
Better Education Building Better Communities?

Preliminary Findings from a Tri-Sector Experiential Hospitality Learning Experience

Abstract

There is considerable attention devoted to the role of experiential learning in higher education; however, more research is needed on the benefits and impacts of such initiatives. Research has examined the benefits of experiential learning for students participating in such activities (Lyu, Li, & Wang, 2016; Lin et al., 2017). Research also illuminates how industry perceives the value of experiential learning (Azar, Albattat, & Kamaruddin, 2020). However, there is a need to examine models of success for experiential learning, as some have already done (Maier & Thomas, 2013). Here, we describe a functioning tri-sector model for the delivery of experiential learning, along with preliminary findings from students' hands-on experiences and their clientele. The findings suggest that students appear to gain from the experience, although it is uncertain whether the learning experiences contribute to achieving the donor's strategic goals.

Key Words

Experiential Learning, Community Engagement, Tri-Sector Collaboration, Student Learning Outcomes, Hospitality

Track

Educational Innovations

Focus of Paper

Industry/Educational

Introduction

Experiential learning in higher education and the involvement of universities in supporting community development are not new ideas. There are various *ad hoc* ways in which higher education can be utilized to support community development and Hospitality and Tourism education. Here, we suggest utilizing a Tri-Sector business model to establish an organizational framework for delivering experiential learning activities to higher education students and developing the social infrastructure to support enhanced health outcomes for a disadvantaged population. We will illustrate how partnerships developed with local non-governmental organizations and philanthropic funds can be harnessed to create learning opportunities

for students in hospitality and other educational programs. We achieve this through two case studies that reflect effective and long-term projects involving hospitality students and addressing the needs of the local population, specifically at a Midwest state university's hospitality program in a city with a large, disadvantaged population.

Research has shown that experiential learning is seen as a positive, from the perspective of industry (Azar, Albattat, & Kamaruddin, 2020), students (Lyu, Li, & Wang, 2016; Lin, et al., 2017; Wang & Croft, 2025), and instructors (Pongračić & Marinac, 2021). Several research initiatives have explored various models of experiential learning delivery to identify the correlates of success in developing experiential learning experiences for students (Maier & Thomas, 2013; Rong-Da Liang, 2021; Ruhanen, 2006). However, these models are mostly *ad hoc* and describe case studies without a theoretical foundation. Here, we examine a specific model, employing a tri-sector approach to illustrate how this approach can be applied to ensure a more sustainable experiential learning experience for students that satisfies all stakeholders. We then examine the preliminary findings from our case studies to determine if the major stakeholders appear to have a realistic hope of achieving the goals they have set for the institutional setup of the experiential experience for students.

Background and Model

Muncie, Indiana, USA (population 65,000), and its surrounding county, Delaware County (population 112,000), are economically disadvantaged and have an unhealthy population. Muncie has a declining economic base and population, has Indiana's fourth-lowest median household income (\$33,944), and tenth-highest unemployment rate (7.9%), making it the third poorest city in Indiana with 30.2% of its residents living in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2021). The population of the city and its county is unhealthy, with Delaware County ranked 87th out of 92 counties surveyed in Indiana, according to a county health rankings report conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin's Population Health Institute (2016). A declining economic base, the exodus of youthful and skilled workers, and the aging of the population have contributed to a city and its surrounding county with a large impoverished population and a population in poor health.

To combat the declining health of the population, several local organizations, under the leadership and financial support of the Ball Brothers Foundation, have undertaken the Optimus Primary project. It comprises several initiatives that focus on all aspects of medical education, emphasizing healthy lifestyles, disease prevention, and medical education excellence. Multiple partner organizations play distinct roles in this effort to reverse the economic decline and subsequent decline in population health in Muncie and its surrounding county.

The relevant component of this project involving experiential learning includes the project's principal partners: the Muncie campus of the Indiana University School of Medicine, Ball Memorial Hospital, and Ball State University. The salient point of this is that Indiana University Medical Students working at the Ball Memorial Hospital in Muncie on rotations are provided accommodation supported by the project and Ball State University. Medical students are provided accommodation at Maplewood Guest House (a Learning Lab for students) and the Village Promenade (another Learning Lab for students). One of the key strategic goals of this initiative is to ensure that medical students have a pleasant stay and are introduced to the positive aspects of Muncie and the surrounding areas, in the hope that the medical students will want to stay and work in Muncie/Delaware County in their professional lives.

