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Dear readers!

It is with great pleasure that I present to you, the Fall 2024 edition of the Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education (JALHE). The publication of this volume (volume 10) is a part of our ongoing mission to celebrate and honor Missouri Western State University's designation as the state of Missouri's institution for applied learning. This volume is dedicated to showcasing the exemplary work being done in applied learning across institutions, and marks an important contribution to the growing body of scholarship dedicated to enhancing student experience through applied learning, which emphasizes the integration of theory and practice. Across institutions, disciplines, and teaching modalities, applied learning continues to transform higher education by fostering meaningful engagement and creating opportunities for students to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts.

I am very proud of the fact that this volume features nine peer-reviewed articles, which is the highest number so far in the history of JALHE! These articles provide innovative insights into applied learning projects within and outside the classroom, and in various research settings, involving faculty, undergraduate students, and their various experiences. A diverse range of practices are showcased through these articles, ranging from experiential learning models, development of new innovative course modules and service-learning, to undergraduate research initiatives, study away programs, etc., each highlighting the dynamic ways in which applied learning enriches both academic and professional development.

The contributions in this volume underscore the critical role of undergraduate students as active participants in knowledge creation and problem-solving. Each article presents not only the successes and challenges of implementing applied learning in higher education but also offers practical recommendations for educators seeking to enhance student engagement and achievement through similar initiatives.

I hope that this collection of work inspires faculty, administrators, and educational leaders to continue exploring and expanding applied learning opportunities. It is my firm belief that by involving students through a variety of applied learning initiatives, we can foster a deeper understanding of their disciplines while preparing them to tackle complex challenges beyond the classroom.

I extend my deepest thanks to all the authors for their contributions, to our peer reviewers, whose careful insights have strengthened the quality of this publication, as well as to the Griffon Office of Applied Learning (GOAL) at MWSU, for help towards the overall publication process. I am confident that this volume will serve as a valuable resource for educators and scholars interested in the transformative potential of applied learning in higher education. #GoGriffs!

Sincerely,

Tilottama "Tilo" Roy,
Editor-In-Chief, JALHE

Undergraduate Research As Applied Learning: Exploring Evacuation Preparedness

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Keywords: undergraduate research, applied learning, experiential learning, mentorship, critical reflection, evacuation preparedness, community resilience

ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of undergraduate research as applied learning, focusing on student researchers' experiences in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and the U.S. Utilizing faculty mentorship and critical reflection, students conducted interviews to assess disaster preparedness and community resilience. The methodology included qualitative interviews and reflective practices. The analysis was guided by theories of experiential learning. Findings reveal that mentorship and experiential learning significantly enhance research skills, cultural awareness, and personal development. The study underscores the importance of integrating experiential learning into education to foster critical thinking. Policy implications suggest that governments should support disaster preparedness and educators should prioritize applied learning initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reports a study within a study. First, it presents a case study on how faculty mentorship of student research serves as an applied learning experience. Secondly, it highlights the results and findings from the students' research.

The project began in spring 2022, during the latter phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. John Fisher, a professor of Emergency Services at Utah Valley University, invited two students, Mary Bennett and Jordan Newman, who were already planning a study abroad trip to the Balkans, to incorporate a research project. He suggested they compare emergency preparedness in Utah with that in Kosovo and North Macedonia. The strategy proved successful, as the students had scheduled their trip, and Dr. Fisher's contacts in North Macedonia and Kosovo helped them select interview subjects, which was particularly beneficial when he was unexpectedly unable to join them.

This paper reviews literature on undergraduate research as applied learning, explores the role of faculty mentorship, and discusses the importance of reflection in research. It outlines the students' research methodology and provides insights from their experiences. The paper also reports on student reflections and analyzes the findings using applied learning theory from the literature review. Additionally, it examines how these findings apply to real-world learning. The paper concludes with a discussion of insights, final conclusions, and recommendations for educators and students interested in using undergraduate research as a hands-on learning experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student research as applied learning is a valuable pedagogical approach that integrates theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Applied learning encompasses diverse methods like undergraduate research, internships, and service learning, providing students with hands-on opportunities to engage in real-world problem-solving. These experiences, supported by faculty mentors, enable students to develop essential skills, including leadership, critical thinking, and collaboration. Reflective practice is also central to student research, allowing students to synthesize their experiences, identify strengths and areas for improvement, and set future goals. This literature review explores the role of applied learning and mentorship in enhancing students' academic and personal growth.

Student Research as Applied Learning

Studies have yielded noteworthy discoveries about undergraduate research as a form of applied learning. Applied learning pedagogies encompass various educational approaches such as study abroad programs, internships, undergraduate research, and service-learning. These methods prioritize individualized outcomes and experiential learning beyond traditional classroom settings (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Additionally, research into the benefits of

integrating project-based learning into interdisciplinary teams showed significant positive effects on students' personal and academic growth (Balleisen, Howes, & Wibbels, 2024). Trolian and Jach (2022) explored the relationship between college students' well-being and their engagement in applied learning activities. As universities increasingly incorporate applied learning into their curricula, undergraduate research stands out as a prominent avenue for students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts (Selznick, Trolian, & Jach, 2022).

The following two examples of student research in applied learning illustrate how research can positively impact students' personal and academic development. Nelson-Hurwitz and Tagorda (2015) developed a project execution course that allowed students to implement applied learning projects by integrating public health knowledge and skills gained during their bachelor's program. Students reflected on and presented their projects in an undergraduate capstone seminar, bridging academic theory with practical experience. Similarly, the Student Organization for the Advancement of Research (SOAR), a student-led initiative at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, facilitated research collaboration between students and faculty. Kepper et al. (2016) noted that over 60% of students were matched with faculty for interdisciplinary projects, and 72% of participants reported improved research skills. Both programs highlight the importance of applied learning in developing research competencies and fostering collaboration in post-secondary education.

Role of the mentor

Faculty mentors are indispensable in the realm of undergraduate research, assuming multifaceted roles that transcend mere supervision. Their contributions encompass a spectrum of services vital for both professional and academic growth. Through guidance, support, and expertise, mentors serve as trusted advisors, offering valuable insights and assistance throughout the research process (Murthy, 2019). They aid in defining research objectives, formulating questions, and developing methodologies, ensuring adherence to ethical standards and best practices. Additionally, mentors facilitate skill development by imparting research methodologies, data analysis techniques, and scientific principles, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities in students (Houser, Lemmons, & Cahill, 2013).

Moreover, mentors play a pivotal role in project supervision, overseeing progress, providing constructive feedback, and assisting in problem-solving. They create a nurturing environment conducive to scholarly exploration and growth, promoting a dynamic learning experience for mentees. In some instances, universities adopt a tiered-mentorship model, where experienced student researchers also serve as mentors alongside faculty members. This collaborative approach enhances peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and fosters a vibrant culture of inquiry and innovation on campus (Redifer, Strode, & Webb, 2021).

Beyond academic guidance, mentors support students in networking,

collaboration, and career development. They facilitate professional connections, expose students to academic communities, and offer insights into career paths and opportunities. Emotional support is also a crucial aspect of mentorship, as mentors provide encouragement, celebrate achievements, and offer solace during challenges.

Mentorship is a reciprocal relationship that requires active involvement from both mentors and students to be effective. Mentored individuals tend to experience higher job satisfaction, stronger professional commitment, and benefits such as improved performance evaluations and faster career progress. At the same time, mentors gain satisfaction from nurturing future leaders and staying current in their field (Fuchs, 2023). In research-focused mentorship, mentors help students develop research skills, guide project design, provide feedback, and connect them with professional networks. This mentorship can extend beyond the classroom to include study abroad programs, further enriching students' learning experiences (Cababaro Bueno, 2023). Students from Utah Valley University engaged in study abroad programs to Southeastern Europe in multiple years, such as 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019, and 2022. These programs aimed to supplement classroom learning with field experience, focusing on emergency response. Students not only learned from local emergency officials but also shared their knowledge with fellow students, enhancing their own skills while teaching others. This hands-on experience, which involved mentorship, allowed students to refine their emergency response abilities, fostering self-confidence and trust, crucial for effective teamwork and building relationships with those they serve (Dayberry & Fisher, 2023; Fisher, Means, & Corson, 2014).

Reflection

Reflection is a process whereby students make meaning of their experiences. It allows them to analyze and synthesize their thoughts, feelings, and actions, leading to deeper understanding and personal growth. Through reflection, students can identify patterns, challenges, and successes, which enables them to make informed decisions and set goals for future endeavors. This introspective process fosters metacognition and self-awareness, empowering students to become more effective learners and practitioners in their respective fields (Weber & Myrick, 2018).

Maxfield and Fisher (2012) conducted an experiment using reflection techniques among students enrolled in an online Homeland Security course, which adhered to Kolb's four-stage learning cycle (1984). Students engaged in reflective observation to explore the practical application of their newly acquired knowledge in their workplaces. Traditional students were encouraged to relate their learning to prospective work experiences, while non-traditional students utilized their existing work experience to enrich their learning process. The diverse knowledge and experiences of non-traditional students significantly enhanced the learning environment for all participants. To facilitate the

application of learning, the course incorporated various methods, including case studies, reflective papers, simulations and training, role-playing, journaling, and discussions (Jarvis, 2001).

Reflection plays a valuable role in undergraduate research, despite being less commonly used here than in other educational practices like service learning. Emerging research suggests that reflective activities help students process their research experiences more fully and generate new meanings regarding their work. Students can reflect on their research process, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement, enhancing learning and personal growth. Reflection encourages metacognitive thinking, fostering awareness of one's thought processes. Analyzing decision-making, problem-solving, and critical thinking during research aids in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge gained in classrooms and practical application in real-world settings. Through reflection, students can set clear goals for their research journey, whether it's refining skills, exploring specific topics, or pursuing further study. Regular reflection allows students to adjust their approach, seek feedback from mentors, and refine their research strategies. Faculty mentors serve as excellent resources for discussing reflections and planning next steps. Engaging in conversations with them can help shape research paths and goals (Nye et al., 2016; Picardo & Sabourin, 2018; Wilson et al., 2016).

This literature review examines the role of student research in applied learning, highlighting methods like internships and service learning. It emphasizes mentorship's impact on skill development, leadership, and academic growth. Reflective practices further enhance students' learning experiences, fostering personal and professional development through real-world problem-solving opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

This methodology section describes the goals of the student research and the process the students followed in gathering and disseminating information. The student research aimed to enhance understanding of evacuation scenarios and assess preparedness for evacuations. The study involved a comparative analysis between the smaller nations of Kosovo and North Macedonia and the state of Utah in the United States.

The study was guided by two central questions:

1. What conditions precipitate the need to evacuate?
2. How well-prepared are individuals when faced with the actual need to evacuate?

In addition, the student researchers wanted to discover whether participants had prepared a disaster survival kit (also called a 72-hour kit).

The researchers, Mary Bennett and Jordan Newman, remained in Kosovo and North Macedonia for a week following the 2022 UVU study abroad to investigate evacuation preparedness. Mentors Zijavere Keqmezi-Rexhepi and Dr. Muhaedin Bela facilitated interviews in the Balkans. They arranged contacts,

translations, transportation, and accommodation. Prior to the study abroad, the students worked with Professor John Fisher to draft a problem statement, review research literature, establish a methodology, and develop interview questions and a consent form. The research proposal received IRB approval at UVU and in Kosovo.

The researchers aimed to explore individuals' experiences forced to leave their homes, governmental responses to evacuations and refugees, the readiness of government entities and populations for evacuations, and the disaster prevention benefits of such preparedness. They conducted face-to-face interviews and surveys with government officials, educators, students, and civilians in the Balkans and Utah.

The qualitative interviews helped the researchers understand how individuals connect emotions, motivations, and meaning to their disaster experiences. The researchers used separate sets of questions for interviews with government officials and workers versus the general public, former evacuees, and former refugees. Among the 27 interviewees were nine government officials or first responders and 18 evacuees from various disasters such as fires, earthquakes, and war. The researchers conducted most interviews (24) in the Balkans, with three conducted in Utah. The findings in this paper tell the stories of seven women, who were children or young women at the time of the Kosovo War in 1898-1999.

Following their research, Bennett, Newman, and Fisher presented their findings at the Homeland Defense and Security Education Summit in Monterey, California from October 30 to November 2, 2022. Funding for the research and conference attendance was provided by UVU undergraduate and scholarly activity grants. The stories and reflection statements that follow are drawn from Mary Bennett’s honors thesis (2023).

FINDINGS

In the Findings section, the summaries from the interviews conducted by the two researchers are presented first. Afterward, the researchers offer their reflections based on their experiences interviewing individuals in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Utah.

Interview Summaries

During the research, it became evident that both individuals and governments in Kosovo and Northern Macedonia lack the necessary resources, funding, and readiness for disasters. Despite experiencing ethnic cleansing, war, and natural calamities, the people of these areas seem unaware of their responsibility to be prepared, the significance of an evacuation kit, and the need to have one. Only a few individuals expressed intention to prepare kits for their families, with most considering it impractical or unaffordable. However, these individuals exhibit remarkable emotional resilience and take pride in their ability to overcome challenges.

Interviews from Utah revealed a surprising gap between the state's

preparedness claims and actual individual readiness for evacuations. While residents recognized the importance of having emergency kits, they did not prioritize making them. Firsthand accounts, including those from a Public Information Officer, Emergency Manager, and retired Fire Chief, underscored the critical need for both personal and community preparedness in emergencies. A respondent who experienced a house fire emphasized the trauma of being unprepared. The interviews highlighted the vulnerability of unprepared communities and the significant strain this places on emergency responders, stressing the importance of timely communication and local knowledge during evacuations.

Perhaps the real gems from the interviews in Kosovo and North Macedonia were found in the heart-wrenching stories of seven women who evacuated and became refugees during the war in 1998-1999 and the subsequent conflict in North Macedonia (2001). Most of the respondents were young women at the time. Their experiences highlight the fear, trauma, and resilience they exhibited in the face of extreme hardship.

Nora's Story: At 18 Nora with her family and others fled from their homes in Kosovo, living in constant fear of Serbian soldiers. They slept fully clothed, muffled their children's cries, and held secret schooling to avoid being discovered and executed. Her family narrowly escaped execution when a Serbian soldier intervened, delaying their deaths. After guards assaulted women, Nora, her family, and others fled into the mountains, praying they would not be found. The trauma left Nora with severe stomach issues, and although they returned home after two weeks, they lived in poverty for many years.

Rozë's Story: Rozë, hesitant at first, eventually shared her harrowing story of how Serbian soldiers assaulted villagers, segregated men from women, and used children's jump ropes to tie and abuse women. The trauma caused Rozë to miscarry. Despite the trauma, she now keeps supplies prepared for future emergencies, advocating for government education on preparedness.

Agnesa's Story: Agnesa's family fled Kosovo in 1998, moving to Norway. They returned to find their home looted and damaged. Unprepared for evacuation, her family faced immense challenges, including theft and poverty, and they continue to grapple with the lasting emotional and financial trauma.

Prende's Story: Prende's family fled to the mountains to avoid detection. The screams of women haunted them, and upon returning, they discovered their home intact but stripped of personal heirlooms. The loss of these sentimental items left an emotional void that continues to affect her sense of identity and connection to her family's past.

Lumturi's Story: Lumturi and her sister, aged 11 and 8, escaped to Albania with their mother. They endured dangerous conditions and narrowly avoided abduction during the journey. Though they eventually found safety, the journey was perilous and could have been easier with better preparedness.

Orkide's Story: Orkide stayed in her village during the war while her husband and sons hid in the mountains. She and other women supported the men with supplies. Nearby, a massacre of 45 civilians took place, highlighting the

ongoing danger. Her family survived, but the constant threat of death weighed heavily on them.

Fatmirë's Story: During the 2001 civil war in Northern Macedonia, Fatmirë was pregnant and targeted by armed guards who aimed to intimidate her into miscarrying. She lacked evacuation kits and viewed preparing them as impractical. Her sons shared her views, but one acknowledged the potential practicality of emergency preparedness.

These stories collectively demonstrate the overwhelming fear, trauma, and resilience of these women during the conflict. Many lacked the resources and preparedness necessary for evacuation, resulting in lasting physical, emotional, and financial scars. Their experiences highlight the importance of disaster preparedness and the need for education and resources to help communities better cope with emergencies.

Student Researcher Reflections

Reflective statements about the purpose and benefits of the research project reveal profound personal growth and a commitment to making a positive impact. The student researchers were profoundly affected by the stories they were hearing, particularly those of the women they interviewed.

Mary Bennett (2023) expressed how the research broadened her perspective, exposing her to new cultures, languages, and geography. The stories shared during interviews shifted her understanding of what truly matters and underscored the importance of disaster preparedness. As a result of the experience, she pledged to support the people of Kosovo and Northern Macedonia while striving to make a positive difference in her own community and at UVU.

"As we progressed through the study it became evident that we were hitting a saturation point with our data and getting repeated similar answers," Mary stated. "It is very apparent that even though this area has seen war and natural disasters the citizens of Kosovo and Northern Macedonia are not aware of what an evacuation kits is and why it was essential for them to prepare. A small few have said they will prepare kits for their families, but most felt it was impractical or unaffordable. However, it is clear the emotional resilience of these people is very strong, and they are proud of what they have overcome."

Nevertheless, she said she was surprised and disappointed by their initial findings, indicating that most individuals they interviewed in Kosovo and North Macedonia have undertaken minimal or no preparation for emergencies and have given little thought to the importance of being prepared. As one interviewee aptly expressed, "We might perish faster than our pickles." This insight underscores the critical need for enhanced disaster preparedness efforts in both regions, Mary said.

Moreover, Mary emphasized the benefits the project aims to bring to UVU, students, and the community. She highlighted the significance of understanding the importance of emergency preparedness and how small steps can enhance

disaster resilience. Recognizing the comprehensive impact of disaster preparation on individuals, communities, and UVU, she anticipates improved outcomes in disaster prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery.

Similarly, Jordan Newman (in Bennett, 2023) reflected on the profound learning experience gained from the research process, emphasizing a greater appreciation for other cultures and those facing adversity. Newman underscored the research's practical implications in preparing for and responding to disasters, offering recommendations for increased resilience. She said she hopes that governments will utilize the findings in planning and policy development, with UVU, students, and the community benefiting from enhanced disaster preparedness.

"During my time in Kosovo and North Macedonia, I felt deeply touched by the strength and courage of the people I met," Mary indicated. "Hearing their stories of hardship made me both admire their resilience and feel sad for the difficulties they face. I empathize with their struggles and felt a strong connection with them."

Furthermore, she stated: "These experiences made me realize how important it is for communities to be prepared for disasters. I felt motivated to advocate for support and resources to help these communities deal with emergencies better. Overall, my time there reminded me of the power of human resilience and the importance of working together to overcome challenges"

Mary was grateful for the help she and Jordan received. "Throughout our research journey, we were graciously hosted by a Kosovar family in Gjilan, with our host, Zijavere Keqmezi, facilitating many of the interviews and providing invaluable translation and transportation support."

"The goal was to evaluate how levels of preparedness impact families and citizens in these countries, shedding light on crucial insights for future disaster planning and response efforts," Mary stated. In doing this, "we sought to understand their past experiences of ethnic cleansing, wars, and natural disasters and how the level of preparedness affected the families and citizens of these countries."

DISCUSSION

The experiences of the two researchers underscore the value of applied learning, faculty mentorship, and critical reflection. Through their participation in research projects in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and the United States, they exemplified the practical application of theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts. These experiences provided them with opportunities for personal and professional growth while contributing to their academic development.

In Kosovo and North Macedonia, the researchers engaged in interviewing residents to understand their preparedness for evacuation in disaster situations. This hands-on approach allowed them to apply research methodologies, interact with diverse communities, and gain insights into local challenges and resilience strategies. Additionally, they benefited from mentorship from faculty members who guided them throughout the research process, providing support, expertise,

and feedback.

The literature review highlights how applied learning has significant positive effects on students' personal and academic growth (Balleisen, Howes, & Wibbels, 2024; Nelson-Hurwitz and Tagorda, 2015; Kepper et al., 2016). The reflections provided by Mary Bennett and Jordan Newman reveal the deep personal and professional growth they experienced through their research project. As a form of applied learning, this research allowed them to engage directly with communities in Kosovo and North Macedonia, highlighting the power of experiential learning in fostering a deeper understanding of real-world issues. Applied learning in this context provided the students with firsthand experience in disaster preparedness, cultural sensitivity, and community resilience. Through interviews and interactions, they were able to bridge academic theory with practical knowledge, reinforcing the critical role that such projects play in preparing students for professional life.

Mentorship played a key role in guiding their research journey. The support from their mentor and the Kosovar family who hosted them ensured that the students had the necessary resources and cultural context to conduct their research. This mentorship extended beyond academic guidance, providing logistical and emotional support, which is essential for the holistic development of student researchers (Houser, Lemmons, & Cahill, 2013). The collaborative approach (Redifer, Strode, & Webb, 2021), including translation and local insights from their host, enriched the research process, demonstrating the importance of building strong mentorship relationships in applied learning experiences.

Moreover, the researchers participated in reflection activities to analyze their experiences, identify learning outcomes, and set goals for future research endeavors. Reflection enhanced their metacognitive thinking, deepened their understanding of research methods, and facilitated their personal and professional development.

