

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

*in the*  
NON-PROFIT SECTOR

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# Environmental Scan Executive Summary

## Acknowledgements

As partners and the co-leads for the project, Transforming Social and Non-Profit Experiential Learning, we would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have been involved in helping to shape and contribute to this analysis and review of how Wilfrid Laurier University engages currently with organizations across the non-profit sector in Waterloo Region and Brantford and how those relationships might deepen in the future. The sector itself is changing dramatically – and is being challenged to innovate and rethink how it does business. Laurier is also adapting to the changing context of how to support student learning, especially experiential learning, both now and for the future changing nature of work. We would like to thank faculty for their thoughtful and candid contributions to the ways in which Laurier might support their work and leadership in experiential learning in the nonprofit sector, along with all of the community leaders who provided insights into the quality and dimension of relationships and student learning opportunities between Laurier and organizations across the sector.

This analysis and the work of this project would not have been possible without the tremendous insight and leadership provided by a group of highly-respected individuals who provided ongoing feedback and direction as members of the Non-Profit Partnership Table. The following individuals, listed in alphabetical order, helped significantly to shape this project and its outcomes along the way.

- Michael Hackbusch, Spiritual Resources Director, House of Friendship
- Jane Hennig, Executive Director, Volunteer Action Centre Waterloo Region
- Lisa Jarvis, Manager, Community & Workplace Partnerships, Wilfrid Laurier University
- John Milloy, Practitioner-In-Residence, Department of Political Science, Wilfrid Laurier University; Director of the Centre for Public Ethics, Martin Luther University College
- Heather Montgomery, Community Builder, The Working Centre
- Shannon Nicholson, Counselling Director, Carizon Family and Counselling Services
- Lynn Randall, Executive in Residence, Capacity Canada
- Jane Tuer, Executive Director, Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington
- Debora VanNijnatten, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Wilfrid Laurier University

In addition, our staff team at Capacity Canada, Jessica Stroebe (Career Centre, Laurier, Project Co-ordinator) and Lydia Awuah-Mensah (Career Centre, Laurier, Program Co-ordinator) contributed immensely to the project outcomes and future plans.

Supporting and challenging students to step into a variety of career opportunities in the non-profit sector will require adapting the ways of teaching and learning across post-secondary institutions like Laurier. This report will provide helpful insights and recommendations into how to do so.

**Jan Basso**, AVP: Experiential Learning & Career Development, Wilfrid Laurier University  
**Cathy Brothers**, CEO, Capacity Canada

## Introduction

Transforming Social and Non-Profit Experiential Learning is a project sponsored by Wilfrid Laurier University and Capacity Canada with the purpose of enhancing Laurier students' experiential learning opportunities in the non-profit sector. Laurier has had a long history of supporting student learning in the non-profit sector. This project was designed to understand how better to support experiential learning in the sector and also to understand the sector's needs more deeply as the picture of how to best support learning and the sector in a reciprocal manner has shifted and evolved over time. To do this, the project set out to establish the competencies required by graduates to succeed in the non-profit sector, the present challenges, the types of experiences the sector requires to be innovative in creating change, and the ways that Laurier can grow learning for students while expanding how it provides service to community partners.

This project was made possible through support from the Province of Ontario through their Career-Ready Fund. It received support during the 2018-2019 year and as such, the following represents a snapshot of experiential learning in the non-profit sector between June 2018 through April 2019. Laurier's Values, Vision, and Mission emphasize its commitment to supporting students and faculty in learning through experience, co-curricular development, and community service. Laurier's Strategic Academic Plan (2015-2020) sets out its goal of expanding experiential learning, particularly through the creation of opportunities for every student, integration of learning through reflection, growth of co-operative education opportunities, and integration of entrepreneurship and social innovation in students' education.

Laurier is recognized in its delivery of experiential learning within community. Laurier has also been a leader in providing students a variety of non-profit sector opportunities in experiential learning. Yet the extent of experiences that are currently offered to students requires a greater examination into what will be required to help innovate and support the non-profit sector in the future and to provide students with the essential skillsets needed to participate in this sector.

## Goals

The project goals included:

1. Increase experiential learning opportunities on both a curricular and co-curricular basis for students within the non-profit community.
2. Highlight experiential learning models, especially those at Laurier that are high impact and innovative.
3. Provide insight and analysis on the non-profit sector's human capital needs, and the human resource requirements in supporting academic program delivery.
4. Develop a certificate of volunteerism through student learning, critical reflection and theoretical inquiry related to the sector.
5. Disseminate project findings and best practice models.
6. Introduce new technology to facilitate the connection between students and opportunities in the non-profit sector.

