Designing Work + Learn programs to advance a life transformative education at Arizona State University

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Brief introduction to the project

Recognizing that 70% of ASU’s undergraduate students work while pursuing their education, ASU recently created a Work + Learn unit to seamlessly integrate work and learning experiences. Work + Learn programs such as Work-integrated Learning, Work+, and the Experiential Learning Network are designed to provide students with a life transformative education that develops their sense of identity, agency, and purpose.

Goals and outcomes

Work + Learn programs are each uniquely designed with the goal of integrating work and learning. These projects are at different stages of development and are focused on offering a variety of ways to engage in life-transformative experiences. For students working at ASU, the Work+ program aims to redesign all student work. This program currently has over 400 working learners along with 40 supervisors participating on campus. For those working outside ASU, it offers a pathway to assessing and understanding their work experiences through the lens of career competencies.

ASU’s Work-integrated Learning program partners faculty with employers, giving faculty the flexibility to embed employer-generated micro-projects into courses and providing students with tools to work as a team on real-world problems. Students design, develop, and present hands-on solutions to a problem identified by a company or non-profit partner. This learning experience allows students to build their creative capacity while addressing industry challenges. During the pilot phases of the program, micro-projects were embedded into 49 courses with 3,325 students participating, resulting in 407,652 experiential learning hours completed. So far this semester (Fall 21), micro projects have been embedded into 21 courses with 1,850 students participating, resulting in 221,665 additional experiential learning hours.

Additionally, the Experiential Learning Network will increase the awareness of, and connection to, the wealth of diverse ‘learning-by-doing’ opportunities offered at ASU through the process of recommending a curated set of experiences based on self-identified student interests. This type of recommendation process is necessary to scale to all learners based on the known exceptional impact experiential learning opportunities have on student academic outcomes, growth in skillsets and success in college and beyond.

Through these programs, ASU will support learners to thrive in an integrated work and learning future. Many colleges and universities offer rich learning experiences of this kind, but more often than not, students learn of them by chance and engage in them through co-curricular structures. No singular experience can help a student totally clarify their identity, agency, and purpose; learners must be able to participate in a variety of opportunities throughout their academic journey. By integrating these initiatives across the university at scale, the serendipitous nature of connection to valuable programs is replaced by a more intentional and consistent engagement in transformative experiences.

Future plans

Work + Learn is now a fully functioning unit within ASU’s University College and we are excited about its future. As we look ahead, the programs within Work + Learn have many goals. Our Work-integrated Learning program has the goal of adding an additional one million experiential learning hours embedded into the curriculum. Work+ is striving to scale to all of ASU’s 10,000+ student workers, as well as, make the program content and resources available across the higher ed landscape. The Experiential Learning Network has received initial funding and is working on developing a recommendation engine to help students identify potential experiential learning opportunities based on their interests.
In January 2020, Bucknell’s CLTE grant team had big plans for mapping the "Ecosystem of Purpose" at Bucknell University (and - we hoped - beyond.). In March, the world changed.

Through the course of early-pandemic focus groups, instrument development, surveys, and student research, we feel we have learned much, as expressed directly by students themselves, about the answer(s) to the question: when have you felt connected to a sense of purpose during your college career?

In short: folks connect to a sense of purpose when they connect to their people.

Phase One consisted of seven focus groups, with just over 50 total students (more than half of them on the cusp of graduation in the early months of the pandemic). Most of them identified as "early adopters" of purposefulness – that is, those that found a productive pathway through. A few self-identified or brought forth through alternative pathways. Major takeaways: our students are hungry for conversations of this sort. There are major, positive, contributing factors. There are also some major detractors (especially social ones). And purpose and belonging/connection are intimately bound together.

Phase Two consisted of identifying themes from the above interviews, and turning them into action-oriented markers. Our final 10 included – on the positive end: friendship; “real world” application of learning; opportunity to help others; encouragement to self-reflect; investment in academic work; and mentorship. On the negative end: over-commitment; apathy (of peers); social alienation; and lack of inclusivity.

