A High-Impact Practices Framework for Evaluating Immersive Learning Competencies in Hospitality Education

Abstract

This study explores students' perceptions of the importance and performance of experiential learning elements in hospitality management education, particularly within lodging and restaurant management courses that emphasize service learning. Using a three-stage analysis - paired t-tests, Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), and multiple regression - the study evaluates how effectively high-impact practices are integrated and how they influence leadership self-efficacy. IPA results show that while many practical and interpersonal skills are well-delivered, elements like critical thinking, real-world application, and social confidence require improvement. Regression analysis highlights organizational skills, communication, and trust as key predictors of leadership self-efficacy. These findings provide practical guidance for refining instructional strategies, ensuring better alignment with student expectations and industry demands, and strengthening the role of experiential learning in developing leadership competencies.

Key Words *High-Impact Practices (HIPs), Immersive Learning, Importance-Performance Analysis, Leadership Self-Efficacy*

Track: *Educational Innovations*

Focus of Paper: *Theoretical/Academic*

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Introduction

What innovative educational approaches beyond traditional methods can effectively enhance experiential student learning while also supporting community engagement efforts? One promising framework for achieving this is the implementation of High-Impact Practices (HIPs), which are rooted in student involvement and engagement theory (Hodge, 2024). These practices immerse students in meaningful, hands-on learning experiences, fostering the development of crucial skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and ethical decision-making (Stallings, 2024). Indeed, research by Kuh (2008) indicates that HIPs not only significantly improve student achievement and retention but also encourage a deeper engagement with societal and environmental challenges. While HIPs have been widely applied across various academic disciplines (Schaab, 2023), they remain surprisingly underutilized within hospitality education, a field where the cultivation of practical skills and active community engagement are particularly vital.

Among the diverse array of High-Impact Practices (HIPs), including undergraduate research (e.g., Ives et al., 2024), study abroad (e.g., Lee et al., 2024), and immersive learning (e.g., McCauliff et al., 2024), immersive learning emerges as a particularly compelling approach. Characterized by active student engagement within real-world or simulated environments, immersive learning uniquely emphasizes both student experiential learning and tangible community benefit. This methodology has demonstrated its effectiveness in fostering student confidence and bridging the divide between classroom theory and practical industry application through direct involvement in community-based projects (McCauliff et al., 2024), especially within hospitality-related disciplines such as lodging management and foodservice programs (e.g., Maneethai, 2025). Recognizing its significant value, research consistently establishes a strong connection between immersive learning and enhanced academic performance alongside increased workforce readiness (Frias & Popovich, 2020; Walker & Rocconi, 2021).

Rooted in experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2006), hands-on experiences cultivate essential experiential learning competencies, such as leadership confidence, teamwork, and applied problem-solving (Jewer & Evermann, 2015; Jose, Patrick, & Moseley, 2017). However, despite a growing interest in experiential education, hospitality educators have given comparatively limited consideration to the specific impacts of individual experiential components within their curricula (Harrington et al., 2010). Given the increasing demand for career-relevant, practice-based education, it is becoming ever more critical to pinpoint which experiential competencies most effectively contribute to both academic achievement and meaningful social impact.

Addressing this need, the present study investigates innovative educational approaches by focusing on high-impact immersive learning as a means to enhance student engagement and foster community development. Specifically, it explores students' perceptions regarding the importance and their performance in various experiential learning components within hospitality and foodservice programs, alongside the influence of these components on their leadership self-efficacy. By analyzing student evaluations of these elements, this research seeks to inform the design of more effective, high-impact teaching practices. Ultimately, the overarching aim is to deepen student learning, improve career readiness, and enable significant contributions to community well-being through the strategic implementation of immersive learning experiences.

Literature Review

Integrating Experiential Learning Competencies into Hospitality Education

While the potential of experiential learning to support student development has long been acknowledged, concerns have been raised regarding its potential lack of structure and measurable outcomes. To mitigate these issues, Lyu and Wang (2016) stress the necessity of aligning experiential strategies with clearly articulated learning objectives. Reinforcing this perspective, Lin et al. (2017) highlight the transformative power of real-world service-learning, enabling students to acquire insights often inaccessible through conventional teaching

methods. Likewise, Maneethai (2025) emphasizes how experiential learning cultivates interpersonal awareness and encourages students to contemplate diverse worldviews—critical competencies within service-oriented sectors like hospitality. Crucially, the advantages of experiential learning extend beyond individual growth to encompass broader societal impact. Student engagement in community-focused projects, such as initiatives addressing food insecurity or community revitalization, exemplifies socially embedded learning that concurrently advances both educational and civic aims (de Graaff & Kolmos, 2007). These activities nurture personal responsibility, social interactions, and leadership development (Anderson, Hsu, & Kinney, 2016), with service learning, in particular, acting as a vital link between academic instruction and meaningful community partnerships (Brandell & Hinck, 1997; Annette, 2005). Given the aforementioned, the following are key outcomes of immersive learning experiences and detailed competencies proposed in the research framework.