## Methodology

Through a literature review, surveys, a series of key informant interviews, partnership table meetings, and an environmental scan, the project explored the non-profit experiential learning experience from the viewpoints of students, faculty, and non-profit organizations to understand the institutional context as well as the sector's unique human resource needs and longer-term human capital development needs.

The review of literature included academic literature on experiential learning and non-profit human resource needs, other related reports, and publications including those from the federal and Ontario provincial governments

Five community partnership table meetings were conducted at Laurier during which community partners and leaders met to provide ongoing feedback, support, and guidance to the process.

## Internal Scan at Laurier

### Defining Experiential Learning at Laurier

Experiential learning occurs both inside and outside the classroom. It is defined as learning in which students apply knowledge and skills in authentic contexts.

This type of learning requires preparation, experiences, and guided reflection that challenges students to make meaning from their experiences.

Through reflection, students have increased opportunities to expand their knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, heighten their self-awareness, and explore careers.

Laurier aims to connect experiential learning, as a pillar of the Strategic Academic Plan, with program learning outcomes and the creation of opportunities for all students.

### Types of Experiential Learning

The types of experiential learning offered at Laurier include:

Curricular	Co-curricular
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• co-op</li> <li>• community service-learning</li> <li>• field courses</li> <li>• field placements/practica/clinical placements</li> <li>• internships</li> <li>• lab experiences</li> <li>• in-course/program projects and experiences</li> <li>• job shadowing</li> <li>• creative performance</li> <li>• academic exchanges</li> <li>• entrepreneurship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• on-campus employment</li> <li>• student clubs, associations and teams</li> <li>• peer programs</li> <li>• student government</li> <li>• student volunteerism</li> <li>• conferences and competitions</li> <li>• professional inquiry</li> </ul>

## Experiential Learning Competency Framework

Laurier has set out various competencies achieved through experiential learning which include:

- adaptability and resiliency
- collaboration and teamwork
- communication
- creativity and innovation
- critical thinking
- diversity and intercultural understanding
- functional knowledge
- leadership
- problem solving
- professional attributes
- self-awareness
- technological ability

## Emerging Themes

### Surveys and Key Informant Interviews

#### Student Surveys

A total of 36 student surveys were completed from students who participated in experiential learning programs. Student participants had a variety of academic backgrounds, including business, science, humanities, arts, music, and social sciences. The various types of placements students participated in included volunteer and community-service learning (CSL) experiences, summer and part-time employment, co-op experiences, and practicum and internship opportunities.

#### Not-Profit Community Surveys

Surveys were sent to 300 non-profit organizations and a total of 32 surveys were completed. Most respondents were from either small (4 employees or less) or large (11+ employees) organizations and there was a nearly equal distribution of each. Twenty-one (21) were from Waterloo Region and 6 were from Brantford. Sixty percent (60%) of respondents had engaged 10 or more students within the last 3 years and, in all cases, students were described as either highly engaged (77%) or somewhat engaged (22%). The most popular types of placements included volunteer experience (18%), CSL and summer employment (17% each), co-op and practicum (15% each), and internship (9%).

#### Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with 24 representatives from non-profit organizations and with 16 faculty and staff members from Laurier. Faculty and staff key informants were identified based on their history and experience participating, leading or being directly involved in an experiential learning course or co-curricular model with the non-profit sector. Community partner key informants were identified as being leaders of a broad range of non-profit organization types and sizes across Waterloo Region and Brantford.

## Student Survey Results

### Experiences in the Non-Profit Sector

The majority of students indicated that they would consider working in the non-profit sector after graduation. Students specified that the factors that make work satisfying for them were their contribution to making a positive change, working in a strong, collegial team, working in a safe, positive, and engaging workplace, and undertaking work that challenged them. Students noted that their experiences were positive and provided insight into social issues affecting community and how non-profit organizations work both in terms of structure and addressing social issues.

Students see non-profit experiences as important learning environments that help them to reflect critically, examine their own values, and change their perspective. A variety of factors supported the success of student placements in the non-profit sector. Students indicated that the most important factor in facilitating success stems from the people working in non-profit organizations and the positive, supportive environment that they contribute. Students also responded that university and faculty support also influences the success of their placements.