We received roughly 400 responses to our survey, spread over the 4 class years. In raw terms, our three most significant responses were “The people around me socialize in ways I find alienating;” “My community includes individuals of different backgrounds;” and “I have been encouraged to reflect regularly on my sense of value, meaning, and purpose.” 9 out of 10 measures (inclusivity being the exception) showed substantial statistical correlation to scores on the Life Engagement Test (Schier, et al.)

Phase Three was a student-focused design process, which eventually yielded our core question, “How can we create conditions for exploring purpose through community at Bucknell and beyond? And the prototype answer: by creating a 6-week small group student experience – led by a student/staff pair – that explores our real experiences around purpose and belonging and provides opportunities to apply practices and tools interpersonally in the flow of our real lives. In addition, 20 Staff/Faculty participated in a workshop and feedback session over the summer, and groups are scaling up as we speak, and we hope to have more information to share at the end of the semester.
Title: Transformative Learning by doing – seeing a sea change
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Introduction to project/Goals/Connection to identity, agency and purpose
Grounded in the assumption that humans have innate agency and sense of purpose, this project sought to recover our instinctual (but alienated) transformational learning identities. Our plan was to bring together students, faculty, and staff from a diversity of institutions in a candid, face-to-face retreat around educational experiences.

The objectives of this project were to recover our (student, staff, and faculty):

- **sense of purpose** as professionals (or nascent professionals) who are applying our abilities in service to student and societal well-being;
- **identity** as learner-educators in an ever-changing, complex world;
- **agency** for increasingly just action that supports systemic flourishing.

Our approach was based on prior successes; in a safe social container, students’ expression of their lived experiences in education have had the effect of liberating themselves and others into their agency and sense of purpose.

Connection to Long-term Well-being
The project was based on the work of I. Prilleltensky (2011) which has indicated that a person’s well-being is contingent upon their experience of justice as they move through the world. That is, they must have what is due them as humans—rights, responsibilities, resources, and obligations—and the process of distributing their due is fair—people have transparent, democratic participation in how distributions are decided and carried out. Our basic premise is that classrooms are learners’ primary institutional domain of experiencing (or not experiencing) these conditions of justice. The project was aimed at transforming classroom cultures through liberating their participants.

Outcomes, successes, and shortcomings
As a shortcoming, not only did events of Spring 2020 upend our plans, but they also revealed an egregious disparity across our community of learners—systemic racial violence and injustice, resource inequities and wide-scale prevalence of adverse childhood experiences. In other words, prior to this work, we did not fully see the system of education that is experienced differently by different students. These revelations shifted our attention from individuals to understanding the sociopolitical systems affecting education and neuroscience dimensions of learning. In addition to a shift to a virtual retreat, we conducted several small-scale interventions aimed at accounting for our whole selves. In terms of successes, we are still assessing the results, but anecdotally, several participants (students and faculty) report “transformational” outcomes. One participant, Ms. Jamie Butler, of Atlanta Metropolitan State College, says, “This [trauma-informed teaching approach] has completely altered my perspective of my students in my classroom...It has helped me to revise my entire curriculum.” She excitedly reports that students are the most engaged she has ever seen in six years of teaching, that using the learnings from our workshop together has enlivened her as a teacher and has the students learning more and feeling more validated in their learning identities.

Participant profile: 10 different institutions across U.S.; 47 students; 50 staff/education professionals; 82 faculty members. (179 participants).

Resources: An additional $53K from Olin College; $2.5K from Bucknell University’s EE department (via Alan Cheville); in-kind partnership of Woodland Harvest Mountain Farm as research partnering site; in-kind contributions of faculty participants from other institutions.

Transferability: At minimum, all faculty can implement, at no cost, classroom practices that build capacity for regulating our nervous systems for learning. We intend to share out a resource handbook at the conclusion of the work.

Future plans for continuation:
We are currently conducting participant interviews in the form of oral histories. Dr. McCray is the lead investigator in this process. Our plan is to have a rich picture of the findings for the final report in June 2022.
Across Four Years and Seven Universities: The Maine Difference
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1. Brief introduction to the project – We are scaling Life-Transformative Educational (LTE) opportunities across a state-wide university system. The seven universities in the University of Maine System (UMS) represent a range from the state’s comprehensive research land-grant university to small regional universities focused on undergraduate and professional education. We will incorporate LTE across all seven universities and all four years of the students’ experience.

