

Experiential Learning Task Force Final Report

April 2016

The Experiential Learning Task Force convened in the fall of 2013 and was charged by the Provost with the following four tasks:

1. Define “experiential learning” for Ramapo College.
2. Refine the institutional learning goals and outcomes for experiential learning.
3. Identify types of existing or new activities and experiences that could meet these outcomes.
4. Develop a plan that would enable 90% of undergraduate programs to require an extended experiential learning activity. Considerations include, but are not limited to, resources, curricular revision, transcription of non-credit experiences (if applicable), timelines, and so forth.

The members of the Task Force were as follows:

Desislava Budeva, Assistant Professor of Marketing
Anne DeGroot, Associate Professor of Teacher Education
Michael Fluhr, Associate Professor of Political Science (Served through December 2014)
Beth Ricca, Director, Cahill Career Development Center
Stephen Rice, Dean, Salameno School of Humanities and Global Studies (chair)
Rowlett Neel Scott, Assistant Professor of Communication Arts
Loraine Tan, Assistant Professor of Chemistry

To begin, we considered the College’s current mission statement and vision statement, and the relevant portions of the newly-approved 2014-2018 strategic plan.

Ramapo College Mission Statement

Ramapo College is New Jersey’s Public Liberal Arts College, dedicated to providing students a strong foundation for a lifetime of achievement. The College is committed to academic excellence through interdisciplinary and experiential learning, and international and intercultural understanding. Ramapo College emphasizes teaching and individual attention to all students. We promote diversity, inclusiveness, sustainability, student engagement, and community involvement.

Ramapo College Vision Statement

As the region’s premier public liberal arts college, Ramapo College of New Jersey prepares students to be successful leaders for a changing world through its distinctive commitments to hands-on learning and faculty-student mentoring.

Ramapo College Strategic Plan

Goal 1: Advance Academic Excellence and Engagement

Ramapo College advances academic excellence and student engagement in the undergraduate experience through its General Education Program and major and minor programs; continued focus on interdisciplinary and experiential learning, and international and intercultural understanding; and increased integration of the Course Enrichment Component (CEC). In addition, the College offers a small number of graduate programs in areas of existing undergraduate expertise and anticipated high demand. To these ends, the College supports a highly qualified, engaged and accessible faculty.

The College seeks to better serve students from underrepresented groups, transfer students, international students, graduate students, and adult learners through programs and services that address the distinctive needs of these growing populations. The integration of technology in support of all these endeavors will be emphasized. The College continuously develops, assesses, and refreshes curricula and improves services.

Objective 1.1: The College will offer rigorous curricula and experiential activities that prepare all students for a lifetime of achievement.

Achievement Target 1.1.2: 90% of all undergraduate major programs will require students to successfully engage, by the time of graduation, in an extended experiential activity (study abroad, co-op, internship, training, clinical, service learning, and student/faculty research); and 50% of undergraduate major programs will require successful engagement by graduation in a meaningful international experience (study abroad, service learning abroad, international internship/co-op, foreign language study, intensive specialized international course).

Clearly, Experiential Learning has been established to be an essential part of a Ramapo College education, with references in the College's Mission and Vision Statements, and in the first goal and first objective of the Strategic Plan.

In this context, we reviewed the final reports of two past groups that convened over the last thirteen years to consider experiential learning at Ramapo. These were the March 28, 2007 report of the Task Force on Experiential Learning chaired by Cherrie Kassem¹, and the June 2, 2003 report of the Experiential Learning Task Force co-chaired by Ellen Kaiden and Carol Morrison. We also examined models of Experiential Learning at other colleges and universities, and we reviewed current scholarship on Experiential Learning in higher education. After some discussion, and with a focus on our specific charge, we came to the following revised definition of experiential learning:

¹ [Appendix 2B from "General Education 2006-9"](#)

At Ramapo College, experiential learning is a purposeful process of engaged, active learning and reflection guided by faculty and staff in which the student develops knowledge, skills, and/or values, from direct experiences in hands-on settings. In all cases experiential learning should be extended, formalized, and include an application of theory to practice.

This definition informs the Standard for Experiential Learning Activities that appears as appendix A and that we recommend as the basis for determining whether a learning activity qualifies as experiential. In considering the question of how to define “extended,” we agreed that this particular requirement may be satisfied if a learning experience is either extended over a relatively long period of time, or immersive for a shorter period of time.

For the work of refining the institutional goals and outcomes for experiential learning, we consulted the “Curriculum and Assessment” page of the Provost’s website and the glossary of the current strategic plan. We also consulted the June 2013 Experiential Learning Assessment Report of the General Education Curriculum Committee (GECCo), which lists four “components of the Experiential Learning Student Outcomes,” as follows:

1. Construct and enhance practical skill sets by applying theoretical knowledge and conceptual understanding in authentic environments.
2. Identify how prior knowledge, skills, and conceptual understanding have been applied to their experiences and how their experiences will enhance future academic study and personal, professional, and civic development.
3. Reflect on their experiences individually and collectively by contextualizing assumptions and hypotheses about their knowledge, outcomes of their decisions, and actions they have taken, and by sharing their insights.
4. Understand and articulate the structure, relationships between, and impacts of the multiple communities and organizations with which they interact.