Reflection, as demonstrated by the students, is a critical component of applied learning (Weber & Myrick, 2018). Mary and Jordan’s reflections on their findings, particularly on the lack of disaster preparedness in these regions and the emotional resilience of the communities, reveal how reflection enables deeper learning and personal commitment to effecting change. Mary’s insight into the saturation of data and the recurring themes in interviews illustrates her growing understanding of the research process, while Jordan’s reflections on cultural appreciation and adversity show the value of applying research findings to broader societal challenges.

Overall, their experiences serve as compelling examples of the transformative power of applied learning, mentorship, and critical reflection in undergraduate research. They highlight the importance of integrating practical experiences into academic curricula, fostering mentorship relationships between faculty and students, and promoting reflective practices to enhance learning outcomes.

Both students emphasized the importance of disaster preparedness and the need for greater community awareness and government action. Their reflections reveal a commitment to making a positive impact both locally at Utah Valley University and globally by advocating for policies that enhance disaster resilience. This experience not only equipped them with practical research skills but also instilled a sense of responsibility to advocate for the vulnerable communities they studied.

In conclusion, applied learning, mentorship, and reflective practice came together in this research project to offer profound learning experiences for the students. Their reflections underscore the importance of integrating real-world experiences into academic settings, demonstrating how applied learning can promote personal growth, cultural sensitivity, and actionable insights that contribute to meaningful societal change.

CONCLUSION

The two student researchers learned valuable lessons from their research in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Utah. They gained a deeper understanding of cultural sensitivity and were moved by the emotional resilience of the communities they studied, despite the lack of disaster preparedness. Their experience highlighted the importance of emergency preparedness and inspired them to advocate for greater awareness and action both locally and abroad. Additionally, they recognized the significance of mentorship and collaboration, which played a key role in their research success. Overall, the project fostered personal growth and a commitment to driving positive change.

For educators, the findings stress the importance of experiential learning opportunities, such as research projects and internships, coupled with mentorship to develop critical thinking and research skills in students. Reflective practices can further deepen student understanding and personal growth. Government officials play a key role in promoting disaster preparedness, public education, and resource accessibility. International collaboration is also essential for creating evidence-based policies that tackle global challenges.

Student researchers can use their insights to advocate for policy changes, inform disaster preparedness programs, and engage in knowledge exchange activities. By maintaining adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and an unbiased approach, student researchers can enhance the credibility of their work. This approach contributes to both academic growth and effective, culturally respectful disaster preparedness strategies, making a meaningful impact on global resilience efforts.

While the research conducted by the student researchers provides valuable insights into disaster preparedness and community resilience, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, the study's sample size in Kosovo and North Macedonia may not represent the full range of perspectives in these regions.

Additionally, response bias could have influenced the data, as participants' answers may have been affected by social desirability or cultural factors. The focus on undergraduate researchers' experiences may also limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or contexts. Moreover, relying on self-reported data introduces the potential for inaccuracies. However,

this research serves as an excellent example of applied learning, allowing students to connect theoretical knowledge with real-world experiences. It contributes meaningful insights to disaster preparedness and underscores the need for further investigation. Through applied learning, the student researchers were able to gain hands-on experience, develop critical thinking skills, and make an impactful contribution to the field.

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Appendix A

Control Questions: Government Officials – Assess Level of Evacuation Preparedness

1. What are the current hazards in your area that could affect an evacuation?
2. What are the current policies and procedures to conduct an evacuation?
3. What are the current policies and procedures to accept refugees?
4. What changes have been made to previous plans due to past events?
5. What resources would be provided to citizens in the event of an evacuation?
6. What changes would you make to the current evacuation plan?
7. Do you feel your government is prepared for a possible evacuation?
8. Do you feel your citizens are prepared for an evacuation?
9. What is your definition of a prepared citizen?

10. What are your expectations of your citizens in the event of an evacuation?
11. Do you have designated routes for evacuations?
12. What services and/or resources will be made available to citizens in the event of an evacuation?
13. How will this be communicated to your citizens?
14. What trainings are being done to prepare government officials for an evacuation event?
15. What trainings are being done with first responders in the event of an evacuation?
16. What programs are being used to educate your citizens on evacuation procedures?
17. What activities would you like to conduct to further the preparedness of your citizens?
18. What are the positives and negatives of what you learned from past evacuations?
19. What do you feel is your nation's level of disaster resilience?
20. How do you plan to evacuate your vulnerable populations?
21. Do you have priority populations in an evacuation?
22. Do you use scenario-based training for evacuations?
23. What are your goals and objectives for evacuations?
24. What are your short and long-term goals for evacuations?
25. Do you use performance checks to assess your progress of evacuation preparedness goals?
26. How do you plan to evaluate gaps in your plan, identify solutions, and develop strategies to fill these gaps?
27. How do you plan to recover from an evacuation event?

Appendix B

Control Questions: Citizens – Assess Level of Disaster Resilience and Vulnerabilities

1. Have you experienced an evacuation?
2. What were the positives and negatives of your evacuation experience?
3. Were you directed on where to go during the evacuation?
4. Did you have a predetermined place you would evacuate to?
5. If not, how did you choose where to go?
6. Did you feel prepared for an evacuation?
7. What would you have done differently?
8. What were the things you were glad you did?
9. How do you feel your evacuation experience changed you as a person?
10. Do you feel like you have recovered from this experience?
11. Do you feel prepared now if an evacuation were to happen again?
12. What do you believe is your role as a citizen in an evacuation?
13. What are your concerns if you had to evacuate again?

Sometimes More is More: Adding a Course Manual to Your Syllabus

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ABSTRACT
This article presents a rationale, as well as practical guidelines, for incorporating a "Course Manual" into the standard course syllabus. The primary goal is to simultaneously increase student success and decrease faculty workload. Relevant literature on effective syllabus construction is reviewed. A novel approach, based on the application of lean principles and strategies, is proposed to reduce student frustration and capitalize on intrinsic motivation. Common benefits for both students and faculty are described, and sample content is provided.

It's in the syllabus. For the modern professor feeling exasperated, exhausted, or even just a little snarky, this phrase is available for purchase on coffee mugs, decals, t-shirts, and more. Why is the expression so popular as to have achieved meme status?

First, because it is true.

And second, because that's not good enough

It Is True

A lot of information is "in the syllabus". That's why we say it to students, over and over. In addition to instructor information and course details, the syllabus has become a repository for institutional policies designed to protect against conflict. In my culture, we use the delightful slang-term, Cover Your Ass (CYA), when referring to verbiage designed "to protect [our]selves from possible subsequent criticism, legal penalties, or other repercussions, usually in a work-related or bureaucratic context" (Cover your ass, 2024, para. 1). These policies often "speak" in legalese which is "the formal, technical language of legal documents that is often hard to understand" (Oxford Languages, n.d., para. 1). In sum, much of the syllabus is painfully boring, practically unreadable, and downright adversarial (Wasley, 2008; Singham, 2005).

In addition to institutional intrusions, well-intentioned professors may use the syllabus to offer preventative advice in a desperate effort to dissuade future students from repeating the mistakes of past students. This tendency to add additional helpful admonitions each time a creative student startles us with a novel transgression is referred to as "syllabus creep" (Wasley, 2008).

So, yes, a lot of information is in the syllabus. However, some of the information is important, but only for a few students. Some are important, but only at a later point in time. And some information in the syllabus is probably not important, for anyone, ever.

Not Good Enough

The fact that much important information is "in the syllabus" is not good enough to convince most students to sift through the detritus of legalese, reactive policy, and untimely minutiae (Smith & Razzouk, 1993). While it is satisfying to credit our students with full responsibility for this situation, some professional self-reflection is warranted. D'Antonio (2007) reviewed 400 syllabi and found such a lack of clarity and attention to detail, that she accused faculty of laziness and questioned whether some of us even care about our students. Ouch.

Furthermore, even when it's well-written, by the time administrators, lawyers, and harried professors have had their way with it, the standard syllabus presents as boring, irrelevant, and antagonistic (Singham, 2005). Of course students don't read it. Let's face it, most of us are drowning in the fine-print of contemporary life, much of which we wisely leave unread. Not reading some of the things we are technically supposed to read is a critical life-skill, without which not much of value would get done.

As knowledge workers, we are only effective if others make use of what we contribute (Drucker, 2006). As applied educators, we regularly use the consumer-lens to evaluate our students' work. If our students produce goods or services that clients, patients, or customers wouldn't value, we question the student's performance. If we offer a syllabus that our students won't use, we should question our own performance.

Motivation Matters

Because the syllabus is important, we endeavor to convince, cajole, and even coerce students to read it. We contrive motivators, such as syllabus quizzes, scavenger hunts, and signed attestations (Smith & Razzouk, 1993; Wasley, 2008; Raymark & Connor-Greene, 2002). But this approach tends to amplify an acrimonious climate without actually promoting meaningful recall or usage (Smith & Razzouk, 1993; Wasley, 2008).

I am an educator at heart, but my chosen subject is psychology. Psychological research can inform our efforts to motivate. Research on human motivation has identified an important distinction between intrinsic motivation, which occurs when a person is motivated because they internally value an activity, as opposed to extrinsic motivation, which derives from external pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Research suggests that whenever feasible, we should cultivate intrinsic motivation, because intrinsic motivation leads to increased sustained effort (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This requires intentionality.

Research in the field further distinguishes three subcategories of intrinsic motivation (Howard, et al., 2020):

- "Motivation to Know" leverages scintillating information that people naturally want to learn more about. A syllabus is unlikely to rise to this standard.
- "Motivation for Fun" capitalizes on a sense of excitement or stimulation when engaging with a task. Again…not likely attainable for the act of reading a course syllabus.
- "Motivation to Accomplish" emanates from the sense of fulfillment that flows from trying to accomplish something. The best way to increase this type of motivation is to induce a feeling of competence during the action (Howard, et al., 2020). This is exactly what a syllabus should be doing anyway.

The purpose of this paper is to describe an approach to syllabus construction that is deliberately designed to prioritize student competence and motivation, while simultaneously streamlining faculty workload.

Is Less More?

One might be inspired by the recent resurgence of minimalist design to adopt an extreme decluttering approach and just trash the vast majority of syllabus content, leaving a more manageable product. While this does sound fun, in a reckless sort of way, it is unadvised for several reasons.

First, the problem with "CYA" policies is that they are "only" there to cover your derriere. The problem with eliminating them is that you leave your butt buck-naked. In the modern work environment this state of (un)dress is nearly as imprudent as showing up to work in the nude. In particular, as applied educators, we coordinate innovative, engaged, authentic learning experiences in the interest of better learning. In doing so, we often accrue some elevated risk (Waters, 2020). We have the right to clothe ourselves in a little legalese.

In addition to protecting faculty interests, administrators and students benefit from detailed syllabi, as well. Administrators commonly use the syllabus to mediate disagreements and appeals (Wasley, 2008). And empirical studies indicate that students respond positively to a well-constructed, detailed syllabus (Palmer, et al., 2016; Saville, et al., 2010; Wasley, 2008; Wheeler et al., 2019).

Finally, culling content precipitates a downward spiral of uselessness. The more content you jettison, the less likely the syllabus has the answers students need, so the less competent students feel when using it, so the less they read it, so the more content you delete, rendering it even less likely to meet student need. Less information in the syllabus means less risk management, less clarity and care, and less intrinsic motivation. When it comes to the syllabus, less is just less.

More is More

Instead of less, add more. Instead of creating an important syllabus, and begging students to read it, create a syllabus so absolutely essential that students must read it to participate in class at all. At first, students will use the syllabus because there is no other choice (extrinsic motivation). Over time, the well-designed syllabus increases student competence, which generates intrinsic motivation to keep using it. We'll distinguish this type of syllabus from common practice by referring to it as a "Course Manual." The Course Manual includes more information, but also more thoughtful effort and more organization and care for the student experience.

If we want our students to use the syllabus, we need to make it genuinely **useful and user-friendly** (Waters, 2023). However, syllabi are rarely designed to optimize utilization (D'Antonio, 2007). Sometimes they are barely designed at all. In contrast, a Course Manual is deliberately designed to respond to empirical research on effective syllabus design by:

- Providing and modeling organization and clarity for students (D'Antonio, 2007).
- Avoiding overloading students with too much information early in the term (Smith & Razzouk, 1993).
- Providing robust, transparent activity descriptions, detailed

schedules, and a success-oriented tone (Palmer, et al., 2016).

- Research indicates that following these principles of effective syllabus design yields improved outcomes:
- Reducing student anxiety (Wasley, 2008).
- Encouraging students to approach instructors for help when needed (D'Antonio, 2007; Blowers, 2002).
- Supporting active learning endeavors (Palmer, et al., 2016).
- Reducing the frequency and validity of complaints and appeals (Blowers, 2002).
- Increasing student perceptions of instructor, course, and the syllabus itself (Palmer, et al., 2016).

The difference between a standard syllabus and Course Manual is one of both content and organization. Commonly, standard syllabus content is arranged according to category and incomplete in nature. Policies are front-loaded, assignment requirements are alluded to, specific expectations are hinted at. And the whole thing is presented on Day One of the semester as a massive bolus for students to gulp down in a single swallow. This is poor design, and clearly a waste of time, else faculty wouldn't need t-shirts proclaiming "It's in the syllabus."

In contrast, a Course Manual is designed according to basic lean principles. Simply put, lean refers to a deliberate approach to improving work quality by reducing any wasted efforts. A Course Manual is built on a foundation of two specific lean principles, using two specific lean strategies.

Lean Principles.

Two underlying principles of lean philosophy serve as a foundation for a Course Manual:

- Prioritize the customer experience (George, 2004). If a product or service is not valued by the customer, it is waste. In academia, we have many stakeholders, but for syllabus construction, the key "customer" is clearly the student. We should care about their experience, and model this care for them in the same way we expect them to care for the experience of their future customers, clients, or patients. The standard syllabus is wasteful in two ways. First, it wastes students' time because it's not useful or user-friendly. Second, the standard syllabus risks the further waste incurred every time we lose a student through overwhelm, demoralization, or failure. While our relationship with students is complicated in that we both serve and evaluate them, the simple truth is that if we have no students, we don't get to be educators. Many regions are experiencing a proliferation of educational opportunities along with demographic trends leading to fewer people pursuing these opportunities. Prioritizing the quality of the student experience is good

pedagogy, good modeling, and good sense.

- Improving processes improves quality of service (good for students) while also conserving resources (great for faculty). Making the flow of information through a Course Manual more deliberate and strategic means that students get better value and faculty waste less time dealing with confused students (George, 2003).

Lean Strategies

The under-used syllabus becomes a useful Course Manual when two key lean strategies are employed:

- In service work, creating a knowledge repository is critical to high performance (Price, et al., 2011). This repository should be well-organized, easily accessed, and comprehensive. In this paper, we use the concept of a "One-Stop-Shop" to apply this strategy to syllabus design.
- In any endeavor, we can improve quality of performance by limiting how much work is allowed into the process at a time (George, 2003). Ultimately, by slowing down the flow of material (in this case, information) into a system (i.e. Course Manual), we can produce higher quality outcomes, more quickly. In this paper, we use the concept of "Just-In-Time" (Canel, et al., 2000) to apply this strategy to syllabus design.

By combining the concepts of One-Stop-Shop and Just-in-Time, we create a Course Manual that provides in-depth, detailed information arranged according to the time information is actually needed.

One-Stop-Shop

In my culture, a "One-Stop-Shop" is a marketplace that provides everything one is likely to need on a typical shopping trip. Eggs, bread, socks, onions, soap, pencils, prescription medication, etc. You can get just about everything you need by stopping at just one shop. It's convenient and user-friendly. I use the term "One-Stop-Shop" here to describe a document that allows students to access nearly every detail that faculty are willing to provide to support student success, without having to hunt, skip, or click around to different sources.

The Course Manual should not include actual "readings" (e.g. textbooks, articles), "listenings" (e.g. podcasts), or "watchings" (e.g. lectures, slides). But it should include virtually everything else the professor shares about how to perform effectively in the course, including due dates, instructions, expectations, rubrics, relevant policies, hints, strategies, etc. Task guidelines should be provided in full detail using a clear, predictable structure, such as the TiLT model (Transparency in Learning and Teaching; Winkelmes, 2023). The One-Stop-Shop approach is particularly useful for applied learning activities, which often entail complicated processes over time. Compiling all the critical information into one document serves to 1) reduce the likelihood of a student

mis-stepping, and 2) protect faculty from accusations of negligence if students do mis-step.

Importantly, there should be just one One-Stop-Shop. All the critical information should be in the Course Manual and only in the Course Manual. Redundant information across multiple sources allows the students to squeak by without building the early habit of referring to the Course Manual. For example, if an online discussion board has instructions posted on the welcome page, some students will participate without referring to the Course Manual. Instead, students should have no idea what to do without referring to the Course Manual. The instruction section of a Discussion Board, Drop Box, or Quiz should simply provide clear instructions on exactly where, how, and why to locate the Course Manual. All other instructions should be found in the Course Manual and nowhere else. In a face-to-face course, the Course Manual is reviewed constantly in class to guide daily activities and the introduction of any new tasks. Students quickly come to understand how valuable it is.

Just-in-Time

"Just-in-Time" is a concept originally coined to describe a lean approach to reducing waste in the manufacturing sector (Canel, et al., 2000). Instead of wasting space and resources storing product before a customer has ordered it, Just-In-Time manufacturers maintain readiness to produce the product as it is requested. In our case, we use the concept to design a syllabus that avoids wasting student bandwidth on course details before they actually need them. In contrast to the standard syllabus, Course Manuals are arranged in the same way a student's reality is organized…into units of time with specific tasks for each unit. Instead of flooding students with what feels like "fine print" at the beginning of the semester and expecting them to store it until relevant, the Course Manual offers exactly what students need to know exactly when they need to know it. Information that feels antagonistic or overwhelming at the beginning of the semester suddenly feels relevant and helpful when offered at the right time. For example, the policy on plagiarism is more meaningful the week students start working on their capstone papers; the process for addressing ethical transgressions feels more relevant just before students enter a field placement.

The Course Manual is divided into whatever time units make sense for the curriculum (Days, Weeks, or simply "Modules" with specified dates) and every single item of information that students need for successful completion of the unit is included in a step-by-step manualized guide. Compared to the standard syllabus, the Course Manual offers substantially more information, but presented in manageable bites just when the student needs it.

Sample Format

Obviously, my colleagues in applied education represent a rich and diverse

set of fields and it is impossible to provide examples relevant to all. But here are some guidelines and examples of application.

First Section: Mandatory Syllabus Content. In the first pages, the Course Manual reflects the minimal information required by the institution or profession to meet either of two goals, 1) for students to have a successful first day of class, and 2) for you to meet your "CYA" requirements. That's it. It should be kept to a minimum. Furthermore, this section should be reviewed only to the extent it is actually useful. If a policy must be included but is unlikely to improve student outcomes, you can cursorily mention it. If some content will eventually be important, but not quite yet, then ignore it now and repeat it in a future section of the Course Manual when it is actually useful. If some content is truly valuable on the first day, by all means review every word. Content in this section might include course title, required materials, university mission and policies, links to professional code of ethics, etc.

Second Section: Course Manual. The second section is the actual Course Manual, which should be clearly demarcated and boldly labeled so that students can discern its unique importance. It should provide highly detailed information (One-Stop-Shop) arranged according to the time it is needed (Just-in-Time). Application is discipline-dependent, but an excerpt from an applied learning course is provided here:

Week 3: All activities due midnight Sunday, February 24

All materials and links are in the Week 3 Module in Canvas.

- Attend your site as scheduled.
- Check your Log: You should have at least 15 hours logged by the end of this week. If you are falling behind, contact your instructor immediately for problem-solving.
- As always, if an ethical or safety concern arises at your site, work with your site supervisor to manage the concern and then contact your instructor immediately to schedule a conversation. Remember, you should document the details of any concern in your own notes, but do not include specific information in any email message; we will consult by phone, zoom, or office appointment.
- Read the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct ("Ethics Code") linked in Canvas.
- Watch the Ethics in Action VideoLecture.
- Take the Ethics Code Quiz in Canvas.
    - Purpose: The purpose of this quiz is to familiarize yourself with the ethics code, not to have memorized the code.
    - Task: This quiz is a learning tool; thus it is "open-book" and you are encouraged to refer to the code itself as you are completing it. It is untimed, and you should plan a block of at least one hour. It consists of Multiple Choice, Short Answer, and Short Essay questions. Your instructor is available for assistance with the quiz by email, phone,

zoom, or office hours. If you want assistance before the quiz is due, you need to reach out before Wednesday at 5 pm so we have time to coordinate our calendars.
    - Criteria: Because this is an untimed, open-book quiz, it will be graded rigorously. You should use official terminology from the Ethics code itself, and your essay answers should provide enough detail and explanation for me to know you understand how the concepts are applied. Your work does not need to be professionally edited, but to receive credit, it must be organized and readable enough for me to easily understand. If you wish to refer to a relevant real-world example from your fieldwork in your answers, remember to not include any personally identifying client information. Breaking client confidentiality for this assignment will result in a grade of zero. Don't hesitate to contact your instructor with questions about this!
- Reflect over the next few weeks on the application of the Ethics Code to your own fieldwork. In Week 6, you will participate in a Discussion Board where you will be expected to identify three Ethical Standards from the Code that are the most challenging to follow at your specific site, and explain why you chose them (specific details are in Week 5 of this Course Manual). Spend the next two weeks of fieldwork reflecting on this question so that you are ready to discuss later.

