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# Experiential learning reveals changing higher ed landscape

*Career competencies added to growing number of curricula at area institutions*

By: Special to the RBJ | Laurie Putnam | August 15, 2022



(Photo by Fauxels for Pixels)

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Cole

"In Rochester there are a lot of local industries that are motivated and passionate about the community and our students," said Cole, who has served in higher education leadership positions at institutions in numerous states including Tennessee, Louisiana and Florida. "Every community I've worked has had a specialized interest and a focus – in Jacksonville it was IT, in Louisiana it was welding, in Tennessee it was Nike. Rochester is very blessed with a flagship optics industry."

The optics industry is just one of the many that want to be involved with MCC students while they are in school and beyond, Cole said. He added that overall, 167 employers and organizations in myriad fields provide workforce development opportunities like co-ops, internships, and apprenticeships to MCC students. He noted that 100% of MCC students do some type of applied learning during their certificate or associate degree studies.

Cole believes in the law of exposure when it comes to ensuring graduating students have the necessary skills for today's available jobs. He explained it like this: "We give them career exposure; the opportunity to see what's out there. Experiential learning offers individuals the opportunity to think bigger and better, to feel comfortable in the work environment, to gain experience and to eliminate fear and doubt."

At Roberts Wesleyan College, the career development office also focuses on the interpersonal and personal skills students need to be successful in the workplace.



Raniewicz

"A lot of what we do is help out students build confidence in themselves and what they bring to the table," said Kathleen Raniewicz, a career success coach who has been with the private, four-year college for almost ten years. "We listen and really focus on encouraging students at the undergraduate level. Skills we lean into are the eight NACE competencies." Created by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in 2015 and updated in 2020 these eight career readiness competencies and examples of each are:

- Career & Self-Development *display curiosity; seek out opportunities to learn*
- Communication *employ active listening, persuasion, and influencing skills*
- Critical Thinking *multi-task well in a fast-paced environment*
- Equity & Inclusion *advocate for inclusion, equitable practices, justice, and empowerment for historically marginalized communities*
- Leadership *use innovative thinking to go beyond traditional methods*
- Professionalism *ex. maintain a positive personal brand in alignment with organization and personal career values*
- Teamwork *collaborate with others to achieve common goals and*
- Technology *quickly adapt to new or unfamiliar technologies.*

These competencies can be strengthened through experiential learning and about 65% of undergraduate majors at Roberts Wesleyan require an experiential learning component. Such experiences could be, for example, an internship at a local non-profit or shadowing at a health clinic. All students are encouraged to participate in at least one experiential learning opportunity during their time at Roberts Wesleyan.

If there are equity, accessibility, or other issues that don't allow for a student to go off campus to complete experiential learning, the career development office provides assistance to find on-campus opportunities related to their fields. They also support curricular-based projects where businesses come to campus to work with groups of students on real-world projects.

"An important part of experiential learning is academic reflection work," Raniewicz said.

"It's not just about the task, but ultimately learning and developing from the opportunity."

When Dr. Julia Overton-Healy, director of career services, St. John Fisher University, assumed her role in 2018 she, like Cole, was not familiar with the Rochester business community but has been extremely pleased with how they welcome student learners.



Overton-Healy

"When we put out a call for a mock interview night we're flooded with volunteers," Overton-Healy said. "The Rochester business community is very helpful and very engaged. They really want to mentor and foster students from all the local colleges and universities. They know that this is an important part of attracting and retaining talent locally."

Overton-Healy called Fisher's relationship with the business community "wonderful synergistic" and pointed to Wegmans, Paychex, Constellation Brands, Rochester Regional, UR Medicine, and the Buffalo Bills [Pegula Sports and Entertainment LLC] as just a few of the regional employers that support students with rich experiential learning opportunities. "One of the unique things about St. John Fisher is that we've embedded career design into our curriculum," Overton-Healy said. "It's woven throughout the entire academic experience here and we're committed heavily to experiential learning in many forms, like mentorships, internships, job site visits, and sponsored research with faculty members."

A survey of Fisher's past two graduating classes showed that 87% of undergraduates completed some form of practical or experiential learning experience during their time at the university and, of those, 40% completed two or more. These numbers are only from students who responded and could be even higher, Overton-Healy notes.

All of the professionals interviewed for this piece noted the impact COVID-19 has had on experiential learning and workplace hiring. Many experiential learning opportunities continued for college students during the pandemic's lockdown but were done remotely or in other ways not typically done before. Both students and internship hosts had to be flexible and open to change.

"COVID has changed the way we have all done our work," Overton-Healy said. "As employers revisit the way they attract talent and re-frame their recruiting strategies, it's more important than ever they look at an applicant's reliance, grit, and problem-solving skills."

*Caurie Putnam is a Rochester-area freelance writer.*