

The Role of Experiential Education: An Analysis from Students' Perspective

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Introduction

Demographic backgrounds of students majoring in Colleges of Agriculture are changing. With more enrollment coming from urban areas, students have little or no personal experience with farming or other agricultural industries. Faculty and employers register a growing concern about a graduate's preparation to assume positions in agriculturally-related firms. As the jobmarket becomes more competitive, graduates are finding that good grades are not enough to help them land their first post-graduate job. As a result, experiential education is becoming important as an aspect of undergraduate education to meet a changing employment situation.

Experiential education is a generic term which describes a wide variety of learning situations (e.g. field placement, internship, work-study) outside the classroom. Students may or may not receive academic credit, they may or may not earn money for their activities during their placements, and they may or may not be required to do this type of activity as part of their graduation requirements. What does link all these disparate experiences is that: "Students in experiential education programs take on new experiences featuring significant tasks with real outcomes and concrete learning achievements" (Harris et al., 1989:7). Although experiential education can be viewed as a modern version of the apprenticeship of the Middle Ages, in contemporary higher education it has not always met with wide acceptance.

Indeed, within higher education, experiential education has often been a controversial issue. A review of the arguments for and against including such activities in the modern curriculum could begin with John Dewey. In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey argues that the complexity of modern society demands a balance between abstract or formal learning and opportunities to test this knowledge in real life situations. In field placements, formal learning becomes real and the theories, concepts and methods of the classroom can be tested in practical ways. Chickering (1976:62) also suggests that experiential education can increase a student's motivation for and commit-

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ment to continued learning. The field placement can highlight gaps in a student's learning, but there also is a special excitement that comes from "seeing knowledge and skills effectively applied." Tumin (1976:48) notes another advantage in "that many important things are not learned well in traditional schools and...that many important things are not learned at all." Tumin goes on to describe some of those things that typically are not learned in the classroom. These would include interpersonal skills such as working in groups or with persons who are different, leadership skills and, self-confidence. A final advantage offered by experiential education revolves around its contribution to a student's vocational decisions. In field placements, students can "try on" a career by personally experiencing the work environment.

Are the "problems" supposedly associated with experiential education "real" or only a reflection of the fact that it occurs outside the traditional definitions of academic learning and so challenges us to think about higher education in different ways? Are the opportunities to learn those things that often are not learned at all within a traditional academic environment as important as those things that are typically associated with the classroom setting? Do the benefits of experiential education outweigh its perceived costs? How do students who participate in field placements evaluate these experiences? The following attempts to provide information to answer these questions using the results of a survey of current students and graduates of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture.

The Survey and the Sample

In the summer of 1989, mail surveys were sent to currently enrolled students and recent graduates of the College of Agriculture, University of Kentucky who had been enrolled in an experiential education course or whose advisors indicated that they had participated in a field placement. The survey process yielded a response rate of 56.5% for students and 51% for graduates.

The surveys obtained information on the nature of the experiential education placement, the respondents' views on the skills and knowledge developed during these placements and their general attitudes toward experiential education. Recent graduates also were asked to consider how participating in experiential education affected their employment after graduation.

Participation in Experiential Education

Over half of the current students and graduates report agricultural economics as their major with landscape architecture and agronomy representing the other significant groups of disciplinary majors. The majority of the students did their experiential education activity in the summer between their junior and senior year. Besides these similarities in academic major and timing of their placements, there are important similarities in their personal backgrounds. For more than two thirds of the participants, both their mothers and fathers either worked full-time or were self-employed. The vast majority of their parents had completed high school and a substantial number also had some college. But over half did not come from a farm background. Hence, many of the participants would benefit from the opportunity to gain experience with agricultural-related firms. Moreover, the students who participate in experiential education tend to come from families with a strong work ethic and a high educational attainment which may account for their interest in and willingness to explore field placement.