Within this sample, you can see clear instructions and criteria for students, provided exactly when they most need it to be successful. In addition, you find unapologetic "Cover-Your-Ass" content relating to risk management and confidentiality; but while this content may land like "legalese" on the first day, it takes on greater import for any student facing actual issues in the field.

This Seems Like a Lot of Work

Yes. It is a lot of work at first. But once developed, the Course Manual reduces faculty workload by streamlining course preparation and implementation, reducing student confusion and queries, and increasing student competence and confidence. Following are a few of the common benefits to students and faculty.

- Research indicates that a carefully constructed, detailed syllabus yields higher student perception ratings (Palmer, et al., 2016; Saville, et al., 2010; Wasley, 2008; Wheeler et al., 2019), which streamlines faculty tenure and promotion endeavors.
- Once constructed, the Course Manual services does double duty as a student guide and instructor lesson plan. I rely on it just like my students do.
- By only providing information in a single "One-Stop-Shop,"

faculty are less likely to make errors when revising course material. One source of information is simply easier to keep track of.

- Once students understand the import of the Course Manual, they make fewer errors and have fewer queries for faculty.
- Students who are absent have a built-in guide for getting caught up more independently.

A Course Manual supports better risk management by presenting critical information in a format more accessible and more timely. When students do manage to make a poor choice, it is much harder to place the blame on faculty negligence. Eventually, the work invested in a Course Manual yields a better learning experience for students and reduced workload for faculty.

Caveats

The Course Manual is not particularly flexible. Once disseminated, frequent revisions would be disconcerting and confusing. This tool is best used in a structured, well-developed curriculum. The Course Manual reduces student confusion, but not right away. Students who are unaccustomed to truly useful syllabi may need several prompts to access the Course Manual before they are intrinsically motivated to use it. This problem is best ameliorated by simply responding to all queries by showing the students exactly where to find the information in the course manual, rather than answering the question itself. This is an echo of the "It's in the Syllabus" trope, with two critical differences. First, I recommend a respectful, friendly tone, similar to what you would expect your students to use in the field. Second, the Course Manual is intrinsically motivating so that once students start to use it, they keep using it without additional reminders. Students who take multiple courses with the same instructor will start the next term strong. Over time, the positive impact builds on itself for both students and teachers.

Conclusion

A Course Manual, while requiring substantial initial investment of time and energy, can ultimately improve student-teacher relations, enhance student achievement, and reduce the burden of hassles caused by the inadequate organization of standard syllabi.

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The Impact of Applied Learning in Criminal Justice: How Does Visiting an Actual CJ Agency Affect A Student's Career Plan?

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Abstract

The final project/paper for the students of the Introduction to Criminal Justice class at Missouri Western State University is an applied learning activity intended to have students visit the actual worksite of a criminal justice agency to not only learn about the agency and their functions, but to also help them come to know if they really want to major in and pursue a career in criminal justice. Using qualitative content analysis of direct quotes from dozens of these papers over the past ten years, we come to the conclusion that this applied learning visit is very helpful in assisting students to know whether or not a job in law enforcement is something they really want to do.

Introduction

We live in a world where law enforcement is not seen as respectable of a career as it used to be. Stories of police brutality and corresponding images in the news and on social media have increased criticism of police officers. Combining this criticism with efforts in recent years by some city governments to reduce funding for the police agencies has created less appealing career prospects for potential police officers. According to a 2023 report by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, recruitment and retention of police officers is a serious obstacle facing law enforcement administrators today.

A number of states have found that at least twenty-five percent of police officers leave their department within the first eighteen to thirty-six months of employment. Supervisors or field training officers frequently hear the departing officer say "this job is not what I thought it was" (Orrick, 2008, p. 8). Another study of police officer attrition found that, "recruits who self-initiated resignation experienced a conflict between the version of policing embodied in their ideal and the reality of policing in practice" (Haarr, 2005, p. 431).

Undoubtedly, the popularity of police drama shows on television have something to do with the development of these idealized views of policing. Furthermore, police department recruiters, in an attempt to recruit more officers, too often "focus all of their attention on the positive, sensational, or exciting aspects of law enforcement" (Orrick, 2008, p. 10). A 2023 report by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, found that, "these depictions of policing, coupled with the sensationalized portrayals in film and television, do not accurately characterize the realities of a law enforcement career and may attract incompatible candidates or lead to disillusionment of new recruits" (p. 31). The loss of a trained officer is costly to the department both in terms of money and time. Estimates of the cost of losing one qualified and trained officer range from one to five times the yearly salary of the officer (Hilal & Litsey, 2020). Those costs include, "background checks, uniforms and equipment, psychological assessments, medical assessments, overtime, training and administrative costs" (Hilal & Litsey, 2020, p. 73).

Notwithstanding inaccurate portrayals of the work of law enforcement in entertainment media or that can be given by recruitment officers, universities that offer criminal justice degree programs should help potential police officers pursuing a justice related degree develop more realistic expectations of the job of law enforcement. These degree programs should help their students understand better the realities of the job. While there may be varied definitions of applied learning in higher education (Jach & Trolian, 2019), helping criminal justice students have realistic expectations of what the job of a police officer involves is an important aspect of applied learning in these degree programs. At Missouri Western State University (MWSU) the Criminal Justice Department has created an opportunity for students in their first semester of college to visit the worksite of a criminal justice agency to get a little taste of what the real job entails and thus gives each student an early opportunity to know if working in

the field is really what they want to do. Student responses indicate that this early opportunity to visit these criminal justice worksites is valuable in helping them decide whether to pursue a criminal justice major before they have invested too much time and/or money in schooling.

Literature Review

Internships tend to be a preferred vehicle for students to apply and bridge their academic learning to their career. In their study, Ross and Elechi (2002) surveyed 154 students to ask about the value of internships. The students reported overwhelmingly that undergraduates benefit from participating in an internship to better prepare them for the real world of criminal justice. Stone and McLaren (1999) found that students working in an internship with a criminal justice agency provides a clearer view of what the job is really like and provides students better networking opportunities and improved employment options. Other researchers found that an internship provided students an important bridge between academic study and criminal justice careers (Parilla & Smith-Cunnien, 1997). Rothschild and Rothschild reported that students who participated in applied learning-based internships "reported higher levels of cultural competency, a greater understanding of their field, and increased confidence in their preparedness for entering the workforce…" (2020, p. 2). Another study found that internships were particularly helpful to those college graduates that were entering the workforce (Budesheim, Khanna, Klanecky Earl, & Guenther, 2023). Another researcher that focused on the value of internships for college students intending to pursue a career in law-enforcement, argued that internships are vital for these college students because "nothing in their education or skills training exposed them to actual field incidents or afforded them the opportunity to deal with the wide array of emotions and behaviors demonstrated by the citizens with whom they must come into contact" (Dale, 1996, p. 22). Other researchers argued that social work students would also benefit from exposure to the criminal justice system as many of them would find themselves working in that field (Scheyett, Pettus-Davis, McCarter, & Brigham, 2012).

Internships tend to be completed by students who are close to the end of their degree and not too long before they graduate and begin their career (Stichman & Farkas, 2005). These same researchers found, through their survey of 99 academic programs that offered internships in criminal justice, that the great strength of internships was that it gave students the knowledge that they had picked the right career for them or that it became clear to them that it was not the right career. Dale also concluded that an internship program gives college students intending to pursue a career in law enforcement a more accurate picture of the profession of policing, stating that "participants who do not like what they see can refocus their career plans without devoting a great deal of time and energy to a career in which they ultimately would not be happy" (1996, p. 24). Other researchers found that not every student who completes an internship in law enforcement will want to work in or build a career in that field

(Assur, Goldberg, & Ross, 1999). While it is true that college students completing an internship with a law enforcement agency in their final year of college, that get turned off with the realities of the job of law enforcement, could still change their career plans at this point, they would still have in-effect, wasted much money and four years of academic study. How deflating it must be to come to the end of an arduous four years of college and realize that they are not going into the career that they had planned to enter. Would it have not been better to have realized their unsuitability to a law enforcement career much earlier in their college years so that they could have chosen a different major?

Student's exposure to the real world of criminal justice during college does not have to wait until an internship in their senior year. Breci and Martin (2000) found that criminal justice students tended to start out with a distorted view of the criminal justice system due to media influences and that instructors should help students dispel these myths by creating real world experiences for their students. Such "real world experiences" do not have to be a formal internship that takes place at the end of their college study. Fichter (1987) found that as students were exposed to the real world of law enforcement, their attitudes changed—they became more sympathetic of criminal justice officials and less sympathetic of criminals. Such a realization would benefit students early in their college experience. Thus, their exposure to the real world of law enforcement should not have to wait until a formal internship. Other researchers found that a surprising number of students reached their junior year of study with "only vague ideas of what occupation they wish to pursue after graduation" (Sgroi & Ryniker, 2002). A formal opportunity much earlier in their years of college to experience the real world of criminal justice certainly would benefit these students. Bowling (2023), who had professional experience both in law enforcement and in education, argued for more opportunities for young people who are thinking about working in law enforcement to job-shadow or otherwise visit with or interact with law enforcement personnel outside the formal structure of an internship.

Context of Current Research

At Missouri Western State University students interested in majoring in criminal justice have to successfully complete two introductory classes before being able to declare the major. In one of these classes, the Introduction to Criminal Justice class, students have a final project/paper where they make a visit to a criminal justice worksite of their choice and then write a report on their visit. Students are encouraged to think of what job they see themselves doing in the field and then making arrangements to visit an agency that does that particular work. Many students are interested in law enforcement and so many students visit a local police department or do a ride-along with a police officer or sheriff's deputy. One of the questions that they have to answer in their report is what is the impact of this visit on their future career plans. One of the primary purposes of this project/paper is to have the students get a realistic, although very brief, experience in the job they are thinking about. If students have never

previously worked in or experienced real law enforcement, then this visit gives them just a glimpse of what it is really like, as opposed to how it is depicted in the media. The expectation is that this little taste of the real world of criminal justice is important for these students to have before they officially declare their major in criminal justice.

Method

This research is a qualitative content analysis study of the reports of hundreds of students that have completed this project/paper in my Introduction to Criminal Justice classes over many years. For the past 10 years I have been collecting from their reports, student responses to the question regarding the impact of the visit on their future career plans. The document containing the exact quotations of students in answering this question does not contain any identifying information of the students who wrote the answers. Thus, the students are anonymous and no one is able to identify what student wrote which answer. Student responses were selected based on their having provided a clear answer to the research question of "in what way does the assignment to visit a real criminal justice worksite help students know better whether they really want to work in the field of law enforcement?" Every student who clearly answered this question in their report was selected for this study.

Content analysis is defined as "a research method for systematically analyzing and making inferences from text" (Bachman & Schutt, 2017, p. 293). Bachman and Schutt (2017) further explain that "the goal of content analysis is to develop inferences from text" (p. 293) and that it can be a form of qualitative data analysis, "because it involves coding and categorizing text" (p. 294). Babbie (2007) describes coding as the key process in qualitative analysis and that in "open coding, the codes are suggested by the researchers' examination and questioning of the data" (p. 385). The open coding used by this researcher in the following examples of students' quotes was how the student found the criminal justice site visit helpful in their future career plans whether or not to pursue a criminal justice degree.

The three open coding schemes are as follows: "helpful in confirming their decision to go into law enforcement," "helpful in causing them to more seriously consider going into law enforcement," and "helpful in causing them to decide to not go into law enforcement." In each of the following quotes, the key words that were used for coding purposes are underlined.

Findings

Student responses range from those who stated that the visit solidified their desire to work in law enforcement to those who stated that the visit showed them that they do not really want to work in law enforcement. In this qualitative study, I found a number of student responses that represented each of the three coding positions indicated above. As part of presenting the findings, I have included the actual words of these students as they answered this question.

There were a number of students who were greatly encouraged from their visit to continue their plans to work in law enforcement. These visits were made to local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. As you can read from their responses, the visit to a law enforcement agency gave them greater confidence in declaring criminal justice as their major and in pursuing a career in policing. The student statements listed below were coded as "the visit was helpful for confirming their desire to go into law enforcement."

- "I believe that my ride-along further solidified my interests in pursuing a career in law enforcement. I learned a lot just from speaking with a seasoned law enforcement officer that made me want to learn more. I think that along with the material learned in class, this visit to a criminal justice entity gets me excited for my calling in law enforcement."
- "My time spent at DEA has made me want to strive for my goal even harder than before. I have now become more interested in working in the law enforcement field and learning more about laws. I saw the agents working nonstop on the cases they were working on. This dedication has made me realize working hard will bring you success. It was amazing to see the agents focused on whatever task they were working on."
- "After being able to do this ride-along, I have not been more excited to go into law enforcement. Even though both of the troopers told me that it was a slower night for them, it was still one of the most interesting and entertaining things that I have ever done. My mindset before the ride-along was to go into law enforcement, and now after being able to see what it is like, it is one of my biggest goals in life. I plan to go on many more ride-along with the **** State Highway Patrol and I also plan to do ride-along with other agencies."
- "At the end of the visit, I can say firmly without a doubt that I have chosen the right career to pursue. Law enforcement has always been so interesting to me and after the visit it has only become more attractive as a career. Their jobs, the courts, everything just seemed so interesting to me. After talking with Sheriff ****, I've become extremely interested in becoming a sheriff myself and plan on pursuing that path to it. I am very glad I was able to learn from people who work in the field, and the experience is one that I will definitely not forget anytime soon."
- "My overall experience of the ride along was amazing. I know now that this is the job I want to have in the future. I know now that I just can't have an office job where everything is the same, I need a job where I am always on the edge of my seat not knowing what is going to happen next. I am now sure that a profession in law enforcement is for me. And I have Officer **** and this project to thank for that."

- "After my ride along, I realized something very important about my choice in becoming a police officer. I realized that 60% of being a police officer is paperwork and 40% of being a police officer is actually being in the field. After a day of being a cop, or at least doing police officer work, I still want to be a cop because after that domestic dispute call, I had a knot in my stomach. The only thing I wanted to do was catch the coward who beat up on a 5'0" female. I still feel like being a police officer is my priority to prevent heinous crimes from happening."
- "Although it wasn't an extremely busy shift, it still exposed me to what it's like to be a patrol officer. I was able to learn many different things, and I was able to experience exactly how different officers handle different situations, as well as the writing of reports and booking. The ride along didn't deter me at all from wanting to become a law enforcement officer, but it did give me an idea of what some shifts will be like when I get there. I am certainly still interested in working in law enforcement, and thanks to this ride along, I better understand many facets of the job."
- "There was a lot more stuff that went on than what I intended when I thought of being a state trooper. You must be really focused at all times and let nothing distract you. But even though it always requires high concentration, I still want to be a state trooper soon. I have always wanted to find a job that followed under the lines of helping and protecting others and I think being a state trooper would be a perfect job for that. Also, as I stated before, the family of officers and deputies there is such an amazing atmosphere. I would say, especially this ride along, made me way more interested into this career. The reason being is that I really enjoyed the atmosphere, the department, and just the whole experience."
- "The long-term impact of the experience [ride-along] made me more excited to start my career. Seeing Officer **** doing what he loves made it very inspirational for me as I took notes and learned from him as an officer. It was a great experience for me. It made me more interested to start my career in Law Enforcement."

Some students had, previous to the assignment, been unsure whether they would pursue a career in law enforcement, but after the visit, they were more encouraged to pursue it. The student statements listed below were coded as "the visit was helpful for causing them to consider more seriously about going into law enforcement."

- "This ride along really made an impact on what I want to do for my future career and how I see law enforcement as the enforcers, not the bad guys. I know that because of this ride along I am leaning towards going for the Highway Patrol for my future career. I say this because everything Trooper

***** and I did that night really caused a spark for what I want to do. I loved every moment of the ride along and the experiences I got to be involved in. It also made me appreciate the officers that put their lives on the line every day to make Missouri better and safer."

- "Doing this ride along has sort of made what the police do every day more real, instead of just the dramatization that I see on the television screen. It's given me a lot more respect for them because they don't always know what they are walking into, even with the information they got from the dispatcher. Sometimes they can relax and have fun, but most of the time they've got to be on their toes. Doing this has strengthened my want (sic) to go further into criminal justice. Maybe not as a patrol officer, but somewhere in this field where I can feel like I'm helping to make the streets a little bit safer, and helping others to make their lives a little bit better."
- "These ride-alongs were great in helping me with my decision on whether I want to be a cop or not. I have decided that I want to become a police officer, even if I do not become a K9 officer (although my ultimate goal is to be a K9 officer). I know a ride-along is not similar to being an actual cop. On the other hand, I got to see what it's like from the passenger/back seat. I have started getting ready to become a police officer and plan on doing many more ride-alongs."
- "I learned that police officers don't just pull people over and give people tickets or arrest people, they also do nicer things like drive older ladies home after their car has broken down just to help them out. I know I witnessed some sad and not so good things, but I also got to see some good and happy things as well. I feel like overall this was a really great experience and I'm really glad I took part in it. I am now more interested in not just criminal justice as a whole, but in the job of being a police officer specifically. I am glad I got to have this experience to look back on and tell stories about. I feel like it has helped me confirm choosing criminal justice as one of my minors for college."
- "I chose to do this ride along with a patrol officer because I've been debating whether or not I want to approach my forensic science degree from a criminal justice standpoint or chemistry standpoint. My two options are to either major in Forensic Biochemistry and work with DNA and other evidence in a laboratory or Forensic Crime Scene Investigation, which would be more hands-on and criminal justice oriented. This experience has helped me decide that I want to pursue Crime Scene Investigation because I loved being on the crime scene and observing what goes on at a crime scene from a police officer's perspective. Overall, this ride along was a good experience and I plan on going on more ride alongs again in the future."
- "After doing the ride along, I am definitely more interested in the police officer side of things. Before doing this, I was a little nervous about going to school for this, but this made me realize that it is a good job to have and a good thing to do, especially if you like helping people. So, I think this

swayed my opinion more in going into this field after I graduate."

- "Overall, my experience while touring the ********* Police Department was one I will never forget. I was able to learn many new things and determine whether or not a career in law enforcement was exactly what I was looking for. I used to be unsure because I have always had a connection with animals, but after seeing the canine team my mind was made up. It just so happens that the team made me want to pursue a career as a police officer even more. I could work with an animal while protecting the community; two things I have always wanted to accomplish in my life."
- "I am actually more interested in becoming a police officer now, than I ever was, because the building was really cool. If I do become a police officer, I would like to be a media relations PIO. The media relations officers stay in the building, most of the time. When Officer **** told me what he does, it actually made me think of different fields in the police field. I think it would be really fun to be a media relations PIO."
- "The long-term impact of my experience at the ****** Police Department is that it made me much more interested in wanting to be a part of the criminal justice system as a forensic scientist. Seeing the behind the scenes of the police department and how everything works made me want to work at a police station or for the government to help solve crimes and help people get the justice they deserve."
- "This visit of the **** police station made me more interested in being an officer. It helped me realize and imagine how a day could be for an officer. I personally do not want to be trapped in an office all day long. I would find that boring. Yes, there will be times where I will be in an office typing reports up and that could be one of my shifts, but at least I know another one of my shifts will be outside an office."
- "After getting a tour and going on a ride-along with the department, I think I am more interested in a criminal justice career. I thought it was a good thing to go on an almost dead night because it kind of broke that, "it's going to be one call after another" thinking. It was great to see how the department is in real life compared to TV. I definitely think it's cool all the kind of stuff they get to deal with and all the stories they get to tell. In the long term, I think this definitely helped me decide I want to work in a small-town police department."
- "Overall, I think that this visit raised my interest in the criminal justice field as a potential career. It was very interesting to talk to some of the people that work there [county sheriff's office] and hear them talk about their job and their experiences. All of them seemed to like their job and everyone I actually talked to said that they felt like they were doing something worthwhile. I think that this is a career field that I can really see myself pursuing a career in someday."
- "This experience has definitely made me think about a possible career in

highway patrol. I really enjoyed the community between the officers and how exhilarating it was to protect people from their own actions and to have hopefully prevented something bad from happening. After going 140+ miles per hour down the highway, I will from then on out be going the speed limit everywhere I drive."

Not all students doing the visit came away with a desire to pursue a career in law enforcement. Some students got enough of a taste of the real world of policing and decided that such a career was not for them. The student statements listed below were coded as "the visit was helpful for causing them to decide to not go into law enforcement."

