

# Experiential learning: An innovative way to bring success in the future endeavors of transfer students

Katia Maxwell | Shannon Pittman

Athens State University, Athens, Alabama, USA

## Correspondence

Katia Maxwell, Athens State University, Athens, Alabama, USA.

Email: [katia.maxwell@athens.edu](mailto:katia.maxwell@athens.edu)

## Abstract

The world of Higher Education has been evolving for some time. From only offering classes in a traditional face-to-face format, to correspondence classes, higher education now has the ability to teach fully online courses and programs. However, no matter how classes are taught, the primary goal in Higher Education has always been to educate students. Students have also changed from those of the generation that make up the majority of the current teaching faculty. Current traditional students grew up with technology, and many do not know what life is like without it. For this reason, faculty have to be more intentional with their content. One way to do this and to re-emphasize the theoretical and conceptual knowledge that they have learned is through High-Impact Practices. Athens State University developed the Experience|Success initiative which focuses on providing students with Experiential Learning activities using High-Impact practices.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education has been evolving. From only offering classes in a traditional face-to-face format, to correspondence classes, all the way to today's world impacted by a pandemic that required everyone to teach fully online. No matter how classes are taught, there has always been a single goal – to educate students. Today's students today have also changed and so have the ways in which they learn. Current traditional students grew up with technology, and many do not know what life is like without it. But most faculty did not go through their college or university experience in the same ways. For many faculty who still remember using “card catalogs” in the library or main-frame computer systems, the new and ever-changing technologies have shifted how faculty teach. For this reason, faculty have to be more intentional with designing and teaching their courses now that information (and misinformation) is easily accessible at students' fingertips. To keep students engaged in their courses it is important to help them understand the importance of and application of what they are learning. One way to do this and to re-emphasize the

theoretical and conceptual knowledge that they have learned is through High-Impact Practices (AAC&U, 2022).

The Association of American Colleges and Universities have identified eleven practices that are considered to be High-Impact Practices (Kuh, 2013). These practices are based on evidence of significant educational benefits for students who participate in them. This is especially true for groups that are historically underrepresented, which happens to be a demographic population that Athens State University serves. The High-Impact Practices that have been categorized by AAC&U are:

- capstone courses and projects,
- collaborative assignments and projects,
- common intellectual experience,
- diversity/global learning,
- ePortfolios,
- first-year seminar and experiences,
- internships,
- learning communities,
- service learning and community-based learning,
- undergraduate research, and
- writing-intensive courses.

With these eleven practices in mind, Athens State University began the Experience|Success Initiative which focuses on Experiential Learning (EL). In addition to this initiative focusing on high-impact practices, it also allows for diversity, equity, inclusion and justice to be integrated into the activities that provide experiential learning and has allowed for Athens State University to begin two new programs to create learning communities for students. One of these programs is the Bonner Leaders program and the second is an Honors program. This chapter outlines details about the Experience|Success initiative, how DEI is an important fact of select activities, and lastly, how the institution is building community through two newly established programs.

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: THE EXPERIENCE|SUCCESS INITIATIVE

Many institutions of higher education are taking the traditional hands-on learning approach that is common within science programs and applying those concepts in different fields. David Kolb (2007) has established an approach to understanding different ways of learning that is made up of four stages. The first stage consists of the student actively participating in an experience, the second stage comes after the experience when students reflect upon what they have just done, the third stage allows students to think of ways that the experience could be improved, and the last stage consists of knowledge learned from the experience, reflecting on the experience, and analyzing ways to make it better to actually improve the experience (Kolb, 2007).

Athens State University has several faculty members that have embraced integrating opportunities into their courses in order for students to obtain practical skills that will help them in their careers of choice after graduation. Many faculty, however, did not initially identify what they were doing as being an Experiential Learning high impact practice. As part of our institution's Quality Enhancement Plan required by our institutional accreditor, Experiential Learning became our focus. The Experience|Success initiative not only provides students with experiential learning opportunities but also provides professional development for our faculty. These professional development activities introduce faculty

to best practices and ways to track what is being done so that faculty are able to learn from it through the institutional reflective assessment process.