2. Goals of the project – We will: (a) use a pilot program at two universities to design an evidenced-based, first- and second-year experience for all of UMS—“Research Learning Experiences” (RLE); (b) use lessons from all seven universities, best practices from the literature, and a data-driven pilot study to increase student success in large-enrollment introductory courses—“Gateways to Success” (GTS); and (c) use the strengths of the system to implement a state-wide plan to increase the availability, quality, and transparency of career-relevant experiences with external university partners (e.g., internships, co-ops)—“Pathways to Careers” (PTC).

3. Project’s connection to identity, agency, and/or purpose – RLE experiences begin with a cohort-building bridge week before a semester-long course. The initial week aims at building students’ identity as learners who can make a difference. Creative exploration and real-world problem solving during the course encourage and help students develop their own agency, while the authentic products of these RLE courses help foster a sense of purpose. Students will then use the identity, agency, and sense of purpose fostered in RLEs and GTS to make the most out of the PTC experiences across the rest of their college experience.

4. Project’s connection to long-term well-being – Assessment of graduates in five-year intervals will track how RLE, GTS, and PTC impact job placement and long-term well-being as compared to those who do not take the opportunity.

6. Project outcomes, successes, shortcomings, and assessment – Our assessment team is designing cognitive (skills) and dispositional (attitudes and beliefs) pre- and post-surveys for students involved in the each RLE, GTS, and PTC pilots to assess gains in identity, agency, and sense of purpose and the skills necessary to achieve them. The change shown by these surveys (in comparison to appropriate control groups) and standard institutional data will serve as our primary metrics for assessing outcomes. Pre-surveys have already been implemented for the first RLE pilot project.

7. Number of faculty and staff involved/number of students impacted – To date, 60 faculty and staff are engaged in planning and an additional 30 faculty are launching the RLE pilot courses at two campuses for 300 students. Next year we plan to double the number of people and the number of universities involved as we scale toward an LTE program that provides opportunities for all 30,000 students and 2,000 faculty of UMS.

8. Overall resources required (particularly those beyond mini-grant funding) – This project is funded largely by a grant awarded to UMS by the Harold Alfond Foundation. Funding from a mini-grant would help us expand student and faculty support, and expand our assessment to multiple universities.

9. Transferability of the project to other institutions – As a system-wide proposal, we will inevitably experience differences in outcomes, buy-in, and methods of execution across the seven participating universities. By documenting these differences during our initial assessment phase, this model for university replication will define variation in adapting LTE to diverse institutions. Our final published products will provide suggestions for LTE institutional transferability under similarly diverse conditions.

10. Future plans for continuation of the project – The Maine Difference is part of a larger system initiative called UMS TRANSFORMS, which lays out and funds a ten-year plan for improving student success and retention. The Maine Difference is our current major actionable initiative that will accomplish this, and we hope that our iterative assessment plan throughout all stages of this project will then become part of a data-driven improvement culture in student outcomes long into the future of UMS.
More Than A Single Story: UM-Dearborn Speaks

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Launching in Fall 2021 More Than A Single Story: UM-Dearborn Speaks, is a digital storytelling project offering student experience in media and other digital technologies that will allow them to explore their identities, purposes, and communities through self-reflective storytelling. Over the span of two academic years, the project will provide students with a chance to share their stories while challenging the myths about Dearborn, the Detroit Metropolitan area, regional commuter campuses, the surrounding Muslim-American community, the impact of COVID-19 on the region.

Goals of the project

This digital storytelling project will provide students with the means to develop important skills, from social-emotional capacities to critical speaking, thinking, listening, to narrative transformation and empowerment while also giving them the space to think creatively and experiment on their own. Digital storytelling literacy can serve as an effective means for students to discover and articulate their values and make the connection between their values and career readiness.

