

# Experiential Learning at UNL

Developed by the Academic Solutions Council

August 2, 2021

## Summary

To meet the goal of the N2025 strategic plan to “equip students for their future by including experiential learning for all Nebraska students,” the Academic Solutions Council (ASC), in consultation with campus stakeholders during AY 20-21, has developed a proposal for implementing a campus-wide experiential learning (EL) requirement. This document provides information for college faculty, curriculum committees, and university leadership about the proposed EL requirement. It describes a rationale for EL, an EL institutional definition, and types of activities that might qualify as EL for the proposed requirement. It further outlines a process by which colleges are being asked to approve the proposed degree requirement, followed by information about how EL courses will be identified and tracked. An appendix provides the guiding principles upon which these proposed processes were developed.

To develop this proposal, ASC members participated in two retreats and additional meetings with representatives from Student Affairs and the academic colleges, the four faculty co-chairs of the N2025, and the director of experiential learning at the University of Georgia, which requires EL for all its undergraduates. Beyond providing this summary document, ASC members are available to meet with college curriculum committees or faculty to answer questions.

## What Is Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). It is based on the principle that the most powerful learning happens when there is a greater connection between the knowledge and skills learned in classrooms and the real-world experience gained outside the classroom (Kuh, 2008). The impact is greater when the two kinds of learning occur reciprocally and cyclically, becoming deeper and more integrated (Brown & Adler, 2008). Experiential learning enables students to transfer knowledge and skills learned in classrooms into real-world problem-solving contexts, which leads to life-long, self-directed, deep, and integrated learning (Ambrose & Poklop, 2015). Experiential learning entails experiencing (concrete experience), reflecting (reflective observation), thinking (abstract conceptualization), and acting (active experimentation), providing opportunities for students to reflect intentionally on their learning and its relevance to their career and life goals (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). This process is typically illustrated as a cycle rather than a discrete set of sequential steps, as seen, for example at:

- <https://experientiallearninginstitute.org/resources/what-is-experiential-learning/>
- <https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>

Experiential Learning may happen in the context of a credit-bearing, academic course or in co-curricular experiences that may take place outside the normal academic context (e.g., internships, service learning, study abroad). Thus, we propose that regardless of context or content, courses and co-curricular activities approved for UNL's EL requirement should include all of the following elements of the experiential learning cycle

- **Concrete experience** – the student encounters a new situation or experience
- **Reflective observation** – the student reflects on the experience through self-assessment and communication
- **Abstract conceptualization** – the student connects or applies the experience to existing abstract concepts or frameworks, which provides an opportunity to generalize learning and formulate new questions
- **Active experimentation** – the student applies new ideas to the world around them, through activities such as problem solving, decision making, design, creative activity, research, or simulation, often resulting in new concrete experiences

## Defining EL at UNL

Drawing upon the above definitions, we are proposing that EL courses that fulfill the undergraduate requirement should either occur in a real-world context or intentionally provide explicit contexts where the student can connect the experience with the real world and the concepts learned in their other coursework. To ensure that colleges have the autonomy to define what counts as EL in their own courses and co-curricular opportunities (see appendix A: guiding principles), existing academic courses that use the Experiential Learning model will be identified by the curriculum committee in the college where the course is offered (for more details see below). Examples of course types that may meet EL requirements (assuming they contain the above elements) include, but are not limited to the following: research, field studies, case work, practicums, student teaching, and study abroad. Co-curricular activities that include the EL elements will be documented through 0-credit courses that either already exist or will be created for this purpose, and may include activities such as internships, leadership, or community engagement.

A 2021 survey of existing UNL courses that might qualify as EL revealed that most students are already taking a course that would satisfy the proposed requirement. Under this proposal, any EL designated course, regardless of the college or program of the student, will satisfy the undergraduate requirement and be notated as an EL experience on the student's transcript. By providing documentation of this engagement in experiential learning, UNL will make those experiences more visible to students, thus enabling students to better grasp the direct applicability of their studies to their career goals. Each experience, verifiable through transcription, will assist them in articulating the value of their education in ways that can be meaningfully shared with potential employers.

Documenting students' Experiential Learning helps us, as a campus, enhance the relevance of college education to our students' academic and career goals. Although our initial goal is to require

students to take one EL course, providing students with opportunities to experience the EL cycle multiple times within their college years in various depth and breadth will help students better apply and generalize their learning to real-world problems and situations.

