculty advisor's expertise, other appropriate members of the Skidmore faculty are brought in for consultation.

Experienced advisors from UWW's academic staff may also play a significant role in determinations about experiential learning. While faculty members are relied upon for expertise in their discipline, UWW advisors are available to answer questions about the principles involved in evaluating experiential learning and generally to facilitate the evaluation process.

Some Ways of Thinking About Adult Learning

One simple model for assessing experiential learning involves establishing course equivalencies. What has the adult student learned outside the classroom that replicates

learning that otherwise might be taught to conventional students in a course? An adult with fifteen years of experience operating a small store, for example, is unlikely to need a Retail Management course offered for a nineteen-year-old. A professional computer programmer has already mastered material taught in many programming courses that would be offered in a computer science department. Similarly, a person fluent in a language other than English has already mastered some of the material taught for credit in foreign language departments.

Another model is the “reverse internship.” The conventional residential student studying political science might be urged to work in a political campaign for internship credit. So the adult who has already worked on political campaigns might ask to have that work reviewed for possible college credit. Frequently adult learning, extended and deepened over the years, far surpasses anything a nineteen-year-old student might learn in several months of observation; in fact, it might be the adult professional whose skills are being shared to a lesser degree with the young intern.

Often experiential learning is not identical to learning in a single course but involves varieties of learning that might be spread over parts of a number of courses, courses which might or might not be taught at Skidmore. Also, it might include learning that is not normally taught in the college classroom but is nonetheless appropriate in level and content for an individual student’s particular program.

Experiential learning is often practical and skill-related. Frequently it is necessary to have it informed by parallel theoretical learning if that learning is otherwise missing. On the other hand, experiential learning can include theoretical components from structured workshops, in-service training, and self-study.

The American Council on Education places limits on experiential learning at three-quarters of the total program. UWW does not have an arbitrary limit, but our practice is generally more conservative than that of other institutions, and rarely would the credit award go that high. There are several natural limits to credit for experiential learning. One involves specificity of content. An adult student might have twenty years of experience as an investment counselor, for example, but a 120-credit bachelor’s program would rarely contain more than, say, twelve credits of the study of investments. Just as an English major would not have 60 credits in the study of Shakespeare, a business student would not expect to generate a large number of credits in a narrow specialty, no matter how lengthy the experience or expert the knowledge.

Often significant, meaningful, rewarding adult experiences—raising a family, visiting a foreign country, performing an important professional task, even developing a technical skill to a high level—are not necessarily appropriate for credit toward a liberal arts college program.

While UWW does scrutinize proposed experiential learning carefully and is generally conservative in credit awards, it is important to honor fully the genuine educational accomplishments of our adult students, which certainly can on occasion translate into

substantial credit. A recent graduate, for example, had at the time of enrollment no previous college, but had a successful thirty-year professional career in the theater. Faculty in the Theater Department at Skidmore recognized her as far more accomplished than the best residential college graduates and recommended that credit be awarded for virtually the entire theater major.

Of course all experiential learning proposed for credit needs to be reviewed and approved not only by the student's UWW academic advisor and faculty advisor but ultimately by the UWW faculty oversight committee.

Here are some examples of experiential learning that has been approved for credit: language skills; artistic accomplishment; business skills; political activity; teaching; counseling and human services experience; professional journalism.

Methods of Documentation

College Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams can be used in some simple cases to document learning associated with certain primarily introductory courses. More often than not, however, the method used for documentation is either the experiential learning narrative or formal faculty assessment.

Historically the experiential learning narrative has been the logical first choice for documenting experiential learning. In the narrative the student provides an overview and summary of the learning proposed for credit, the context in which it was acquired, and concrete examples that demonstrate the general principles involved. Typically such narratives go through one or more revisions under the guidance of both the student's advisors; ultimately the advisors reach agreement on the appropriateness of the proposed learning and the recommended credit award.

The experiential learning narrative has the advantage of engaging the student in the thoughtful reexamination of the learning process and of placing the details of the proposed learning before the eyes of the faculty committee for approval.

In certain cases the formal faculty assessment, often a portfolio assessment, is considered the more appropriate means of documentation. This typically occurs when there is a body of material to be viewed or reviewed: an artist's portfolio, for example, or a journalist's clippings. Language competence is usually documented through faculty assessment. Often faculty assessment is employed for the purpose of interpreting evidence of professional certifications, training programs, and diverse professional accomplishments, where faculty expertise is necessary to establish the level and scope of the learning under consideration.

The advantage of the assessment is the level and intensity of expert scrutiny brought to bear on the proposed learning. In practice often both methods are to some degree combined, with the student producing documents to support an experiential learning

narrative or the student providing some written context to explain documents or other work being formally assessed.

Faculty involved in the experiential learning assessment process are essential participants; their expertise and judgment are definitive. Any faculty uncertainty or discomfort with an individual case of proposed learning—whether the appropriateness of the learning itself, the amount of credit being recommended, or the vehicle for documentation—will be thoroughly discussed with the UWW academic advisor. No recommendation for credit is brought to the UWW faculty committee without the full knowledge and approval of the faculty advisor.