Project's connection to identity, agency, and/or purpose

Stories have the ability to empower or dispossess, bestow prestige or tarnish reputations. The more storytelling communities can offer, the more their ability to shape outside perception. This project will not only develop and cultivate storytelling skills in our students but help them reflect on and be intentional about their decisions and plans.

Project's connection to long-term well-being

More Than A Single Story: UM-Dearborn Speaks will also work to lead to new digital storytelling projects in our region outside of the university setting. Graduates from this program will learn how to tutor others in digital storytelling and be encouraged to serve digital ambassadors across campus and in their communities.

Project outcomes, successes, and shortcomings (and assessment methods)

Pending. Pre and post survey assessment and faculty assessment of critical thinking, storytelling ability, capacity to give and provide constructive feedback on matters of social identity, systemic patterns of racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, classism

Number of faculty and staff involved/number of students impacted

Faculty: 9, Students: 10 (but expanding out to local community in year 2)

Overall resources required (particularly those beyond mini-grant funding)

Faculty Time, WeVideo Licensing, Student Intern Stipends

Transferability of the project to other institutions

Henry Ford Community College, Dearborn Public Schools

Future plans for continuation of the project

Graduates from this program will learn how to tutor others in digital storytelling and be encouraged to serve digital ambassadors across campus and in their communities.
The USC Viterbi Ethos Project

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The Ethos Project, embedded in the University of Southern California’s Viterbi School of Engineering’s Division of Engineering and Society, intends to infuse humanitarian values and ethical practices in undergraduate engineering and computer science students. The project melds four interrelated sub-projects which embed guided experiential curricular and co-curricular learning. Sub-project 1: Freshman Academy Renovation, touches the lives of all first semester freshmen across engineering majors and in computer science. Guided by the principles of project-based learning and human-centered design, freshmen students work together with faculty leaders and near-peer, upper division student mentors to design and create prototypes of potential solutions for the National Academy of Engineering’s Grand Challenges. Sub-project 2: Engineering Moment is a short-form podcast series that fosters a sense of professional identity and social responsibility in students. Sub-project 3: Engineers Engaging Community helps students understand that public engagement is integral to the practice of humanitarian engineering and that engineering does not exist in a vacuum, but instead is part of a larger community discourse. It engages students with public audiences, creating speaking opportunities for them in diverse communities. Sub-project 4: The Good Life engages students with ethical considerations of engineering and technology professions by holding a series of discussions between undergraduate and graduate students.

**Project Goal:** Ethos’ goal is to develop students’ mindsets as contributors to and creators of societal change via technology and its role in improving outcomes for diverse groups. This is accomplished through citizen-centric engineering design and development of engineering identity through practices of humanitarian communication. Ethos strives to leverage communication, ethics, and technology for the common good.

**Identity, Agency, and Purpose:** Each Ethos sub-project builds upon another commencing in students’ freshman year, extending through their senior year, and into their professional careers. The sub-projects build students’ individual and collective engineering identities and situate them personally and professionally with humanitarian foci for their future engineering and computer science practice.

**Connection to Long-term Well-being:** Taken together, the projects provide holistic opportunities for engineering and computer science students to develop technical and other professional skills in full preparation for diverse careers within the engineering and computer science disciplines.

**Project Outcomes, Successes, and Shortcomings:** Ethos is in its first semester of operation and therefore its outcomes are formative. Accordingly, this presentation is a “work in progress” opportunity for the PIs with hopes to receive feedback via a panel presentation and “Q and A” from the audience members to inform Ethos’ outcomes. To date, the Freshman Academy Renovation sub-project has provided training for fourteen student mentors, 240 freshmen, and six faculty members on human-centered design, challenge-based learning and near peer mentorship. Student training is in progress. Teams have been created and are having design brainstorm meetings. The projects and student/near-peer interaction will be assessed using a multidimensional observational rubric paired with an ABET aligned product checklist and narrative evaluation. Teams are beginning work in USC’s Baum Family Maker Space. The remaining three sub-projects are in planning and student hiring stages. These sub-projects will be assessed via user satisfaction surveys and impact counts with all participants. Focus groups may also be convened after each major event.

**Faculty/Staff Involvement and Students Impacted:** There will be eight faculty, three staff members and approximately 375 students impacted by Ethos at the end of its first year.