### Skills and Competencies Gained from Non-Profit Experience

Students indicated that they gained various skills and competencies during their placements. Students self-reported that the top skills gained were related to communication, collaboration and teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, and adaptability and resiliency. Student responses suggest that providing further student preparation in these areas prior to or during experiential learning placements would support students in the workplace to develop these skills more in-depth.

### Student Participation in Placements

Students identified that they participated mostly in frontline engagement, writing and communication, fundraising, and staff support. In these roles, students indicated that they are able to see the direct connection of their experiential work to the difference made in the non-profit sector. Students also participated in administrative tasks, advocacy, and other types of work including physical work and undertaking case studies.

Students' motivations for participating in non-profit experiences included an interest in the non-profit sector, career development, a desire to do good and help others, and interest in new extracurricular experiences. Student motivations are underpinned by altruism, and they get excited about their work by being part of something that has an impact on community.

## Non-Profit Sector and Faculty Interview Results

### Quality and Type of Student Engagement in the Sector: Feedback from Stakeholders

The applicability of student placements is an important consideration in experiential opportunities. Students desire to make real contributions to community change, as opposed to simulated or theoretical – they prefer a hands-on approach. However, designing these

opportunities requires some thought in the way non-profit organizations can support student learning. Non-profit respondents noted that smaller organizations have a harder time supporting students in a way that larger organizations can, based on their capacity to supervise placements. There is an opportunity for both faculty and non-profits to understand their respective views on student engagement within experiential learning, and design opportunities that support holistic student engagement.

### Length of Placements

The length of student placements is significant in supporting meaningful, quality experiences for students. However, there is no consensus on what length of time would be appropriate for student placements as they need to reflect both the learning goals and outcomes as well as student interests, level of experience and capacity, and lastly capacity and interest of the community partner. While there is often a desire to build a relationship with a partner over a longer period of time, this is not always feasible for a variety of reasons.

### Preparing Students for Experiential Learning Experiences

Student connection to experiential opportunities is strengthened by their ability to take on meaningful experiences in the non-profit sector. The non-profit respondents noted that the ability of students to take on meaningful opportunities during experiential learning placements is a way to support student connection to workplace opportunities. The findings suggest that there is no systematic approach to assisting students to prepare for their placements. Individual courses, and the faculty that teach them, offer various preparatory and onboarding components that are built into the curriculum. However, not all courses introduce students to these areas. Some students utilized career services for support during their placement opportunities. A unified approach to preparing students for experiential learning in the workplace would support students in their placements.

### Relationship Building with Community

Overall, the partnership between Laurier and non-profit organizations is positive and interconnected. The non-profit sector is seen as part of the education process and integral to student learning. The relationship between the two is seen by non-profits as mutually beneficial, multi-faceted and long-standing. The non-profit sector noted that the CSL team at Laurier has taken a personal approach with organizations and provided excellent mechanisms for feedback. Non-profit organizations commented that experiential learning, and the relationship between the university and sector, would be enhanced if the sector was seen as an equal partner in experiential learning.

There is an opportunity for clearer understanding of the goals of the course or the knowledge that students are being graded on, to ensure that students are getting what they need from organizations to apply theory to practice. Strengthening reciprocity between the two groups is seen as important in order to ensure that the community meets their needs and the students have successful experiences, so that they will be interested in working, volunteering, or donating to organizations in the future.

## Clarity of Expectations

To strengthen the relationship between the non-profit sector and Laurier, further clarity with respect to expectations emerged as a theme. Non-profit organizations see a need for further opportunity to understand how experiential learning supports students' learning goals. Emerging from the findings from both non-profit organizations and faculty is that there is opportunity to develop and strengthen reciprocal partnerships to meet the needs of students, as well as those of the non-profit sector.

## Institutional Implementation of Experiential Learning

The findings suggest that both faculty and the non-profit sector participants see experiential learning as an essential part of student learning and connecting the university to community and sector. This is important in linking academic learning to workplaces, fostering strong institution-sector relationships, exposing future workforces to the non-profit sector, and supporting critical reflection of students vis-à-vis issues affecting local community, for example.

