

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY | Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning | Office of
Experiential Learning

Equitable Pathways to Experiential Learning

Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The University of Calgary's [Experiential Learning Plan \(2020-25\)](#) strives to make experiential learning (EL) a cornerstone of the UCalgary experience. The *EL Plan* has two targets: by 2025, all undergraduate students will participate in two EL activities, and all graduate students will have the opportunity to participate in at least one EL activity. Drawing on an earlier pilot project to provide financial support to equity-deserving students involved in unpaid Work-Integrated Learning courses, the Office of Experiential Learning (OEL) initiated a research project in the fall of 2021 to capture feedback from students on barriers to participating in EL along with their recommendations for enabling student participation in EL at UCalgary. This project, Equitable Pathways to Experiential Learning builds on priorities in UCalgary's EL Plan and draws on UCalgary's strategic directions in Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility as established by the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. This report is a compilation of students' responses to and feedback on the issues of access and inclusion in EL.

This project was also inspired through UCalgary's participation in the Future Skills Innovation Network for Universities (FUSION) which was funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Centre. Partial funding for this project came from the FUSION Network.

- Increase Communication and Promotion of EL Activities
- Provide Financial Supports to Enable Participation
- Enhance Information and Resources About EL Activities
- Increase Number and Variety of EL Activities

NEXT STEPS

The Office of Experiential Learning will continue to engage members of the UCalgary community and other invested audiences with the student feedback and recommendations compiled through this project. To date, this work has been shared at various conferences, such as the Society for Experiential Education (SEE), the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), the Canadian Association College and University Student Services (CACUSS) and Cooperative Education Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL).

We welcome further opportunities to explore this rich student feedback with other teams and groups, and to explore specific strategies to enhance participation and belonging in EL. This student feedback is also relevant to several parallel projects at UCalgary. These projects, such as the Work-Integrated Learning for Neurodiverse Students Initiative and the development of several new WIL opportunities, like the UNIV 304 – Experiential Learning in-7 (l)-3.9 (r)-4..2 (r9.8 (er)-04 TlgTd[(an-9.1 (e

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Calgary's [*Experiential Learning Plan \(2020-25\)*](#) strives to make experiential learning (EL) a cornerstone of the UCalgary experience. The *EL Plan* has two targets: by 2025, all undergraduate students will participate in two EL activities, and all graduate students will have the opportunity to participate in at least one EL activity. Achieving these targets requires a fulsome understanding of barriers to accessing EL, and a cross-campus commitment to inclusive access for

In addition to the aspirational targets for students completing EL, campus consultations for the EL Plan identified three priorities for EL: (1) Expanding capacity and reducing barriers; (2) Increasing student opportunities and (3) Tracking and ensuring high-quality EL.

The benefits of students engaging in EL are numerous and include skill development related to career readiness (teamwork, complex-problem solving, and collaboration), civic consciousness, interpersonal skill development, and self-efficacy (Eyler, 2009; Kuh, 2008; McRae, 2015). EL supports students in discovering a sense of purpose (personally, professionally, and academically) and prepares students to make meaningful contributions to their fields and communities.

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METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The Equitable Pathways to EL project embodied accessible and inclusive values and research practices including a project team that was composed of diverse backgrounds and expertise with representation from graduate, undergraduate students and various staff. A key element of the project's research design was initiating conversations with student groups, student services teams and student facing units. These conversations were used to develop survey questions and focus group protocols and scripts. Two conceptual elements helped shape the inclusive methodology the team adopted for the project: researcher reflexivity in the form of the developmental evaluation process and a students-as-partners model (Healey et al., 2016) for the research design.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via two means: an online survey and focus groups. Both methods explored three main ideas; to what extent EL activities at UCalgary are accessible to (and inclusive of) all students, to learn the barriers students perceive to engaging in EL, and to understand the solutions students recommend minimizing those barriers. In total, 3,868 survey responses were received and after data cleanup there were 2,002 valid responses. This response rate represents approximately 5.5% of UCalgary student enrolment (Office of Institutional Analysis, 2020).

