ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

THE CASE FOR THE CO-CURRICULAR LEARNING MASTER PLAN

Five Challenges to Infusing Career Skills into Co-Curricular Experiences

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INTRODUCTION

A typical college campus displays many signs of traditional, academic learning. Classroom lectures, laboratory experiments, painting and sculpting, and students in groups and alone working in the library: these are just a few of the many ways that learning is traditionally viewed in the academic world. But what of the other ways that students learn? What of the skills that are gained through co-curricular experiences and are particularly useful for a student's future career?

In this article, we unpack five of the most vexing issues that student affairs practitioners face in connecting the skills that students gain from co-curricular experiences with the desired competencies of employers. Being able to identify and articulate these challenges—and understand their associated complexities—is an important first step toward more intentional design and assessment of co-curricular experiences to promote meaningful learning.

CHALLENGE #1

HIGHER EDUCATION AND BUSINESS LEADERS ARE SPEAKING DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

Higher education and business leaders have long attempted to build a bridge to connect our two separate lands, but in many cases we are still speaking different languages, using different units of measurement, and accessing different materials to construct the bridge. It is safe to say that many employers see our work in more vocational terms: for example, they may see the primary goal of education as preparing for a job, whereas higher education professionals may see our primary goal as helping students transform intellectually.

This baseline challenge has been further compounded by the fact that we are no longer trying to prepare students for just one job, as in the past, but we are seeking to equip students with transferable skills that could be applicable to any number of careers. Today's college graduates will likely have more jobs than previous generations, even switching careers multiple times (Berger, 2016). What is more, many of these jobs—even industries—don't exist yet. And all of this is taking place in an era when knowledge and information can be fleeting. As Keeling (2004) further observes, "knowledge is no longer a scarce or stable –commodity. [It] is changing so rapidly that specific information may become obsolete before a student graduates and has the opportunity to apply it."

These are tremendous leaps that today's students face, and it is our job as educators to help them make successful jumps. There has been a growing movement to connect the skills that students gain through

participation in co-curricular experiences with the abilities that are desired by employers. This movement has been largely based upon a desire to unify our terminology, so we speak of skill development in the same language that business and industry leaders do. The approach has been framed in the work of the National Association Colleges and Employers (NACE), who have asked employers about the skills they seek in college graduates for more than 20 years. This list of skills—represented in the graphic below--has remained remarkably consistent over time (Peck, 2017).

There is a distinct connection between participation in co-curricular experiences and closing the supposed skills gap perceived by employers. When we focus on helping students develop transferable skills from co-curricular experiences, we are helping them transform into the kind of person they want to be. To help

students become successful, we need to assist them in developing transferable skills and connect our bridges with business and industry leaders so students can find a rewarding career after college.

CHALLENGE #2

THE FALSE HOPE: "IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL LEARN"

"If you build it, they will learn." This phrase suggests that if we go to the trouble of providing co-curricular or experiential learning opportunities, students will learn. Some erroneously assume that because the connection between participation in co-curricular experiences is so natural, educators do not need to do anything in particular to cultivate it. This is patently false.

Data from the Project CEO (Co-Curricular Experience Outcomes) benchmarking study shows that students participating and leading co-curricular experiences tend to rate their skill level higher than students who are not involved. Students who are more deeply involved also tend to rate themselves higher than students who are only participating at a surface level. This is of course, very promising in giving purpose and meaning to student affairs work. In the most recent version of the Project CEO benchmarking study, though mean scores tend to be higher the more deeply involved students are, we were unable to find any statistically significant correlation between participation in co-curricular experiences and an increase in self-rated skill among 7 of the 8 skills we studied.

This is disheartening for a variety of reasons. First, self-ratings are notoriously inflated. Individuals tend to overrate their own skill (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Second, self-ratings tend to act as a proxy for self-confidence. In other words, even with the scales tilted heavily in our favor, we still cannot show a meaningful impact to this work in a way that holds up to rigorous assessment.

