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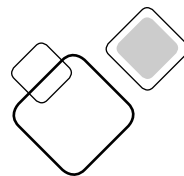
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Student Motivations and Perceptions Across and Within Five Forms of Experiential Learning

JEFFREY SCOTT COKER AND DESIREE JASMINE PORTER

ABSTRACT | Understanding student motivations for participating in high-impact educational practices is important for improving learning experiences. This article explores student motivations across and within five forms of experiential learning at Elon University: study abroad, research, internships, service-learning, and leadership experiences. Surveys and interviews were used at the end of students' senior year to understand what drives choices, the obstacles hindering student decisions, and the perceived value of each experience. A complex web of motivations arose related to majors and career goals, the perceived value of different opportunities, learning goals, financial need, minority status, and other factors. Students perceived many benefits from experiential learning related to worldview (93 percent of students), career development (87 percent), and academic learning (84 percent), though students varied widely in reporting which experiences they valued most and least. Findings suggest four implications for practice: making experiential learning a more substantial part of curricula, having a diverse set of experiential learning opportunities available to meet diverse student needs, being attentive to the socioeconomic situations of students, and promoting the benefits of each experiential learning opportunity in a balanced way that promotes multiple facets of a liberal education.

KEYWORDS | experiential, motivation, study abroad, internship, service-learning

The broad-ranging benefits of experiential learning in general education are widely recognized. For example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities recently brought together National Survey of Student Engagement data from thirty-eight institutions to show the impact of various

experiential learning opportunities (and other high-impact practices) on gains in deep learning, general education, practical competence, and personal and social development (Finley & McNair, 2013). These data show that students who participate in undergraduate research, study abroad, internships, and service-learning show greater gains in every area compared with students who do not participate. In addition, more is clearly better—learning gains continue as students do several types of experiential learning (Finley & McNair, 2013). Countless other studies support similar benefits of experiential learning (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Coker & Davies, 2002; Franklin, 2010; Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Psychology-based studies also suggest that experiential learning can outweigh instruction prior to adulthood (Decker, Lourenco, Doll, & Hartley, 2015). These findings have led many institutions to include experiential learning as part of general education requirements for all students.

Although experiential learning is widely recognized as a high-impact practice, the dynamics of student motivations for participating are less well understood. Student motivations for completing experiential learning are important for two reasons. First, motivation partly drives student rates of participation when students have choices across a curriculum. Campuses maximizing student learning not only provide more experiential learning opportunities but also align those opportunities with the motivations of students (Coker & Porter, 2015). Second, student motivations are an important part of the learning process itself, and they directly impact outcomes. Students arrive at college with a range of desires, expectations, and preconceptions that can shape the form, timing, duration, and quality of experiential learning. Likewise, experiences and culture on a campus can have powerful impacts on student motivations and perceptions. Overall, it follows that it is of great value to better understand student motivations for the purposes of improving institutional messaging, mentoring, access, and the experiences themselves.

Previous research provides examples of how student outcomes can vary depending on the motivations, demographics, and previous experiences of students. Raman and Pashupati (2002) have found that motivations and program perceptions work in concert to drive experiential learning outcomes and that intrinsic motivations are the strongest predictor of outcomes. Likewise, Seider, Rabinowicz, and Gillmor (2012) have found that the impacts of service-learning on worldviews are affected by expectations prior to experiences. Participation and learning in experiential situations can also vary depending on gender, race, and socioeconomic background (Penn & Tanner, 2009; Shirley, 2006). Similarly, outcomes within experiential learning activities are impacted by volunteer experiences in high school, leadership abilities,

religious activities, gender, and other variables (Astin & Sax, 1998; Brush, Markert, & Lazarus, 2006).

A motivation of particular note to general education is the motivation to learn, a key element of lifelong learning. Experiential education plays an important role in cultivating the motivation to learn through real-world experiences (Sibthorp et al., 2011).

Understanding student motivations and perceptions across a college career is no easy task. As with any set of human decisions, there is a complex interplay of both conscious and unconscious forces at work, as well as substantial variation across the population. From the perspective of a college student, the possibilities can be dizzying. Consider study abroad from the student perspective as an example: Should I study abroad? Why? Where? Is that better than doing an extended internship or research experience? Should I go for a few weeks, a semester, or a year? Will it fit into my schedule? Can my family afford it? What are my friends doing? What if I don't like my classmates and I'm stuck with them for an extended period? Will studying abroad hinder my on-campus commitments? How will the courses transfer back? Understanding how students process questions such as these is necessary to understand why experiential education works (when it does) and how to make it better (Mackenzie, Son, & Hollenhorst, 2014).