- "I did a partial ride along with **** giving me an experience that was very eye opening. I took this class because of my interest in this field and my love of crime shows, but I learned that the television dramatized version is very different than the real world. While I'd like to think that it only takes an hour to investigate and arrest the criminal, it doesn't really work like that. While taking this class I am also enrolled in accounting and have learned that accounting is what I really want to do. Even though I found this class so interesting I know that I have some qualities that wouldn't make me very susceptible to this line of work. Yet the basic knowledge that I have taken away from this class I think everyone should know about the law and the criminal justice system."
- "The long-term impact the experience had on me was that working in a police station is hard and has detailed work. They must deal with so much paper work, investigations, and the progress of detectives plus the other duties they have as an officer. The paper work is too much for me to handle and I couldn't imagine how I could even get through an entire work day. I really enjoyed the tour and ride along because I really got to see how police officers live and work."
- "The long-term impact of the experience for me is that I respect what the brave men and women do to protect our communities but not sure it is the job for me. I'm not less or more interested in a career in the criminal justice system but just want to keep my job options open besides criminal justice. I loved taking this class, as it was very informative and interesting, and enjoyed learning the different parts of our criminal justice system. Most likely I will not be perusing (sic) a job in the criminal justice but have the utmost respect for the people in the field and it was a pleasure to talk and learn about this field."
- "The long-term takeaway for me was that I do not think criminal justice is a job for me, for this simple fact, I think I would opt for a career where there are not so many uncertainties. I would not have to worry about being falsely accused of something in the public eye that could potentially end my career for no particular reason."
- "This assignment with the interview has made me reconsider my choice in

majoring in this field. In the beginning of the semester this was something I really wanted to do and was passionate about but as it got more into detail, I have changed my mind. I fully believe that this is not for me. I feel I do not have a stable emotional state to do this. I feel I would get attached to the people I am helping and I don't want to have a job where I have to take it home and worry if this person is going to be okay tonight, what else could I have done to have helped that person more. This assignment and semester have shown me to give more respect to those that are protecting me and others."

- "I have a new appreciation for the sacrifices our criminal justice officials make to keep us safe. I will continue to pursue a career in legal studies but not as an active member of any police force, instead I would like to be some kind of family lawyer. If I had been considering a career as a Police Officer, this experience would definitely make me reevaluate to make sure I am certain that I'm ready to risk my life and mental well- being for the safety of others."
- "Honestly this [visit of small-town police department] made me less interested in criminal justice because of the chaos it seemed to be in that building, too much for me to handle."
- "Initially, the ride-along made me more interested in a law enforcement career, as I was impressed with the friendliness of the department and the interesting nature of police work. That was somewhat reinforced by the conversations that I had with Officer ****, one of which included the subject of work-life balance. He said he maintains his work- life balance by not picking up much overtime, which sounded nice. Upon further reflection, though, I cannot reconcile the twelve-hour shifts, working holidays, and the dayshift/nightshift rotation aspect of the career. All of that simply sounds like it would take too much of a toll on my goal of starting a family because it would mean that I would have a harder time being available for my kids as much as I want to. However, I have great respect for law enforcement personnel and found the ride-along to be a pleasant and informative experience."
- "The impact this project had on me was to confirm that I would not want to become a police officer and that I have no interest in the criminal justice field. **** said, "Interviews, follow ups, interrogations and death scenes does take a very heavy toll on all officers, but detectives deal with the worst of the worst." I do not believe I am mentally or physically capable of performing such a job. The men and women who do this job have my utmost respect and admiration."
- "It was interesting to talk to Sheriff **** and to hear about what goes on in the department, but I do not think I would want to have the responsibility of a police officer. I do not think I will go into criminal justice at all its just not my thing. Plus, some of the situations you would be in would not be fun and

I am not quick with decision-making. I respect the people in the field and what they do for us, it's just not for me.

Discussion

If the research question for this study was, in what way does this assignment to visit a real criminal justice worksite helps students know better whether they really want to work in the field of law enforcement, then it is very evident from these many student quotations, that the visit did help them know better whether or not they should pursue a major and a career in law enforcement. For many students, the visit solidified their previous desire to pursue a degree and career in law enforcement. For many others who were not really sure, it gave them the confidence to move forward to declare a criminal justice major and prepare for a career in law enforcement. For another group of students, the visit made clear to them that law enforcement was not for them. Considering the investment of time and resources that policing agencies put into recruiting and training officers, having these students come to this understanding about themselves and their future while still early in their college studies was invaluable. These students, undoubtedly changed their plans to major in criminal justice and instead found another major to pursue. In this sense, these are probably the students that benefitted the most from the assignment to visit a law enforcement agency.

Conclusion and Limitations

Students who desire to major in criminal justice with the goal of entering a career of law enforcement benefit from visiting a law enforcement agency early on in their college career so that they can get a taste of the real world of policing. Based on the reading of student reports of their visit, having students make such visits in their first criminal justice class at Missouri Western State University was very helpful in causing them to decide whether or not they really wanted to become a police officer. Students who decided that they did not want to become police officers were able to change their plans and major in a different field before they had invested much time or money in what would be a fruitless major for them. By analyzing student responses, this researcher was able to determine that the assigned visit was very helpful to the students whether they decided that law enforcement was the career for them or not. This research is helpful to college instructors and administrators teaching criminal justice to know that creating a similar visit early in their curriculum would be beneficial. Many college programs utilize internships to introduce their students to the field, but internships are usually done at the end of their time in college (Stichman & Farkas, 2005), so that those students who get turned off by the work have wasted much time and money towards a career that they will not pursue.

There are limitations to this qualitative based content analysis study. The visit that the students made was brief and still probably gave them a somewhat idealized view of law enforcement. The officers that took them on the ride-along or gave them tours of police departments probably focused on the more positive aspects of the job. Such a short visit could not give them a realistic experience of the most challenging, dangerous, or negative aspects of the job as a police

officer. However, what they did experience was more realistic than what is depicted through the media, and in some cases, the officers did at least talk about some of the not-so-pleasant aspects of the job. A further limitation is that by its nature a qualitative study does not usually lend itself to quantitative analysis. A good idea for a follow- up study would be to track many more individuals completing the visit to see who actually went on to declare criminal justice as a major and then went on to both enter into and then stay with a career in law enforcement. Such data would lend itself to quantitative analysis that would be interesting to explore.

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Outfit Students for Opportunity: Applied Learning in Campus Career Closet Development and Outreach

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Abstract

In the pursuit of academic and professional success, students often encounter barriers that extend beyond the classroom. One significant challenge is access to professional attire, a critical component for job interviews, presentations, networking events, and internships. Career closets—designated areas on campus where students can go to receive new and gently used professional clothing at little to no cost—can alleviate the challenge, but only if students know the resource is available. Promoting a campus career closet is a great way for students to practice their media and journalism, strategic communication, and business and marketing skills, as there is much to be shared with audiences using traditional and new media methods. Students can play a pivotal role in raising awareness, promoting engagement, and fostering a positive perception of the campus career closet among their peers and the broader community while simultaneously gaining valuable experience and building their professional portfolio.

Introduction

Clothing is one of the most salient artifacts of culture. When people feel good about the way they look, they naturally convey confidence and a positive attitude. These nonverbal messages can be as important in a presentation or interview as the verbal skills used in presenting one's research or in demonstrating career aptitude (Maran et al., 2021).

For some college students, procuring professional clothing can present a significant challenge. Beyond tuition, college students face a multitude of financial hurdles such as rent, food, textbooks, and transportation. To help students overcome the financial challenge of obtaining professional clothing, many colleges and universities are offering a valuable resource that not only alleviates financial challenges, but also empowers students in their career journeys: the campus career closet.

Campus career closets offer access to professional clothing at little to no cost. Some closets operate using a rental system, while others allow students to keep the clothes. No matter how the resource is structured, looking professional can significantly boost students' confidence during an interview, presentation, or career event. Knowing their attire is appropriate allows them to focus on their skills and qualifications, making a stronger first impression.

Similarly, not all students come from families who can afford to help them purchase a professional wardrobe or even offer advice. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018; Nam, 2023), in 2016 37% of undergraduate college students were first- generation. A first-generation college student is an individual enrolled in a college or university whose parents did not obtain a post-secondary 4-year degree (NCES, 2018; Nam, 2023).

Because many first-generation college students come from lower-income households and will likely incur more college debt, career closets are a vital resource, ensuring students have access to appropriate attire regardless of their financial background.

Sustainable Option

The financial benefit of a campus career closet to students is evident, but there are other reasons students shop second-hand. Generation Z—people born in 1997 and onward—is one of the environment's greatest champions (Dimock, 2019). This generation acknowledges the large amount of textile waste that gets incinerated, dumped in landfills, or exported to developing countries (Niinimäki et al., 2020). In fact, 14 million tons of clothing are thrown away in the United States every year (EPA, 2022). Embracing practices like thrifting, upcycling, and repurposing, Gen Z appreciates sustainable practices when it comes to procuring clothing (Jacobs, 2020). Organized clothing swaps, shopping at second-hand stores, and renting clothing are just a few of the ways that many college students attempt to reduce waste and save money. Because career closets often rely on donated clothing, many college students appreciate having a sustainable option on campus.

Career Services

Many campus career closets are managed by Career Services, a department or resource center within a college or university dedicated to assisting students in exploring career options, gaining relevant experience, and achieving their career goals. Career Services offer a variety of resources and services aimed at supporting students in their career development, such as resume assistance, job search and interview preparation workshops, and career counseling.

Career advisors provide valuable guidance to students utilizing the career closet. They can help students identify appropriate professional attire for events where professional dress is expected, ensuring that students make informed decisions about their wardrobe choices.

Further, career advisors facilitate partnerships with other groups on and off campus, such as student clubs, philanthropic organizations, or alumni networks. These partnerships can help enhance the resources available in the career closet and expand its reach to a broader audience of students.

Applied Learning

While Career Services plays a vital role in supporting students throughout their academic journey, the personnel in these centers are busy and may not have time to promote the resource. It is also possible they may lack specific training in persuasive communication and media engagement. Indeed, a campus career closet is only going to be successful if students and faculty know it exists. Promoting a campus career closet is a great way for students in business and communication-related disciplines to practice their strategic communication, journalism, and marketing skills, as there is much to be shared with audiences and stakeholders using a variety of traditional and new media methods. Students can play a pivotal role in raising awareness, promoting engagement, and fostering a positive perception of the campus career closet among their peers and the broader community while simultaneously gaining valuable experience and building their professional portfolio. By way of course activities and assignments, students develop the ability to think critically and creatively. They also build professional acumen, leadership and collaboration skills, and tangible work to put in a professional portfolio that sets them up for success after graduation.

There are many activities faculty can design that will give students practical, hands-on experience working for a non-profit client. When students are presented with the opportunity to do what they need to learn, every action provides a personalized learning experience, which builds motivation, especially when the work they are doing benefits students just like them.

That motivation connects to what is learned and can be felt deeply by the learner, making what is learned more relevant and meaningful (Dewey, 1938).

Communication, Integration, and Promotion

Promoting a campus career closet presents the opportunity to use a diverse set of communication. Our methods involved in-class assignments and projects in an introductory public relations course; practicums and workshops; work-study programs; independent study courses; and collaboration with student media. These methods were chosen to capture a wide range of competencies and experiences, reflecting real-world applications and interdisciplinary learning outcomes.

Integration with Public Relations Course: In the Introduction to Public Relations (PR) course, the career closet has been a central focus, providing students with real-world experience in event planning, fundraising, and promotional campaigns to raise awareness and engagement. Student input was used to create the Request for Proposal (RFP) submitted for the grant that ultimately funded the initiative. Through these projects, students have honed their skills in strategic communication, audience engagement, and campaign execution, culminating in tangible successes for the career closet and its outreach efforts.

Incorporation in Media & Journalism Practicums and Workshops: By positioning the career closet as a non-profit client for media and journalism practicums and workshops, students have gained valuable hands-on experience in graphic design, media relations and content production. Projects have ranged from creating multimedia stories and video features to developing targeted social media campaigns. These practical experiences have not only advanced students' media skills and given them work examples for their professional portfolios, but the experiences have also amplified the career closet's visibility and impact on campus.

Work Study Student Programs: Work-study students play a pivotal role in supporting the career closet's daily operations and promotion. Their responsibilities include organizing donations, tracking inventory, content creation for social media accounts, assisting with special events, and customer service. These experiences provide students with on-the-job training in business management, marketing, and communication while fostering student growth and development.

Independent Study Courses: Through independent study courses centered on business and marketing communication, students can work closely with the career closet as a client. These courses encourage students to develop comprehensive promotional strategies and execute targeted campaigns. Projects have included market research, social media marketing, content and brand development, photography, video production, and cross-platform advertising efforts. The outcomes demonstrate students' ability to apply theoretical knowledge in a practical context while advancing the career closet's mission.

Collaboration with Student Media: Collaborations with student media (e.g., TV news station, radio station, student newspaper/magazine) can be instrumental in elevating the career closet's profile on campus. Student-led initiatives have produced news segments, radio interviews, and articles that

showcase the closet's services and impact. These partnerships offer students hands-on experience in journalism and broadcasting while raising career closet awareness and support.

Discussions and Implications for Future Research

One of the primary challenges in increasing use of a campus career closet is a lack of student awareness. Limited promotion is a significant factor contributing to this issue. This lack of outreach means that many students remain unaware of the resource, missing out on opportunities to access professional attire for interviews and career-related events.

Faculty in communication-related disciplines can assist in promotion of the campus career closet by introducing activities where the career closet serves as a non-profit client in the classroom. In doing so, several qualitative outcomes and observations emerged. Students were enthusiastic about engaging in projects that promoted the career closet, providing them with opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in a real-world context. Anecdotal feedback from students indicated hands-on experiences deepened their understanding of business acumen, media production, and strategic communication principles. They were also excited to have tangible examples of work for their professional portfolios. Although informal observations indicated a heightened awareness and use of the career closet across campus, highlighting the effectiveness of multifaceted applied learning approaches, if the career closet is not actively promoted every semester, awareness and use may drop. Even though students have been actively engaged in promoting the career closet in certain classes and practicums, their participation may come to an end when they advance into other courses, which is why consistently using the career closet as a client across multiple semesters is essential to increasing awareness and use of the resource.

These observations contribute to the broader understanding of applied learning and community engagement by illustrating the potential for integrating practical projects into academic programs. By engaging students in hands-on experiences, they are better able to connect theories and knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world situations. When given opportunities to collaborate with diverse organizations, students will gain a broader view of the world, an appreciation of community, and insight into their own leadership skills, self-confidence, and pre-professional values.

While this study focused on the effectiveness of integrating the campus career closet as a non- profit client in journalism and strategic communication courses, it did not evaluate the impact on students' long-term career goals or outcomes. Future research could explore how applied learning projects influence students' career trajectories over time.

Similarly, this study was conducted at just one university campus. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of similar applied learning projects in a variety of academic settings in different geographical regions.

Finally, future research could shift focus from the campus setting and analyze professional dress standards related to hiring decisions and/or employer

perceptions of the clothing choices among recent college graduates during job interviews. This could expand existing scholarship regarding employers' expectations of recent graduates when hiring.

Conclusion

The campus career closet is a vital resource for students, providing access to professional attire while simultaneously offering hands-on learning opportunities in public relations, advertising, and strategic communication. With the support of more than 150 donors—many of whom have contributed multiple times—our career closet has received nearly 5,000 items of professional clothing. These donations have made it possible to serve over 300 undergraduate and graduate students, empowering them to confidently pursue and present themselves in places where professional dress is expected.

Further, a campus career closet can support and enhance the professional development of student workers, and give PR, advertising, and strategic communication students the opportunity to create quality work samples for their professional portfolios. These tangible examples of strategic communication, media engagement, and campaign execution will help set these students apart in the job market, increasing their chances of being hired in their chosen fields. Indeed, campus career closets can serve as a powerful experiential learning opportunity, engaging students in real-world projects that bridge the gap between theory and practice. This initiative reinforces the importance of applied learning, community engagement, and the impact of strategic communication efforts on campus and beyond.

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“Get Out There, Learn Something New”: Impact of a Short Term Domestic Academic Sojourn on Social Work Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to understand the impact of a US-based two-week domestic academic study away program on undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the scope of social work practice, identity as professional social workers, and professional interests in the field. Nine participants were interviewed two years following the program. Data from the semi-structured interviews, journals completed on the program, and reflection papers completed immediately following the program were analyzed. Findings indicated that this applied learning experience had a transformational impact on their understanding of themselves, their cultural competence, and their subsequent social work practice.

Introduction

Immersion in a different culture can positively impact students' understanding about themselves and others (Das & Anand, 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Gerstenblatt & Gilbert, 2014; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Pariola-Smith & Goke-Pariola, 2006; Roholt & Fisher, 2013). To this end, well-designed study abroad and domestic "academic sojourns" offer students the opportunity for immersion wherein they are able to gain practical cultural knowledge, experience, and awareness of global issues (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Brown, 2009; Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015; Moorhead et al., 2014; Sherman, 2016).

For the profession of social work, effective practice with diverse clients requires continuous learning about the self in relation to – and in service of – others (CSWE, 2022; NASW, 2020). Social workers are expected to understand how human identity and experiences are formed or shaped by various dimensions of diversity and consequences of difference (NASW, 2020). These professionals engage diversity and difference in practice at the individual, group, and community levels with people who embody multiple intersections of identity related to their socioeconomic class, culture, ethnicity and race, immigration status, and religion. In service of this, social work education programs have included academic sojourns (variously known as study abroad and study away programs) to provide applied learning opportunities for students to enhance their competency interacting with diverse others (Mapp & Rice, 2019; Zhu, et al., 2023). However, very few studies have explored the impact of short-term domestic academic sojourns. Further, of six studies found on short-term domestic academic sojourns in the US and US territories, only three involved social work students (see Bolea, 2012; Cordero & Rodrigues, 2009; Dubus, 2014). This study sought to add to this small body of literature.

How can – and in what ways can – short-term experiences like these positively affect participants' sense of themselves and professional interests? This exploratory study investigated the impact of a short-term domestic academic sojourn or "study away" program on undergraduate social work students who traveled from a largely rural southeastern state for a two-week applied learning experience encountering the culture and professional practice community in metropolitan Los Angeles, CA.

Review of Literature

Differentiated by distance and duration, study abroad experiences can be long- or short-term (Lane et al., 2017). Whereas, long-term study abroad experiences can last up to a full academic year (Study Abroad, 2019), shorter-term study abroad experiences can be as short as one to two weeks. The latter are very popular, accounting for 59% of all US students' study abroad experiences (Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015). They are usually more affordable and accessible to students who are unable to commit a whole academic year or semester away due to time commitments like education, employment, or family

obligations (Moorhead et al., 2014). When planned well, these programs can be just as effective in developing cultural and global awareness and self-efficacy as long-term study abroad programs (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2019; Core, 2017; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Sobania, 2015).

Similar in duration to short-term study abroad programs, study away experiences typically last from one to several weeks - often over spring break or during a winter or summer term - and also offer a more affordable and accessible experience. However, students travel within their country of origin (Lane et al., 2017).

For US-based students, a well-planned, well-facilitated domestic study away program in the US can match the learning outcomes of an international study abroad program (Sobania, 2015). Whether studying immigration and social inequality in the borderlands of Arizona (see Lanson & Merlin, 2015), African culture in the eastern coastal wetlands (Benton, 2015), or environmental design, sustainable living, and global citizenship on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota (Pyatt et al., 2015; Burleson, 2015), the US provides numerous cultural immersion opportunities.

Benefits of Studying Abroad or Away

Study abroad programs increase cultural and global awareness, fostering participants' self-confidence, self-esteem, self-control, self-direction, and self-efficacy as they adapt to new situations outside their comfort zone (Blake-Campbell, 2014; Bolea, 2012; Brown, 2009; Das & Anand, 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Pariola-Smith & Goke-Pariola, 2006; Schvaneveldt & Spencer, 2016; Smith et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2018; Sobania, 2015; Zhu et al., 2023).

In effect, placing students in new environments exposes them to different cultures and different ways of thinking, positively impacting their intercultural awareness and knowledge (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2019; Czerwionka et al., 2015; Gearing et al., 2020). Importantly, studying abroad has a greater impact on multicultural competency than just traveling abroad (Kim, 2015). In other words, structured encounters and learning in a new environment are key. Further, short-term study abroad programs have demonstrated a positive impact on social work student participants' intercultural understanding and perspectives (Moorhead, et al., 2022). As a professional discipline that prioritizes graduates' ability to work effectively with diverse populations, such experiences present a unique and enriching opportunity to support social work students' learning in this area.

Study Abroad and Away for Social Work Education

Self-awareness and reflection are key strategies social workers employ when working with their clients (NASW 2020). Further, developing the capacity to acknowledge others "as experts of their own lived experiences" is a practice behavior social work students are taught (CSWE, 2022). In service of developing cultural competence (an ongoing and continually evolving process) study abroad experiences offer undergraduate and graduate social work students the opportunity to enhance their understanding of themselves in a global context (McPherson, et al., 2022), develop and practice social work values, expand their global awareness, develop social work skills, and enhance their ability to support diverse client systems (Brown, 2009; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015; Gearing et al, 2020; Kim, 2015; Mapp, 2012).

For instance, social work students enhanced their sense of professional identity and increased their commitment to social justice – a core value of the social work profession – as the result of their participation on a short-term international study abroad program to India (Moorhead et al., 2014). Similar outcomes were also found for short-term domestic programs. As a result of their experience on a 10-day cross-cultural immersion to a Lakota Indian Reservation, students reported greater cultural empathy and understanding (Bolea, 2012). In another example, social work students who traveled to New Orleans from Boston to rebuild a domestic violence shelter following Hurricane Katrina deepened their commitment to civic leadership and social justice in the process (Dubus, 2014). In effect, these types of cultural immersion experiences enrich social work students' cultural awareness as they transition from learning and reading in the classroom to practicing the concept (Thibeault, 2019).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This qualitative study sought to determine the extent to which a short-term domestic academic sojourn focused on learning about social welfare programs in another region of the country impacts social work students' learning. More specifically, the following research questions drove the investigation: (1) To what extent did the Study Away LA program affect participants' understanding of the scope of social work practice? (2) To what extent did the Study Away LA program impact participants' sense of identity as professional social workers? And (3) To what extent did the Study Away LA program influence participants' professional interests and activities in social work practice?