The last section of the online survey included a separate link for survey respondents to express interest in being part of a focus group. Twenty-six participants across eight

Design of EL Activities, Policies and Processes

EL activity design was the most common and complex theme. A total of 435 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme (See Figure 1). This theme was also where students shared spending the most time and effort making decisions related to EL, e.g., whether to apply or participate. Subthemes within this barrier group included eligibility criteria, commitment, and intensity of the activity among other commitments, a lack of inclusive spaces and a lack of flexibility within the activity.

Eligibility Criteria

The application process and eligibility criteria for EL activities received many critical responses that illustrate the frustration students feel with such a process. Application processes were described as 'long and tedious' with 'short deadlines' that made it hard to complete if you were a full-time student or a student with other commitments beyond school. Students often had trouble navigating the application process and one survey respondent suggested that the applications were filled with 'jargon' that they couldn't understand. When students attempted to reach out for help, they found it difficult to find someone who could help them. As one respondent described it,

Every time you email someone that you think will help you, they say, "*I don't know what you're talking about. You need to talk to someone else.*" They put you to someone, and then it's just like a whole cycle of being transferred, and you just don't get the information or the right person to help you, to sit you down and say, "*Okay, this is what you need to do.*" It is kind of annoying how we have to do everything ourselves, even though we're putting so much time and money and patience, for them to just say, "*Good luck. Have fun figuring it all out. We'll just be choosing whoever we think is okay.*"

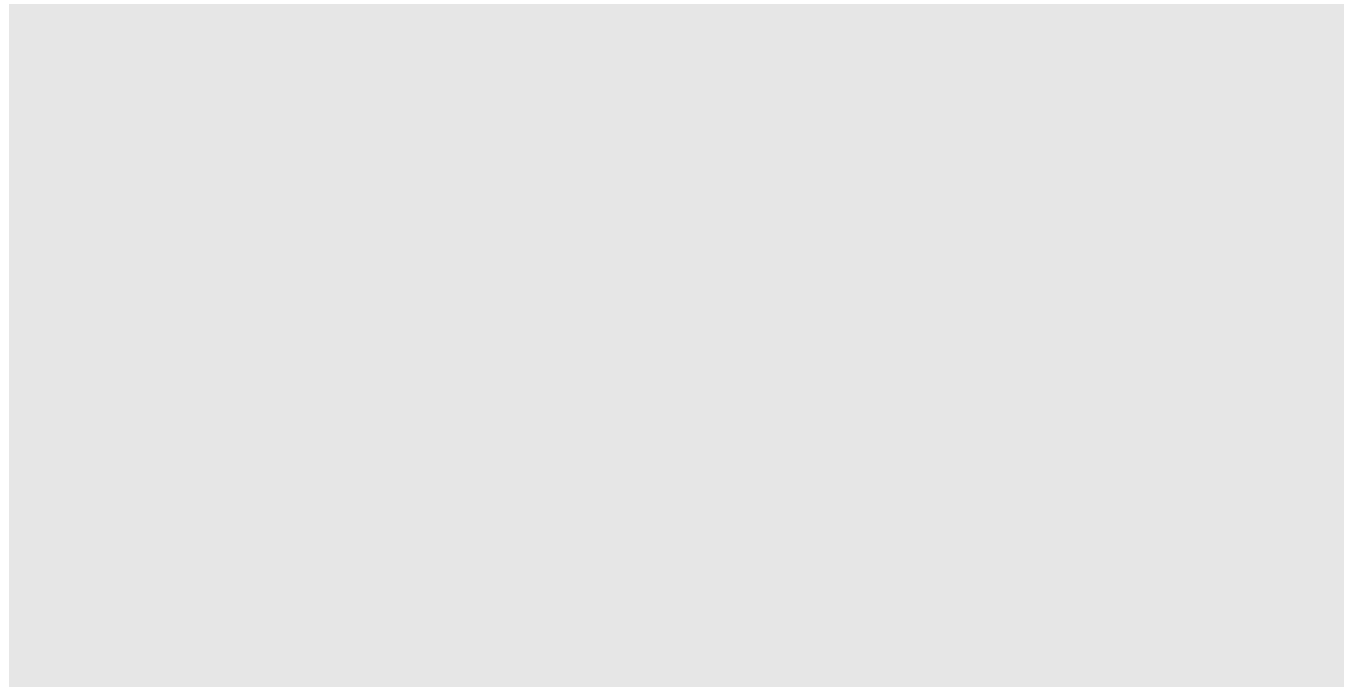
while attending university to pay tuition, or students who had a semester where their grades were impacted by personal circumstances.