This is somewhat substantiated when we examine why students participate in experiential education. Less than one in three of the current students and one in four of the graduates indicated that it was a requirement of their degree program, and therefore in this sense, the participants were not "forced" into a field placement but chose this option of their own accord. This is not to say that they did not receive some compensation for their participation. While graduates were twice as likely as current students (69.7% vs 35.9%) to indicate that they had received academic credit for their placement, the vast majority of both groups had received some pay for their work, with the current students averaging \$724 a month and the graduates \$666 a month.

Nature of Field Placements

Field placements occur in a wide variety of firms and settings. Students worked in agribusiness firms (e.g., farm supply cooperatives, landscape architecture firms, greenhouses, financial firms, grocery stores), in county extension offices and as research assistants to faculty doing laboratory or field experiments. Given the diversity of placements, it is not unexpected to find that the duties performed also varied widely. During their field placements students assisted extension agents, store managers and researchers in their various work roles; had responsibility for organizing fund-raising activities or coordinating media programs; developed and analyzed financial and other types of data; performed design work for architectural and landscape firms; and some simply did general field or clerical labor. Clearly, there are major differences in the levels of responsibility and the scope of the duties students performed and it is likely that these differences are a factor in how students evaluate the educational value of their placement. However, this could not be explored further given the small sample size.

Eight out of ten of the current students indicated that the firm where they did their field placement was the type of firm for which they wanted to work upon graduation. A

comparable number of graduates indicated that their field work provided them with an edge in searching for a job. Indeed, one out of five have been or are currently employed by the same firm where they did their field placement and one out of four are working for a related firm. These graduates believed that potential employers viewed them more positively and two out of three also felt that their field experience helped them to advance in their own chosen career.

How did the field placement experience affect the participants? Both current students and graduates were asked to indicate the extent to which their field work had contributed to the development of a list of skills and abilities and then to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements about experiential education. The following analysis compares and contrasts the views of current students and graduates as to the influences of their experiential education activities. Individual comments will be used to illustrate particular points.

Field Placements and Skills

Overall, current students were very enthusiastic about their experiential education program (Table 1). Half or more stated that the field placement helped them to work independently and effectively with others, even those from different backgrounds. A similar proportion also stated that they learned how to listen effectively; how to identify, define and assign priorities; how to conduct research projects; how to apply the basic concepts of their disciplines; and, how to develop their own ideas and program of work. Finally, six in ten indicated that the field placement helped them feel more confident about their major and choice of a future career. It is interesting to note that nearly one in three of the current students also indicated that their field placement led them to use a microcomputer for both word processing and data analysis or spreadsheet work. Given the wide diversity of field placements it is remarkable that so many students would be using a computer during their placements. In general, the skills checklist suggests that field placements help students to gain a better understanding of the role of agriculture in society and provides them with a better understanding of the work world they are preparing to enter.

The graduates generally agreed with the positive assessments of the current students on the contributions of experiential education to their academic skills and personal abilities, although not to same the degree. As with the current students, graduates overwhelmingly agreed that during their field placement they learned how to work effectively with others from different backgrounds or with different views. Half or more also indicated that their placements had somewhat to a great deal helped them learn how to speak and write effectively; read with understanding; organize and lead others; identify, define and assign priorities; conduct a research project; feel positive about their academic major and career choice; and, understand better the relationship between agriculture and the larger society.

Several respondents offered personal comments to illustrate their responses to the checklist and two of these high-

Table 1. Experimental Education Skills and Abilities

Below are listed some skills and abilities that a person might acquire when doing field work. The percentages indicate the degree to which respondents felt that their placements helped them to acquire these skills.