Given the elements of our new definition of experiential learning, we concluded that the college should proceed with three outcomes in mind, not four. Thus, through their experiential learning activities, students will be able to:

1. Identify how academic content and concepts apply to their experiential activities and how these activities will further their academic study and personal, professional, and civic development.
2. Critically reflect on their experiential activities in a formal way—either orally or in writing—in order to assess their assumptions, identify the outcomes of their decisions, consider alternative courses of action, share their insights, and demonstrate the integration of theory and practice.
3. Where relevant, demonstrate and articulate an understanding of the structure, relationships among, and impacts of the communities and organizations with which they interact.

In addressing the third part of our charge, and based in part on the previous studies of experiential learning at the college, we agreed that the following learning activities *could* meet the goals and outcomes of experiential learning, provided that the activity fully met the definition about, and the Experiential Learning Activity Standard:

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|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Alternative spring break | Service learning |
| Capstone courses | Student/faculty research |
| Clinicals | Studio courses |
| Co-ops | Study abroad |
| Fieldwork courses | Training |
| Independent study courses | Upper-level laboratory courses |
| Internships | |

Any plan that would enable 90% of undergraduate programs to require an extended experiential learning activity by 2018 would need to address three main areas.

First, the plan would have to establish a process for programs to identify and ratify which of their current learning activities meet the definition and learning outcomes indicated above. To do this, we recommend that each major program, and the Teacher Education program, detail each of its learning activities that seem to fulfill the criteria and learning outcomes of experiential learning. After this initial identification, a new unit-level Experiential Learning Committee would review each summary to confirm that the standards are achieved. The committee would then communicate its findings to the appropriate Dean and the Registrar. This committee would also be responsible for ensuring that future learning activities (including, for example, new courses) are similarly evaluated to meet the standards. To guide this work, we propose the Experiential Learning Activity Standard, which appears as Appendix A.

Second, it would have to provide for a common means for recording any experiential learning activity undertaken by a student to meet the program requirement. Because the strategic plan calls for major programs to require an extended experiential learning activity, it is important that this activity be recorded in the student degree evaluation. It might also be beneficial to the student to have this activity recorded on the transcript as well. Our recommendation is that the degree evaluation include a new "Experiential Learning Activity" field that shows the requirement as "met" or "not met." All courses that satisfy the requirement will then be coded in Banner so that the requirement shows as "met" when the student registers for that course. Any learning activity that meets the requirement but that is not credit-bearing will be coded individually once the activity is both approved by the convener and dean and completed. Finally, it might also be desirable to record any additional experiential learning activities pursued beyond the program requirement. This might be done on a co-curricular (rather than academic) transcript.

And finally, it would have to devote the appropriate resources to the administrative and instructional costs associated with an increase in experiential learning activities. Among these costs would be those associated with the following activities: additional off-campus site development; student placement and orientation; student, faculty, and staff travel to off-campus sites; student supervision; guided reflection, evaluation, and assessment sessions; and recording of activities. The increase in these activities might require the hiring of additional

personnel, increased funding for independent study and co-op supervision, and an increase in “in-load” faculty supervision of student experiential learning.

Before this new initiative in experiential learning at Ramapo is launched, we recommend that clear policies and procedures are in place for ensuring the proper administrative and curricular oversight of all experiential learning activities, and for recording those activities. These policies and procedures should also make clear the lines of authority and responsibility for meeting the college’s strategic goal. Finally, we recommend that issues concerning the availability and cost of transportation to off-campus activities are thought through and addressed to the extent possible.

Appendix A

Standard for Experiential Learning Activities

At Ramapo College, experiential learning is a purposeful process of engaged, active learning and reflection guided by faculty and staff in which the student develops knowledge, skills, and/or values, from direct experiences in hands-on settings. In all cases experiential learning should be extended, formalized, and include an application of theory to practice.

1. The learning activity primarily involves engaged, “hands-on” learning.
2. The learning activity is accompanied by regular and formalized reflection that considers both the process and the outcome of the activity.
3. The learning activity is guided and/or supervised by a faculty or staff member.
4. The learning activity is designed to develop knowledge, skills, and/or values that are meaningful and applicable in real-world settings.
5. The learning activity constitutes a minimum of 45 hours of work and reflection.
6. The learning activity is formalized through pre-approval by the relevant convener, through any needed orientation and training, through faculty and/or staff supervision, through regular reflection, and through recording on the student transcript.
7. The learning activity requires an explicit application of theory to practice.

For more detail on the standards for experiential learning activities, see “Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities,” published by the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) at <http://www.nsee.org/8-principles>. This document is based in part on that report.

Appendix B

Glossary of Terms

This glossary is based on information we have been able to gather from the Ramapo College website and from discussions with faculty, staff, and administrators. It is intended to be descriptive rather than comprehensive.