In addition, eligibility criteria often state that experiential learning opportunities are not open to international students. On this topic, some students perceive discrimination due to factors out of their control, e.g., no internship contracts beyond the legally permitted 20 hours per week, prioritization of Canadian experience, and Visa requirements. International and permanent residents/Canadian students also expressed concern about application processes that require academic and/or professional references. Considering the predominately remote learning and working formats that resulted during the pandemic, many students felt they could not approach course instructors or supervisors for reference letters, as they lack the confidence to make such a request and had concerns about whether the reference letter would accurately portray their abilities.

Commitment and Intensity of EL Activity

Students also reported having to self-evaluate the commitment and intensity of an EL activity’s design. Navigating this challenge requires students to determine whether their responsibilities, resources, and priorities could accommodate the energy and the overall commitment some EL requires. Students shared that regardless of whether the EL activity was a few hours or several months, coursework, personal responsibilities, and wage-earning work make it difficult to participate in EL. See Figure 1 for a full breakdown of the responsibilities and priorities that influence students’ decisions to participate in EL activities.

FIGURE 1. Responsibilities and priorities that influenced your decision to participate in EL (N=1,863)



Being able to commit to a certain EL activity meant that students needed flexibility from the university which was not available to some respondents. The institution’s lack of flexibility in EL opportunities came up multiple times throughout the survey and during the focus groups. One survey respondent suggested that the lack of flexibility in EL programs means they are not able to participate as much as they would like. One student suggested that,

commonplace. I should not have to ask for flexible arrangements based on my specific case; it should be a best practice.

Lack of Inclusive Spaces

Students also described barriers in a lack of inclusive spaces in EL activity design. Inclusive spaces refer to whether students feel their identity(ies) will be respected in an EL activity, through interactions with others or the physical space in which the EL activity is happening. Students stated that their physical differences make them feel less included in EL activities, whether that was because they identified as wearing a hijab, a woman, a person of colour or as non-binary. One respondent suggested that often, "it's majority white men who end up getting selected for EL programs and activities and that for them the selection criteria is 'political and discouraging.' In addition, In ae52 (e)9 (s(y,)2.1n (ude)9.1 (n6 ((r)t)2.c s)-1.t(r)-1.4 1.91 (d)-120(i)-4 (-02 ()i)14)2.7ndTc s

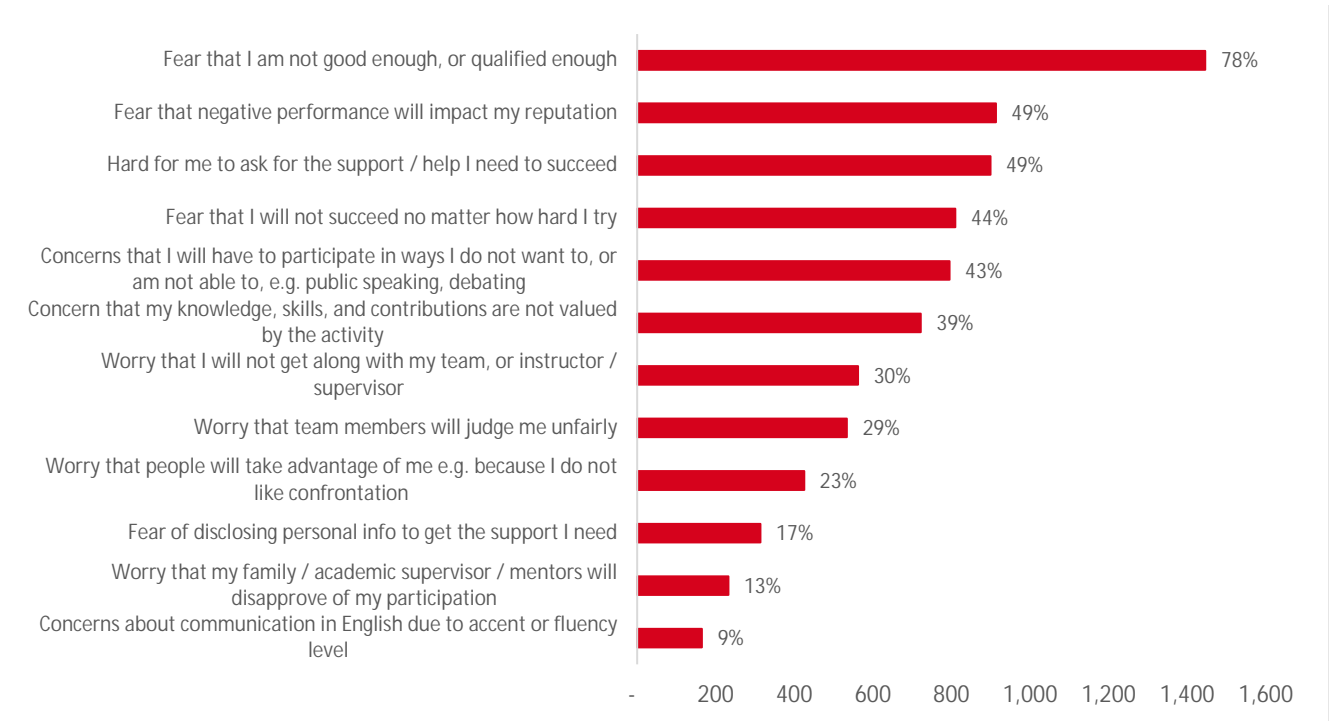
Another survey respondent said that time was an issue because there was pressure as a first-generation student to complete the degree as quickly as possible:

I am managing a part-time job with full-time school, as a first-generation university student with little to no support from family. Barely have time to do anything else even though I want to, but then it would take me longer to finish my degree. Full-time coursework is like a full-time job that leaves very little room to enjoy other activities

Fears, Uncertainty, and Imposter Syndrome

This theme included comments about students feeling out of place, intimidated, and/or unable to compete with other students. A total of 284 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Many students expressed a fear of failure or rejection, fear of talking to supervisors or instructors, uncertainty, and imposter syndrome. These feelings could cause students to experience concern about their “fit” in an EL activity. In the survey, 78% of respondents expressed the concern that they were not experienced or qualified enough to participate in EL (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Concerns that have influenced respondents’ decision to participate in EL (N=1,851)



These fears were also expressed in focus group and survey data. Students reflected on feeling out of place or experiencing imposter syndrome due to social anxiety, not seeing people like themselves in the EL activity, not knowing anyone who has done the EL activity, and not wanting to compete with other students. Additional comments connected to imposter syndrome included fear of failure, or rejection, feeling overwhelmed at not knowing what to expect, and fear of talking to instructors or supervisors. One focus group participant discussed what they perceive as the students that participate in EL, expressing intimidation and a perceived expectation of needing to know their end goal before participating in EL:

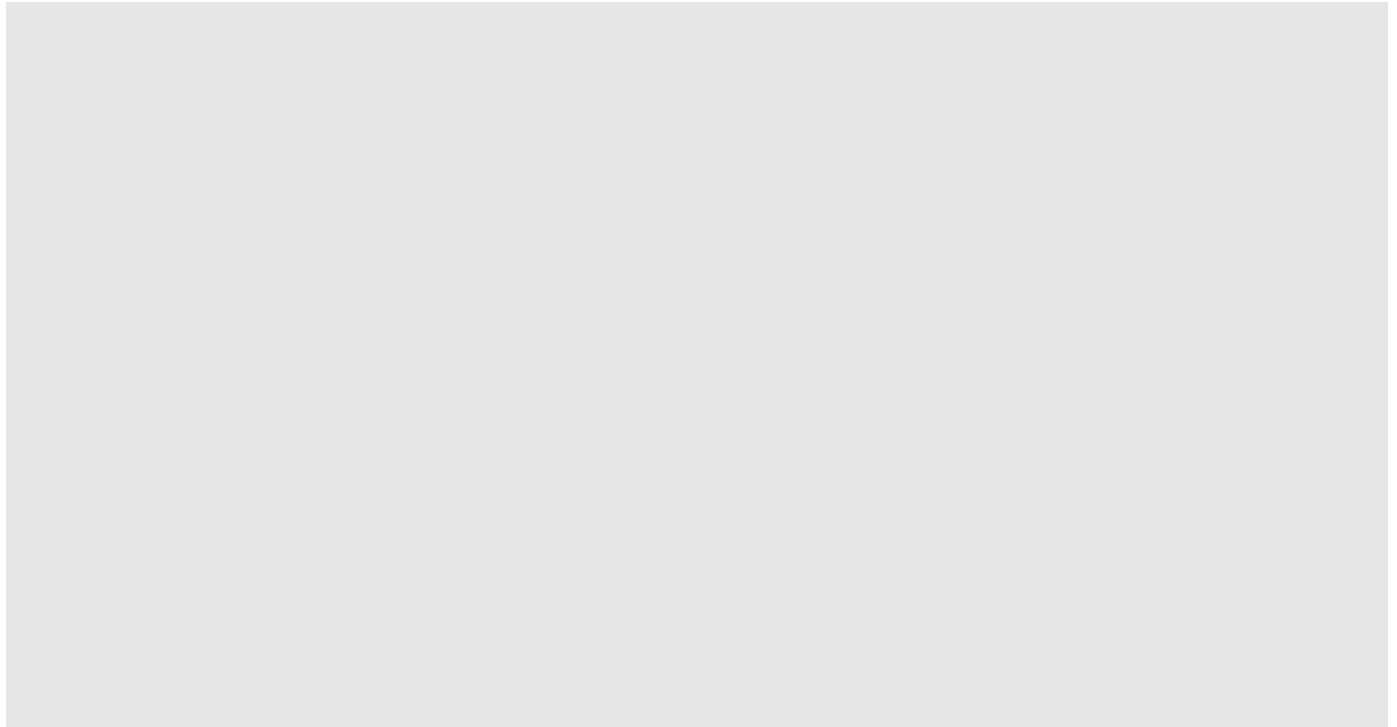
When I think of those experiential learning programs, I imagine the students to be ‘keeners’ and ‘go-getters’ – they know what they want to do with their degree. I felt like I generally didn’t. I was more of a wanderer. I don’t even know what I’m doing or what I wanted to do. It felt almost intimidating – I have

to get all of my life sorted out and all of my passions and my career focus sorted out, before even going into something like that. Not for all of them - I did experiential learning just as part of required coursework. That was a bit of a confidence boost, seeing that you can figure this stuff out while you're doing it, and you don't need to have it all before. But before I took the higher-level classes that had that, it really did feel that way