There is an opportunity to refine the current experiential learning model and strategy to support students and faculty, and to foster increased understanding between the university and non-profit sector in how experiential learning is implemented. Physical, financial, and human resources are a factor in supporting a comprehensive experiential learning strategy, both from the perspective of the university preparing and sending students to opportunities, and the sector receiving them. The non-profit sector indicates that it would like to see a comprehensive strategy to implementing experiential learning within the sector.

## Professionalization and Career Development Learning

Participants indicated a desire to have more opportunities to enhance professionalization and career development learning. Faculty and non-profit participants emphasized the need to clarify the expectations and understanding of experiential learning requirements for both students and organizations. There is a clear sense from both the non-profit sector and faculty that students require workplace readiness and professionalism preparation prior to beginning their placements. There are a number of student training and preparatory sessions available to students including a credit course as well as modules developed by staff at the Career Centre, through Co-op, and Community & Workplace Partnerships. Ongoing promotion of these materials to faculty and community partners will help support preparedness for student learners and will address issues related to 'fit' and appropriate workplace behaviours. Moving forward, there continues to be an opportunity for non-profit partners to support this training in other ways so as to customize it and tailor it to the non-profit work environment.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed through the data collected in this scan as well as through conversation with the partnership table and other internal stakeholders. They represent some initial steps that might be considered to enhancing existing models and addressing some of the above identified strengths and opportunities.

### Recommendations Related to Staffing, Resources and Technology

- Continue to support CSL and other support staff in Community & Workplace Partnerships in their roles to bridge opportunities between the university and community partners. Consider the ways these relationships may be strengthened through Memoranda of Agreements.
- Continue to develop an inventory of placements and partnerships in the non-profit sector and renew this data annually.
- Consider resourcing both high-impact models with small numbers of students participating as well as existing models with large numbers of students participating. Many of the models developed with fewer students are first-class examples of experiential learning in the sector and warrant ongoing development, and broader dissemination beyond the Laurier community as their design and application is novel and merits attention.
- Create a financial mechanism to support curriculum projects that are community-engaged.

### Recommendations Related to Student Support and Professionalization

- Provide ladder pathways for students interested in non-profit careers that identify curricular and co-curricular options that can be taken throughout a students' time at university.
- Support facilitating and building student knowledge related to professional communication, boundary-setting, career pathways, etc. within the sector.

### Recommendations Related to Community Partner Support

- Help non-profit community partners understand what makes Laurier students different. Connect this differentiation to the curricular or co-curricular experience in which the student is participating. This will help partners to understand better the learning outcomes associated with the experiential learning placement.
- Continue to provide streamlined communication for community partners.
- Continue to structure staff and resources as a one-stop shop to meet needs of community partners.
- Create structures/mechanisms to support consistency with more complex community projects. Specifically, how might they be resourced or staffed?
- Continue to market and communicate experiential learning opportunities to community partners.

### Recommendations Related to Program Design and Faculty/Staff Support

- Consider ways to support faculty through recognition of work required in community-engaged partnerships.
- Consider a faculty mentorship program for faculty interested in supporting and facilitating experiential learning.
- Continue to conduct marketing and outreach to faculty partners to help them understand the types of experiential learning options, models and support available to them



## Conclusion and Next Steps

This scan reflects feedback and insight from a broad array of sources including key literature, key faculty and community insights, survey data as well as feedback from students. The analysis provides insight into areas of strength and future opportunities that Wilfrid Laurier University might consider as it seeks to grow and enhance its experiential learning programs in the non-profit sector. Laurier has a long history of supporting and facilitating partnerships, projects, placements, and volunteerism in the non-profit sector and is both grateful to the sector and its organizations for the ongoing opportunity to continue to help shape and grow student learning.

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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*A Showcase of Laurier-Community  
Partnerships*





## *Practica & Placements - Turning Theory into Practice*

Manuel Riemer has a true passion for building strong reciprocal relationships with community partners to achieve learning outcomes and inspire social change. As an associate professor in the Department of Psychology, the Community Psychology graduate program coordinator and Director of the Viessmann Centre for Engagement and Research in Sustainability, Riemer understands first-hand how experiential learning in the non-profit sector motivates students and creates meaningful learning opportunities. He also acknowledges that supporting placements of this nature is often time-consuming and requires a strong commitment from all community members.

Riemer's partnership with the Waterloo Region District School Board gave students the chance to work with real survey data – rather than artificial data used in teaching which is often “cleaner” – highlighting the complexities, rewards and challenges of applying theory in contexts outside of the classroom. Riemer believes that, while students may struggle in the moment with applied learning in the community, what they gain in terms of knowledge and skills development will help them long after the specific course is finished.