Most of the literature on experiential learning examines each type of experience in isolation. However, to fully understand student motivations, a broader approach is required because students often make curricular decisions while weighing their options against one another, both across and within experience types. This is particularly true when experiential learning requirements are in play, framing several types of experiences together.

This study attempts to triangulate student motivations and perceptions across and within five different forms of experiential learning using surveys, co-curricular transcripts, and interviews to discover what forces are ultimately driving decisions and outcomes. The context of this study is a university where experiential education is a major institutional focus—Elon University. Elon considers experiential learning to be a reflection of core institutional values such as an appreciation for diversity, an ethic of service, a strong work ethic, a commitment to civic responsibility, and a love of learning. Undergraduate students are required to complete an experiential learning requirement as part of the core curriculum, choosing from the “Elon Experiences”: study abroad, research, internships, service-learning, and leadership experiences. The vast majority of students far surpass the requirement. At the time of this study, about 72 percent, 25 percent, 87 percent, 85 percent, and 47 percent of students participate in study abroad, research, internships, service, and leadership experiences, respectively. This rich experiential learning environment creates an

excellent opportunity to explore research questions that span multiple forms of experiential learning.

Methods

A survey instrument was developed for assessing the motivations and perceptions of students related to their experiential learning in college (see the appendix). The instrument was improved by field-testing it with several students and colleagues and was then administered in paper form to sixty-two undergraduate seniors in the month before their graduation from Elon University. The survey included questions about demographics, high school background with experiential learning, participation in experiential learning in college, motivations for their choices of experiences, and perceived outcomes of the various experiences.

Faculty members in ten interdisciplinary capstone courses invited all seniors in their courses to complete the survey. Participation was voluntary. These courses are a graduation requirement for all students, and thus the sample pool was a representative sample of upperclassmen at Elon University (double-checked using demographic data). The response rate was 61 percent.

All students who responded to the paper survey were invited to complete a thirty-minute videotaped interview in the two weeks before graduation. Twenty-four students completed interviews. The first part of the interviews consisted of the same eleven questions for all students, followed by more personalized questions designed for individual students based on their responses to the paper survey. Questions were structured to develop a complete picture of each student's experiential learning in college, including his or her motivations, obstacles, records of participation, perceptions about the quality of experiences, regrets, and outcomes.

Standard questions from the surveys and interviews were analyzed through thematic content analysis. Themes that individuals emphasized were also noted from both the standard questions and the personalized questions. Co-curricular transcripts were also utilized to double-check the experiential learning history of each student.

Findings Across Experiences

Value of Experiential Learning in College

Overall, students perceived all five Elon Experiences as extremely valuable. The vast majority of students reported that they benefited from the Elon Experiences in terms of worldview (93 percent), career development (87 percent), and academic learning (84 percent). Seventy-two percent of students reported that their

participation in Elon Experiences altered their future plans, while about half reported benefiting in terms of prospects for graduate or professional school. When asked how much they had learned from each experience that they had completed, students also rated each individual experience highly, ranging from 3.9 for service-learning to 4.7 for study abroad on a 1–5 Likert scale (Figure 1).

Each of the five experiences was thought to be the “most valuable” by at least a few students in the study (Figure 2). Likewise, different combinations of students mentioned each experience when discussing professional development and prospects for graduate or professional school. These results suggest that there is great value in having a range of experiential learning opportunities so that students can match their interests and aspirations with the opportunities available. No one experience is best for all students.

Motivating Factors

Students were asked to rate several factors based on how much they influenced their decisions related to participation in experiential learning opportunities. As shown in Figure 3, individual students are influenced by a complex array of