Leadership Self-Efficacy

Immersive learning practices significantly contribute to the development of leadership self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their capacity to lead effectively (Bergman et al., 2021; Hannah et al., 2008). This outcome aligns directly with a central developmental goal of experiential education. According to Baden and Parkes (2013), interaction with socially responsible leaders in hospitality and business settings helps students internalize core values like sustainability, inclusivity, and ethics. These values are further strengthened through practical, hands-on experiences such as service-learning and community-based projects, which place students in authentic leadership situations (Pizzo et al., 2025; Komives et al., 2005). Rooted in Kolb and Kolb's (2006) experiential learning theory, these activities foster leadership development (Odom et al., 2012) by promoting the acquisition of practical skills, interpersonal skills, citizenship, and personal responsibility (Anderson et al., 2016; Cheung and Delavega, 2014).

Practical Skills

Iimmersive learning significantly contributes to the development of crucial practical skills. Traditional classroom assessments often struggle to capture the depth of practical skill acquisition vital for effective leadership. Hebert and Hauf (2015) argue that immersive learning environments—including simulations, role-plays, and project-based tasks—provide rich opportunities for hands-on learning frequently absent in conventional instruction. These experiential strategies assist students in bridging the gap between theory and practice, thereby enhancing their decision-making, problem-solving, and overall leadership effectiveness (Ruhanen, 2006; Schreck et al., 2020).

Interpersonal Skills

Effective leadership is intrinsically linked to strong interpersonal communication and collaboration skills, areas where many graduates find themselves lacking upon entering the workforce. Experiential learning, particularly through team-based and client-centered projects, offers a supportive context for cultivating these competencies. Warner (2020) observed that service-learning courses led to notable improvements in students' self-confidence and community engagement. Moreover, individual learning styles can influence this development; students with a preference for experiential learning tend to excel in interpersonal domains, while those who favour abstract learning may be more inclined towards analytical tasks (Mainemelis et al., 2002).

Citizenship

Leadership mindsets must also be underpinned by civic awareness and ethical responsibility. Service-learning promotes these values by involving students in projects that address community needs, thereby fostering empathy, civic virtue, and social responsibility (Annette, 2005; Brandell & Hinck, 1997). These experiences encourage a public-minded orientation and ethical decision-making, both of which are fundamental to civic leadership. Structured formats such as volunteerism, internships, and participatory research further support democratic participation and social cohesion.

Personal Responsibility

Leadership necessitates personal responsibility, a trait that develops through reflective learning and engagement built on trust. Student-cantered, experiential learning environments are highly conducive to this growth (Andrade & Westover, 2020). Service-learning, in particular, cultivates accountability by requiring students to balance academic obligations with community responsibilities. Khiatani and Liu (2020) emphasize the reciprocal nature of these interactions, noting that students deepen their ethical responsibility and interpersonal skills through sustained collaboration with community partners. Such experiences are foundational in shaping socially conscious leaders.

Within this framework of high-impact immersive learning, a dynamic platform emerges for cultivating student leadership through the development of four key competencies: practical skills, interpersonal skills, citizenship, and personal responsibility. When thoughtfully integrated into course design, these competencies not only enhance students' academic and professional readiness but also foster meaningful contributions to community engagement. Building upon the insights gleaned from the existing literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses to guide both its exploratory and empirical analysis:

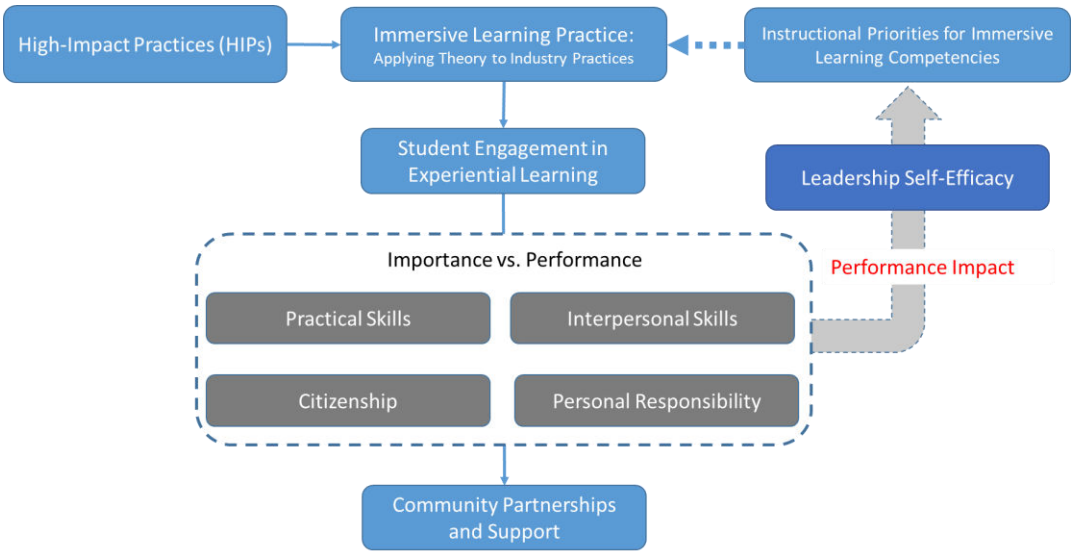
H1: Statistically significant discrepancies will exist between students' perceived importance and their perceived performance across various experiential learning competencies.

H2: Students who engage in experiential learning elements that are rated highly in both importance and performance will demonstrate significantly greater levels of leadership self-efficacy compared to those who do not.

The Research Framework

This study posits that high-impact immersive learning fosters student leadership development through the cultivation of four core competency domains: practical skills, interpersonal skills, citizenship, and personal responsibility. This framework highlights how intentionally structured immersive learning opportunities—including active student engagement in experiential learning and collaborative partnerships with community stakeholders—contribute to the enhancement of leadership self-efficacy. By strategically aligning instructional strategies with these key competencies, this model offers a clear pathway for cultivating reflective, socially responsible, and ultimately, workforce-ready hospitality professionals (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Research Framework



Note. Research Framework Developed by the Authors Based on the Literature

Research Methods

Background Information: Immersive Course Cases

Student engagement in community-based initiatives not only strengthens local economic vitality and social cohesion but also fosters a reciprocal learning environment that supports student development while generating meaningful community impact. Reflecting this commitment, a Midwestern U.S. university's Destination 2040 Strategic Plan (Goal 1E) underscores the importance of HIPs by mandating that all students complete at least one course featuring such an experience, including options like undergraduate research, immersive learning, study abroad or away, or coursework centered on societal or global challenges involving diverse perspectives.

In direct alignment with this institutional mission, the proposed framework strategically integrates hospitality courses with HIPs to elevate student learning, engagement, and leadership capabilities. Grounded in student engagement theories, HIPs are known to foster critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, and global awareness—all essential competencies within the dynamic hospitality industry (Kuh, 2008).

Within this context, hospitality courses such as lodging management and restaurant management are implementing project-based learning that is directly connected to real-world challenges. This includes establishing partnerships with local hotels and community organizations dedicated to addressing food insecurity. These experiential activities provide students with opportunities to lead teams, collaborate with diverse stakeholders, and apply their classroom knowledge in practical, hands-on settings. Ultimately, this deep engagement fosters personal growth, a sense of civic responsibility, and enhanced professional preparedness, thereby reinforcing the transformative value of HIPs within hospitality education.

Data Collection and Measurement

To investigate the impact of immersive learning, two student-led courses were implemented: one in collaboration with a community lodging facility (Maplewood Guest House) and the other cantered on food insecurity projects addressing “No hunger” in the community. Both courses employed a two-phase assessment process, with surveys administered at the beginning and end of each semester. The survey instrument comprised two main sections. The first section required participants to evaluate 19 experiential learning elements, adapted from the work of Anderson et al. (2016) and Cheung and Delavega (2014). These elements represented key facets of student development, encompassing critical thinking and problem-solving, personal growth, social responsibility and citizenship, and the development of caring relationships. Each element was assessed using two distinct 5-point Likert scales: one gauging perceived importance (1 = not at all important to 5 = very important) and the other assessing perceived satisfaction (performance) (1 = not at all satisfied to 5 = strongly satisfied). Furthermore, five items measuring leadership self-efficacy were included (e.g., *“I feel confident that I can be an effective leader in most of the groups I work with”*), utilizing a 5-point agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) (Karriker & Hartman, 2019). The second section of the questionnaire collected demographic and background information, including gender (male = 37, female = 80, prefer not to answer = 8) and age (M = 20.5, SD = 1.6). Data collection occurred in two waves: the first at the semester's outset (n = 147) and the second at its conclusion (n = 135), and this process was repeated annually over a five-year period from 2020 to 2024.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three stages to investigate the impact of experiential learning on leadership development. First, paired t-tests were performed to conduct a gap analysis, comparing students’ perceived importance and performance across 19 experiential learning elements. Second, Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) was used to visually map these elements, providing insight into the alignment between student