Methods

Procedures

In May of 2018, ten students from an accredited undergraduate social work program at a mid sized public university in a largely rural southeastern state participated in a short-term (2-week), faculty-led academic sojourn to the metropolitan Los Angeles area. Nine [n = 9] of the students were in the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program and the tenth [n = 1] was a Sociology student). All participants enrolled in Study Away LA as an elective course.

The 15-day "Study Away LA" program focused on providing participants with the opportunity to (1) identify the unique roles of social workers and other helping professionals in the Los Angeles/Long Beach area; (2) display self-awareness regarding one's own social identity(ies) through contact with diverse and vulnerable populations; (3) evaluate the concerns/challenges and services available to vulnerable populations; and (4) analyze the social, economic, and environmental justice issues that affect individuals, families, groups, and communities in Los Angeles/Long Beach related to those affecting client systems in their home communities and as applicable to their eventual social work practice and the unique history and culture of the Los Angeles metropolitan area and the innovative social services provided to its residents.

Program participants toured innovative social service organizations that focused on social, economic, and environmental justice issues. The students interacted with consumers and providers from a variety of social services including those focusing on child welfare, mental health, services to people experiencing homelessness, former gang-involved and previously incarcerated men and women, older adults, veterans, the LGBTQIA community, and other vulnerable populations. Several agencies provided training and students participated in a neighborhood service-learning project. In addition, program participants had the opportunity to visit unique historical and cultural landmarks (e.g., the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Santa Monica Pier, Griffith Park Observatory, Watts Towers, the Queen Mary, and Catalina Island).

Two meetings were held prior to the sojourn to introduce participants to the faculty leaders, each other, and orient them to the program (e.g., flight details, laundry, food, what to bring), the syllabus and courses assignments, behavioral expectations, and program safety and emergency-preparedness. Significantly, the opportunity to build relationships and process expectations and feelings about the anticipated experience was included. For instance, the visit to a center serving the LGBTQIA population was discussed and participants were encouraged to contact one of the faculty leaders to share any concerns or reservations they might have about their participation.

Prior to the trip, participants selected from a set of pre-determined social welfare topics, e.g., gang involvement and interventions, homelessness, refugees, to focus them on a relevant social welfare issue or population they would encounter during the program. Their first assignment was to complete a paper pertinent to a site they would visit. For example, the participant who selected Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles, was prompted to explore the history, demographic characteristics and trends, and innovative services provided to Skid Row residents and discuss the role of social workers.

While on the sojourn, each participant delivered an onsite presentation based on their social welfare topic paper and posted a summary of this information to social media to document their experience. In addition, the participants kept travel journals to reflect on their perceptions, insights and general experience gained from agency visits and training. Entries were

expected to be informational but also analytical reflecting their feelings, thoughts, discussions, and observations. In the final prompts, participants were asked to reflect on what the program taught them, how they had changed as a result of their participation on the trip, what experience(s) held their attention both personally and professionally relevant to their social work practice, and lessons they believed applicable to practicing social work in their home communities.

A final post-trip reflection paper completed several weeks following their return home, asked participants to summarize their experience and learning in three areas: 1) a critical analysis of a social, economic, or environmental justice issue and intervention highlighted while in Los Angeles/Long Beach as related to the same or similar issue affecting client systems in their home region and the role social workers and other helping professionals can and should play in addressing the issue; 2) a critical reflection on the self-awareness the participant gained about their own social identity(ies) through encounters with the diverse and vulnerable populations; and 3) and identification and description of ways the student anticipated using the lessons learned to future professional practice.

Sample

Each of the nine social work students who participated in the Study Away LA program agreed to participate in the study. All identified as female, six identified as white, and three identified as persons of color including one who identified as Latinx, and two who identified as bi-racial (one self-identified as Native American and white, and the other as Black/African American and white.) All the subjects had earned the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree, and at the time of the interviews, two had completed their Master of Social Work (MSW) and two were enrolled in a graduate social work program and a student affair's program respectively. Eight of the nine participants were employed in various professional social work positions including as a case manager, a therapist, in long term healthcare and rehabilitation, probation in and parole, and prevention education for vulnerable populations. One participant was unemployed at the time of the interview.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the research questions. In addition to basic demographic information, the guide included questions about participants' program experience, the impact of the program on their sense of professional social work identity, and their current social work practice. Although the interview guide was used to sequence and direct questioning, flexibility allowed for inquiry of other related topics. This allowed for the co-author to probe deeper into topics or areas of interest that surfaced during the interview.

Interviews were scheduled and conducted via the media platform, Zoom, over a six-week period by the second author. At the time of the study, she was an MSW graduate research assistant who was unknown to the participants. Verbal

consent was obtained by each participant at the beginning of the video recording.

On average, the interviews lasted 31 minutes with a range of 24 minutes to 43 minutes. The Zoom video recordings and automatically generated transcripts were reviewed for accuracy. Inaccurate interpretations of participants' responses in the transcriptions were corrected as needed. Participants' names and names of agency staff were redacted from the transcripts for purposes of confidentiality. Names of agencies and landmarks visited were not redacted to highlight the relevance of specific sites should other programs choose to replicate all or part of the experience.

Each participant's completed travel journal and final post-trip reflection paper as described above were also gathered as additional data sources for purposes of data analysis. The names of agencies and landmarks visited in these documents were also not redacted.

Data Analysis

A content analysis of the interview transcriptions was conducted to distinguish the impact Study Away LA program had on participants. Grounded theory, which pursues the meaning people give to certain events, provided the basis of an initial analysis, enabling the authors to make meaning of the respondents' commentary and identify themes that emerged from their interviews and written reflections (Yegidis et al., 2018). The authors used combined data from all sources into a final thematic data analysis (Royce et al., 2016). In addition to the interview transcripts, participants' journals and post-trip reflection papers were also analyzed to enhance the credibility of the findings (Yegidis et al., 2018). The goal of this triangulation was to corroborate the researchers' interpretations of the data and to reduce biasing findings from one source over another (Royce et al, 2016).

The researchers initially worked independently, then met to debrief comparing, refining, and consolidating data into two overarching themes related to the impact on participants' cultural competence and their identity as a social worker. Given the first author's direct involvement with participants while on this program, preconceptions and potential biases were particularly considered in the analysis and interpretation of the findings in order to enhance credibility and ensure trustworthiness. To foster transparency, an audit trail included a record of initial and subsequent decisions throughout the process of developing and implementing the research study including data gathering decisions and analyses to aid in establishing the dependability of the research.

Findings

The Study Away LA program exposed participants to a wide range of social workers employed at a variety of agencies. Through their participation, they were able to witness the application of concepts and practices learned in the classroom - reporting that they enjoyed the "hands-on" experiential learning the

program offered. As one student commented, the program "helped develop my knowledge and understanding" about a variety of social service agencies while another remarked in her post-trip reflection, the experience was a meaningful way "for a social worker to get to see social work in action and experience it hands on" adding in her interview that," I was able to see in person what I had read about in books". For many, the two-week program was a transformative part of their social work education impacting their cultural competence and identity as a social worker. (Unless otherwise noted, exemplar quotes were drawn from the interviews.)

Impact on Cultural Competence

Visiting a community away from their home communities gave these students the opportunity to learn about new and different cultures they had previously been unfamiliar with or had little exposure. It "forced …[us] out of [our] comfort zone" as one participant wrote in her reflection paper. For another, the Los Angeles area "literally had a mix of everything like different cultures … It was absolutely amazing!"

Increased Cultural Humility

Some participants reported coming home more culturally competent. One participant stated in her reflection paper, "I learned a new way of thinking", when referring to the people she met, and the social and economic justice issues encountered on the program. As one participant said of the trip, "It was … kind of like a waking up moment for me … [and] made me more open and understanding to my personal biases. It helped open my eyes to see what I was biased against," adding that the experience "helped me work towards actively overcoming those [biases]." Another participant who became very interested in working with ex-offenders as a result of her research and visit to Homeboy Industries, the largest gang intervention and rehabilitation program in the world, reflected the Study Away LA program helped her "humanize clients [and] reduce stigma" in her current practice as a probation and parole officer, and affirmed her belief that "people deserve second chances." For a third participant, her encounters with people experiencing homelessness and service providers working to help them highlighted for her, "Just because I might not be able to step in their shoes, doesn't mean I can't walk along beside them." The same participant reflected in her journal, "Living in the world is not easy and it is easy to hit the bottom when you feel like there is no one to encourage you to reach the top; I want to be that encouragement system." During the program, Study Away LA participants visited a center that served the LGBTQIA community where they received a basic cultural competency training geared toward social workers. The training focused on working with individuals who identify as LGBTQIA and explored the importance of honoring clients' self-identity. As one participant wrote in her journal, "As future social workers we need to meet clients where they are", adding, "It is so important to address clients how they address themselves and their gender pronouns."

Participants also had the opportunity to learn and adopt other culturally appropriate language. On a visit to Skid Row, the social work guide educated them that "people who experience homelessness" was a more appropriate descriptor that centers the individual rather than their circumstance. This led to greater understanding and empathy as revealed by a participant who admitted to "biases about people who are substance abusers" prior to Study Away LA; but after a half-day visit with police officers and mental health workers who partnered to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness in Long Beach, she explained she had come to understand that "addiction really is a disease" and she gained a "better understanding of the cycle of addiction." (At the time of the interview, she had since earned her MSW and worked as a therapist supporting people with substance use disorders.) Similarly, another participant reflected in her paper, "it wasn't just one thing that leads to homelessness but an interconnected web of social issues and broken systems that leave vulnerable populations unprotected."

Deepened Commitment to Professional Core Values

Connected to these insights, participants deepened their appreciation for the central importance of social justice and human rights to their cultural competency after visiting the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance. At the museum they heard from a holocaust survivor and attended a talk and met a former white supremacist. At the beginning of the self-guided tour of the museum, students encountered two doors. One student reflected on this experience in post-trip paper:

> We were first asked to pick a door to go through. They were labeled 'Unprejudiced' and 'Prejudiced.' As I stood in front of the door, I decided I would go through the "Unprejudiced' door because I would like to think of myself as someone who does not judge others [who] are different from myself. Little did I know; the 'Unprejudiced' door was locked so no one could go through it because everyone is prejudiced even if they are not completely aware of it.

Participants linked this experience with their commitment to social work's core values. In her journal the same participant reflected, "As a future social worker, it is my responsibility to fight for social justice for people, so this kind of thing does not happen in the future." Another wrote in her journal the experience, "Provided us opportunities to self-examine our own prejudices and racism in the world. But most importantly it emphasized the need to speak out when we witness injustices." Complementary of this but related to her greater understanding about the factors that contribute to people experiencing homelessness, another participant noted during her interview, "It's going to take

the entire community in some capacity to see true change, because just one person alone isn't enough to fight any fight at all."

Two days after their visit to the museum, the group took part in an LGBTQIA inclusive, interfaith ceremony followed by one of the largest pride parades in the US. Unplanned, the students were invited to join an advocacy group marching in the parade. In a post-parade journal entry, one participant was deeply and unexpectedly moved by the experience, writing that she saw herself as "a warrior and a social worker ready to take on the world." In fact, this same participant reported finding the courage to later participate in a local Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) protest in her home community directly connecting her participation to her experience marching in the pride parade while on the program.

This sense of urgency and collective responsibility to address social injustice was reflected in other participants' commentary as one participant wrote in her post-trip reflection, "If as social workers we are helping this community find their voice and fight for their rights, we have succeeded."

Impact on Identity as a Social Worker

The social welfare programs participants visited and the professional social workers they met gave participants the opportunity to not only learn about innovative interventions designed to address the needs of vulnerable populations at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, but also gave them insights about their future identity as professional social workers.

Expanded Understanding of and Commitment to the Profession

Participants reported they had not initially realized the breadth and scope of what social workers can do. In fact, several had previously accepted the view that social work practice was primarily limited to "child and family services" and "child welfare"; however, the program highlighted a broader range of possibilities. For instance, one participant described a visit to a comprehensive healthy aging program as a "light bulb moment," while another reported that visiting a gang rehabilitation program helped her see the scope of practice "in a different light."

Taken together, the participants agreed the experience "solidified … that hope and … want for a better community" and clarified their career choice in social work. As one participant who went on to earn her MSW and work with older adults reported, "[I was] able to find clarity and figure out what I wanted to do [as a social worker]." Another participant who was in an MSW program and working at a private foster agency at the time of the interview, said she "felt more confident that I was on the right career path." In her reflection paper, another participant wrote the program "reaffirmed the [social work] path of course I wanted to complete."

Increased Professional Self-Efficacy

Further, the Study Away LA program helped the participants see themselves

in the role of professional social worker. In her post trip reflection paper, a participant said after visiting a coalition meeting of service providers in Skid Row:

> It was nice to see and hear real questions and problems faced and addressed by people who could one day be me. They all were advocates speaking on the behalf of their clients and fighting for what they needed. As a future social worker this allowed insight into what goes on in their lives and what they do with their jobs.

Reflecting on the impact of the program, another participant wrote in her post-trip reflection paper, "by being a social worker, I truly am going to change someone's life for the better."

Participants discussed the benefits of meeting and talking with a variety of professional social workers and clients. One recognized that for her, "talking to everybody that worked at the social service agencies just reaffirmed … I have the confidence to do [social work], and I know I can do this." Similarly, another claimed that she "got braver" and as a result of these interactions she learned to "relax around clients." Another participant who worked in probation and parole at the time of the interview said the Study Away LA program, "allowed me to realize my passion and where I wanted to take my social work … [and] that I want[ed] to help incarcerated men, women, and juveniles."

Not only did the trip confirm the participants' desire to be social workers and helped them focus on their target population, some committed to using the innovative ideas learned on the program to make change in their own community. As one participant wrote in her journal, she wanted to "take the progressive innovations from LA back to [her home state]" while another reported she had replicated elements of a program model for aging adults she learned about to create an independent living program for older adults in her current position.

Discussion

Consistent with the literature on study abroad and away programs, and as evidenced by students' reflections, the Study Away LA program increased participants' cultural competency (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2019; Core, 2017; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Sobania, 2015) and humility (Zhu et al., 2023).Traveling to an unfamiliar region in the US shifted the participants' way of thinking and feeling, resulting in a transformative learning experience (Das & Anand, 2014; Foronda & Belknap, 2012; Gerstenblatt & Gilbert, 2014; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Pariola-Smith & Goke-Pariola, 2006; Roholt & Fisher, 2013). In effect, this cultural immersion experience connected participants' learning and reading about cultural awareness to practicing the concept (Thibeault, 2019).

Moreover, the experiential learning during the program ignited participants'

desire to apply their new insights to their practice in their home communities. As Dubus (2014) found, students gained a greater awareness of social justice and social work ethics; and corresponding with Cordero and Rodriguez (2009), the importance of diversity and social justice was reinforced. Furthermore, meeting with and speaking to a variety of experienced social workers showcased professionals in practice who demonstrably promoted the dignity and worth of the person and the importance of human relationships, were committed to social justice and service, and who showed integrity and competence as aligned with the core values of the National Association of Social Work ([NASW], 2020). For several, this was an epiphany – a "light bulb moment." Significantly, the program helped participants see themselves in the roles of the social workers they met – not at the specific agency they visited but back in their home communities. Taken together, this applied learning experience fostered students' reported self-confidence, self-direction, and self-efficacy (Brown, 2009; Schvaneveldt & Spencer, 2016) – particularly as related to their self-identity as professional social workers. In many ways, the experience solidified their commitment to the field reinforcing the finding that well-designed applied learning opportunities connecting students' classroom learning to real-world practical experiences including those outside of the classroom can positively impact students' motivation in their field of study (Trolian & Jach, 2020).

Practical Implications for Undergraduate Education

A short-term domestic academic sojourn can give undergraduate programs – particularly professional programs – the opportunity to build upon classroom learning and deepen students' connection and commitment to their field. In addition, it is a chance to further foster cultural competence – an essential skill for today's workplace. For US-based programs, the United States is an ideal short-term study away destination for expanding students' multicultural understanding and can match many of the learning outcomes associated with study abroad programs (Sobania, 2015). Further, these programs are usually more affordable and accessible to students who may have other commitments limiting their resources and ability to travel for extended periods of time (Moorhead et al., 2014). Study away programs can be led over winter, spring, or summer breaks so as not to disrupt the traditional fall/spring semester and can be an additional elective credit option (as was done with Study Away LA).

Importantly, organizers and faculty leaders must carefully plan learning objectives (Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Gjelten, 2012) and work closely with contacts in the destination community (Castemeda & Zirger, 2011; Fisher & Grettenberger, 2015; Mapp, 2012) to provide a set of experiences that will broaden participants' views of what social work practice can encompass. Service-learning opportunities (Bolea, 2012; Lane et al., 2017) should also be considered to benefit the community visited. Assessing students' knowledge and attitudes prior to and following the program is also key (Mapp, 2012). This can be accomplished through formal data collection, i.e., pre-and post-surveys, interviews and focus groups, informal discussion, or some combination of these.

While on the program, it is critical to provide the space for discussion and reflection to support participants in processing their experiences (Bolea, 2012). Further, the opportunity to reflect on what they learn during and after the trip is essential (Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Gjelten, 2012; Salisbury, 2012). This could be achieved through a post-trip written assignment or some other creative presentation of participants' experiences as applicable to the personal and professional insights they gain and anticipated implications for their professional practice. Finally, while careful planning is critical, allowing for spontaneous learning is essential.

While the Los Angeles metropolitan area offers an abundance of innovative service providers and cultural experiences, it is not an inexpensive or convenient area to visit for participants who may be from regions in another part of the country. Many regions of the US are rich with opportunities to replicate such a program (Sobania, 2015). If cost and time are constraints, programs may consider study away programs closer-to-home. For instance, the first author traveled with two-dozen students as a faculty leader on a week-long spring break bus tour of Kentucky exploring the unique geography, culture, and history of the state. A particular advantage for many of the nontraditional students who participated in that program was the fact the group was never more than 3-hours from home. This may be critical for place-bound students who may select a short-term study away versus a short- or long-term study abroad program based on their convenience and affordability (Moorhead et al., 2014).

Limitations

The interviewer (the second author) was not previously known to the participants. This may have been a possible limitation in that the respondents may have tempered their responses due to their lack of familiarity with the interviewer. However, it is argued, on balance, the reduced potential for bias on the part of the interviewer (or the interviewees) versus the first author conducting the interviews was preferable given his prior and ongoing relationship to the participants.

Further Research

A quantitative study utilizing pre- and post-surveys to assess student learning outcomes related to participants' knowledge, values, and cognitive and affective domains specific to their understanding of the scope of professional practice, identification, and motivation in the field, and cultural understanding/competence/humility is needed. In addition, comparing outcomes across multiple academic sojourns can establish the efficacy of these programs.

Conclusion

In an era of escalating costs for students in higher education (Kimball & Luke, 2018), a well-planned, short-term academic sojourn is a more affordable alternative to a long-term study abroad program and can be equally as effective

at promoting participants' cultural competency (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2019; Core, 2017; Cotten & Thompson, 2017; Sobania, 2015).

As an applied learning experience, Study Away LA had a lasting effect on those who participated. The participants enthusiastically reminisced on how the two-week sojourn was transformative not only on a personal level but also as it impacted their current work as graduate students and professional social workers. In fact, for one student, it was essential to her entire undergraduate experience when she claimed "[the program] taught me more [about] myself in two weeks than my whole college career did in three-and-a-half years."

Given its potential impact on participants' cultural competence and sense of themselves as professionals, undergraduate programs should consider tailored, short-term domestic academic sojourns as a relatively affordable, applied learning experience. As one Study Away LA participant implored, "get out there, [and] learn something new!"

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Know Better, Do Better: Enhancing K-3 Students' Early Literacy Skills Through Professional Training

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Abstract

Educational reform over the past several decades has consistently had the same goal, to close the achievement gap or large academic disparities that exist amongst students. Recently, national trends and revised English-Language Arts (ELA) standards across the United States have shifted to promoting foundational skills and science-aligned approaches which require PK-12 teachers to be prepared to integrate and provide scientifically based strategies to support students in learning how to read. These shifting landscapes have left district leaders evaluating current curriculums and seeking professional development opportunities that are more aligned with scientific findings and evidence-based practices. To better understand the outcomes or effects of the workshop, authors used a convergent parallel mixed methods design. The findings show that the early literacy workshop's format and content significantly impacted teachers' knowledge and perceptions of the important role that foundational skills play in developing skilled readers. As others look to develop professional training that mirrors the effectiveness of this one, they must thoughtfully consider the structure, application and the culture of the experience.