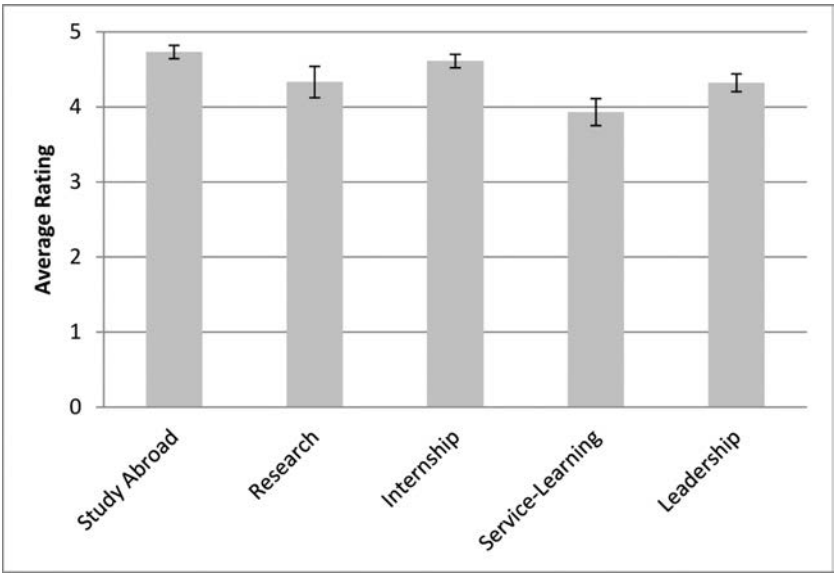


Figure 1 | Perceptions of learning: student ratings of how much they learned from their participation in five forms of experiential learning (1 = *very little* and 5 = *a great deal*). Error bars represent standard error ($n = 62$).

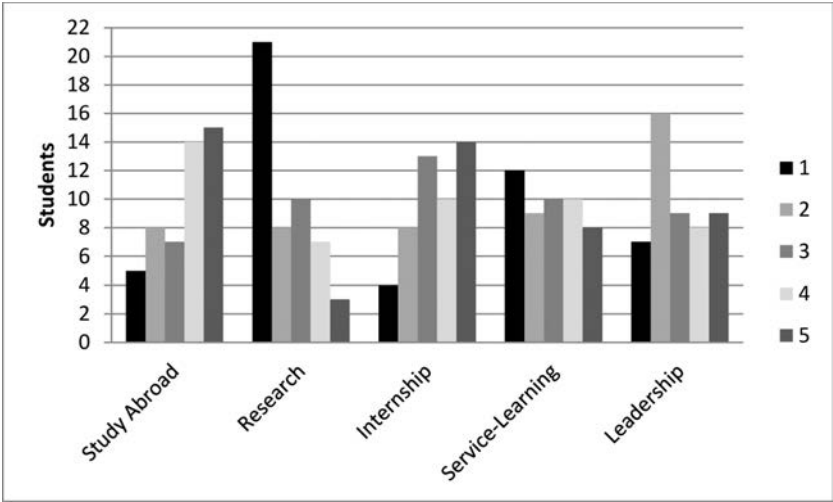


Figure 2 | Rankings of experiences: student rankings of the value of five forms of experiential learning (1 = lowest and 5 = highest) ($n = 62$).

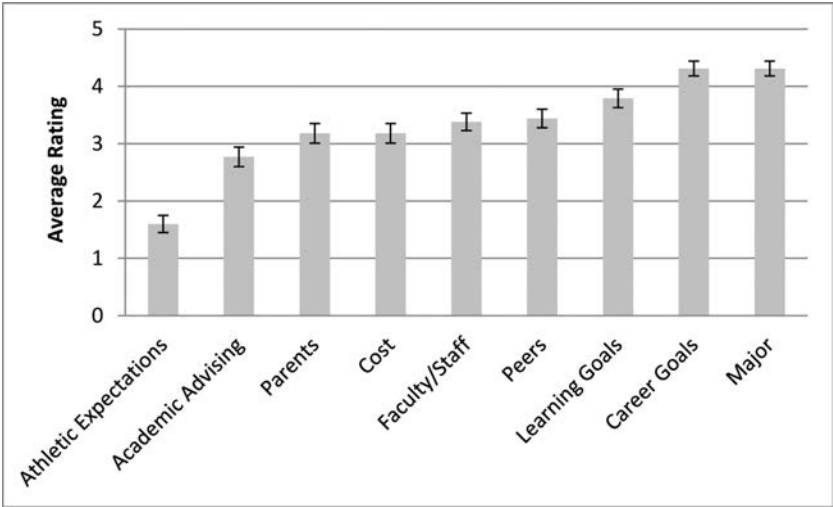


Figure 3 | Factors that influence student decisions: student ratings of factors that influenced their decisions related to participation in experiential learning opportunities (1 = lowest and 5 = highest). Error bars represent standard error ($n = 62$).

factors. Many students reported that career goals and majors were among the most influential factors, followed by learning goals. Interestingly, peers rivaled faculty/staff as the most influential people among the factors listed, followed by parents. Academic advisers were least influential. Cost was moderately influential on average but had a big impact on many individuals (see “Study Abroad” section below). Likewise, athletic expectations were rated low on average but were usually rated as a 5 for student-athletes.