**Required Resources:** The project costs are faculty, staff and student time, materials and supplies for the sub-projects. These costs exceed CLTE funding. Therefore, the Viterbi School has earmarked funds for student support and materials and supplies for miscellaneous meeting costs and team projects.

**Transferability to Institutions:** Each of the four sub-projects are highly transferable across diverse types of colleges and universities. The four sub-projects can be embedded together or individually in any college of engineering especially those which commence with a “first-year” experience for students.

**Future Plans/Project Continuation:** The PIs have university commitment of a cost share for Ethos in addition to CLTE funding. Moreover, the intent is for the four sub-projects to become institutionalized by the Viterbi School.

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Understanding Barriers and Supports for Building Sustainable, Relationship-Rich Academic Environments

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1. Background

In recent years, efforts to address persistent challenges, such as a struggling advising system and failure to ensure that our marginalized students feel that they belong, have resulted in a proliferation of new programs and initiatives at the University of Virginia (UVA).

Our project focused on gaining a better understanding of the current landscape of UVA initiatives aimed at fostering supportive student–faculty interactions. Our initial research questions included: What models already exist on our campus for prompting meaningful conversations between faculty and students? How intentional are they about fostering interactions that help students develop their identity, agency, and sense of purpose? What personal characteristics, skills, and support do individual instructors need to support students’ personal development? What are the structural supports and barriers to creating a culture in which everyone understands that supportive relationships are central to learning and students’ personal growth?

To begin answering these questions, we secured IRB approval and conducted nine interviews with program directors and two focus groups with ten total faculty.

2. Methods

In Spring 2021, we conducted a qualitative descriptive study consisting of surveys and semi-structured interviews with program directors/staff (i.e., faculty/staff who lead formal programs/initiatives at UVA that provide opportunities for building supportive student–faculty relationships) and focus groups with faculty (i.e., individuals who are exceptional at forming relationships with students in the context of formal programs, their courses, and/or in informal ways). This work was approved by UVA’s IRB-SBS (Protocol #4106).

Audio recordings of interviews with nine program directors/staff and two faculty focus groups were transcribed, read holistically, and then coded based on Felten and Lambert’s (2020) four guiding principles of meaningful relationships for students: 1) students must experience genuine welcome and care, 2) relationships provide inspiration for students to learn, 3) students need webs of relationships in college, and 4) meaningful relationships help students examine “big” questions of meaning and purposes in their lives. We also included codes to capture two additional dimensions identified by the Coalition of Life Transformative Educational Experiences: 5) fostering students’ agency and 6) respecting students’ identities and helping them develop their sense of self.
3. Findings

3.1. Interviews with program directors/staff

Overall, UVA provides a number of programs that have the potential to facilitate meaningful faculty–student interactions and relationships that could increase the likelihood of students’ thriving. Not surprisingly, no single program attended to all six components identified above. The majority of program directors/staff reported that their programs aspired to extend genuine welcome and care and inspire students to learn and be academically engaged. In addition, several programs are conceiving of their role as helping students build relationship networks with peers and staff in addition to facilitating faculty–student relationships.

Noteworthy is the dearth of evidence related to intentional efforts to open spaces for students to explore questions related to meaning and purpose. When program directors spoke about purpose, it was largely in the context of helping students see the purpose of their chosen field and their role as developing professionals. Relatedly, a significant number of program directors/staff had difficulty articulating how their program respected students’ identities and allowed them to further develop their sense of self beyond a professional identity. This stood in sharp contrast to programs that specifically targeted marginalized students where identities were primarily understood as social identities.

Interestingly, there seems to be a parallel to the 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report finding that while 63% of students strongly agreed that they had at least one professor who made them excited about learning, only 27% of students strongly agreed that they had professors who cared about them as a person, and only 22% strongly agreed that they had a mentor that encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams. This experience of not being seen and supported as a person with hopes and dreams may be the result of a lack of programmatic attention, in addition to other institutional barriers.