expectations and program delivery (Lee & Kim, 2014). The iso-priority diagonal line in the IPA grid represents equilibrium between perceived importance and performance; elements above the line indicate instructional strengths, while those below highlight areas needing improvement. This approach helps prioritize key competencies such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork (Azevedo et al., 2012), thereby supporting curricular strategies that meet industry needs and enhance community-based learning. Third, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the extent to which experiential learning predicts leadership self-efficacy, using 19 performance-based predictor variables grouped into four domains: Practical Skills (PS), Interpersonal Skills (IS), Citizenship (CS), and Personal Responsibility (PR). Leadership self-efficacy served as the dependent variable, represented by the mean score of five items with acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$).

Results

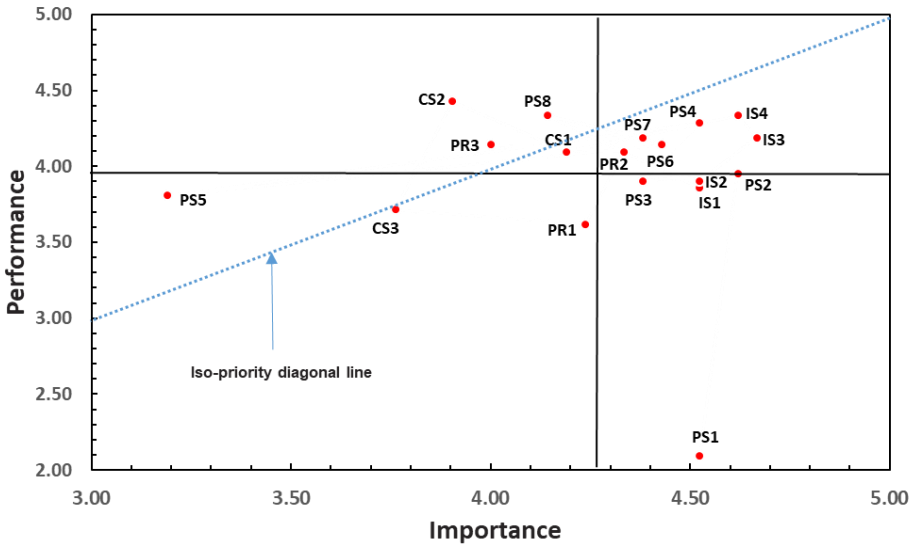
Importance and Performance of Experiential Learning Elements

Figure 1 presents a comparison between the perceived importance and performance of experiential learning elements, as measured by Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA). The analysis is organized into four quadrants (see Appendix A), with the x-axis representing performance and the y-axis representing importance. The axes were determined using the overall mean scores for importance ($M = 4.28$) and performance ($M = 3.95$), serving as the crosshair values for quadrant classification.

The majority of respondents placed six elements—PS4, PS6, PS7, IS3, IS4, and PR2—within Quadrant I ("Keep Up the Good Work"). These elements, primarily related to practical skills and interpersonal competencies developed through the food insecurity program, were rated highly in both importance and performance. This suggests that students recognized the value of these elements and felt that they were being delivered effectively within the course.

Conversely, several elements were positioned in Quadrant IV ("Concentrate Here"), indicating high importance but relatively low performance. These include applying knowledge to real-world settings (PS1), problem analysis and critical thinking (PS2), social self-confidence (PS3), personal growth (IS1), and the ability to work well with others (IS2). These findings highlight areas where instructional strategies may need to be strengthened to better align delivery with student expectations.

The IPA grid, including the iso-priority diagonal line (where importance equals performance), offers a visual representation of the relationship between these two dimensions. According to the foundational principles of IPA, the interpretive value lies not in examining importance or performance in isolation, but in assessing the balance—or imbalance—between them. Figure 1 reveals that many practical and interpersonal skill items fall above the iso-priority line, meaning their importance ratings exceed their performance scores. This imbalance suggests there are meaningful opportunities for enhancing the implementation of these experiential learning elements in future iterations of the capstone course.