Students were also asked to report their high school involvement in activities analogous to the five Elon Experiences (substituting “educational travel” for study abroad, “employment” for internship, and “community service” for service-learning). Of the students who participated in a given experience in high school, 80 percent went on to complete a similar college experience. On the other hand, 60 percent of students who did not complete a given high school experience went on to complete it at Elon. The one exception to this pattern was employment/internships. Of the fifteen students who were not employed in high school, all fifteen of them completed internships in college. Overall, while high school activity is clearly correlated with college choices, most students did branch out into new activities in college. This is likely very positive, since new, unfamiliar environments spur cognitive dissonance and learning (Ewert & Yoshino, 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Combinations of Experiences

To investigate whether students tend to pair particular combinations of experiences together, we calculated the percentage of students who completed every two-experience combination and compared those percentages with what would be expected by random assortment. The most common combination of experiences was study abroad paired with an internship (74 percent of students). This was not surprising, since those two experiences are the most common at Elon, and a random assortment of students completing each would predict that 73 percent of students would complete both.

Interestingly, every percentage for a combination of experiences was near what would be expected with one exception: far fewer students completed study abroad and leadership activities together than would be predicted by random assortment. Although this was not an expected finding, it may be rationalized by the fact that students abroad would likely have difficulty leading campus organizations during the same academic year. Several students in interviews explicitly mentioned not studying abroad because they felt that their leadership was needed in a campus organization (“My organizations were going

through strife and really needed my support,” as one student said). Based on these results, it appears that leadership experiences and study abroad can be obstacles to one another in some situations.

Obstacles and Access

Based on student interviews, the most common obstacles or issues for students across the Elon Experiences were related to money and time. Finances was the most common obstacle mentioned. This usually related to financing study abroad, as described below, but sometimes related to paying for internship credits or travel to off-campus sites. A small number of students also mentioned uncomfortable host family situations, difficulties transferring credits from non-Elon study abroad programs, and other issues. Interestingly, the “obstacles” were sometimes learning experiences that the students valued highly, such as high expectations or heavy workloads within work environments.

All students had access to at least one Elon Experience (or else they would not have graduated), and nearly all had access to all five experiences. Ninety-four percent of students were able to complete the experiences that they claimed to have valued the most, and 83 percent were able to complete the experience they valued second-most. Overall, students had broad access to the Elon Experiences and were able to complete their first choices. This level of access far exceeds national norms (Finley & McNair, 2013).

On the other hand, 59 percent said in interviews that they did not have the same access to all five of the Elon Experiences. Students cited finances, requirements within majors, athletics, lack of research opportunities, commitments to student organizations, family situations, and transportation issues as reasons for unequal access (in that order). In most cases, students did not mean “unequal access” in the sense that there was an institutional problem but, rather, as acknowledgment that they had to make some tough decisions because of time or money constraints. In a few cases, however, students did suggest the need for more freedom within certain high-hour majors and athletics programs.

A regret for at least 17 percent of students was that they had not gotten involved earlier in experiential learning opportunities. These students tended to acknowledge that their own decisions led them to “run out of time” and miss out on some desired experiences. Procrastination, switching majors, and high-hour majors were cited as contributing factors. Earlier exposure and/or targeted advising could have been beneficial for these students.

Findings Within Individual Experiences

Study Abroad

Pursuing intrinsic goals (e.g., self-discovery, desire to understand) promotes learning and well-being more than extrinsic goals (e.g., wealth, popularity) (Ryan & Deci, 2011). Since study abroad motivations were found to be highly intrinsic, focused around desires for self-discovery and understanding other cultures, it was not surprising that it was perceived as the most valuable of the five Elon Experiences by about a third of students. On paper surveys, this was evident in the question about how much students thought they had learned from each experience (Figure 1) as well as student rankings of the five experiences (Figure 2). Study abroad was also noted most frequently as impacting student worldviews, consistent with the literature (Engberg, 2013).

As one would expect, students who studied abroad were influenced by a combination of factors, including career goals, major, learning goals, peers, parents, faculty/staff, cost, and academic advising. Students who did not study abroad were more influenced by cost, academic advising, faculty/staff, and athletic expectations than students who did study abroad. On the other hand, students who did not study abroad were less influenced by peers and parents. It seems noteworthy that students who study abroad are more influenced by peers and parents, while students who do not are more influenced by academic advising and faculty/staff, possibly suggesting that peer- and family-targeted strategies for encouraging study abroad would be effective.