Lack of Financial Resources

A total of 206 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Throughout, two key subthemes emerged. First, the costs of participating in EL created a significant barrier. This cost included paid experiences or activities with supplemental fees, such as highly sought-after EL activities like study abroad or field

FIGURE 3. INFORMATION THAT INFLUENCED RESPONDENTS' DECISION TO PARTICIPATE IN EL (N=1,784)



Respondents also struggled with understanding the benefit of participating in EL, especially when making decisions to sacrifice or balance other activities and commitments to participate. They shared that if they were unable to assess the risk of feeling overwhelmed by participating in the EL activity, they would opt not to apply or participate. This included being uncertain of the commitments the activity necessitated, and if they could balance the time commitment and intensity alongside other commitments, including coursework, off-campus work and other matters. A focus group participant explained the lack of information that comes from departments around EL opportunities:

Every once in a while, we'll get e-mails [from the Department]; at the very bottom there would be in tiny, tiny print, like, 'Oh, there's this opportunity'. But it's implied that you better be the perfect candidate or

- Diversify Faculty and Staff Representation and Engagement

Increasing Communication and Promotion of EL Activities

A total of 468 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Students consistently expressed the need for improved promotion of EL activities. Critically, 146 excerpts coded were of students sharing that they had not seen or heard of many of the EL activities included in UCalgary's EL Framework. Some students in the survey called for easy-to-access resources available as early as 1st year,

I would like to see easy-to-access resources that go over what all these EL activities are, and how to go about doing them. As a 1st year, I didn't even know "experiential learning activities" were a thing, until this survey. I'm guessing that's in part due to our introduction at the beginning of the year being non-existent, because of COVID. It felt like jumping right into classwork with no introduction of our degrees – that was the 2021 Fall introduction. If you(o)-4.1 ()-5n in3(i)-0.9 e2

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