Academic Study and Vocation

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Whether students study the arts, languages, science, or philosophy, an academic education should enable them to find meaning and purpose in life, to find a calling – to pursue a vocation. Progressive academia incorporates an experiential learning model, encouraging professional aspirations that build on and provide additional motivation for classroom learning. One form of experiential learning that is prominent nationally and that has always existed at LaGuardia Community College is the Cooperative Education Internship Program (Co-op). Co-op’s mission is to:

- Engage students in a process of active learning that links classroom activities and work experiences with opportunities for critical analyses and reflection;
- Enable students to achieve their educational, personal, and career goals; and
- Empower students to contribute to the community as responsible citizens of a rapidly changing multicultural and global society. (LaGuardia)

While many scholars view favorably the notions of experiential education and learning through work, others remain skeptical about their place in academia. Richard Freeland, past President of Northeastern University, has written numerous articles espousing the importance of experiential learning and work while highlighting the tensions that surround experiential learning pedagogy and practice. According to Freeland,

[a]t a time when 60 percent of young Americans attend college, we should recognize that curricular models created when higher education was reserved for social and economic elites need to be re-thought. We should move beyond the shopworn opposition of liberal and professional education and seek ways to nurture in our students both the impulse to grow intellectually and the desire to prepare for the practical and material challenges of adulthood. It is time for academe to recognize that occupations
apart from primarily intellectual pursuits can be, and are for many people, a rich source of meaning in their lives.

The debate surrounding the role of work and experiential learning in the curriculum is not new. This debate has accompanied cooperative education programs since 1906, when Dr. Herman Schneider of the University of Cincinnati started a cooperative education program for engineering students. Schneider thought it was essential for engineering students to put theory into practice by working in the field while attending classes (Wilson 4). At that time, there was some criticism and a lack of support for this learning model, but despite the criticism and over one hundred years later, cooperative education flourishes. At LaGuardia, Cooperative Education offers internships in over 350 major corporations, government agencies, and not-for-profit organizations to students in a wide variety of majors, from those geared toward specific professions to programs in the liberal arts.

With an eye toward continuing innovation in the field of experiential education, in 2002 LaGuardia undertook a college-wide study of its Cooperative Education program. Under the leadership of President Gail O. Mellow, a “Task Force on Redesigning Cooperative Education” was charged to review and make recommendations about the Co-op internship program at the college. The Task Force reviewed best practices and conducted a literature review in the field of cooperative education, analyzed trends in experiential learning practices, examined data and issues related to Co-op at LaGuardia, and engaged with many others in the college community to obtain feedback from diverse constituencies. The final consensus of the Task Force was that cooperative education internship experiences are valuable and should be required across the curriculum. According to the 2002 Task Force report,

Co-op at LaGuardia is more than just participation in internships. It is a central component of education at its best, based on an educational philosophy that embraces individual needs and draws upon student strengths and experiences. Through a collaborative and active learning process, Cooperative Education addresses and promotes psychosocial, cognitive, and interdisciplinary skill development. It provides a context for self-assessment and self-directed learning where the learner connects, constructs, and reinforces knowledge through direct experience, reflection, analysis, and synthesis. (Kopp, and Kolomechuk 1)
The benefits of internships for students are well-documented within and beyond the LaGuardia report. In *Changing Lives: LaGuardia Stories*, compiled by Professor Emeritus Catherine Farrell, who taught for many years in Cooperative Education at LaGuardia and served as a Dean in the Division, students recount and reflect on their educational experiences at LaGuardia and elsewhere. An underlying theme for most students reflecting on their education is the value of their work and cooperative education experiences in enabling them to make connections between classroom learning and what they want to accomplish in their lives. Students found that reflecting on the connections between study and work was intellectually engaging and purposeful. According to Keen and Howard, “[p]sychological or personal outcomes positively related to co-op experience include greater attachment to their university, firmer commitment to educational goals, short-term gains in social adjustment . . ., increased autonomy, and improved quality of interpersonal relationships . . .” (132).

Cooperative Education at LaGuardia serves students on paths toward degrees in the majors they selected upon entering LaGuardia as well as those who are changing majors. For LaGuardia students who must change majors because they do not earn the grades required by selected programs, Cooperative Education can be particularly important. Making alternative educational and career plans is crucial for students such as those who choose to pursue, say, Nursing but do not get into the Nursing program. Internships complemented by Cooperative Education seminars can help those students become aware of alternative careers in health care or other fields.

Participation in regularly scheduled Cooperative Education seminars is required of students enrolled in internships. Currently, the Cooperative Education department offers a variety of internship seminars including: Critical Reflection and Learning at Work (CPA041), Fundamentals of Career Advancement (CPB041), The Future of Work (CPC041), and Reflective Practice in the Teaching Profession I & II (CPA011 and CPB011). The seminars provide a framework for students to analyze and reflect on their internship experiences in relation to course content. The seminars also support decision-making related to careers and enhance the development of the college’s core competencies. Additionally, the seminars explicitly reinforce the importance of individual and collective civic responsibility with a special emphasis on recognizing the importance of an equitable multicultural environment in the workplace and in the community.
I believe it is critical that experiential learning be reinforced throughout the curriculum. The college’s Center for Teaching and Learning and the Cooperative Education department, in conjunction with several other academic departments, have taken steps to achieve this goal by facilitating year-long professional development seminars for faculty such as the “Experiential Education in the Disciplines Curriculum Review and Integration Project” which took place in 2003–04. During 2006–07, the Center’s professional development seminar series brought together faculty from the Humanities department and the Cooperative Education department to promote the development of oral communication skills in the Co-op internships and corresponding seminars. During 2007–08, the Center brought together faculty from across the college to further align the Cooperative Education seminars with program-related competencies in Accounting, Paralegal Studies, Travel and Tourism, Business Administration, Business Management and the Humanities.

As a college, we have made great strides in recognizing the importance of learning through experience and work and in connecting experiential learning to the disciplines. As we move forward, I hope that we will continue to use what we have learned to enable students to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

WORKS CONSULTED