The most common obstacle that prevented students from studying abroad was cost. Of the students who rated cost as being “highly influential” in their experiential learning choices (a 5 on a 1–5 Likert scale), only 38 percent studied abroad. Among all others, 90 percent studied abroad. Stated another way, 62 percent of students not studying abroad cited cost as highly influential in their decisions. Financial pressures clearly play a significant role in experiential learning decisions, driving students from financially stressed backgrounds away from study abroad and toward other options. It is worth noting that Elon has recently increased scholarship funds that are earmarked for experiential learning, but those increases were not relevant for the students represented in this study.

Another notable finding was that several minority students rated study abroad as the most valuable experience to them and yet did not participate. The reasons given in interviews, though complex and multifaceted, are sometimes directly related to being a minority on a college campus. For example, several students said that they did not study abroad because they felt an obligation related to a minority cause or organization on campus. Some minority students felt overwhelmed by the cumulative effect of cost, the planning involved, the

thought of being isolated as a minority on a study abroad program, and/or other stresses. Many graduated with regrets that they did not study abroad.

There were also student populations who felt like they had less access to study abroad because of time constraints. Some situations involved the pressures of high-hour majors, but most involved the expectations (or perceived expectations) of varsity sports. Several varsity athletes reported being unhappy with their inability to study abroad during short-term programs, in particular.

One surprising finding from interviews was the frequency with which students made study abroad decisions based on their own ancestry. Ancestry came up spontaneously in around 20 percent of interviews with students who studied abroad. Students often used study abroad programs to better understand the cultures and languages of their ancestors (and occasionally close friends). This finding might cause some reassessment of what is actually going on in many students' minds when they are evaluating cultures during study abroad programs. Student motivations for experiencing culture are often less about encountering diversity and difference and more about better understanding their own roots.

The most common regret among students (46 percent of interviews) was that they wished they had studied abroad more. Those who did not study abroad wished that they had, those who studied during one winter term wished that they had gone for a semester (or for multiple winter terms), and those who studied for a semester wished that they had gone for a year. Likewise, students who completed programs of different durations valued their longer programs more highly than their shorter. This should not be misinterpreted as meaning that shorter programs (i.e., three-week programs) were not perceived as valuable, since nearly every student thought that short-term programs were very valuable. Nevertheless, the duration of study abroad clearly matters from the student point of view, a fact that should be considered given the national trend toward shorter programs. On the flip side, there were also several students who were willing to go on shorter programs who were unwilling to go on semester programs. Overall, the lesson seems to be that maximizing student success includes encouraging students to study abroad longer while also providing programs of differing lengths.

Research

Students who did research found it to be a valuable learning experience (4.46 on a 1–5 scale), and several students found it to be among the most valuable of the experiences. Consistent with previous work (Buckley, Korkmaz, & Kuh, 2008), the more research students did, the more highly they tended to value it. No student who did research mentioned having a bad experience.

Nevertheless, when compared with the other Elon Experiences, research was the lowest-ranked experience (average of 2.24 on a 1–5 ranking). Students ranked research lower than the other Elon Experiences because of preconceptions and impressions about research, generally speaking, and not Elon's research program. Interviews showed that many students arrived at college with a very negative perception of what research is like and never overcame the negative associations. Students commonly said things such as "Research just isn't my thing" or "That's not really relevant to me." Other students went on to discover and participate in research while at Elon, observe positive experiences that their friends were having, or gain a heightened appreciation through their coursework. Variables that increased the chances of research being valued included doing research, participating in a fellows program (scholarship programs for advanced students), majoring in the sciences, desiring to attend graduate school, and hanging around students who did research.

A national employer study by Hart Research Associates (2013) has found that research and analysis rank first among the skills that employers value. Other studies have shown that the learning value of undergraduate research transcends disciplines and career goals (Craney et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the culture of undergraduate research may not make this clear within many universities. Students associated research with getting into graduate and professional schools but rarely with skills of the workplace or employment opportunities. Thus, there is a striking contrast between what employers say they want (research skills) and how undergraduate researchers are reflecting on their research experiences. It would be very valuable for students to reflect more broadly on what they are getting out of research.