Introduction

Educational reform over the past several decades has consistently had the same goal, to close the achievement gap or large academic disparities that exist amongst students. These disparities have contributed to constant efforts to advance educational approaches and increase student performance. Though concerted efforts have been made, American students' reading abilities have shown minimal improvement over the years with one in three children not reading at the basic level of comprehension (NAEP, 2022). This inability often results in lower levels of educational attainment, lower income levels and social or public health concerns (McLaughlin et al., 2014). These undesired results are likely linked to these students not having the proficient skills to be successful in our 21st century society.

As national trends and revised English-Language Arts (ELA) standards across the United States shift to promoting foundational skills and science-aligned approaches, PK-12 teachers need to be prepared to integrate and provide scientifically based strategies to support students in learning how to read. The science of reading (SoR), an interdisciplinary body of research focusing on how children learn to read, outlines a sequential progression of skills that specifically emphasize the importance of phonological and phonics instruction to ensure young students obtain literacy proficiency. This shift in instruction and legislation requires teachers to provide more explicit instruction in print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency, and for school districts and leaders to provide more systematic early literacy training based on scientific findings. When teachers have adequate training and knowledge of early literacy foundational skills, they make more informed instructional decisions and dedicate more instructional time to these components than their peers who do not have the same knowledge and training (Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky, 2014). This results in higher gains for students in classrooms with well-equipped and trained teachers (Piasta et al., 2009). While reports show that undergraduate programs are more adequately addressing scientifically based reading instruction than they were a decade ago, graduate program coverage is stagnant (National Council on teacher quality (NCTQ) 2020). So, while there are more teachers entering the field better equipped to teach reading, there is a gap in the knowledge of in-service teachers who did not receive the same level of training and preparation. How should training be administered? What tactics strengthen knowledge and perceptions? This article outlines the collaborative effort between an urban metropolitan institution and local area school districts to facilitate in-service teacher training and implementation of science-aligned strategies to enhance foundational skills instruction.

Understanding the "Shifts" in Instruction and Legislation

Shifts in Mandates

Prior to legislative mandates, many curriculums, state standards and teacher philosophies embodied a balanced literacy approach. This approach relies heavily on comprehensive instruction grounded in teacher choice and professional judgment (Wexler, 2019) Teachers are encouraged to have many tools in their toolbox and use the methods that they think are most appropriate and responsive for the students they are working with. One common practice in balanced literacy is guided reading. Using this approach, students read books at their instructional level and the teacher provides prompts and cues that direct students to use pictures and context, in addition to looking at the print, to guess the unfamiliar word. In recent years this approach has faced scrutiny in building skilled readers (Shanahan, 2012; Schwartz, 2021). Findings indicate that an explicit, systematic approach to build students' word recognition skills is most effective in teaching students how to read (Ehri, 2020; Lindsay, 2022). It is also believed that limiting students to books within their instructional level can widen the achievement gap or what Wexler (2019) refers to as the "knowledge gap". With the "shift" to an explicit, systematic approach to build foundational skills, SoR provides a scientifically grounded framework that pinpoints reading challenges and provides strategies for effectively addressing them.

Shifts in Philosophy

SoR is grounded in the work of Gough and Tunmer (1986), a formula demonstrating that reading has two basic components: word recognition (decoding) and language comprehension See Figure 1. This approach promotes that teachers must teach students to decode words accurately and automatically while also providing students with knowledge rich experiences to develop sufficient language comprehension abilities. Much like a multiplication problem, if one of the components is not developed, or a zero, sufficient reading comprehension will not develop.

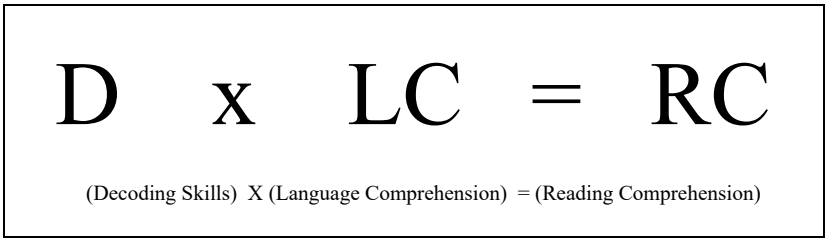

Figure 1. The Simple View of Reading vs. The Two Components of Reading

Shifts in Legislation

As the conversations evolves around effective literacy instruction and the need for foundation skills instruction in the early grades, so does legislative involvement. Thirty-eight states across the US have enacted laws that mandate evidence-based curriculum and teaching training aligned with the science of reading (Schwartz, 2024). Some states have even gone to the extreme of prohibiting guided reading systems in schools. In our state, schools are required to identify students performing below established thresholds and provide science-aligned interventions. Our state mandated that teacher preparation programs embed science-aligned reading and writing strategies, and the state school board has issued a statement encouraging districts to promote high-quality early literacy instruction based on the science of reading (The Reading League, 2024). These shifting landscapes have left district leaders evaluating current curriculums and seeking professional development opportunities that are more aligned with scientific findings and evidence-based practices.

Shifts in Approach

Embedded in the SoR approach is a focus on building the foundational skills necessary to read proficiently. Through a structured, applied learning framework, each of the foundational skills, print concepts, phonological awareness, decoding and fluency, work together to help the student read words accurately and effortlessly. Explicit, systematic instruction in these areas is critical in the early grades so that students become proficient readers by grade 3.

By incorporating applied learning into educational practices, teachers can create more engaging and relevant learning experiences for students. Applied learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the practical application of knowledge and skills in real-world contexts (Schwartz & Bransford, 2020). It moves beyond traditional rote learning to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. The structure applies to all learners, including teachers.

While many states have sought out national training models and resources, asynchronous structures can create challenges for both engagement and retention of materials. While online structures allow flexibility and teachers to establish larger teaching networks, the ability to design content and training that meets teachers' needs and align with their specific curriculum materials and resources are barriers to engagement and classroom application (Creemers et al., 2012). Training must be designed to facilitate a learner's comprehension and internalization of the material. To achieve this, content should be interactive, varied in format and easy to navigate (Heydari et al., 2019). When these components are not addressed,

lower levels of engagement often yield lower completion rates (De Freitas et al., 2015; Ericson et al., 2016).

Our University Response

Our institution is centered in a midwestern metropolitan city surrounded by 12 local area school districts. Monthly, literacy faculty and district literacy leaders meet to discuss progress made with state literacy initiatives and implementation of science-aligned practices. Though the state has recognized national professional learning opportunities for educators, the cost, structure and time required of those opportunities has proved difficult for local districts. District literacy leaders sought more hands-on, in-person opportunities for teachers to gain knowledge and develop understanding of science-aligned approaches to teaching reading. This need led to the development of the Early Literacy Workshop. The goal of the workshop was to align teachers' knowledge and instructional practices with the decades of research on how students learn to read.

The Workshop Model

The Early Literacy Workshop contained five 3-hour in-person, collaborative sessions designed to develop teachers' knowledge and instructional practices focused on foundational skills over the course of a 15-week semester. Each session focused on a different foundational skill providing participants with both theory and applicable strategies for classroom use. After topics were explored collaboratively at in-person sessions, participants individually completed an online learning module connected to the designated skill and content objectives. Each module consisted of knowledge building activities and opportunities to create classroom resources featuring a home to school connection. Three of the sessions focused on print awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics.

Print Awareness

This session communicated the important role that students' print awareness has on their development as skilled readers. Participants explored the four domains of print awareness and enhanced their ability to identify effective components of print focused read-alouds. Participants were tasked with creating print focused read-alouds with rich salient texts currently used in their classroom and developed resources to increase print awareness in home environments.

Phonemic Awareness

This session aimed to help participants understand the relationship between phonemic awareness and reading proficiency. Participants explored the dimensions and developmental progressions of phonemic awareness and engaged with multi-sensory strategies to build students' phonemic

awareness. Participants constructed a 5-day plan to address a state standard connected to phonemic awareness and created an at-home resource to support caregivers in reinforcing this skill development in the home environment.

Phonics

This session examined the relationship between phonics knowledge and word recognition skills. Participants uncovered the phases and developmental progression of word reading and identified favorable decoding approaches to supporting students with weaknesses in working memory and/or processing speed. Participants explored the components of explicit phonics lessons and wrote a plan for using decodable text in the classroom to enhance students' application of phonics knowledge.

Workshop Participants

Prior to the workshop, faculty hosted online informational sessions to provide educators with workshop dates, structure, and expectations. Participants were selected in the order their interest form was received. Twenty-nine educators from across six local area school districts were selected to participate in the workshop. One participant was male and twenty-eight were females. This is representative of the teachers within the state. Participants ranged in years of experience and district role See Table 1.

Years of Experience	# of Participants
0-5	5
6-10	3
11-15	4
15+	17

District Role	# of Participants
K-6 classroom teacher	16
Instructional Coach	3
ESL Teacher	3
SPED Teacher	2
Reading Specialist	3
Did Not Report	3

Table 1. Demographic Information

Methodology

To better understand the outcomes or effects of the workshop, the authors used a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell, 2013). Given this was the initial workshop, the authors wanted to better understand how the workshop impacted teacher knowledge and perceptions. Thís approach provided the opportunity to collect qualitative and quantitative data in tandem, analyze it separately, and then merge the results for a clearer understanding. See Figure 2. With the desire to build teachers' understanding in how these skills are interconnected to foster fluent reading, the authors analyzed teachers' perceptions and knowledge growth in concepts of print, phonemic awareness and phonics.

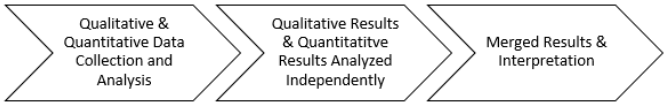

Figure 2. Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Design

Quantitative Data

To address teacher needs, the authors conducted a paired-samples t-test to determine the effectiveness of the workshops' implementation and if it increased participant self-perceptions of their overall knowledge and understanding of how early readers develop. The authors also looked at frequency counts of responses identifying knowledge in connection to phonics and decoding, phonemic awareness, and concepts of print to determine if any other information could be provided.

Qualitative Data

For the qualitative data collection, the authors used an open-ended survey to gain additional information as to how participant knowledge had grown in relation to phonics and decoding, phonemic awareness, and concepts of print. The authors used systematic thematic coding procedures to extract themes with a high degree of occurrence (three or more), and then broadened codes to find similar constructs (Azizi & Ismail, 2023; Patton, 2002). The authors further reviewed qualitative responses using the same methodology to determine what aspects of the workshop participants found most useful.

Results

Quantitative

Data analysis utilized SPSS for the paired samples t-test and descriptive statistics. Quantitative results indicated there was a significant difference in the scores prior to the workshop (M=3.47, SD=0.68) and after (M=4.38, SD=0.56) workshop implementation; t(29)=6.68, p =1.5e-7. The observed

effect size was large (1.24) indicating that the magnitude of the difference between the average and μ0 is large. These results suggest the workshop had a positive effect on teacher perceptions of their overall knowledge and understanding of how early readers develop. To better understand this outcome, the authors disaggregated the data into individual components. Session topics were embedded within each of the components. See Table 2 for disaggregated participant perceptions.

Concepts of Print			
	Pre	Post	Percent Change
Excellent	10.00%	**68.97%**	58.97%
Good	73.33%	**27.59%**	-45.75%
Fair	16.67%	**3.45%**	-13.22%
Poor	0.00%	**0.00%**	0.00%
Phonemic Awareness			
	Pre	Post	Percent Change
Excellent	20.00%	**72.41%**	52.41%
Good	66.67%	**24.14%**	-42.53%
Fair	13.33%	**0.00%**	-13.33%
Poor	0.00%	**3.45%**	3.45%
Phonics			
	Pre	Post	Percent Change
Excellent	10.00%	**68.97%**	58.97%
Good	76.67%	**31.03%**	-45.63%
Fair	13.33%	**0.00%**	-13.33%
Poor	0.00%	**0.00%**	0.00%

Table 2. Disaggregated PArticipant Perceptions Post Workshop.

It appeared initially that participants grew the most in phonemic awareness, but upon a closer look, it is clear participants came in with the most confidence in this area. One participant decreased. Overall, there was a steady increase, and the workshop had a positive effect on teacher perceptions.

Qualitative

Authors analyzed participant perceptions of knowledge growth in the concepts of print, phonemic awareness and concepts related to phonics. Overall, participants also noted the expanded repertoire of strategies and planning more mindfully. These included types of strategies, how to be intentional and explicit, to include integration across subject areas and better understanding what is developmentally appropriate. Additionally, the

concepts gained also validated teacher knowledge and helped teachers identify misconceptions in a safe space. "*I feel as though I was validated in a lot of ways throughout this workshop.*" Another noted, "*I had some misconceptions about environmental print. This workshop also made me more aware of how I can guide students to look at the print within pictures, the punctuation marks used, and the type of print or direction of the print that the author used.*" One noted, "*[I have] a better in-depth understanding of those skills and being able to explain to parents and teachers with confidence*." Another said, "[I now have] validation that explicit phonics instruction is critical for all students."

Print Awareness. In the areas of print awareness, participants noted the importance of read-alouds at all ages. One participant noted, "*I learned the concept of a print-focused read-aloud is a low investment, high-yield strategy*." Another stated, "*I learned a lot about how important it is to do print-focused read-alouds. I knew this was important, but I definitely learned more about it and how important it is in developing foundational skills.*"

Phonemic Awareness. In the area of phonemic awareness, participants noted better understanding the importance of it and the need for early intervention. Some noted better understanding the difference between phonemic awareness and phonics.

"*My knowledge around phonemic awareness was strengthened during this workshop. I have more resources that show how identifying phonemic awareness struggles early is necessary and that early intervention can help reduce reading difficulties in the future*." Additionally, "*students need a true understanding of phonemic awareness if they are going to be successful when connecting it with graphemes to decode."*

Phonics. Participants noted the importance of morphology and phonics rule patterns in connection to phonics and decoding. Specifically, understanding the specific scope and sequence of phonics instruction.

"*I learned a few more "rules". These are so fascinating to me. I love learning more about phonics and I've found that kids do too. I also learned a lot about morphology. Morphology is the area I still need to work on. I need to develop better lessons in morphology and this is an area that I still struggle a little with."*

Participants also shared how the strategies benefited and supported their own understanding. "*I learned about continuous vs. stop consonant sounds and how starting with continuous sounds can help a student blend the sounds continuously*." Another stated, "I *really thought that English was just a really hard, irregular language. I have never analyzed as deeply as*

we did in this course. Through this course, I learned that there are quite a few patterns even within irregular words. I also learned a lot about the "rules" of English that I didn't know."

Additionally, we asked participants what aspects of the workshop were most useful in supporting their knowledge development. Participants noted three main themes related to the structure, the application, and the culture of the environment. See Table 3 for key ideas and participant quotes.

Key Ideas
Structure
● Learning from experts
● Research-based approach
● Varied structure that included readings, webinars, hands-on activities, and professional book studies
Application
● Hands on learning opportunities
● Multiple strategies explicitly shared and practiced
● Timing allowed for practice in between sessions
Culture
● Collaborative space
● Enjoyed working with multiple district participants
● Participants felt validated and that it was ok to be vulnerable and admit misconceptions

Table 3. Useful Aspects of the Workshop.

As Table 3 showcases, the workshop's structure was highlighted as an important element. Specifically, the timing provided time for practice in between. "*I think having our sessions spread out (unlike a one-week summer class) was extremely beneficial."* Additionally, homework in between was designed with direct application implied. "*Preparing materials for families was an unexpected and good challenge."* In addition, it offered voice and choice through varied methods. One participant said, "I *appreciated that the assignments were varied - webinars, articles, podcasts, book chapters, etc."* Another stated, *"I loved that we were able to make choices in some of our assignments that would pertain to us in our current positions."*

Further, the structure and application "wasn't *just a sit and get, instead we actually saw the activities in action, but also weren't treated like children. I appreciated being talked to like the professionals that we are and having time to collaborate with so many amazing educators from around the metro."* This connection established a culture within the workshop that allowed for vulnerability. *Participants spoke to the learning that was needed. "I need to challenge myself and continue to push forward to learn best practices to provide my students with instruction that builds their foundation and pushes*

them to their highest level." Another noted, *"I didn't rank myself higher on this survey only because I have not had an opportunity to implement the things I've learned yet. Next school year will look very different for me, and I will be able to bring this new knowledge to the forefront of my classroom."* Overall, valuable aspects included the workshop's structure, the application of the strategies shared, and the environment's culture.

Findings & Implications

The findings show that the early literacy workshop's format and content significantly impacted teachers' knowledge and perceptions of the important role that foundational skills play in developing skilled readers. As others look to develop professional training that mirrors the effectiveness of this one, they must thoughtfully consider the structure, application, and culture of the experience.

Structure

Participants discussed that the variance in learning structure and the variety of activities facilitated strong learning opportunities for them. Learners are more active and engaged in their courses when they interact with the course content through different modalities, with their peers, and their instructors (Lear et al., 2010). This engagement and design will more likely maintain their desire to learn and feel satisfied with the experience (Banna et al., 2015). When designing professional training, be intentional in incorporating different learning modalities, offering choice in knowledge building materials and variance in learning tasks. This applied learning approach caters to the different learner preferences of participants which positively contributes to their learning and overall engagement.

It was also discussed that the semester-long structure and hybrid design created space for participants to process the content and consider next steps for application. Just as cognitive load theory, or the inability to retain or attend to new information when the brain is overloaded, is often discussed with developing readers, facilitators must implement a structure that provides processing time and individualized application of content. This applied learning structure enhances problem solving encouraging the development of higher-level thinking (Dewey, 2020). The hybrid design of the workshop enabled learners to engage in meaningful discussions and hands-on opportunities with the content while also enjoying the flexibility in other course components for content delivery. Honoring the diverse needs of participants as well as their desire for the content to be personalized and specific to their needs will increase the likelihood that participants will meet the learning experience's intended goals and objectives (Shirky, 2015).

Application

Application is where the learning sticks so creating hands-on opportunities to explore the content and strategies followed by group reflection and processing is a critical component of any successful

professional training. The reality is that supporting learners in applying and transferring their learning needs to be deliberate and intentionally planned (Merriam & Leahy, 2005; Roumell, 2019). Though constructing materials and preparing hands-on learning opportunities is often tedious and time consuming, the tradeoff is participants better understanding the content and how they could implement the strategies shared into their own professional context.

Participants' time is valuable, so ensuring that the individual tasks assigned post training are meaningful and applicable to the participants' context is critical. Students interested in the learning content and tasks are more willing to exert effort to achieve their learning goals (Wang et al., 2023). Structuring tasks in a way that encourages the participants to apply the knowledge gained from the training while also honoring the variance in their experiences and positions will likely result in strong implementation and increased retention of the desired behavior or strategy. These opportunities for authentic application set the foundation for the culture of the workshop.

Culture

The last thing facilitators must consider is how to create a culture that fosters collaboration and vulnerability. As professionals it can be challenging to admit that our current practices are ineffective, yet this vulnerability is essential to professional growth (Brown, 2012; Brown, 2016). It's hard to shift our approach to better meet the needs of our target population when it hasn't been part of our everyday practice. Participants consistently highlighted how valuable collaborating and learning from the experiences of educators from different districts, schools and positions was in their development and understanding of the workshop's goals. When participants' voices are positioned at the center of discussion, their experiences as professionals are validated and viewed as assets in the space. Participants need to know that small shifts can be made to strengthen existing practices. As one participant noted, "I appreciated being talked to like the professionals that we are." This approach supported vulnerability, and a growth mindset as indicated by the participant statement regarding having a "steep learning curve," and needing to "continue to push forward to learn best practices to provide my students instruction that builds their foundation and pushes them to their highest level." When participants experience positive emotions such as enjoyment, interest, and enthusiasm while engaging in learning activities, confidence increases, and they are more likely to have better academic performance and content retention. These positive emotions can enhance motivation and cognitive processes, improving mindset and overall learning outcomes (Fasso & Wright, 2018).

Closing

As states continue to work to enhance the literacy landscape, more training is needed. Workshops providing the structure, application and environment shared above can serve as a stimulus to address one of the most influential factors of student achievement, teachers and teacher training. By creating a space focused on increasing teachers' knowledge and understanding of science- aligned approaches to teaching reading, our state is a step closer to long-term, sustainable change. This study demonstrates that educators at a local level can develop effective workshops on their own without relying on state or national professional organizations to provide training. Implementing workshops locally reduces costs and makes this training more feasible and available to educators.

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Identifying and Overcoming Barriers to Study Away Courses At A Regional Public University

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Abstract

It is widely recognized that study away (i.e., off-campus) courses enrich the educational experience of undergraduate students. These courses have been shown to increase students' personal growth and intercultural competency, while providing hands-on exploration of the natural and cultural history of other regions and countries. Study away courses are an excellent example of how Missouri Western State University fulfills its mission as the applied learning institution for the state of Missouri. Missouri Western State University is an open-enrollment regional university with a large proportion of economically challenged students, many of whom are also first-generation college students. This situation presents many potential barriers to student participation in, and faculty coordination of, these courses. These challenges include course fees, trip logistics, institutional support, and perceptions of study-away courses. In this paper, we discuss how we have approached these challenges in one domestic and three international study away courses focused on biology and geology.