As we have struggled to determine why we do not see a clearer impact on student learning and development, one explanation is that experiential educators have changed the way they measure student learning, but not how we endeavor to create it. We have written previously about how the "cart" of assessment got in front of the "horse" of student learning. That is to say, the movement to measure student learning actually in many ways predated the movement to define student affairs practitioners as educators. The result is that we still often treat student learning as if it is just a small part of assessment, not as it truly is in which assessment is just a small part of student learning. When we treat learning in the co-curriculum in this way, we act as though it is the experiences that teach, rather than the skills intervention of a trained educator.

A focus on employability holds tremendous potential to improve students' development of career skills. Yet, this potential has not yet been realized. Many practitioners who work with experiential education and co-curricular experiences would like to do better in prompting skill development –they just don't know how.

CHALLENGE #3

ARTICULATION OF SKILLS

In recent years, it has become commonplace to claim that students are gaining more skills than they are able to articulate. Many have suggested that we focus more on helping students tell the story of their learning. While this is useful, we suggest that a reason this has not been very effective is that students' inability to articulate their skills happens when they haven't fully developed them. Articulation comes at the end of skill development, not the beginning, or middle.

Knowing how to do something and being able to do it are two different things. Last year, we published the Co-Curricular Career Connections Leadership Model (C3). In it, we advanced what we call "The 5 As of skill development." These are awareness, acquisition, application, advancement, and articulation of skill. These are used to describe the process of developing new skills.

Students first become aware of a skill they want to develop. Then they begin the process of acquiring that skill by gathering learning about that skill. But only when they apply the skill, are they able to improve. When you think about it, no one would want an IV put in by a nurse who had only read about how to complete the task. We want someone who has put this important skill into practice. If we want students to be able to articulate the skills they develop from co-curricular experiences, we must help them through each stage of the skill development process to help them move from knowing how to do something to actually doing it.

Articulation is a critical phase in skill development, but it is the final stage. Explaining how something is done without knowing how to do it is not real articulation. To articulate a skill, you must really know how to do it. That is why so many of our students are unable to explain what they have learned to potential employers.

CHALLENGE #4

SKILL DEVELOPMENT IS MORE COMPLEX THAN WE GIVE IT CREDIT FOR

When thinking about skill development, there is a common tendency to oversimplify the process. There are a variety of skills to be had in the world, and students simply need to "catch" them. Once they catch them, they have them, and they can display them to others. Right?

Wrong. This oversimplification is incorrect, and simply isn't how skill development works. For students to progress in a certain area, the intentional intervention of a skilled educator is required. This section presents three less widely discussed aspects of the skill development conversation in higher education: integrative learning, levels of investment, and intellectual development. When taken together, these aspects illustrate the complexity and multi-dimensionality of what it means for students to truly develop skills, shining light on our tendency to oversimplify it in the ways we think about and discuss it.

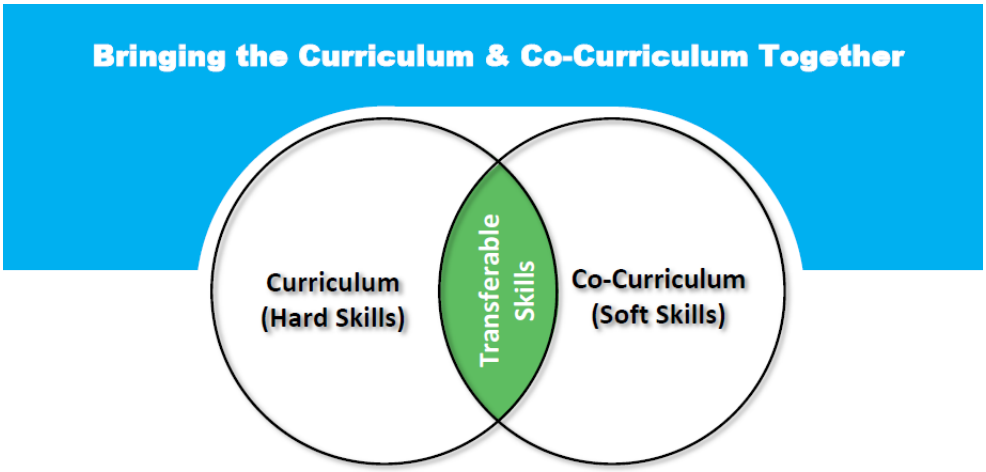
Integrative Learning

Many colleges and universities expressed the desire to create integrated learning. This refers to opportunities for learning in the classroom to connect with learning outside of the classroom. If you ask most educators how we should do this, they often reply that we should provide students the opportunity to apply through co-curricular experiences the skills they are gaining inside the classroom. The problem

with this is that it's not always possible. For example, how can we show that we prepare students to be better at chemistry by participating in Student Government?