Alternative break – The [Civic & Community Engagement Center](#) hosts alternative breaks for both winter and spring. Students can work doing community service such as caring for animals, maintaining agricultural fields, planting trees in villages and at local schools, painting projects, engaging in environmental and social issues, and building houses for those in need. Past alternative breaks have taken place in Aranjuez, Costa Rica, Asheville, NC, Albuquerque & Abiquiu, NM, and Sea Bright, NJ.

Capstone courses – A capstone course is the culminating class of a degree, usually taken during the senior year. In a capstone course a student integrates knowledge gained during the student's course of study, incorporating the discipline's primary modes of inquiry into a final major paper or project that is consistent with the best practices of the discipline. At Ramapo, capstone courses are distinguished by a 400-level course number designation.

Clinicals – Clinicals are required in the Nursing Program. Students in the generic nursing program spend a large amount of their clinical time at The Valley Hospital which is designated as a Magnet Hospital by the American Nurses Credentialing Center. Clinical affiliates include other local magnet hospitals as well as local community agencies. Students in the RN to BSN and the MSN programs complete their clinical requirements at a variety of hospitals and clinical settings throughout the state. Each clinical site is chosen to provide the best educational experience possible.

Co-ops – (See also Internships) Co-ops – short for Cooperative education programs – refer to paid full-time work opportunities that last from three to twelve months, during which students do not attend classes. The goals for co-ops are for students to gain real-world experience in work positions that are relevant to and supplement their academic studies, interests, and career goals. Co-ops can be both in the public and private sectors. Co-ops are 2 or 4-credit formal academic courses in which students complete either 120 or 240 hours of work experience, respectively, at the internship or co-op site. The program integrates academic assignments and on-campus work with a faculty adviser with supervised off-campus work experience at the co-op. Co-ops are currently required by several majors including Communication Arts, Music and International Business.

Fieldwork courses – These are courses that require time outside the classroom working in settings that relate directly to the course (schools, programs for children with special needs, hospitals, senior citizen residences and day programs, hospices, community agencies, outpatient clinics, mental hospitals, forensic settings, community agencies, and visits to the New Jersey Bar Association and the County Courts.) Time in field courses can range widely from a few hours a week to full-time (five days a week.) Fieldwork courses are required or offered in various programs including Teacher Education, Psychology, Social Work, Sociology and Law and Society.

Independent study courses – An independent study is a credit-bearing course that is focused on original scholarly research. The independent study is arranged on an individual basis between student and professor. The topic of the independent study is based on a student’s learning track. Usually students will complete the independent study in their junior or senior year. The expectations will vary across disciplines, but all independent study students will work closely with their professors to produce a major piece of scholarship.

Internships – (See also Co-ops) Internships, while similar to co-ops, are usually done in conjunction with classes during the semester, or separately during the summer. Internships can be paid or unpaid, and full or part-time. The goals for internships are for students to gain real-world experience in work positions that are relevant to and supplement their academic studies, interests, and career goals. Internships can be both in the public and private sectors. At Ramapo, internships are considered informal and self-directed by the student, and they do not count for course credit.

Service learning – Service learning is an integral part of Ramapo College’s commitment to student engagement and community involvement. The Civic and Community Engagement Center offers a number of service learning opportunities. Each academic year, students contribute their time, energy and skills at a wide variety of community partner organizations and with people from equally diverse backgrounds through their participation in the program. Several faculty members participate in the program by offering service learning in their courses.

Student/faculty research – This is collaborative research done by a faculty member and students and presented at Ramapo College and at conferences. All the schools at Ramapo promote undergraduate research. Every year, students receive faculty-student research awards to recognize excellence in undergraduate research. Often, Ramapo students present the results of their research at local, regional, and national conferences, author papers, and engage in other activities that will prepare them for the next stage in their lives.

Studio courses – Studio courses are courses offered primarily in Contemporary Arts that are experiential by design and complement the student’s learning in other courses in the discipline. In studio courses, through class time and assignments, students develop the skills to express themselves as artists and build their artistic practice through an exploration of art-making strategies that provide students with direct experience with instruments, materials and technology, and which concentrate on the interaction of form, content, and technique and an understanding of the history of the medium(s). Emphasis is on students executing, understanding and discussing quality craft, and productive conceptualization and creative problem solving. Feedback is often given through individual as well as group critique. There are both lower and upper-level Studio courses; there is agreement among Contemporary Arts faculty that only upper-level courses should count for fulfilling an experiential component.

Study abroad – Study abroad programs are designed to supplement on-campus courses, and to enable students to have international, intercultural, and interdisciplinary experiences outside of the classroom so they can fully understand the principles, concepts and theories presented in the classroom. Currently, there are over 500 program options in over 60

countries on all continents. Opportunities are available for every major and generous scholarships are available.

Training – Training is noted in the college’s Strategic Plan as an example of extended experiential learning. Training is an inherent and integral part of many experiential learning activities including co-ops, internships, service learning, and student teaching.

Upper-level laboratory courses – These are upper level 300 & 400 lab science courses. All of these courses in TAS involve experiments that may need multiple lab sessions to complete. These experimental courses may involve more advanced concepts and introduce students to more complex instrumentation and experimental and data analysis techniques than in lower-level laboratory courses.