		A			
		Great Deal	Somewhat	Little	Not At All
		%	%	%	%
Speak persuasively	Students	33*	41	21	5
	Graduates	17	45	22	16
Write effectively	Stu	21	36	28	15
	Grad	15	35	25	25
Write for different kinds of audience	Stu	21	23	26	31
	Grad	16	22	27	35
Listen effectively	Stu	62*	38	--	--
	Grad	38	49	9	4
Read with understanding	Stu	33	36	26	5
	Grad	22	43	22	13
Work effectively with others	Stu	80	18	2	--
	Grad	75	18	3	4
Work with others who hold different views or are from different backgrounds	Stu	67	21	10	2
	Grad	62	29	8	1
Organize and lead others	Stu	33	31	23	13
	Grad	22	43	20	16
Work independently on your own	Stu	69*	31	--	--
	Grad	56	34	6	4
Develop your own ideas and program of work	Stu	54	28	15	3
	Grad	36	39	16	9
Have self-confidence	Stu	61*	31	8	--
	Grad	45	38	12	5
Feel positive about your choice of a major	Stu	59*	28	13	--
	Grad	38	38	16	8
Feel positive about your choice of a	Stu	54	36	10	--
	Grad	44	32	18	5
Identify, define and assign priorities to problems/goals	Stu	59*	26	15	--
	Grad	27	43	25	5
Conduct a research project to gather data	Stu	56*	23	10	10
	Grad	38	29	12	22
Utilize research data to solve problems	Stu	41*	36	13	10
	Grad	29	26	22	23
Apply the basic concepts of your discipline	Stu	51*	41	8	--
	Grad	35	47	12	6
Apply the basic methods/skills of your discipline to work	Stu	49	38	13	--
	Grad	38	43	13	6
Deal with problems using math or statistics	Stu	23*	33	26	18
	Grad	14	18	35	33
Use a computer for work processing activities	Stu	31*	20	28	21
	Grad	13	13	17	57
Use a microcomputer for data analysis or spreadsheet work	Stu	31*	8	31	31
	Grad	7	9	17	67
Understand the relationship between agriculture and larger environment	Stu	49	26	15	10
	Grad	31	31	20	18

*T-Test of differences in group means for current students and graduates significant at .05

light the specific ways in which field placements enhance classroom learning. "I think field work as a requirement to graduate would benefit every student. It gives a student realistic career goals and exposes some myths they believe about the working environment. It requires and builds good organization and communication used in a professional setting." "I strongly encourage and recommend experiential education at an early stage. It helps a great deal in deciding if the chosen major is in fact the area in which you wish to work. Also, it greatly improves your ability to relate to topics taught in class."

However, graduates and current students did offer some-

what different opinions on their field placements, albeit often only in degree rather than in kind. Some of these differences can be accounted for by the changing times and technology. For example, the differences in the use of computers during their placement can be understood by simply noting the increasing use of computers in almost every facet of business and education in just the last five years. Also, the graduates' views may differ because they are now employed and time has given a different perspective to their experiences. While graduates are comparing their field placements to "real life," the students are comparing to their classroom experiences.

General Attitudes

In addition to asking the students and graduates whether the field placement enhanced their academic learning, they were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements about the experiential education process in general. Students and graduates shared some common opinions but also differed (Table 2).

Both students and graduates gave overwhelming endorsement of the fact that field work helps you learn how to cope with authority, discipline and conflict in work relationships; helps you to understand the importance of the general principles and concepts in your field; and, helps you to acquire a sense of professional identity. As one graduate commented: "I don't feel a person can fully understand their field without an additional work experience. It is very important in showing a person the good and bad areas of their major." Another said: "This has been the best three months education that I have ever had. I would recommend anyone to obtain an internship with the career pertaining to their degree. The reason being is that there are so many things that a person can learn by doing that no classroom or book can teach." The role of experiential education in introducing participants to the dynamics of the work place, the expectations of a career area and thus, helping to solidify career decisions seems unequivocal. Moreover, as the comments suggest, these are lessons that can only be learned outside the classroom where decisions and actions have real consequences.

However, this is not to say that the students and graduates did not see some problems in the experiential education process. Nearly a third of both groups felt that in field work, students often simply do clerical or manual labor and, one in 10 of the students and one in five of the graduates felt that students are often treated as "cheap labor" in a field placement. This situation may develop because of a failure to match student needs and interests with the opportunities offered by different types of firms. This suggests that whoever has responsibility for assisting students in identifying and locating potential placements have a good knowledge of how firms integrate student interns into their operation.