Our struggle to integrate learning is likely based on the flawed assumption that integration should look like providing students technical skills. But a focus on transferable skills opens up new possibilities for integration. If the classroom is the best source of technical skills, and students have the opportunity to gain transferable skills outside of the classroom (i.e. problem solving, teamwork, communication, etc.) the two should connect. As Dungy and Peck (2019) noted, "While the nearly infinite variety of possible technical skills makes it impossible to apply all of them in a co-curricular context, focusing on transferable skills ensures that the skills students gain will complement their academic learning and their experiences inside and outside of the classroom will connect like never before" (p. 11).

Simply put, a focus on employability introduces the potential for integrative learning. By aligning our learning outcomes for co-curricular experiences with employability skills, we not only help to prepare students for success in their careers –but also complement the technical skills they gain from their classes.

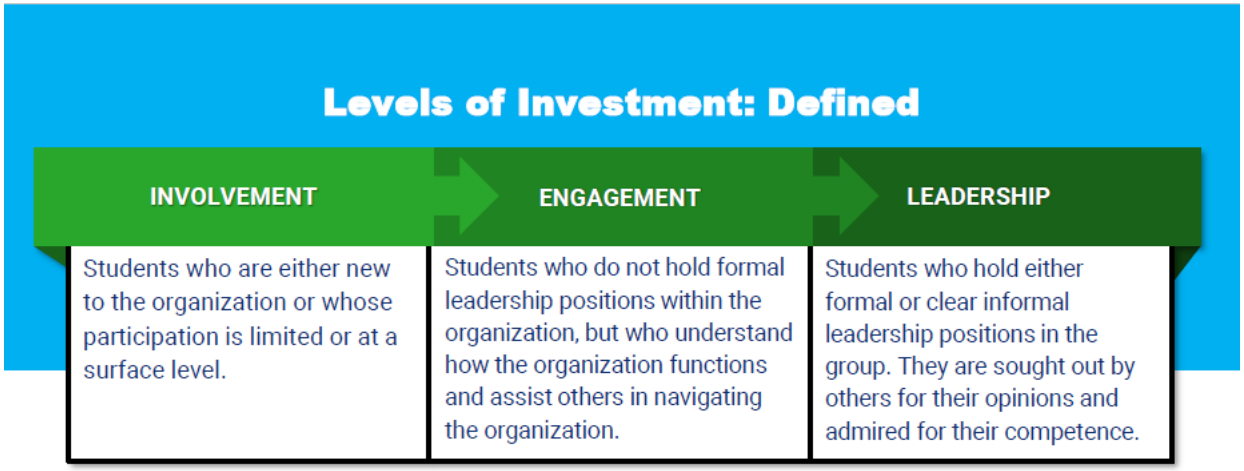


Levels of Investment

Many have expressed a desire to measure student learning as it occurs across time. The challenge with this is that time is not always the best measure of engagement in a learning activity. For example, one student may be new to an experience but is actively participating from the start. Another may have been involved for years, but they are only participating at a surface level. Who would we expect to learn more in this scenario? Clearly it is the student who is more deeply engaged. In this way, time is actually a confounding variable.

In his development theory of student involvement, Alexander Astin (1984) wrote "student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. Thus, a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (p. 518). It seems that from the beginning, we have known that it is not the amount of time that most influences student learning –it's energy.