Introduction

Both study abroad courses and study away courses, which apply the principles and pedagogy of international study abroad programs to domestic programs (Sobania & Braskamp, 2009), are high-impact applied learning opportunities for undergraduates that can broaden students' perspectives and enrich their college experience. Although study abroad programs are relatively common at many universities, study away courses to domestic destinations are a valuable alternative. Students who participate in domestic study away courses can experience many of the benefits of an international study abroad course, and these programs can be more affordable and logistically more feasible than courses that require international travel (Hope, 2008; Sobania & Braskamp, 2009; Meyers & Arnold, 2016). For example, Lane et al. reported that the redesign of a proposed study abroad course to South Africa to instead travel to a domestic destination led to substantially higher enrollment while still addressing the course learning outcomes (Lane et al., 2017). For the remainder of this article, we will use the term "study away" to refer to both domestic and international courses.

In several studies across multiple disciplines, students reported increases in functional and interpersonal skills, understanding of global relationships and interdependence, and cultural sensitivity after completing a study away course, including both domestic and international programs (Cisneros-Donahue et al., 2012; Engberg, 2013; Lane et al, 2017; Zimmermann et al., 2021). This kind of cultural competency is a necessary skill in many careers. For example, health care providers must meet the health care needs of patients from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Nursing students who participated in a domestic study away program reported an increase in empathy towards patients from different ethnic and socioeconomic groups, as well as a greater understanding of disparities in the healthcare system (Nicely & Stricklin, 2017). Study abroad courses in health care increased the effectiveness of nursing student communication and improved patient care (Carpenter & Garcia, 2012). While these studies focused specifically on nursing students, cultural competency and communication skills are important for all undergraduate majors and are among the basic competencies in the Missouri state undergraduate general studies curriculum, underscoring their importance in undergraduate education.

During study away programs, students have to go beyond the classroom model of learning, applying content knowledge and skills in new contexts. This increases students' understanding of course content (Taylor & Shore, 2019) and their ability to properly use skills learned in class (Delmas, 2021). Students who participate in study abroad programs have increased graduation rates, higher enrollment rates and higher cumulative GPAs subsequent to their trip away (Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Xu et al., 2013). Despite the benefits of study away courses for students, these courses are often limited due to a variety of significant intrinsic and extrinsic challenges (Shinbrot et al., 2022). In the 2021-2022 academic year, only 5.9% of US undergraduates participated in a

study abroad program. Only 15.8% participated in short-term courses, defined as being less than five weeks duration (IIE, 2023).

The Missouri Western State University (MWSU) Biology Department has a long (30+ year) history of offering short-term study away courses. Recent nine-day trips have traveled to Arizona (2020), Costa Rica (2021 and 2019), and Belize (2024). These trips have all focused on experiential learning about local ecosystems and culture, and some trips have also included a focus on hands-on ecology research projects (Table 1). Our study away courses have no prerequisites and we do not limit these experiences to Biology majors. Therefore, while we present content (e.g., coral reef fishes we expect to see in Belize) and expect the students to learn about the destinations before, during and after the trip, this is typically not our emphasis. We want to expose students to different habitats, ecosystems, climates, peoples, and cultures. By doing so, we hope they will be more well-rounded and globally aware citizens.

Students maintain a daily trip journal recording their activities, thoughts, and reactions to the day's events. Often these trips are followed by a meeting - open to other faculty and students and participants' friends and family - in which students present Powerpoint "travelogues" of each day of the trip, as well as results of their research projects (when applicable). This allows the students to synthesize their experiences from the trip and engage in self-reflection.

Destination	Transportation	Lodging	Trip focus	Activities
Arizona	domestic flights, rented van	hotels	exploration of biology, geology, culture	Visits to Grand Canyon, Painted Desert, Petrified Forest and Saguaro National Parks, Red Rocks and Homolovi State Parks, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum
Costa Rica	international flights, bus provided by tour company	field station, hotels	exploration of biology and culture; independent research projects	Visit to, and 2-day research projects at, La Selva Biological Station; visits to Cahuita (coastal town) and San Jose (capital city), including the Gold Museum
Belize	international flights, domestic flights in Belize, bus provided by tour company	field station, hotels	exploration of biology and culture	4 days of snorkeling on Belize Barrier Reef from Belize TREC; visits to Belize Zoo, Xunantunich, and Cahal Pech (Mayan ruins)

Table 1. Summary of recent MWSU study away trips (2019-2024)

In this paper, we draw on our experiences in leading study away courses to briefly explore three major challenges to conducting study away courses. We also provide suggestions for minimizing or overcoming these challenges.

Challenges to a Regional Public University STEM Study Away Program

Financial challenges

Cost is broadly noted as a major barrier to student participation in study away programs nationwide (Brown et al., 2016; Lingo, 2019). MWSU is an open-access regional university that serves many financially challenged students, and funding an elective study away trip is often difficult for students. The authors begin to advertise their study away courses, including the estimated cost, at least a year in advance so students have time to plan financially. Faculty hold multiple informational sessions the semester prior to the program. These meetings often include a guest from the Financial Aid Office or the office which runs the study away program to help answer students' questions about payment.

When departments are in charge of making arrangements for their trips, deposits required prior to payment of student course fees can strain departmental

budgets and discourage study away course offerings. One solution is to have a study away "slush fund" built up using a percentage of the funds collected during previous study away trips. This can be used to make deposits for future trips, and repaid out of student fees. There have been multiple substantial changes to the MWSU study away program structure since 2020. This has created confusion as to when and how student course fees were assessed, which has led to some students dropping courses early in the term. Clarifying costs, payment structure, and how the payments will appear on a student's tuition bill early and often is very important to student recruitment and retention.

Logistical challenges

Direct support and participation by faculty and staff is highly important in a successful study away program. Only 8.2% of US undergraduate study away students in academic year 2021-2022 were from the physical or life sciences (IIE, 2023). Niehaus & Inkelas (2016) found that STEM majors' intent to study abroad waned significantly between freshman and sophomore years, with the greatest change being found within the biological sciences. This discrepancy is likely due to STEM students' more structured schedule of courses as well as preparation for standardized exams, such as the MCAT, among other factors (Desoff 2006, Wainwright et al. 2009, Niehaus & Inkelas 2016). This low rate of STEM participation has been mitigated in some cases by having an office dedicated to accommodating students from STEM programs in study abroad programs (Kim & Lawrence, 2021). While no such office exists at MWSU, the Biology Department has faculty who are dedicated to bringing students into the study away program. Biology faculty and staff provide most of the organization, promotion, and advising about scheduling and course planning.

For the three most recently completed study away courses, planning and coordination were primarily done by the Biology Department. The instructors and administrative assistant were in charge of arranging lodging, activities, food and transportation for all participants; in the case of the international trips, a travel agent and in-country tour operator were also involved. This department-based format significantly increased the amount of work for instructors planning the course, both during and before the semester in which the class took place. Some instructors could find this extra work, on top of already-heavy course loads, to be discouraging. Having access to a capable and well-organized study away office has helped greatly. For institutions lacking such an office, having a department template for trip design (see Appendix for the authors' trip design template) would be extremely useful, along with a clear understanding of the time and effort required for faculty to plan and lead a trip.

During the time in which the authors have created and run study away courses, the university study away program has had multiple directors, shifted to different offices within the university, and for a time had no central leadership. While this in no way reflected active discouragement, the lack of consistent structure resulted in confusion and miscommunication between faculty, staff and administration during the planning and execution phases of our study away

courses. We have found that, especially with the turnover and instability in study away program administration, it is best to have a core group of experienced instructors who have successfully taught study away courses available not only to lead future courses, but also to mentor and train other faculty. These "experienced" instructors not only have run multiple study away trips/courses, but have also already overcome some of the inherent challenges and problems encountered along the way. They are also helpful for informing new staff and administrators of previous policies and procedures.

Perceptions of study away courses

An additional common factor found as a reason for non-participation in study away courses is student engagement in non-academic activities - sports, clubs, student government, etc. (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Brown et al., 2016; Kim & Lawrence, 2021). This creates a sense of "missing out" or an "effort" barrier, wherein students are worried that a study away opportunity will cause them to miss out on valuable on-campus experiences or activities, or create an excess workload for them upon return. This barrier can be partially resolved by moving the dates of the study away trip to the period over winter break or between the spring and summer semesters, when no classes are taking place and clubs and teams may not be meeting or practicing. The authors have also found it difficult to generate student interest in domestic trips, in part because students have harbored an expectation of visiting a foreign country during any kind of study away program. For example, some students who did not sign up for a proposed study away trip to the Pacific Northwest said part of their decision was due to the fact that the trip did not include a visit to Canada.

One of the ways to combat these student concerns is to give students opportunities to have them addressed directly by the course instructors. The authors hold multiple informational meetings about a trip in the semester prior to the scheduled course to advertise and describe the course activities and to answer student questions in person. We are also planning to add visits to student organizations to reach more potential participants. During these meetings, instructors use their own experiences on these trips as well as quotes from past students to inspire future students to participate in study away courses. We emphasize to students how these can be once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Personal experiences can be powerful evidence. We often employ quotes or stories told by past student participants, and stories from the instructors themselves. As an example, one of the authors tells potential students how it felt the first time he, as a Nebraska boy, was swimming on a coral reef in Belize and saw a pod of squid swim up and change colors and patterns multiple times in a few seconds, which felt like being in a Jacques Cousteau documentary. Students are drawn in by the personal and dramatic stories we can tell about our own experiences.

We have also used multiple methods to summarize and publicize participant activities during and after a study away trip. Early trips often had a "Field Natural History Public Night" scheduled after the group returned to campus. The

instructor would request photos from trip participants and prepare an overview that was given to the public (parents, classmates, friends, and the academic community). Occasionally, prior to the trip, a schedule was prepared and each student was placed on a team that was responsible for documenting one particular day of the trip activities. During the public presentation, teams were given ten minutes to summarize their day's activities. More recently, blogs have been created and daily posts - including photos, a brief narrative, and "quotes of the day" - are uploaded by students during the trip. This innovative process has allowed non-trip participants to vicariously experience the trip in real time.

Conclusion

Having a consistent and cohesive group of study away instructors within the Biology Department is one of the most important aspects of our program. It provides a form of institutional memory that benefits future instructors, as well as staff and administration. It is important to clearly communicate to prospective students all costs of the course, and how and when charges will appear on student accounts. Providing information about trip experiences via informational meetings, public post-trip presentations, and dissemination of blog links can help to attract student interest as well to counter inaccurate perceptions of study away trips. Despite the challenges involved in planning and executing study away trips, these courses are vitally important opportunities for students and are often among the most significant parts of our students' college experience.

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Appendix A. Template of Trip Design

Timeframe	Item
1 year before trip	Make reservations with local providers/tour companies Start recruiting students (interest meetings, department emails, etc.)
Semester before trip	Intensify student recruitment efforts Have students fill out trip paperwork (commitment to pay, liability waiver, etc.) and order passports (if applicable)
4-6 months before trip	Purchase plane tickets/reserve vehicles Purchase (or have students purchase) travel insurance and travel health insurance Provide students with a packing list and tentative itinerary Encourage students to consult travel health clinics about recommended vaccinations, etc. Apply for research permits (if applicable; timeframe for this will also vary depending on location)
1 month before trip	Confirm on-the-ground reservations
1 week before trip	Meet with students to review travel plans and packing list and answer last-minute questions
Within 1 week after trip	Request student evaluations of trip
Within 1 month after trip	Presentation of results from research projects (if applicable); presentation of daily “travelogues” to family, friends, colleagues

Harnessing Prairie Survey and Restoration Through Applied Learning: Insights From Research Done in Missouri Western State University's John Rushin Teaching and Research Prairie

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Keywords: Prairie, restoration, applied learning, Missouri Western State University, education, research, conservation

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Abstract

Prairie ecosystems, once expansive across North America, have faced significant degradation and fragmentation due to expanding agricultural development (World Wildlife Fund, 2023). Efforts to survey and restore prairies offer a unique opportunity for applied learning in environmental education. This paper explores the potential of prairie survey and restoration projects to enhance students' applied learning experiences and develop practical skills in ecological research, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable land management. Drawing upon interdisciplinary perspectives from ecology, education, and community engagement, and utilizing flora survey of the John Rushin Teaching and Research Prairie at Missouri Western State University as a model for applied learning, this paper examines the educational benefits of prairie survey and restoration and provides recommendations for integrating these activities into formal and informal educational settings. By engaging students in hands-on activities, we aim to enhance understanding, foster environmental stewardship, and contribute to effective prairie restoration.

Introduction

Amidst the growing number of stark ecological challenges (Seebens, 2017), the role of environmental education in shaping a future of sustainable resource usage has never been more critical. Institutions of higher education stand on the precipice of this fight, sporting both the responsibility and the potential to foster the knowledge, skills, and foundations for sustainable, ethical resource usage needed to address modern ecological challenges. When carefully integrated into existing curricula, environmental education surpasses traditional disciplinary boundaries and fosters a sense of connectedness and importance between conservation and everyday life. In doing so, it can help train and call all members of our society to support a common goal of sustainability and good stewardship of the land.

This study explores the vital role of environmental education in higher education, and through the use of a case study, emphasizes its importance in cultivating a generation that is aware of the environmental challenges at hand, but is also empowered to take action. By examining the state of current curricula, identifying gaps, and proposing strategies for improvement, we aim to contribute to the ongoing and necessary dialogue for expanding environmental education in academia, particularly in higher education.

Overview of Prairie Ecosystems and the Importance of Prairie Survey and Restoration for Biodiversity Conservation and Ecosystem Resilience

Ongoing studies so far have shown that regions of the North American prairie (including tallgrass, mixed, and short-grass prairies, an integral part of the Great Plains in North America) are among the continent's most endangered ecosystems, with tallgrass prairies being globally endangered (Rickletts et al., 1999). The decline of North American prairies has severely impacted native

prairie plants and animals (Samson & Knopf, 1994; Knopf, 1996). Although considerable progress has been made towards the development of a conservation framework for the Great Plains (Risser, 1996), significant challenges persist in integrating social, economic, and biological factors into effective prairie conservation strategies.

In addition to the loss and fragmentation of native grasslands, the conservation of the Great Plains systems faces other significant challenges. A critical issue in contemporary conservation is understanding the role of ecological drivers (Knopf & Samson, 1997). Focusing solely on landscape patterns without considering the ecological drivers that shape species diversity overlooks a crucial aspect of conserving species, communities, and ecosystems. Ecological drivers in the Great Plains include broad scale drought, grazing and fire on landscape and local scales (Fuhlendorf & Engle, 2001). The Great Plains developed in the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains, receive most of their seasonal precipitation in spring and summer. Precipitation increases and drought frequency decreases from the Rocky Mountains eastward to the Mississippi River. From central Texas to south-central Canada, the growing season shortens, average temperatures drop, and a larger portion of annual precipitation falls as snow. These broad-scale climate gradients play a significant role in determining the evolutionary composition and distribution of prairie communities (Steinauer & Collins, 1996). However, average conditions are only part of the story. The inherent unpredictability of year-to-year precipitation also has a major impact. Severe droughts can lead to widespread local extinctions of annual forbs (wildflowers and other broad-leaved, nonwoody plants) and grasses that have invaded perennial stands, and recolonization of these sites is a slow process. Prairies are ecosystems primarily composed of perennial grasses and forbs, interspersed with a few shrubs and very few trees.

The prairies in Missouri are known as tallgrass prairies due to their abundance of warm-season grass species that can grow from 2 to over 6 feet tall. Located just east of North America's Great Plains—one of the largest grassland regions in the world—Missouri benefits from more moisture and richer soils, which support taller grass species. Historically, the tallgrass prairie region extended from Manitoba southeast to eastern Indiana, and southwest to northeastern Oklahoma, including the eastern parts of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. In contrast, the Great Plains to our west feature mixed-grass and, further west, shortgrass prairies, where drier conditions favor shorter grasses. Prairie plants can be incredibly variable and are dependent on different types of soil and access to water, and often show seasonal variability.

Experiential Applied Learning and its Application in Environmental Education Including Prairie Survey and Restoration

Integrating Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984) and Place-Based Education (PBE) (Gruenewald, 2003) into prairie survey and restoration projects creates a dynamic and impactful educational framework that benefits both learners and the environment. By engaging in concrete

experiences, such as conducting field surveys and participating in restoration activities, students and community members gain direct, hands-on knowledge of prairie ecosystems. These activities might include identifying and cataloging native plant species, monitoring wildlife, assessing soil health, and mapping invasive species. These practical experiences provide the foundational knowledge needed to understand the complexities of prairie ecosystems and the importance of their conservation.

Reflective observation plays a crucial role in this integrated approach. After participating in field activities, learners are encouraged to reflect on their observations and experiences. Discussions can be facilitated to explore what was observed, any unexpected findings, and the implications of these observations on the health and biodiversity of the prairie. This stage helps learners to develop critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of ecological relationships and processes. Reflective sessions can be structured as group discussions, individual journals, or presentations, fostering a collaborative learning environment where insights and ideas are shared and expanded upon. Abstract conceptualization involves synthesizing the reflections and observations into broader ecological concepts and theories. Learners develop an understanding of key principles such as ecosystem dynamics, biodiversity, and the impacts of human activity on natural habitats. This stage transforms practical experiences into theoretical knowledge, allowing learners to grasp the underlying science behind their hands-on activities. By connecting their direct experiences to broader environmental concepts, students and community members can see the relevance and importance of their work in a larger ecological context.

Active experimentation, the final stage of ELT, involves applying the newly acquired knowledge and theories to ongoing and future restoration projects. Learners are encouraged to develop and test new strategies for prairie conservation, such as experimenting with different methods of invasive species control, planting native species in different arrangements, or implementing innovative monitoring techniques. This stage not only reinforces learning but also contributes to the continuous improvement of restoration practices. By actively participating in the iterative process of experimentation and adaptation, learners become more proficient in problem-solving and more committed to environmental stewardship.

The integration of ELT and PBE in prairie survey and restoration projects fosters a deeper connection between learners and their local environment. This approach not only enhances educational outcomes but also promotes a sense of responsibility and empowerment among participants. By understanding and actively engaging in the restoration and preservation of prairie ecosystems, learners develop a lifelong commitment to environmental conservation and sustainability. This holistic educational model not only benefits the individuals involved but also contributes to the long-term health and resilience of prairie landscapes.

Principles and Practices of Prairie Restoration and its Significance in Providing Applied Learning Opportunities to Students: MWSU's John Rushin Teaching and Research Prairie is an Example

Missouri Western State University (MWSU), a primarily undergraduate institution, located in Saint Joseph, is situated in the North Western part of the state of Missouri. MWSU is a student-focused learning community dedicated to preparing individuals for lives of excellence through practical education. One of the assets of the biology department at Missouri Western State University is the John Rushin Teaching and Research Prairie (JRTRP), situated just outside the campus. Spanning across 34 acres of the southeast corner of the campus, this unique prairie habitat is a valuable resource for the campus community and attracts botanists and nature enthusiasts from beyond. It offers exceptional applied learning opportunities for students from a wide variety of disciplines. The prairie, championed by Dr. Mark Mills, biology faculty member and then department chair, was officially dedicated on October 31, 2020, to honor Professor Emeritus Dr. John Rushin and his career, and to support a tallgrass prairie restoration effort. This initiative provides an excellent platform for faculty and students to study, learn, and manage tallgrass prairie and oak savannah ecosystems.

During the growing season between late May and early September, this prairie is usually dominated by big and little bluestem grasses with a high concentration of asters, legumes, and milkweeds. The JRTRP, which encompasses the MWSU cross country track, is used for a variety of applied learning experiences including undergraduate research, class field trips, and Course-based Undergraduate Research Experience (CURE) projects, and is also utilized by local citizens as a walking trail and conserved nature area. The prairie has been subjected to prescribed burns periodically, the first one being done in the spring of 2023. It has also been subjected to weeding and removal of invasive species, notably Johnson grass (*Sorghum halepense* L. (Pers.)) and invasive bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare* (Savi) Ten.). Most of these initiatives were undertaken by students majoring in Wildlife Conservation and Management that were also active members of MWSU's Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society, and formed an active part of MWSU's mission to provide students with unique and exciting experiential applied learning experiences. Students were helped in their efforts by biology faculty members from MWSU, as well as community members and nature lovers. Although the initial seeding of the prairie was performed in 2021 from seeds provided by the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) and the Dunn Ranch Prairie in Missouri, about one thousand milkweed (*Asclepias* sp.) seedlings (comprising butterfly milkweed, swamp milkweed, whorled milkweed and the common milkweed) were also planted across the prairie during June, 2023.

Premise of Current Study, Summary of Key Findings, and Significance

Our case study aims to better understand the composition and populations

of prairie forbs on an institutionally managed tall grass prairie. Through this study, students investigated whether or not the 'Occupancy Modeling' method was able to accurately reflect the composition of the campus prairie, and create plans for future management with a baseline model to evaluate the effectiveness of future management strategies. 'Occupancy Modeling' is a statistical approach to estimate the true population of a given species. The 'Occupancy' relies on the assumption that human-conducted surveys are not perfect and help us determine the percentage of missed detections. We chose to utilize this approach because it is easily adaptable for use on a variety of species and allowed us to utilize data collected from previous surveys for a larger, more complete data set.