Interviews showed that student researchers often formed close mentoring relationships with their research advisers. These students were usually hand-picked by faculty who had invited them to do a project, or they were part of a fellows program that required research and had extra mentoring built in. On the other hand, students who did not do research tended to report slightly less influential relationships with faculty, staff, and advisers.

Access to research experiences was varied in different disciplines. For example, students in the sciences and within fellows programs had greater access and participation rates (70 percent and 75 percent, respectively) in research than students in business (20 percent) and other professional areas, which tend to emphasize internships. A few students (17 percent of those interviewed) wanted to do research but could not find opportunities in their field or were not able to connect with a faculty mentor. Other students did not realize how valuable research could be until they saw their friends doing it as upperclassmen. By then it was often too late for them to get involved.

It is impractical for every student to do individually mentored research in an environment where many other experiential learning opportunities are also emphasized. While this is to be expected, a limited number of research mentors can also lead to situations where students with more resources (through special programs and scholarships) gain preferential treatment for obtaining still more resources. Several first-generation, low-income students took note of scholarship students being paid extra over the summer to do research, while less fortunate students struggled through unpaid internships. This reflects a national trend for low-income students to be less involved in undergraduate research (Webber, Nelson Laird, & BrckaLorenz, 2013). To prevent inequity, or the perception of inequity, institutions must take special care to maintain diversity within space-limited programs.

In summary, students who do research perceive it as a valuable learning experience. However, because of preconceptions, research was perceived as the least valuable experience by the student population as a whole. This dichotomy is not surprising, but it does suggest areas of potential improvement on many campuses: encouraging an appreciation of research for all students, finding creative ways to accommodate more student researchers, providing opportunities for reflection on what students are getting out of research, and maintaining diversity within research programs.

Internships

It was clear from student perceptions of learning (Figure 1), rankings of the Elon Experiences (Figure 2), and interviews that students highly valued their internships. Interestingly, every demographic group rated their internship learning very similarly (around 4.6 on a 1–5 scale), regardless of gender, concern about cost, patterns of other experiences completed, and other variables.

At the same time, primary motivations for doing an internship expressed in interviews were often extrinsic (e.g., career advancement) and not necessarily based on learning, possibly dampening the transferable learning that took place. Ideally, students in an internship would have a learning orientation focused on deepening skills and expertise, as well as deepening awareness, thinking, and interpretation capacities (Spence & McDonald, 2015).

There were some interesting differences in how different groups ranked internships relative to other experiences. Most notably, students who completed service-learning experiences ranked internships much lower (3.1) than students who did not complete a service-learning experience (4.1). The dualistic perceptions between internships and service-learning were also evident among the few students who did not complete an internship. These students tended to rank service-learning most highly. One student with a strong service

mind-set even refused to call her service-oriented internship an internship. There is not necessarily a dualistic relationship between service-learning and internships. Nevertheless, many students associated internships with corporate life and individual advancement while associating service with civic life and community advancement.

Groups that ranked the value of internships higher (relative to other experiences) included students in professional disciplines, those in Greek life, and those who were not concerned about the cost of experiences. Groups ranking internships lower included students who were more concerned about cost and those in the sciences.

Students who completed internships were influenced by factors very similarly to the overall student population (see Figure 3), which is not surprising since the vast majority of Elon students do internships. The influences of majors and career goals were most obvious in students' choices because most internships were related to their field of study and students clearly associated internships with training for jobs and careers. Nevertheless, interviews revealed examples of virtually every factor listed in Figure 3 as being a dominant influence for individual students.

When students were asked whether the Elon Experiences benefited their career development, internships were the most common experience mentioned by far. Although this is a natural connection to make, the association for students is enhanced by Elon's internship office being housed in the Career Center.

Paying for internship credit, which happens at Elon in summer terms, was a frustration for some students. Elon, like many universities, assists students during the internship process through internship identification, paperwork, insurance, mentoring, and reflection. These activities occupy the time of faculty and staff, and thus students are expected to pay for summer internship credits. Some employers even require interns to receive credit hours. Nevertheless, paying for internship credits was very unpopular, even contentious, among some students in interviews. This was particularly true within majors that required internships, which tended to be the professional disciplines. This is a very difficult issue for universities. On one hand, the university services are adding value, and they do cost money. On the other hand, students tend to associate work with getting paid, not paying someone else, and so there is a psychological barrier to paying for internship credits that does not exist with other types of credit. Paying for credit can also lead to severe or insurmountable burdens for low-income students who must accept unpaid internships to enter certain industries. Universities might mitigate the problem by explaining to students that internship credit payments cover insurance and staff time and by offering subsidized options for low-income students.

