

CAREER READINESS

Experiential learning is a core mission at Northeastern University

There's no substitute for experience.

That's pure and simple and widely accepted as fact. However, when experience is discussed in an academic setting, it becomes complicated and often controversial.

Now enter the living, breathing case study that is Northeastern University (NEU), where uniting classroom learning with workplace experience is continuously evolving.

NEU's faculty senate has made experiential learning a required part of the campus-wide "NUcore" curriculum, and it takes effect with the freshman class of fall 2007. This major development comes after nearly a century of deepening roots in cooperation education at Northeastern.

A better way to learn

"We think it's a better way for our students to learn and for the institution to create knowledge," says Susan Powers-Lee, executive vice provost. "Education involving interpersonal communication, analytical skills, teamwork and leadership can be learned in the classroom, but not to the same extent," she adds.

The co-op educational model allows students to alternate periods of academic study with six-month periods of paid, full-time employment related to the student's major or interests. NEU students are encouraged to pursue as many as three experiences which most often involve co-op study. They also may satisfy the graduation requirement through academic internships, service-learning, faculty/undergraduate research, community-based research, study abroad, student leadership development and other related programs.

There is a financial commitment on campus. "It's key to have enough advisors in place," explains Powers-Lee. "There's also the cost of maintaining an academic schedule that allows students to be gone half the year. We need more faculty repeating some upper level courses, about 15-20 percent more sections. That produces smaller, more attentive classes," she notes.

The operations, on campus and off

At the epicenter of NEU's growing experiment is its College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), where academic learning and required experience have been linked for more than ten years. CAS Dean James Stellar has helped double the number of applicants and improve the quality of students from matriculation to graduation.



"American higher education has to come down from its ivory tower and interact with the real world," Stellar declares. He wages his crusade with a special unit within CAS called the Center for Experiential Education and Academic Advising (CEA). CEA enables professionals at other institutions to incorporate experiential learning within their curricula.

"We believe that higher learning involves educating both sides of the brain: one lobe with theory and fact and the other with emotion and logic," Stellar explains. "Academic excellence plus deep experience produce personal transformation."

Arranging co-ops for nearly 3,000 students each semester involves a responsive infrastructure. Included in NEU's Division of Cooperative Education are three departments: Career Services, Cooperative Education, and International Cooperative Education. NEU employs 75 staff members who facilitate student placements among more than 2,000 co-op employers in Boston, across the United States and in many corners of the world.

NEU also enjoys the cumulative benefits that flow from 160,000 area alumni who themselves have first-hand co-op experience. "It's second nature for them to create and manage programs," explains Marian Stanley, NEU's vice president for corporate partnerships. Stanley caters to the increasing number of employers who are building talent pipelines.

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"It's very important to have a highly structured process, and to be able to help employers develop programs," Stanley notes. Meanwhile, employers respond with job offers. Among students who participated in NEU's co-op program last year, 55 percent report receiving at least one full-time job offer from a co-op employer.

Easier said

Some institutions boast an experiential learning requirement as a point of differentiation. You may be familiar with recruiting ads like, "At XYZ University, students earn more than a diploma, they build a résumé."

Northeastern's commitment has more substance. Stellar and NEU host an annual Summer Institute on Experiential Education for visiting deans, directors, faculty, administrators, and their teams. Here's where colleagues roll up their sleeves to develop strategies that strengthen their efforts to integrate and promote experiential learning on their respective campuses.

"Northeastern wants to be a leader in thought, policy and practice," Stellar says. "Teaching other institutions how to do it is a natural extension of our educational mission. We help them develop a strategy to confront change,

minimize cost, and wage a friendly campaign to win the hearts and minds of stakeholders."

Many students also need to change their mindset and values, such as about graduating within four years. "If you ask a Northeastern student when he or she expects to graduate, you'll likely hear a short dissertation about how one experience or another will configure their academic path," says Stellar.

Powers-Lee adds, "More and more students are interested in international options, so we'll need to grow our international units to keep pace with student demands."

"Meanwhile, we must remain curious, puzzled and attentive about practices, about theories of learning, and how institutions can structure themselves to do this. We need more research and practical data to prove ourselves," Stellar says. ■



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