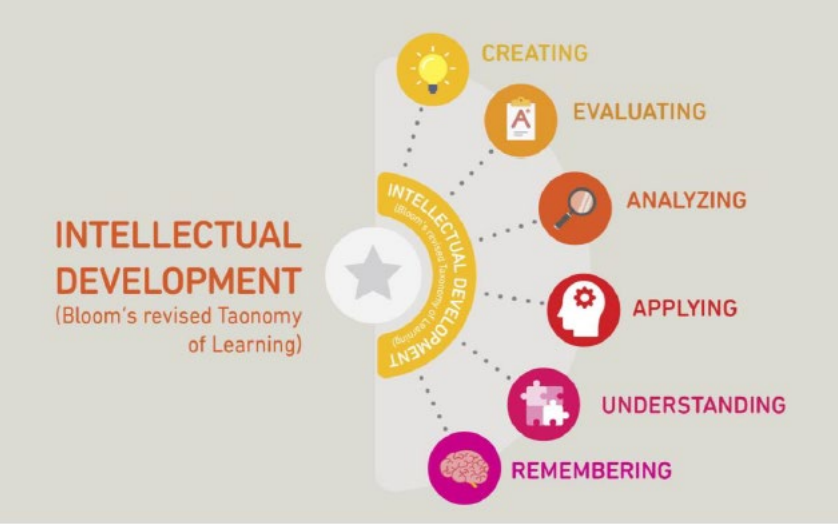
So how do we capture the amount of mental energy that students are putting into a given experience? We suggest that students can be divided into three conditions that we call the Three Levels of Investment. These conditions are called involvement, engagement, and leadership. A student who is at the involvement stage is either new to an experience or only participating at a surface level. An engaged student is actively contributing to the group, taking on responsibilities, and providing informal leadership to the group. A leader is someone designated by the group to provide guidance and direction. They are typically in formal leadership roles and they align the work of other leaders, including informal leaders who are at the engagement level.



Student learning and development outcomes are often isolated from one another. Learning is treated as if it is discrete and disconnected, and assessment often focuses too much on lower-order learning outcomes. This makes sense, because these are easier to measure: it is easier to know if someone remembers or understands something than it is to know if they are able to evaluate or create something new. Very often in the co-curricular environment, we ask students to take a series of individualized workshops or retreats and give them credit when they've attended enough of them. But if we want the co-curriculum to be taken seriously, we must ensure that it meets the rigorous standards of an academic curriculum. When learning outcomes are mapped to higher-order learning and skill development, we are able to create higher-order learning as students invest more time and energy, and when we measure that learning as well.

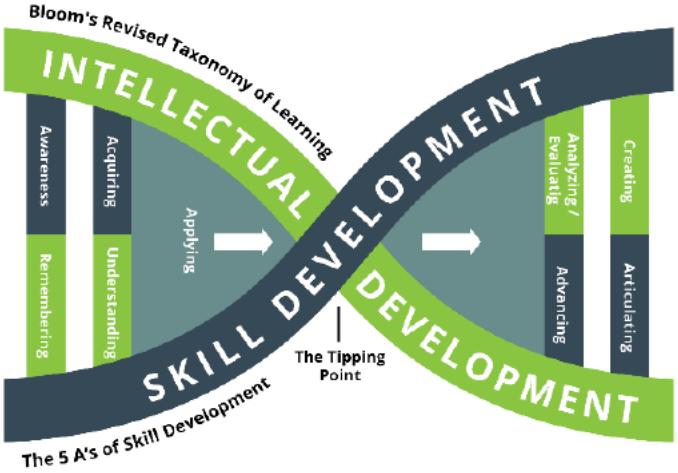
Intellectual development

Intellectual development is measured using Benjamin Bloom's revised taxonomy of learning. At lower levels of investment, learning outcomes are mapped against lower levels of intellectual development. For example, at the involvement level, we expect students to accomplish the lower-order skills of remembering and understanding. At the engagement level, learning outcomes are mapped against intermediate levels of intellectual development: applying and analyzing. For leaders, learning outcomes are mapped against higher-order learning, evaluating, and creating.



Higher levels are more difficult to measure, but they are also more rewarding overall. For example, imagine we were looking at the ability to set goals for a student organization. At the involvement level, we would only expect students to know what the goals of the student group are. Do they remember and understand those goals? At the engagement level, we would expect that students are applying and analyzing those goals. Are they aligning their work in the group with the goals that have been set? Where are the breakdowns, and how can they overcome these hurdles in accomplishing the group's goals? For leaders, we want them to be able to accomplish higher-order outcomes. Can they create new goals and evaluate progress towards those goals?

