

Chapter 17

The Experiential Learning Design Accelerator: Integrating Human–Centered Design With Student Learning Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will describe the Experiential Learning Design Accelerator (the Accelerator) initiative at the University of Arizona and its impact on this campus. Specifically, this chapter will address the campus-wide faculty selection process, programmatic components of the Accelerator including topical workshops exploring themes such as reciprocity within community partnerships, iterative development embedded in student-facing assignments, and the design and execution of effective digital learning tools. Critically, this chapter will look at the foundational training in design thinking to inform course design and delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, evidence gleaned through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has supported universities to take up the challenge of addressing quality, equity and perceived value of

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undergraduate education. In “High Impact Educational Practices: What they are, who has access to them and why they matter,” George Kuh (2008) notes: “when I am asked, what one thing can we do to enhance student engagement and increase student success? I now have an answer: make it possible for every student to participate in at least two high-impact activities during his or her undergraduate program, one in the first year, and one taken later in relation to the major field” (p. 21). As a result, many institutions have created structures to strengthen their commitment to practices that engage students deeply in their learning to produce desirable student outcomes. This chapter will trace the University of Arizona’s path through creation of an institutional structure to enhance commitment to high-impact practices within the curriculum and co-curriculum, with a particular focus on increasing community-based learning. We illuminate the ways that design thinking has supported faculty to reconceive of both the process and purpose of partnering beyond the university to create bi-directional community-engaged learning experiences. We describe how community engagement can begin with the co-creation of a course design and how this process influences the desired outcomes of a community-engaged learning experience. Finally, we describe an effort to assess the student learning outcomes associated with community engaged courses in terms of academic self-efficacy, civic-mindedness and career-readiness.

BACKGROUND

With the ethos that “learning happens everywhere” in mind, in mid-2014 the Vice Provost for Academic Initiatives and Student Success at the University of Arizona, a campus with nearly 47,000 students located in Tucson, Arizona, convened a campus wide “100% Engagement Task Force.” Working intentionally across the boundaries between student affairs and academic colleges, thirty academic administrators, faculty, student affairs staff, and assessment professionals participated in the effort. The task force undertook to operationalize a strategic plan to provide “a learning experience tailored to individual students’ needs” that will “graduate future leaders who have the skills to apply their knowledge and solve the world’s grand challenges.” This initiative, called 100% Engagement, would 1) define the University of Arizona’s commitment to high-impact, quality learning practices 2) suggest actions to ensure equity in reaching 100% of undergraduate students with at least one deep learning experience within or beyond the classroom and 3) recognize the learning taking place across a variety of educational contexts, both at the level of the student and at an institutional level. The then-President of the University would report progress toward reaching 100% of students as a key institutional performance metric.

In 2015, 100% Engagement was cataloged within academic policy as a campus-wide initiative to “ensure that all undergraduate students engage within and beyond the classroom in transformative educational practices that impact their personal and professional lives.” Building upon the taxonomy of high-impact experiences outlined in Kuh’s work, the policy sought to layer the point of view of the learner, considering broadly what the learners will do and learn within an experience when selecting where to engage her time and mental effort, over the many discipline and registration-centric signifiers that students typically navigate when selecting courses. It called for faculty and staff to attach to their courses and co-curricular opportunities digital tags indicating to students the Activity they would engage in and the key Competencies (see Appendix 1) that the experience would support them to develop. These were informed by the Association of American Colleges & Universities VALUES (AACU, 2021) framework for the essential graduation-level learning outcomes “that all students need for success in work, citizenship, and life.” The Activity and Competency notations apply equally to all experiences, whether

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