The goal of the Experience|Success initiative is to increase the number of experiential learning opportunities in each program, connect these EL activities directly to the student's program of study and career path, and to strengthen students' ability to transfer the knowledge, skills, and abilities from the EL activities into those chosen career paths. The initiative provides a vehicle for broad-based involvement in the design and implementation of a university-wide effort to ensure that graduates are equipped with a strong set of competencies for their chosen careers. The EL initiative demonstrates a shift in the university's culture as the initiative itself and the evidence of its work will be mutually reinforcing.

The first step in the Experience|Success initiative was for Athens State to define Experiential Learning. At Athens State University, Experiential Learning is a process through which students develop knowledge, skills, and values by applying theory and academic content to real-world experiences within the classroom, community, or workplace. Experiential Learning encompasses internships, undergraduate research, expeditions, community service, and other creative and professional work experiences.

With a definition and method to collect faculty feedback in place, Athens State identified five categories of experiential learning activities successfully taking place on campus. Those categories are: (1) Workplace Learning, (2) Learning through Research, (3) Hands-on learning, (4) Learning through Expeditions, and (5) Community-Based learning. Each of these five categories will be further discussed with examples of how faculty have embraced and integrated these activities into their courses in *Transferring Classroom Experiences to Practical Career Needs – Chapter 2*. In addition, the process of developing experiential learning activities allowed faculty to carefully consider how to integrate these EL activities into required course curriculum to support diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

## DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND JUSTICE

Athens State University is Senior Institution which is an upper division institution where students must transfer in at a Junior or Senior standing. Athens State also offer graduate courses in some programs but is primarily an undergraduate institution. As such, Athens State primarily serves non-traditional transfer students who have families, are trying to finish a degree that they had previously started elsewhere, are currently employed, and some are choosing a career change. As Athens State has developed its mission and vision, and recognizing the changing modalities for teaching and learning, the institution recognizes that it must provide online students the same opportunities that traditional, on-ground students have. Of course, by definition, online students will have often different experiences than students who attend a traditional class but part of the challenge in today's higher education experience is to find ways to make sure that all students with the same learning opportunities and are meeting the same learning outcomes. The modality in which a course is taught should not impact the overall learning experience that a student is able to have. Whether a student takes a class online or in person, they will have learned the same content and have the same skillsets at the time of graduation.

When it comes to diversity, equity, inclusion, justice (DEIJ), and Experiential Learning (EL) there is no "one size fits all" approach. This means that providing EL opportunities requires a constant process of reflection on the activity so that it remains relevant and inclusive for all. Here, one faculty member describes this process:

Personally, I teach Computer Science and Information Technology classes. A couple of my classes include projects that are of an EL nature. These classes

are usually in the area of community-based learning where we partner with a community organization where students will create some type of software for them. Most of the time it's re-designing and redeveloping a website; however, there have also been applications that have been developed, and cybersecurity analysis that have been done. All of these project partnerships are vetted by the faculty members and a meeting between organization and faculty is held to be sure that the organization understands the goal of the project partnership and that the requirements are not beyond the abilities of the students.

Recently, I taught a class where I had a couple of students that were already in their careers (10+ years) but they started before their organization required a Bachelor's degree and now they are back to finish what they started. In the same class I had students who had just finished their first 2 years at a community college and had transferred to finish their degree with us. Throughout the semester students are taught the skills that they are required to have to be able to work on the partnered community project, and throughout their time working on the project they are able to ask questions of the faculty member with any items in which they may need additional assistance with. No matter where the student is in their career outside of the classroom, they all must participate and complete the project given to specification.