## *Social Entrepreneurship in Action*

Enactus is a network of global business, academic and student leaders and university campuses dedicated to developing the next generation of entrepreneurial leaders and social innovators. Laura Allan, Executive Director of the Schlegel Centre for Entrepreneurship & Social Innovation is the faculty advisor and liaison for Laurier's Enactus student teams. She believes that applied co-curricular learning opportunities are critical to help students build the necessary skills that will help them thrive after graduation.

Laurier student teams have won two regional Enactus titles by using entrepreneurial action to transform lives and shape a better, more sustainable world. This experiential learning model is unique in that it engages students in global citizenship through problem solving. Using mentorship, coaching and a competitive process, student teams advance through social business development trials locally, regionally and nationally as they consistently hone and develop their social venture. Allan sees how this model of experiential learning can engage a generation of young people committed to making a difference.





## *Community Engagement Fostered in Curriculum Option*

Edmund Pries is a professor in the Departments of Global Studies and Religion and Culture who, among other things, teaches the Semester in Community Engagement offered in the Faculty of Arts. This course operates in partnership with The Working Centre and allows students to embed themselves in real-life experiences. As a capstone course, students deepen their understanding of the in-class theory, explore the boundaries of their knowledge and build meaningful relationships in such a dynamic community organization. The Working Centre is located in downtown Kitchener and is known for its grassroots, emergent and radically-inclusive programming.

The relationship between Laurier and The Working Centre is one of unique collaboration. Pries believes the capstone and Option work so well for students because The Working Centre team are engaged in the classes and work as true partners in the learning process. Staff get to know students personally, helping them make thoughtful decisions about their placements. Pries believes this type of experiential learning offers students a true introduction to community work, as well as transformational insights into their own life direction and career goals.

## *An Introduction to Sustainability*

Associate professor Robert McLeman believes the best way to teach the meaning of 'sustainability' is through practice. In his second-year Introduction to Sustainability course in the Environmental Studies program, McLeman's students are organized into consulting teams and work with local governments to generate concepts and ideas for building environmental, economic and social sustainability. Each year, students are partnered with a different township in Waterloo Region. They are briefed by planning officials, conduct site visits, monitor local media and survey residents to learn their aspirations for their community. The student consultant teams develop project concepts that are presented to township staff and shared with residents.

Local governments draw on the ideas for community planning and students acquire practical expertise in project development, sustainability design, and professional report writing. Past ideas have included community trail plans, innovative transit strategies and downtown core 'make-overs'. For many students, this course is their first encounter with experiential learning, and encourages them to pursue senior level courses that focus on community engagement.







## *Building Professionalism through Fund Development*

Andrew Robinson's course on Professionalism offered through the Human Rights and Human Diversity program has students writing grant proposals on behalf of organizations in the City of Brantford. Previous proposals crafted by student teams in partnership with selected non-profits have helped secure much-needed funding for events, programming and administrative needs.

As students learn about best practices in teamwork and grant writing, Robinson positions himself as the students' manager, offering concrete feedback via progress reports throughout the term. Through this experiential model, students learn about collegiality, confidentiality and other foundational skills like how to write emails and effectively communicate in professional settings. According to him, many students appreciate the skills they gain in this course because they recognize the transferability of these skills to the work environment. Critical to the success of this course is Robinson's ability to build strong relationships with community partners and to manage expectations effectively. Providing support for community partners while helping students gain professional skills makes this course a win-win collaboration.

## *Deepening Student Volunteerism with the Experiential Certificate*



Experiential Learning & Career Development at Laurier is recognized for adapting to the changing needs of work-places and learners and has developed programs that help students build career competencies connected to their professional and learning goals. The Career Centre recently piloted a co-curricular experiential learning certificate to support students' co-curricular interests in the non-profit sector. Through its hands-on community volunteerism component, the Experiential Certificate in the Social and Non-Profit Sector offers students a unique co-curricular opportunity to clarify their values, understand those of organizations in the community and connect the two.

Feedback from Laurier students indicate they are hungry for more learning that allows them to build professional skills while learning through interest- and values-based volunteer opportunities. This certificate was delivered to first year students during the pilot phase and will be subsequently delivered to all students from all years and disciplines by Lydia Awuah-Mensah, Program Co-ordinator in the Career Centre