The issue of supervision is one of the greatest problems associated with experiential education noted both by its advocates and critics. This is particularly problematic if the experiential education will receive academic credit. At UK, there has been a gradual movement to require a written

contract between the student and the faculty member directing the experience which specifies the activities that the student will perform and the outcomes that will be used as part of the evaluation of the student's work. When placements are to be nonacademic settings, the individual with whom the student will be working is also expected to sign the learning contract, thus acknowledging both the tasks and the outcomes from the placement. Yet, despite the requirement of written contracts, they may not always be developed, and this can cause problems.

Both groups generally felt that there was adequate supervision by faculty of their work. However, one in five graduates but less than one in 20 students stated that there was not enough supervision by the firm. This is somewhat surprising since all of the firms responding to our survey indicated that one person on their staff is responsible for directing and coordinating their field placement program. It may well be that student and faculty definitions of "supervision" differ from the expectations of the firm representatives. It should also be noted that four out of the ten responding firms indicated that participating in experiential education programs requires "a lot" of additional work for them.

Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that one in four students and more than two out of five graduates stated that the criteria for evaluating their work while in the field was unclear. There are several possible explanations for this common critique. Perhaps learning contracts are not being used by all supervising faculty or, the contracts are not specific enough when addressing evaluation criteria or, there is slippage between written evaluation criteria and what is

actually reviewed and considered by faculty when assigning a final grade. In the final analysis, what is clear is that the supervision of field placements and the evaluation of student performance remain problematic.

Although students and graduates agree that experiential education should be a requirement for graduation, albeit to differing degrees, they do not agree on when the field placement should occur. While one in three current students agreed that it should be in the freshman or sophomore years, only one in five graduates feel it should be at this time. It should be remembered that currently, most students do their experiential education in the summer between their junior and senior years. Although an experiential education opportunity earlier in their academic training may help students better understand career opportunities, they may not yet have taken sufficient course work in their major to fully appreciate the relationships between disciplinary concepts and methods and the work world. Moreover, freshmen and sophomores may not be as attractive as juniors or seniors to potential cooperating firms. This latter point is confirmed by the responding firms who overwhelmingly indicated that they preferred to work with juniors or seniors.

Both students (80%) and graduates (64%) supported the idea of the College establishing an international field placement program, and the majority of both groups would (or would have) participated in such a program. Given the multinational character of most businesses today, an international experiential education opportunity would probably attract considerable interest.

Table 2. View on Experiential Education.

The following are some statements about field work in general. The percentages indicate the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with statements.

		Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Not Sure %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
Field work helps you to learn how to cope with authority, discipline and conflict in work relationships	Students	49	43	8	--	--
	Graduates	42	5	1	--	--
Field work helps you to acquire a sense of professional identity	Students	39	61	--	--	--
	Graduates	34	57	9	--	--
There is little relationship between academic or course work and field work in a firm	Students	3	8	18	41	31
	Graduates	3	16	6	52	23
There is not enough supervision by faculty of student's work while in the field	Students	3	8	23	49	18
	Graduates	4	9	32	42	13
Field placements should occur within the freshman or sophomore years	Students	13	21	26	28	13
	Graduates	7	12	29	36	17
There is not enough supervision by the firm of the student's work while in the field	Students	--*	4	21	49	26
	Graduates	8	12	22	44	14
The criteria for evaluating student's work while in the field is unclear	Students	3*	23	21	46	8
	Graduates	8	36	25	26	5
Field work helps you to understand the importance of the general principles and concepts in your	Students	31	62	4	3	3
	Graduates	29	57	10	1	3
In field work, students are treated as cheap labor	Students	5	5	18	44	28
	Graduates	4	16	14	50	16
In field work, students often simply do clerical or manual labor	Students	3	26	8	49	15
	Graduates	6	25	16	39	14
All students should be required to spend one semester in a field placement as part of their academic program	Students	15	54	10	21	3
	Graduates	31	29	16	23	1
The College of Agriculture should establish an international field placement program	Students	31	49	21	--	--
	Graduates	29	35	32	3	1
I would be interested in participating in overseas field placement	Students	24	37	24	13	3
	Graduates	32	27	13	20	8

*T-Test of differences in group means for current students and graduates significant at .05.