This type of class activity can be very controversial, because the project sponsor does have to sign legal paperwork where anyone affiliated with the project cannot be held liable for anything that may go wrong, and students do have to sign over their intellectual property rights to the sponsor of the project. One of my students who had more experience in the class saw the project as providing "free work" to the non-profit that we had partnered with. And, he was not wrong – this type of activity is essentially unpaid work that our students are doing for an organization. While he never raised any issues, he shared some comments in a course survey. At the end of the experience he had to compare skills, knowledge, experiences, and abilities from before beginning the project and the end of having had it accomplished. Below is an excerpt from the reflection that he submitted.

"I really did not know what to expect coming into this project. In the real world, I do not believe I have ever been in a situation where I worked to create a deliverable for a client before. In a school setting this assignment sounded even stranger, like homework that's kind of also unpaid labor for a business. After doing the work I do see the value in an assignment like this for an aspiring web developer about to graduate without much of a body of work or resume to speak of. That doesn't apply to me personally, but there are still things I can gain from this experience."

While he initially did not see the value of the project, at the end of it he did share that he saw the value in having it in the class especially for those students who were not as experienced or set in their careers as he was. Even with this he also shared that he was able to learn about himself, and his work ethics due to the fact that he did have to work directly with a "client" and that was not part of his daily task at his place of employment. One of the things that is extremely

important for a faculty member to do is to emphasize to students the importance of the project and the experience that can be gathered from it not just to those who may not have the opportunity to participate in an internship or co-op course to gain some real world experience before graduation, but there are things that students who are already working in the field, such as this student, may learn about themselves.

This faculty member's experience is important because it emphasizes the fact that faculty members need to regularly reflect on what they are teaching and how students perceive and understand their learning experiences. Faculty must determine ways of how to obtain information from students based on their honest thoughts and experiences with the learning activity.

At Athens State, there is an Experiential Learning Activity Survey that students are asked to complete. The results of the surveys are submitted to the faculty anonymously so that faculty have the opportunity to reflect on the activities that are provided to students. Part of the information collected is demographic which allows for the institution to do cluster grouping analysis that provides more detailed information about what is working.

In addition to DEI, justice has been an area of research associated with experiential learning opportunities and being able to identify ways to provide justice teaching to students. Two areas that students can be given the challenge to think about justice are those in community-based learning, and also learning through expeditions. If students participate in activities that have a focus on society, they can then be asked to reflect on the concept of justice. In study abroad programs, students have the opportunity to be able to see how others live and reflect on how cultural differences may impact justice. Peterson (2002), in discussing learning with justice, stated that

“Students must be continually pushed to think of how their own lives relate to the conditions that they are studying. What does a commitment to justice and sustainability imply for their future roles as consumers, as citizens, as parents, as professionals?” page 202.

At Athens State University, it is critical that DEI is in the forefront of everything. Athens State is in a geographic location within the state of Alabama where there are many historically underrepresented individuals. And, while the institution has the lowest tuition rates in Alabama, many students attending the University may first be interested in the institution because of the lower cost of tuition. The fact that the institution is also an upper division institution requires it to be creative and think outside the box on how to teach courses and provide students with the same opportunities that they would have from a traditional 4-year institution. Not only does Athens State University recognize the diversity of its students, but faculty also need to recognize how different a student's “home life” may be. The demographics of Athens State University shows a portion of students that are non-traditional with families and full-time employment. In addition, some students that might be considered traditional college students that began their freshman year immediately after high school and have transferred from a Junior College or another 4-year institution. These students will all be taking courses together, and no matter the modality of teaching a course, every student should have the opportunity to have the same experiences as others. Being able to integrate Experiential Learning activities into the curriculum allows faculty to provide all students with an opportunity that they may otherwise not be able to obtain if that student is not able to take on extracurricular activities or participate in field trips that will allow for further reflection on society and cultural.

While experiential learning is widely regarded to be a high-impact practice, the way in which it is implemented can create a significant disparity in its success. Faculty need to have ways to increase their awareness of strategies for creating more DEIJ learning and engagement for their students. While surveys are one option, support for professional development is extremely important, and professional development is not just something to be provided to faculty and staff, but even students have an opportunity to participate through two special programs that have been created through the Office of Experiential Learning and Special Projects.

## LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Not only are students able to participate in High-Impact practices in the classroom but they are also able to participate in these activities outside of the classroom and through special programs that allow for the student to build a community with each other by sharing experiences together. The key goal of learning communities is to have students consider solutions to complex problems that impact their communities and how they may be able to make an impact in improving their communities. Normally a learning community will consist of a major project that the cohort of students that start the program together will work on together. While Athens State is not a traditional residential campus, students still can participate in specific learning communities.

### Bonner leaders program

The Bonner Leader Program ([www.bonner.org](http://www.bonner.org)) was incorporated into the Experiential Learning umbrella at Athens State as a program that provides students with the opportunity to participate in Community-Based Learning. It is considered a fellowship program for students who have a financial need, exhibit a capacity for leadership development and show an interest in community service. Bonner Leaders go through professional development activities to build their leadership skills and focus on giving back to the community which provides students with a foundation for citizenship, work, and life. Students that are accepted into the program are asked to complete an application that requires them to reflect on service to their community that they have been a part of, a problem/issue that their community faces that they would like to help make a positive impact on, and also their experiences in working with others as part of a team. The students are accepted into the program on a cohort level, they are required to individually work a minimum of 8 h a week volunteering in the community, and dedicate 2 h a week to leadership training and fellowship with their cohort. Each cohort also has the opportunity to select a “big picture” project that they would like to work on together. This can be anything from a food drive for the local food bank to organizing a full community event that ends up turning into a yearly event.

### Honors program

The Honors Program at Athens State was designed for high-achieving students wanting to enhance their academic experience by becoming part of an interdisciplinary community of peers committed to intellectual inquiry and lifelong learning. Honors Program students are matched with a Faculty Supervisor and are provided with support to complete a research or creative work project over the course of three semesters, which allows them to deepen

their academic experience through project-based learning. Often, students are unable to participate in project-based learning activities because of financial concerns and the Honors Program provides funding to support materials for student research projects and for student travel to conferences.

Students engage in and receive peer support through cohort meetings led by Honors Program faculty, and students are also given the opportunity to attend off-campus cohort building trips that expose students to new places and ideas. Honors Program students additionally work together to give back to the community through community service projects and organizing on-campus diversity and inclusion events. The Honors Program seeks to empower students as citizens of a global community.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the modality in which higher education institutions are offering classes must evolve along with students' learning evolutions. Not only the way that each student is taught, but the activities that are provided for them to be able to learn the skills that they need to be successful in their careers. Athens State University began an initiative to streamline the opportunities that students have through the offerings of experiential learning activities in the classroom. However, this focus recognizes how much bigger this initiative can grow. Athens State faculty and staff are able to not only give students the opportunity to practice the skills that will be essential in their careers but also can bring awareness about diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice across the entire academic curriculum. Athens State has been able to develop programs that have allowed for a continued focus on building learning communities for all students. These are ongoing lessons that faculty are now able to reflect on, and begin to work through how to improve the educational journey for all students through the different opportunities and programs that are available to them.

## REFERENCES

- American Association of Colleges and Universities. (2022). *High-Impact Practices*. <https://www.aacu.org/trending-topics/high-impact>
- Kolb, D. A. (2007). *The kolb learning style inventory*. Hay Resources Direct.
- Kuh, G. (2013). *Ensuring quality and taking high-impact practices to scale*. American Association of Colleges and Universities.
- Peterson, C. F. (2002). Preparing engaged citizens: The models of experiential education for social justice. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 8(1), 165–206.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Katia Maxwell**, Ph.D is the Director of Quality Enhancement Planning and Associate Professor of Computer Science at Athens State University

**Shannon Pittman**, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Biology at Athens State University

**How to cite this article:** Maxwell, K., & Pittman, S. (2022). Experiential learning: An innovative way to bring success in the future endeavors of transfer students. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2022, 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20514>