Barriers to supporting students identified by program directors/staff included a lack of institutional accountability and mechanisms to identify whether or not faculty advisors and mentors “are doing their job.” They also noted that faculty have little or no preparation for being good advisors and mentors. In addition, program directors/staff pointed to the complexities of a decentralized system that makes it difficult for individual students, faculty and staff to navigate student support services and understand how the resources work together. This further increases logistical challenges that take time away from relational work that program staff and faculty may want to engage in.

Regarding institutional culture, there was agreement among a large portion of program staff, particularly those serving marginalized students, that there is a misalignment between public messaging, targeted fundraising, and resource allocations for programs dedicated to mentoring, advising, and relational work.

Our study also found that, with one note-worthy exception, programs did not conduct rigorous impact assessment aside from gathering mid-year and end-of-year reports and satisfaction survey data.

Study participants pointed to factors that increase program success, including well-trained and dedicated faculty and program staff, leadership accountability, sustained funding streams, clearly defined goals, and institutional support and resources.
3.2. Faculty focus groups

The relationship builders in faculty Focus Group 1 (FG_01) consisted of five Academic General Faculty Members (Tenure-Ineligible) and two tenured Associate Professors. Thus, as a group, their voices are more representative of faculty with lower status and power.

FG_01 participants saw the relational aspect “core to why I teach in the first place.” At the same time, they described the work as “invisible” and at times “extractive” and doubted that their school or the larger university “truly supports and values this investment in relational aspect with our students.” They expressed confusion about the institution’s expectations and questioned whether or not the work with students “is actually part of [their] job.” They noted that UVA expects someone to build relationships when they tell prospective students: “UVA might be big, but you can always build these relationships with your faculty.” “But the question is, who’s doing it?” Participants of this focus group agreed that students were more likely to approach female faculty and minority faculty for support and that this labor remained invisible and unappreciated, often to the detriment of faculty’s careers.

One FG_01 participant remarked that the current generation of students may have increased expectations and needs for support and there was agreement that UVA lacks resources for supporting students in crisis. In their experience, students returned to them for help when they could not get an appointment for or had exceeded the limited number of counseling sessions allotted to students or didn’t find the counseling services helpful.

As a result, faculty in FG_01 who excel at building relationships with students and are willing to support them beyond their academics report feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. This group suggested that relational work should count in promotion and tenure and be rewarded by being given back time. The faculty of FG_01 further affirmed that they are good at relationship building and that they did not necessarily want all of their colleagues to take on this work, noting the potential for harm particularly around supporting students of color.

By contrast to FG_01, Focus Group 2 (FG_02) included two senior tenured faculty members in leadership positions and one experienced tenure-track assistant professor. All three faculty had received a fellowship early in their time at UVA that allowed them to pursue a teaching project focused on relationship building. The participants of this focus group were largely satisfied with the resources provided by the institution. The tenured faculty in FG_02 agreed that their schools’ norms and culture are central to the behaviors of faculty. One tenured faculty observed that the culture at UVA had shifted and that being popular with students has become a detriment to a faculty member’s advancement.

This assessment directly mirrors the sentiment of FG_01, that they would like to see the current culture change from one that is “pitying” colleagues who are supporting students to one that recognizes and rewards those contributions.

References


**INTRODUCTION**

Higher education is currently facing a two-part challenge to student wellbeing: (a) a recent history of mental health deterioration among students, and (b) the coronavirus pandemic. These two factors have interacted with each other to create ever-more-precarious student wellbeing outcomes, including potential detriments to mental health, identity, agency, and purpose. While multiple studies have documented declines in mental health, little research has been done to understand the potential impact on identity, agency, meaning, and purpose. Our national survey research with Wake Forest University's Wellbeing Assessment seeks to answer the question: Has the pandemic impacted some components of wellbeing more than others, and if so, which ones?

**WHAT DID WE DO?**

Using statistical modeling (ANOVAs), we briefly demonstrate that while most students' subjective wellbeing was negatively impacted during the pandemic, the pandemic's effects on identity, agency, meaning, and purpose were comparatively minor. We use another set of statistical models (path modeling with extracted factor scores) to demonstrate the importance of identity, agency, meaning, and purpose.