Practical Skills (PS)	Interpersonal Skills (IS)	Citizenship (CS)	Personal Responsibility (PR)
PS1: applying Knowledge to the "Real World"	IS1: person growth	CS1: understanding cultural and racial differences	PR1: caring relationships
PS2: problem analysis and critical thinking	IS2: ability to work well with others	CS2: social responsibility and citizenship skills	PR2: being trusted by others
PS3: social self-confidence	IS3: leadership skills	CS3: community involvement	PR3: empathy and sensitivity to the plight of others
PS4: conflict resolution	IS4: communication skills	CS4 Ability to make a difference in the community	
PS5: workplace skills			
PS6: skills in learning from experience			
PS7: organizational Skills			
PS8: connecting theory with practice			

Figure 2. The results of the importance-performance analysis map.

Regression Model of Leadership Self-Efficacy from Experiential Learning Elements

To examine how experiential learning elements to leadership self-efficacy, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted using 19 predictor variables grouped into four thematic domains: Practical Skills (PS), Interpersonal Skills (IS), Citizenship (CS), and Personal Responsibility (PR). The regression model demonstrated a strong overall fit, with $R^2 = .54$ and Adjusted $R^2 = .45$, indicating that approximately 54% of the variance in students' perceived leadership self-efficacy could be explained by these experiential learning components. The model was statistically significant, $F(19, 105) = 13.335$, $p < .001$, and the Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.464 suggested no major concerns regarding autocorrelation in the residuals.

Among the 19 performance-response predictors, nine experiential components were found to have a statistically significant positive association with leadership self-efficacy. These included PS3: social self-confidence ($\beta = .177$, $p = .004$), PS4: conflict resolution ($\beta = .152$, $p = .009$), and PS7: organizational skills ($\beta = .212$, $p = .001$), indicating that practical abilities tied to interpersonal confidence and organization are critical. Additionally, several interpersonal and social factors significantly contributed to leadership self-efficacy: IS2: ability to work well with others ($\beta = .128$, $p = .037$), IS3: leadership skills ($\beta = .263$, $p < .001$), and IS4: communication skills ($\beta = .180$, $p = .005$). From the citizenship and personal responsibility domains, CS1:

understanding cultural and racial differences (β = .212, p = .001) and PR2: being trusted by others (β = .216, p = .001) also emerged as important predictors. The constant term in the model (β = .986, p < .001) was significant as well, reflecting the baseline level of leadership self-efficacy when all predictors are held constant. On the other hand, several experiential learning components did not show a statistically significant relationship with leadership self-efficacy. These included PS1, PS2, PS5, PS8, IS1, CS2 through CS4, and PR1 and PR3. While some of these variables exhibited positive trends, their contributions were not strong enough to reach significance within this model.

Discussion

Grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2006; Cheung & Delavega, 2014), this study integrates three student-led experiential projects into two high-impact immersive courses—lodging management and food operations—within a hospitality management program. These projects offer practice-based learning experiences that cultivate professional competencies through meaningful community engagement. Emphasizing both practical and interpersonal skills, the study focuses on developing critical thinking, leadership, problem-solving, and personal growth within capstone-level learning environments. To assess effectiveness, the study employed Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA), incorporating the iso-priority diagonal line, and multiple regression analysis. The IPA identified competencies students perceived as both highly important and effectively delivered, while the regression model pinpointed those significantly contributing to leadership self-efficacy.

Findings revealed strong alignment between perceived performance and actual impact. Five competencies—conflict resolution (PS4), organizational skills (PS7), leadership (IS3), communication (IS4), and trustworthiness (PR2)—were both highly rated and statistically significant predictors of leadership outcomes. Meanwhile, social self-confidence (PS3) and teamwork (IS2), though underperforming, also significantly predicted leadership self-efficacy, suggesting key areas for instructional improvement. Conversely, competencies such as critical thinking (PS2) and real-world application (PS1) were valued but did not predict leadership outcomes, while several others demonstrated low importance and predictive value, warranting reevaluation.

A notable limitation of this study is its focus on a single university and a limited set of hospitality courses, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future research should explore similar experiential frameworks across diverse institutional settings and academic disciplines to validate and extend these results. Overall, the findings reinforce the transformative potential of high-impact experiential learning to promote leadership, civic engagement, and ethical responsibility. Prioritizing competency-driven design can further elevate the role of experiential education in preparing hospitality students for dynamic professional challenges.

(**Word Count: 2,997/3,000**)

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Appendix A: Importance-performance map