Career Opportunities

What effect, if any, does experiential education have on graduates' job opportunities and later career progress? According to the graduates, a very beneficial effect. Graduates were asked to complete a section on their employment since leaving UK. Nearly half reported that they had a firm job offer prior to graduation and for the rest, they averaged 4 months following graduation to search for and begin a job. The great majority stated that their field work experience had given them an edge in searching for a job and that potential employers viewed them more positively because they had this experience. As noted earlier, one out of five of the graduates have been or are currently employed by the same firm where they had done their field placement, and another one quarter have been or are employed by a similar firm.

The graduates offered many comments on their competitive advantage in the marketplace due to their experiential education activity. One said: "I really think the internship that I had made a positive impact on my ability to find a job." Another noted that "Employers are reluctant to hire someone with a degree but no hands-on experience. I found my internship has opened doors for me in my career." The experience also gives them an edge once they begin their job, especially if it is in the same firm or one similar to where they had their field placement.

The suggestion that employers look more favorably on job applicants is confirmed by the responses of the firm representatives. Eight out of ten stated they give preference to job candidates who have held placements with them in the past. The other two noted that their firms look for prospective employees with field work experience.

Summary and Conclusions

This study of currently enrolled students and graduates of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture who have participated in experiential education programs indicates overwhelmingly positive views. Students and graduates indicate that field placements help them to confirm their commitment to their discipline and assist them in career planning. The placements also clearly help participants develop and hone a variety of academic and professional skills that would not be possible with only classroom work. Furthermore, the graduates and the participating firms strongly acknowledge the value of experiential education in helping students find employment and in advancing their careers.

Given these very strong endorsements from the students who have participated in experiential education and the employers who sponsor such placements, why is it that experiential education has not become a more integral part of the undergraduate curriculum? Indeed, such experience gives students the competitive advantage in the job market. It is not just a perceived advantage but one confirmed by the businesses who hire graduates. While adequate supervision of students in placements and evaluation criteria remain problems, they certainly could not be classified as insurmountable obstacles given the significant number of par-

ticipants and firms who report satisfaction on both these counts.

This suggests that the answer is to be found in our own attitudes toward learning experiences that occur outside the classroom and how we value "real life" versus "book" learning and our own willingness to engage in learning activities beyond the traditional lecture-classroom exam format. It is somewhat disheartening to realize that in the last decade of the twentieth century we are still arguing about the benefits and advantages of a learning experience strongly advocated a half a century ago.

While educators' resistance to innovations has often been remarked upon, it would seem that certain socioeconomic and demographic trends would add overwhelming weight to the reasons for including experiential education as a requirement in our undergraduate programs. For example, fewer of our students come from rural backgrounds and therefore, fewer are familiar with farming and the agribusiness industry in general. Moreover, there are fewer students entering college as the "baby-bust" generation moves into late adolescence. Academic programs that offer potential students innovative learning experiences that clearly have academic and career advantages will, in all likelihood, be more successful in attracting students than those that remain with more traditional approaches.

The results of this study support John Dewey's challenge to educators to acknowledge that learning is a multidimensional process. Harris et al (1989:10) argue: "An effective learning experience should not only include abstract principles but also provide an opportunity to test out concepts. Experiential education provides students opportunities to apply, integrate, and evaluate a body of knowledge of a discipline via firsthand participation. It lets students see real consequences of their actions and evaluate their learning by criteria other than grades."

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