This study focused on conducting flora surveys of the JRTRP, concentrating on dicotyledonous flowering plant species, during the period between the first burn and the first frost event occurring in early November, 2023, to identify the effects of plant growth in a post-burn restored prairie habitat. The prairie was split into four sections following boundaries created by the cross-country track (Fig. 1). Each section was sampled independently every two weeks. Sampling was conducted using a 1-meter square plot made of PVC pipe, all plants within the plot were recorded. Each plot was at least 1 meter away from the previous plot to ensure plants were not counted multiple times. Special considerations were made for plants over 4 feet in height, as they could not be reasonably contained within the square plot. These plants were counted if they were touching the outside boundary of the plot. Surveys were conducted from the beginning of May to the first part of November at the start of the first frost event. Occupancy Modeling was performed in R using the "unmarked" package (R Core Team, 2021). All models were run at a 95% CI.

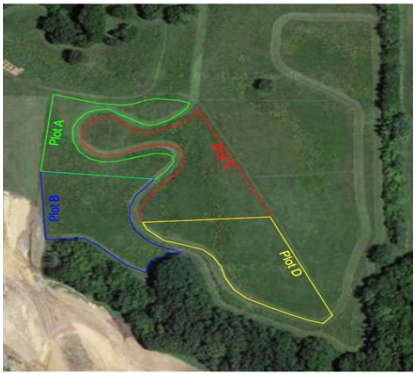

Figure 1. Plot Boundaries for the Current Study

For our survey results (Table 1; Fig. 2), we found *Asclepias*, *Cichorium*, *Rudbeckia*, and *Daucus* to have an occupancy rate of 99%. The numbers for *Asclepias* are likely inflated due to the planting efforts of native milkweeds for monarch butterfly populations. It is important to recognize that the effects of heavy-handed management are at play and can influence the results of

occupancy. Detection probability represents the probability that species will be detected within the given parameter. For us, this equals a 1-meter squared plot. It is also important to note that non-detection does not mean that a species/genus is not present. Detection probabilities are relatively stable across our genera, which generally shows that there is not a large selection bias towards one genus. *Cirsium* and *Rumex* had the two highest detection probabilities within our study (38 and 36%, respectively). *Cirsium*, however, was found to be statistically significant and fit within the expected parameters of the Mackenzie-Bailey test for goodness of fit (Mackenzie & Bailey, 2004). This distinction is important because *Cirsium* is mainly composed of the species *Cirsium vulgare* (Savi) Ten (Common Bull Thistle), which is an extremely invasive plant in our prairie system. The model for *Cirsium* gives us important baseline information on the population structure of the genus and can give us a comparison tool to evaluate the effectiveness of future management techniques. 'C-Hat' is a value that represents the overinflation of data. Our survey bases parameters for C-Hat on a study published by Mackenzie and Bailey (2004), which puts normal ranges between 1 and 2. C-Hat values under 1 are generally underinflated and can indicate underrepresented species or sampling bias. The C-Hat values over 2 can indicate overrepresented species or sampling bias. Our study found an overinflation of *Rudbeckia* and an underinflation of *Rumex*, *Silphium*, and *Daucus*. All other genera fit within the expected value. The P-value measures the probability that a result is as extreme or more extreme than the observed data, assuming the null hypothesis is true. In essence, it is the likelihood that our data occurred by random chance. For this study, we utilized a 95% confidence interval (P = 0.05 for significance). The null hypothesis for this study argues that there is no difference in populations between genera of plants. Any estimates of genera found to have a p-value less than or equal to 0.05 and a C-Hat value between 1-2 are considered to be well-fit; this distinction is present in the genera *Asclepias*, *Cichorium*, *Erigeron*, *Rudbeckia*, and *Cirsium*. These genera are marked in the table and graph with an asterisk to represent well-fit models (Table 1; Fig. 2). These genera can be used to reject the null hypothesis and indicate that there are population differences between some species of prairie plants.

Genera	Occupancy *P.*	SE	Detection *P.*	SE	C-Hat	*P*-value
*Asclepias**	0.99	0.011	0.22	0.042	1.79	0.05
*Cichorium**	0.99	0.011	0.22	0.042	1.79	0.04
*Erigeron**	0.88	0.178	0.29	0.074	1.48	0.09
*Rudbeckia**	0.99	0.022	0.23	0.043	2.11	0.01
Rumex	0.55	0.137	0.36	0.089	0.66	0.83
Silphium	0.97	0.190	0.28	0.071	0.94	0.50
*Cirsium**	0.72	0.129	0.38	0.076	1.84	0.03
Calystegia	0.62	0.170	0.29	0.089	1.02	0.41
Daucas	0.99	0.008	0.18	0.040	0.44	0.93
Solidago	0.88	0.316	0.19	0.079	1.74	0.06

Table 1. Probabilities of Occupancy and Detections

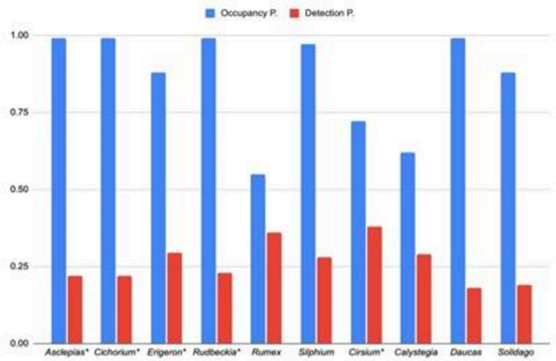

Figure 2. Probabilities of Occupancy and Detection

Integrating Prairie Survey and Restoration in Curricula: Challenges and Opportunities; Future Directions and Recommendations

Students pursuing a career in natural resource management can be afforded the opportunity to practice management principles by engaging in survey and restoration efforts similar to the ones that are being pursued in the John Rushin Teaching and Research Prairie discussed above, especially our study discussed in this paper. An essential piece to any management plan is site selection and monitoring. Prairie surveys allow students the ability to study the impacts of micro-habitat differences and its importance for site selection. Variances in soil composition, nutrient density, sun exposure, topography, and a host of other factors all present unique variables to be monitored and studied intensely. This study focused on the presence and absence of key native and invasive species, which allowed us to more narrowly select survey sites based on ecological factors such as the presence or absence of targeted species, proximity to natural corridors, access to resources, and human disturbance. Site selection must be done methodically and precisely to accomplish the goals of any project. Including students in the process allows for them to gain a better understanding of the factors at play and begin to build a system for evaluating confounding variables and selecting a site that maximizes the probability of favorable outcomes. Involvement in the initial steps of project development helps to empower students and foster the growth of their professional and skill set development.

In order to be best served, it is essential that students be involved in all stages of restoration. From initial planning, to surveying, to maintenance; students provided both eager hands and hungry minds. Introducing students to common restoration techniques such as prescribed burning and invasive species control is critical to a well-rounded education in natural resource management. Including students serves to simultaneously accomplish two goals, students learn

valuable hands-on skills and necessary maintenance is completed. Applied learning experiences on the John Rushin Teaching and Research Prairie have taken a variety of forms, but all serve the same purpose: get students involved in good stewardship of the land.

Long term management strategies can be further leveraged to give students the largest benefit in the smallest area. Structured patch burning can create a variety of habitats that can be used for comparative studies and allow students to get the most opportunities to participate in applied learning experiences. Utilizing a routine system of burning (i.e. 1,3,5 year patch burn plots) allows the land to be managed long term for targeted species while still providing students the opportunity to learn necessary career skills like prescribed burning. Furthermore, students should be involved in the planning and execution of management plans, this should range from being present at meetings for the creation of burn plans, site surveys, weather monitoring, and date selection. While it is critical for students to be involved in the execution of the plan, students are often left out of the administrative duties that are essential for the successful execution. Students are then expected to perform many of the administrative and planning duties with little to no experience in these skills. Expanding prairie management initiatives in higher education settings offers numerous opportunities to further student learning and environmental stewardship. Applied learning experiences, as a whole, allow students the opportunity to practice a variety of skills and techniques to reinforce prior learning (Hensel, 2018) By incorporating applied learning experiences in prairie restoration, students can further develop their professional and practical skills and gain a more in depth understanding of the ecosystem. Universities may further this goal by building partnerships with local conservation agencies, non-government organizations (NGO's), and naturalist groups to encourage community support. Integrating prairie restoration projects into existing biology, environmental science, and natural resource curricula can provide students with unique research opportunities and allow students to build a deeper sense of connection to their environment.

To further the goals of environmental education and applied learning, research should focus on several key areas including the effectiveness of applied learning initiatives, long term ecological impacts, interdisciplinary approaches, and stakeholder involvement. Investigations of applied learning projects centering on prairie restoration may help to grow student engagement, knowledge retention (Concilio, 2024), and attitudes towards conservation and may be particularly effective in general biology or non-major biology courses to further foster a sense of good stewardship of the land in a larger population of students. Building a framework of applied learning experiences focused on prairie restoration can serve to answer several unique questions such as how do hands-on restoration activities influence students' understanding of ecological principles? What are the long-term effects of applied learning projects on students' attitudes towards conservation and their likelihood of engaging in future management activities? Can applied learning experiences boost students'

critical thinking and problem-solving skills compared to traditional classroom-based education?

Our research priorities can also serve to help prepare students for field-based biology work. By tackling questions relating to student outcomes and career pathways, we may be able to see trends in participation in applied learning activities centered on prairie restoration and students' career and education trajectories. Studies involving new technology can give students insights into the cutting edge of their chosen career field and may include questions such as the effectiveness of digital tools to enhance students understanding and engagement of prairie restoration projects (which may include the use of GPS/GIS technologies, drone applications, species identification using Artificial Intelligence, etc.), or assessing the role of online collaboration for facilitating networking experience and communication between students, partners, and stakeholders.

By addressing these research priorities, we can hope to further advance the field of environmental education, leading to more effective pedagogy, better student learning outcomes, and greater community involvement in conservation efforts. Supporting prairie conservation and education efforts requires robust policy frameworks at the local, state, and national levels. Ideally, policies will aim to ensure consistent funding for university-based environmental projects through grants and programs, incentivize the inclusion of environmental education with a focus on local ecosystems in curricula, provide training and resources to educators to effectively teach environmental management and restoration projects, and promote the allocation of land for conservation programs and to integrate these spaces into curricula. Supporting prairie conservation and education efforts requires robust policy frameworks at the local, state, and national levels. Ideally, policies will aim to ensure consistent funding for university-based environmental projects through grants and programs, incentivize the inclusion of environmental education with a focus on local ecosystems in curricula, provide training and resources to educators to effectively teach environmental management and restoration projects, and promote the allocation of land for conservation programs and to integrate these spaces into curricula.

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Taking the Easy Way *In*: Leveraging Applied Learning Into Scholarly Contributions

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Abstract
This paper presents a rationale, justification, and practical guidelines for working with select undergraduate students to efficiently leverage their applied experiences into scholarly contributions. A review of the literature indicates that a) graduate programs heavily weight undergraduate research in the selection process, but that b) research opportunities are not equitably distributed among students, and furthermore, c) traditional research experience is not a very good predictor of graduate school success anyway. By capitalizing on existing applied activities, faculty can help a more diverse range of students bolster their curriculum vita, without stretching the student (or ourselves) too thin. This paper offers practical guidelines that have been successfully implemented in an undergraduate university setting with a dedicated applied learning mission.

Introduction

In my culture, "Taking the Easy Way Out" is an idiom typically used to insult someone for finding an easy way to avoid doing a hard thing (Take the easy way out, 2024). The implied offense echoes the common modern sentiment that prizes an overbusy, overworked lifestyle as being morally superior (Cohen, 2018). But lean approaches to quality improvement, progressive postmodern philosophy, and contemporary human experience all call into question the assumption that the "hard way" is necessarily best.

The purpose of this paper is to outline a rationale, justification, and practical guidelines for helping undergraduate students "take the easy way" into advanced education by leveraging existing applied experiences into the scholarly presentations/publications that many graduate programs demand of applicants. A lean mindset is applied with the goal of aligning key resources with the tasks most likely to yield the best outcomes without unduly wasting time and energy.

Primary of Research Experience in the Graduate Application Review

Survey data indicate that graduate application committees heavily weight undergraduate research experience (URE) in the selection process. Across a variety of professions, applications with more research experience receive stronger consideration (Hall et al., 2004; Landrum & Clark, 2005; Miller et al., 2021; Muffly et al. 2009; Norcross et al., 2005; Weiner, 2014; Woo et al., 2023). Clearly, we should be encouraging students to maximize research involvement if they hope to compete for graduate positions.

But Sometimes They Cannot

Unfortunately, opportunities for undergraduate research are finite and inequitably distributed (Carpi, 2017; Miller et al., 2021; Woo et al., 2023). Supervising URE is a labor-intensive endeavor, and limited opportunities are available. Subjective bias affects faculty selection of how to offer the coveted positions, and may differentially impact underrepresented minority groups (Woo et al., 2023). Furthermore, students are differentially able to accept said offers (Woo et al., 2023). Those who are managing family caregiving responsibilities, those who must work long hours to afford education, and those who were underprepared by their secondary education, are less capable of engaging in extracurricular research (Miller et al., 2021; Woo et al., 2023). The ongoing impact of historical discrimination means that the group of students who are not offered—or cannot take advantage of—URE opportunities, may overrepresent the underrepresented (Carpi, 2017; Miller et al., 2021; Woo et al., 2023).

Frankly, We Can't Either

As applied educators, we face myriad challenges that may reduce our capacity to mentor traditional research. And in applied education, where we must "expect the unexpected" it is particularly unwise to injudiciously add more to our workload without considering the potential domino-cascade of unintended consequences (Author, 2020a). In this paper, it is assumed that faculty are already operating at capacity in terms of how many URE we offer, and that few of us can offer more without reducing our overall performance. An

overambitious student research agenda will mean lower quality individual student projects along with the various repercussions that always follow from overextending ourselves (Author, 2020a).

And Maybe We Shouldn't Anyway?

Whenever we face a mismatch between resources and aspirations, a lean approach--which focuses on minimizing wasteful tasks to improve quality--may be of service. In this case, our key lean strategy is to transcend the tendency to assume that everything we are doing actually should be done (Drucker, 2006; George et al., 2004). At heart, it is a contrarian philosophy that allows those willing to question the status quo to achieve better results. So rather than assuming that URE is a top priority and automatically allocating more resources toward it, we start by asking whether URE should be a top priority at all. Immediately, we are faced with three contraindications.

First, while it is intuitive to assume that URE would be a good predictor of graduate school success, available research indicates otherwise. Overall, undergraduate research experience does not predict success in graduate school very well (Miller et al., 2021, Sibulkin & Butler, 2015; Woo et al., 2023). Most informatively, a meta-analysis involving 18 unique samples, totaling 3,525 students, found that URE is largely unrelated to academic performance, degree completion, professional/practical performance, and even publication productivity (Miller et al., 2021). There was one notable exception, in which URE did predict success in a graduate program. Importantly, this graduate program was specifically dedicated to academic science, with a mission statement identifying "practicing the scientific method" and achieving "scientific breakthroughs" as key objectives. It is possible that in this case, URE was rendered a valid predictor because it was so directly relevant to the program mission. In any case, the author cautioned other programs to empirically identify their own unique predictors, in part due to the paucity of research affirming URE as a common valid indicator (Weiner, 2014).

Second, the modern scholarship scene is increasingly dysfunctional, with a proliferation of predatory venues, insidious trickery, and outright fraud (Author, 2020b). Modern hiring, tenure, and promotion practices force such an overabundance of low-quality research that assessing the worthiness of sources has become a science in its own right (Bauerlien et al., 2010). While good research is utterly essential to human progress, more does not necessarily mean better.

Finally, applied learning educators understand that the best researchers do not always make the best practitioners; these two skill sets are sometimes distinct. Expecting all students to excel at the traditional research process in order to access advanced training in applied fields may needlessly perpetuate inequity and lost talent.

It Is Okay to Do Things the Easy Way

We have arrived at a troubling intersection of findings that suggest URE a) is heavily weighted by graduate application committees, b) is inequitably

distributed among students, and c) seems to rarely predict success in graduate school anyway. Thus, creative, efficient approaches to the problem are both necessary and permitted (Author, 2024).

In the demanding field of applied education, pragmatic challenges necessitate a solution that simultaneously:

- Increases opportunities to add research to the curriculum vita (CV) of a wider range of students.
- Adds little to the workload of faculty mentors.
- Provides a pedagogically sound learning experience, albeit one that may look different from traditional UREs.

We need to provide meaningful opportunities to a wider range of students, without exhausting our bandwidth.

Lean Strategy

As applied educators we already provide authentic assignments that engage students in the application of professional knowledge and skills to real-world tasks. This approach generates enormous motivation, self-regulation, and intellectual engagement (Nasrollahain, 2024), which can then be leveraged into scholarly contributions. Instead of scrambling to proffer new traditional research opportunities, we can capitalize on the applied experiences we already curate. In this way we adopt a lean strategy that maximizes returns from what we already do best, rather than diverting resources to peripheral endeavors (George et al, 2004).

One approach, which has been successfully and repeatedly implemented in an undergraduate applied learning university (Allen, 2022; Evans, 2023; King, 2023, Miles, 2024; Pohl, 2022; Tauchen, 2022) is offered here. For the purposes of this paper, we will call it an Applied Literature Review:

Step 1. Students participate in an existing applied learning curriculum for several weeks in order to get an understanding of the real-world implications of the work.

Step 2. Students are engaged in a detailed review of the profession's code of ethics (or similar foundational literature).

Step 3. Students are asked to integrate their understanding of professional ethics with their applied experience to identify one real-world problem they need to learn more about in order to do their best work.

Step 4. Class time is dedicated to a supported workshop guiding students to access the professional literature of their discipline to find the best answers to the problem they have selected.

Step 5. Students synthesize a summary of their findings to share with their classmates, including direct implications for their immediate applied goals.

The assignment is authentic, applied, ethically grounded, and student-directed. It is built into the existing curriculum, and should replace other content as needed, so that faculty are not attempting to append this to an already

overflowing workload. Step 5 is the final step for most students. However, select students, based on performance, can be encouraged to use their final summary as the foundation of a conference or journal proposal. Thus, some of the work has already been done. While additional mentoring will be necessary, this approach is immensely more time-efficient than supervising the same student in a fresh new traditional research project. More students can be offered more opportunities for URE without overextending faculty resources. An Applied Literature Review generates more weighty and intriguing proposals than a standard literature review, increasing the likelihood of acceptance. And because the process is also time-efficient for students, a more diverse subset will be able to take advantage of the opportunity.

Triple Dipping

This approach is a strategically efficient and pedagogically-sound means of optimizing student URE for their CV. In addition, it presents at least three ancillary advantages to address three looming challenges:

- Many underrepresented minority students do not know if they want to seek further education and may be reluctant to invest in URE (Carpi,2017; Miller et al., 2021). However, the Applied Literature Review approach represents a valuable opportunity to practice a skill set with more obvious value. Because across many disciplines, while some professionals conduct research studies, most of their colleagues apply said research. Thus, students are simultaneously preparing for two possible post-baccalaureate paths. Students who can describe the process of 1) engaging in the field, 2) noticing a skill gap, and 3) deliberately accessing the professional literature for support, will present at least as well in a job interview as on a graduate school application. Furthermore, while Applied Literature Reviews may not offer practice in the typical process of scientific, laboratory, or traditional scholarly research, they do offer experience in related scholarly skills, such as navigating the submission process, applying for travel support, preparing content, and performing in scholarly venues.
- The field of graduate student selection currently has a precariously wobbly stance on the use of standardized test scores, such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), which may or may not discriminate against underrepresented minority groups (Woo et al., 2023). While graduate faculty are wrestling with this conundrum, it behooves undergraduate faculty mentors to emphasize the importance of alternative measures. The primary objective of this paper is to encourage the efficient optimization of the CV. But the Applied Literature Review simultaneously promotes stronger letters of recommendation (LOR). Faculty who mentor this type of project are able to observe a distinctive sample of student performance, which can effectuate more distinguished

LORs. This is particularly valuable because preliminary research suggests that LORs may actually be meaningful predictors of graduate school success (Hall et al., 2004; Kuncel et al, 2014; Woo et al., 2023) and they are heavily weighted by many graduate school selection committees (Landrum & Clark., 2005; Norcross et al, 2005; Woo et al., 2023). Enhancing our ability to write supportive letters describing a broader range of skills can contribute to diversification of the graduate student population.

- As higher education grapples with the challenges and opportunities posed by advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI), an Applied Literature Review assignment doubles as an assessment that is too personalized to be fully delegated to ChatGPT. This activity meets best practice recommendations for assessment in the age of AI, including execution during class time, a presentation format, student-directed topic selection, and authentic skills practice in realistic situations (Rudolph et al., 2023)

It Is Easy to Second Guess the Easy Way In

When committing to take the "easy way" in, it is easy to question ourselves. In my pursuit of this unabashedly strategic solution, I have occasionally encountered the sentiment that my process is inferior to traditional URE. In fact, if the overall system were not in the state of disarray expounded above, then I am not sure I would be writing this paper. But the graduate student selection system is struggling with significant issues that have a substantial impact on diversity and equity. And as contrarian, postmodern philosopher Robert M. Pirsig (1989) points out, "A real understanding of Quality does not just serve the System, or even beat it or even escape it. A real understanding of Quality captures the System, tames it and puts it to work…" (p. 226). Because of the inherent import of what we do, applied educators are in a powerful position to lead the way in shifting the narrative. When pursuing quality within a dysfunctional system, deviating from the status quo can be highly functional.

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