Learning something new involves both knowledge (intellectual development) and skill development. We must be able to think through the new skill and become increasingly able to put it in practice.



The model above shows the DNA of how knowledge and skill come together. When we become aware of and begin to acquire a skill, we must be able to remember and understand information about the skill. By applying what we learn and actually putting it into practice, we begin to cross the knowledge/skill continuum. At a certain moment in this process, we reach a tipping point where we have enough knowledge to practice the skill effectively. Beyond that, it takes evaluating one's progress and analyzing areas of strength and weakness in order to improve or advance the skill. Once one has achieved a certain level of mastery of a skill, they are able to create ways to improve their own skill and perhaps even teach the skill to others through effective articulation of the skill.

As educators, we must be able to treat skills as complex and provide students with the opportunity to achieve higher order thinking and skill development as we progress.

CHALLENGE #5

ASSESSMENT OF SKILLS

A serious issue in the Student Affairs field is our difficulty with assessment. As we face increased demands for our time, many are struggling just to keep up. This can make it harder and harder to devote the time we need to understand the impact of our work.

Despite decades of focus on conducting valid assessment of student learning in student affairs, many still lack the skill to do it effectively. What is perhaps more disheartening is that many lack the desire, as well. If you ask most higher education professionals why they decided to work in this field, most will say that they did so to make a difference. From this perspective, it's difficult to understand the aversion to assessment that is evident throughout the field. Assessment is simply the way that we measure the difference that we are making.

Rather than use data to support the conclusion that we are making a difference, we often prefer anecdotes instead. When we use anecdotes to validate our work, there can be a temptation to see all students through the lenses of those who are having the best experiences. These are the students we see at our events, who join our student organizations and who participate in our leadership development programs. But as Kuh et al. (2010) remind us, "for every student who has such an experience, there are others who do not connect in meaningful ways with their teachers, their peers, or take advantage of learning opportunities. As a result, many students leave school prematurely, or put so little effort into their learning that they fall short of benefiting from college to the extent they should" (p. 9 and 10)." Herein lies our challenge.

There are decades of research that suggests engaged students have better outcomes from an educational standpoint. They tend to feel more attached to the institutions they attend and as a result, persist at higher rates (Tinto, 2012), get better grades (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2007), and even give back more as alumni (Gaier, 2005). Recent research conducted by Gallup suggests that students who experience a high degree of academic and social engagement in college are more likely to experience greater wellbeing across their lifespan (Rath and Harter, 2014). Even just attending campus events has been linked to a significantly higher GPA (Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2012).

With so many positive effects associated with co-curricular participation, it is a puzzle to some why student affairs professionals are not more excited about validating the work they do and the impact they make. Pressure to constantly prove the worth of their work without a framework in which to do so tends to be the root cause of the staff having a wide-spread aversion to assessment. Love and Goyal (2019) and others have

also suggested that there are a variety of reasons for this lack of enthusiasm, such as a lack of understanding of how to conduct valid, reliable assessment, or the lack of time to do it well. Student Affairs professionals would benefit from a structure which would provide pre-written learning outcomes, a programming guide for learning activities that can help the institution to accomplish these outcomes, and a valid assessment instrument for evaluating them.

CONCLUSION

The challenges we have laid out in this piece are not insignificant. We have unpacked questions and challenges related to the following:

- How can we link the learning students can achieve in co-curricular activities with the skills that employers want?
- How do skilled educators create the conditions to ensure that this learning occurs?
- How can we make sure they are aware of this learning and can articulate it to others?
- How do we make sure that students gain complex versions of these skills and integrate them with the learning they experience in the classroom?
- How do we measure this learning?

In direct response to these questions, the Co-Curricular Learning Masterplan was designed. This document provides a turnkey solution for educators to advance learning and development outcomes related to employability skills, to plan for robust learning from a variety of co-curricular experiences, and to measure these skills in a valid way.

If you're interested in learning more, we hope you'll explore our on-demand training "A Model for Infusing Essential Career Skills into Co-Curricular Student Experiences." You'll identify essential learning outcomes and leave with an assessment tool to build better co-curricular development experiences and demonstrate their value toward student learning.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

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We would love to continue the conversation.