Service-Learning and Leadership

The data for service-learning and leadership experiences were often similar and/or interrelated, and so they are discussed here jointly. Overall, the findings support other studies showing that preconceptions do have significant impacts on service-learning (Raman & Pashupati, 2002; Seider et al., 2012) and leadership experiences (Turesky & Gallagher, 2011).

As shown in Figure 1, the overall student ratings of learning were high for service-learning (4.0) and leadership (4.3). When students were asked to rank the five experiences from least to most valuable, responses for service-learning and leadership were similar, both averaging 2.9 and both with a relatively even distribution of responses across the five rankings (Figure 2).

Students who completed service-learning and leadership experiences were influenced by factors very similarly to the overall student population (see Figure 3), but with slightly more influence by peers among those completing service-learning. Likewise, students who completed each experience expressed overall benefits from the Elon Experiences that were similar to those expressed by the overall student population.

A notable finding was that perceptions of the value of service-learning and leadership were both highly correlated with student financial backgrounds, but in different ways. Specifically, as student financial security increased, various ratings of service-learning went down, and those of leadership went up. For example, as the influences of cost on students declined on a Likert scale from 4 to 3, 2, and 1, student ratings of their learning while doing service declined from 4.2 to 3.9, 3.5, and 3.3, respectively. In fact, students who were the most financially secure (rating the influence of cost as a 1 or 2) participated in service-learning much less, and those who did participate rated the learning value of service-learning far lower than the other experiences (by at least 0.8 on a five-point scale). Psychological studies have shown that higher social class predicts less ethical behavior in many situations (Piff, Stancato, Cote, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012). Although the deprioritization of service-learning among wealthier students does not necessarily indicate less ethical behavior, it does suggest less connection to community-based problems and a significant pedagogical obstacle for service-learning efforts.

On the other hand, leadership was ranked lower by students who were more concerned about cost (ranking of 2.8 among those who rated cost influences as a 4 or 5) and higher by students less concerned with cost (ranking of 3.4 among those who rated cost influences as a 1 or 2). Interestingly, the less financially secure students indicated more learning from leadership experiences even though they valued them less.

Students involved in Greek organizations also perceived service-learning as less valuable than those who were not Greek. Since Greek organizations actually require service, this could mean that their service (or environment for service) is not of the highest quality for learning. However, the lower ratings of service-learning within Greek organizations appear to be more related to financial backgrounds than to Greek life. Among the Greek students, both financially stressed and financially secure students valued service-learning similarly to their non-Greek counterparts in each group. In other words, the Greek overall average was lower because they are wealthier (on average), not because they are Greek.

In interviews, students who were entering fields such as human services or education commented on how service-learning was beneficial to them and their personal and professional development. Other students did not fully make those connections. Though nearly everyone valued the personal fulfillment they received from doing service, students often linked it with a one-directional giving process that primarily helped someone else. Since employers and graduate schools do value skills related to service-learning such as problem solving and the ability to interact with people from diverse backgrounds (Hart Research Associates, 2013), it is valuable to emphasize personal and professional benefits (along with community benefits) during the service-learning process.

Leadership was the opposite with regard to personal and professional development. Students in interviews often spoke about their leadership experiences as personal opportunities, more frequently mentioning how they contributed to their professional development or prospects for graduate/professional school. Benefits to the community or to other people were mentioned much less frequently than with service-learning.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest four implications for practice that would help to optimize experiential learning on many campuses. First, and most simply, most campuses would be wise to make experiential learning a bigger part of their curriculum. Student perceptions were a powerful testament to the fact that experiential learning is a highly effective set of pedagogies for empowering learning and the shaping of student futures. Many students recounted experiential learning being the highlight of their college experience.

Second, in addition to there simply being more opportunities, it would be valuable for campuses to create a diversified portfolio of experiential opportunities that allow students to match their needs, interests, and aspirations with the experiences available. It was especially notable that every type of experience was rated highest by some students and lowest by others—one size does not

fit all. The student motivations and perceptions that drive their experiential learning choices are clearly very complex, and no one type of experience is developmentally ideal for all students.