## Approval of the EL Requirement

To implement a campus-wide EL requirement, each college will need to approve it for all degrees it offers. Thus, each college is being asked to provide a plan to approve a recommendation for an EL requirement that will go into effect with the 2022-2023 Undergraduate Catalog. Following is guidance on developing such a plan and implementing it.

### Suggested Catalog Language

As the official document outlining degree requirements, the Undergraduate Catalog page for each college will need to be amended to reflect the new requirement. We recommend the following language for approval:

*All undergraduates in the [college name] must take an Experiential Learning (EL) designated course. This may include 0-credit courses designed to document co-curricular activities recognized as Experiential Learning.*

### Suggested Approval Process

It is important that this requirement be consistent across campus to ensure equity in undergraduates' experiences (see Appendix A: Guiding Principles). To achieve this, we recommend the following process for each college to propose and approve the requirement:

1. College curriculum committees review this document and discuss the requirement and suggested catalog language. They are encouraged to invite an ASC representative to offer context and answer questions.
2. The curriculum committees adopt a proposal for vote by the college faculty. If they feel that significant changes are necessary, they should confer with an ASC representative so that ASC can facilitate consistency with other colleges.
3. College faculty approve proposals in meetings in the Fall 2021 semester.

## Identification of EL Courses

Once a college has approved the requirement, that college will identify courses for meeting the EL requirement:

1. Units will be asked to identify courses that best exemplify Experiential Learning and that students are likely to encounter in their degree programs – e.g., courses required by those programs. Colleges may also identify elective courses they offer that also meet the EL criteria. It is not necessary for every course that involves experiential learning be identified for the EL requirement; rather, units should exercise selectivity in order to ensure that the requirement truly reflects experiential learning.
2. Upon approval by the unit, approval of the EL designation for each course will be voted on by the respective college curriculum committee.

3. Upon college-level approval, courses identified through this initial process will be administratively tagged with an EL designator through the University's curricular management system.

Each college will also create a zero-credit course in which students may enroll to document their co-curricular experiential learning activities. Similarly, some university-wide zero-credit courses will be created to capture campus-level experiences (e.g., UCARE, Education Abroad). This will ensure that all students will have opportunities to achieve and document their experiences even beyond those that may already be included in their undergraduate curriculum.

### Ongoing Identification and Approval

After this initial identification phase, faculty who desire either to adapt their course to meet the defined experiential learning opportunities, or to create an entirely new course that meets this objective, will have an opportunity to identify the experiential learning component through a new field to be included in the University curriculum management system (CIM). Approval of such requests will be accomplished through normal curricular approval processes.

### Support for Students

A list of courses identified as counting toward the EL requirement will be maintained on a dedicated website by the Office of Undergraduate Education Programs, providing a resource for students, faculty, advisors, parents, and other stakeholders. In addition, promotion of new EL courses and co-curricular opportunities will be provided at that website, and may be included in digital signage, social media, or through other outreach mechanisms.

### Questions?

For more information, please contact Patty Sollars, [patricia.sollars@unl.edu](mailto:patricia.sollars@unl.edu).

### References

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- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
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## Appendix A: Guiding Principles

In conceptualizing how a transcripted graduation requirement for experiential learning might be implemented effectively and equitably for all undergraduates, we propose the following guiding principles:

- Consistent with the N2025 commitment that each student has the opportunity to co-create their UNL education, the EL requirement should support and enhance students' educational experiences and career and life goals in flexible, diverse, and individualized ways.
- The EL requirement should honor and value the diverse ways that experiential learning takes place across departments, programs, and disciplines. Rather than providing a strict set of criteria for what constitutes EL, each college should have the autonomy to define what counts as EL in its own courses and co-curricular opportunities.
- Units may identify existing courses that already reflect the spirit of the EL requirement or they may develop new courses and opportunities as needed.
- Students may fulfill the EL requirement through any course with an EL designator, including those offered outside of their degree programs or colleges.
- While the EL requirement ensures that each student will complete at least one EL course or co-curricular opportunity prior to graduation, units are encouraged to provide and promote multiple EL opportunities for students as appropriate to the specific discipline.
- Units should work to ensure that EL opportunities are equitable and inclusive for students regardless of financial or social background.

## Appendix B: Academic Solutions Council Members for AY 20-21

Sohrab Asgarpoor, Associate Dean, College of Engineering

Renee Batman, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor

Erin Blankenship, Associate Dean, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

Steve Booton, Registrar, Office of University Registrar

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