

Chapter 7

Developing Integrated Learning Environments for Improved Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the use of design thinking in created integrated learning environments where student learning is captured across curricular and co-curricular experiences. The chapter outlines the current context and trends in higher education that demonstrate the need for integrated learning environments and the need to assess experiential learning by centering students in the process. Centering students in the process of designing integrated learning environments empowers them on a path of self-authorship where students identify the goals of learning, how that learning will be documented, and how experiences scaffold to ensure students move from introduction to mastery of skills. The chapter concludes with examples from campuses that have created integrated environments where learning is documented and recorded, including examples of comprehensive learner records and a fully integrated bachelor's degree program.

INTRODUCTION

The assessment of student learning outcomes in the co-curriculum is often diffused across many departments without central goals guiding students through their learning experiences. As higher education leaders consider what skills and abilities students should acquire in the years between orientation and graduation, it is imperative to identify and communicate outcomes with students and map those experiences to a curriculum. This curricular approach to determine the appropriate outcomes and how to measure student achievement align well with the design thinking processes. This chapter will focus on the

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define phase of design thinking by exploring the current trends in higher education, and considerations for measuring experiential learning in the context of defining a problem statement that can be addressed through the phases of the design thinking process. An effective way to achieve the goal of defining the purpose of experiential education and measuring success is through the creation and implementation of integrated learning environments.

Learning is often perceived to primarily occur in the classroom or under the leadership of a faculty member. Therefore, faculty and other academics have become the default practitioners in the development of curriculum and measuring student outcomes. In reality, learning is a continual process occurring in a multitude of environments through diverse experiences. Students often report hands-on application, also referred to as experiential learning, is how they best gain and solidify their understanding of new knowledge and competencies. Student affairs practitioners have long known the learning opportunities students have in student organizations, housing, student employment and other co-curricular experiences are highly effective environments for learning. In fact, the publication of the Student Learning Imperative (ACPA, 1994) shifted the field of student affairs to emphasize learning through service delivery. The statement argued that learning, personal development, and student development are intertwined and inseparable (Schuh et al., 2016). In the almost thirty years since the publication of the Student Learning Imperative, student affairs practitioners have continued to identify ways to measure and report the learning that occurs in the co-curricular. Such engagement opportunities teach and enhance students' skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem solving, to name a few. In the Project CEO White Paper, over 20% of respondents indicated that their co-curricular experiences were the primary environments where they learned teamwork, decision-making, problem solving, workflow planning, and verbal communication (Griffin, 2016).

This chapter will use the define phase of design thinking to address the integration of curricular and co-curricular experiences by first exploring the current environment and emerging trends in higher education that influence the outcomes and learning opportunities provided for students. This will lead into a discussion regarding design thinking and the foundations of integrated learning. Finally, the chapter will conclude with examples of how campuses are creating integrated learning environments and documenting student learning, including the use of comprehensive learning records.

Current Context and Emerging Trends in Higher Education

Before users of the design thinking model are able to define the problem they are addressing, they should have a strong understanding of the environment and context they are working within. In our case, we are discussing the challenge of assessing experiential learning. This section outlines some relevant changes in higher education that impact the implementation of experiential learning and the need to document student learning in multiple environments.

Higher education institutions face the ever-present challenge to develop and maintain learning environments across complex systems. In recent years, increasing accountability to document and quantify both student learning and the value of a college degree has mounted from a multitude of stakeholders that includes students and parents, state legislatures, accrediting bodies, alumni, and other community leaders. Much of the pressure for higher education to prove it's worth comes from increasing expectations for job placement and post-graduation success as the investment that families and parents make in a college degree has become a greater burden for families and students. Many institutions are facing mounting costs, declining enrollments, quickly changing demand for academic programs, and changing

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