Third, optimizing learning experiences requires attentiveness to the socioeconomic situations of students. Lower-income students often need targeted mentoring, peer role models, and/or financial assistance to overcome the obstacles of access associated with quality study abroad, internships, and research experiences. Likewise, higher-income students often need their (sometimes) privileged mind-set to be challenged in order to maximize learning. Across all income classes, creating the cognitive dissonance that leads to transformative learning often requires introducing students to socioeconomic situations they are unaccustomed to dealing with and then helping them to process their new experiences in a constructive way.

Finally, institutions should frame the benefits of each experiential learning opportunity in a balanced way that promotes multiple facets of a liberal education (research skills, problem solving, interacting with people from diverse backgrounds, etc.). Before students do an experience, their mental image of that experience is based largely on cultural stereotypes and preconceptions—research is for lab scientists, study abroad is for learning about other cultures, internships are for getting a job, service is for helping the less fortunate, and leadership is for personal development. These preconceptions often perpetuate a lack of participation and learning, such as when students in professional disciplines avoid research even though employer surveys suggest that research skills are most highly valued or when wealthier students do not fully engage with service-learning even though they might benefit the most from seeing the world through the eyes of the less fortunate. As a wealth of research shows, each form of experiential learning is an opportunity to cultivate a wide range of academic, personal, and professional benefits. Institutions can better frame experiential learning through nonstereotypical imagery and language in marketing, broad liberal learning goals, preparatory assignments that prompt awareness of the breadth of possible learning, and postexperience assignments that prompt reflection.

Limitations of this study include uncertainty about the transferability across institutions, which may have different demographic characteristics than Elon. Also, the study went deeper into the motivations of a smaller number of students instead of striving for a larger sample size (with less depth), thus limiting the ability of the study to break out information by demographic category. Another limitation was not having access to official records related to students' family income, leaving the study to rely upon student perceptions about the impacts of cost. Finally, certain results (i.e., the frequency with which students talked about family ancestry when discussing study abroad choices) were surprising,

and so those results can only be reported anecdotally because direct, probing questions about the surprising findings were not asked.

Appendix

Student Survey

- What is your employment history? (positions, duration of employment, hours per week)
- Are you affiliated with a Greek organization (Interfraternity Council/ Panhellenic Council/National Panhellenic Council)? (yes/no)
- What type of high school did you attend? (private/boarding/public/ early college/other)
- What is the highest degree or level of school your parents have completed?
- Check the experiences you were involved with in high school and explain the depth and length of your involvement. (research, employment, leadership position, educational travel, community service)
- How much time have you spent outside the United States? (none/ under a month/one to six months/six months to a year/more than a year)
- Rank the following based on how valuable you think it is? (*least valuable* = 1 and *most valuable* = 5) (service-learning, undergraduate research, leadership, study abroad, internship)
- What Elon Experiences have you completed? Check all that apply and explain. (research, internship, leadership, study abroad, service-learning)
- What motivated you to participate in the Elon Experiences you have?
- Why didn't you participate in the other Elon Experiences?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did the following influence your Experiential Learning Requirement decisions? (1 = *not at all* and 5 = *highly influential*) (learning goals, cost, academic advising, peers, parents, faculty/staff, career goals, major, athletic expectations, other—explain)
- Has your gender influenced your Experiential Learning Requirement choices in any way? Please explain.
- Has your race or ethnicity influenced your Experiential Learning Requirement choice in any way? Please explain.
- How much do you think you have learned from the experiences that you have completed? (1 = *very little* and 5 = *a great deal*) (study abroad, service-learning, leadership, internship, research)

- Do you think you have benefited from the Elon Experiences in the following areas? Please explain. (academic learning, worldview, career development, prospects for graduate/professional school)
- Has your participation in the Elon Experiences altered anything about your future plans? Please explain.

JEFFREY SCOTT COKER is the director of the Elon Core Curriculum and associate professor of biology at Elon University. He has been an active scholar in the area of experiential education for fifteen years. During his term as director, the Core Curriculum has undergone many improvements: revision of First-Year Foundations courses, doubling of the Experiential Learning Requirement, creation of new advising materials, implementation of capstone projects for all students, retitling of the program and its parts, creation of core curriculum and interdisciplinary prefixes, reduction of class sizes in first-year seminars, creation of "Core Forums" (common intellectual events for all first-year students), and so on.

DESIREE JASMINE PORTER is a 2015 graduate of Elon University. She received her bachelor's in business administration with a concentration in marketing. She has served as a student speaker at a host of conferences in the United States including the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. She lives in Durham, N.C., and works at Credit Suisse as a derivatives analyst.

NOTE

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