The project, therefore, involves several partners relevant to the experiential aspects discussed here. The non-profit organization that funds the project is the Ball Brothers Foundation. This foundation, which has been in existence since 1926, is a legacy of the Ball Brothers (noteworthy industrialists in Indiana) and is dedicated to the improved quality of life in Muncie and its surroundings (Ball Brothers Foundation, n.d.).

This foundation supplies funding to support accommodations for Indiana University School of Medicine students doing their medical rotations at Ball Memorial Hospital in Muncie. These students are provided with housing and events supplied and managed by Ball State University. Ball State University's undergraduate students are involved in various ways in supporting medical students who stay at the residence. In recent years, Ball State's undergraduate students have been involved in experiential projects, including designing events for medical students at Maplewood Guest House, surveying the premises to identify improvements for the facilities, and organizing events for the medical students. These projects have included many more initiatives.

The Maplewood Guest House has been operating for Indiana University School of Medicine students since August 2017, while the Village Promenade has been housing learners since 2014. The Maplewood Guest House is a historical mansion built in 1898 that was a residence for William C. Ball (one of the Ball Brothers) and his family. Currently, it houses nine medical students, while the Village Promenade is a more modern facility that houses up to seventeen students for the Optimus Primary project. The symbiotic relationship between the Indiana University School of Medicine medical students and Ball State undergraduate students fosters a learning ecosystem in which medical students receive high-quality hospitality services and Ball State undergraduates engage in practical, experiential learning. The strategic goal of Ball State University's involvement in the project is to encourage medical students to consider living and practicing medicine in the Muncie area after completing their studies. This, in theory, would lead to an increase in the number of medical professionals available to the people living in the Muncie area, resulting in better medical attention and medical services for the local population.

The model, in this case, involves several private entities in the medical field, a state university, and the support of a well-respected nonprofit organization. In the ideal tri-sector model, private, social, and public entities collaborate, each pursuing its self-interest to create outcomes that are desirable for the broader community (Broadcast Your Authority, 2024). In this instance, we see that the public entity of the state university is intimately involved in the project and benefits from it by providing students with opportunities to participate in practical hands-on projects relevant to students of Hospitality and other fields. The private partners have an interest in ensuring that qualified medical personnel are introduced to the professional and other opportunities available in the Muncie area, as many of the private employers in healthcare are in the market for good physicians willing to live in the area. The social institutions, such as the Ball Brothers Foundation, recognize the value in investing in the project to benefit the community in the long term, while also providing a supportive and practical experiential learning lab for State University undergraduate students studying at Ball State University.

Case Studies

For this paper, there are two case studies with empirical data that we can examine to measure the project's success. In the first case study, we examine how experiential learning has influenced the learning experience for students participating in projects involving the Maplewood Guest House. To learn about how students have benefited from being involved in projects supporting the Optimus Primary project and the Maplewood Guest House, a survey was developed to measure their reactions to the experiential experience and their sense of readiness for a career. A survey was developed using NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers) career readiness competencies. These competencies encompass several key areas, including communication, analytical skills, and collaboration, which NACE has identified as essential for success in the workforce. A survey was distributed to undergraduate students of one class that participated in experiential learning at the Maplewood Guest House during the Spring 2025 semester. While only 16 students responded to the survey at the end of the semester, there are some findings that suggest some success in incorporating experiential learning into the curriculum.

The preliminary findings of the research illustrate, most notably, that the students involved in the experiential learning at the Maplewood Guest House demonstrate a great deal of confidence in their ability

to work effectively in teams with their fellow students and to perform professionally in a workplace setting. Additionally, the data show that many students report having a sense of confidence in leading others, which is significantly higher than would otherwise be expected. While these data are interesting, they are still incomplete. Future iterations of the study will enable us to collect richer data, allowing for more rigorous data analysis. Additionally, this baseline of data will allow us to have future research in which we can compare and contrast students who did not do experiential experiences in the classroom with those who did so that there may be a comparison of the way that traditional classroom teaching prepares students with workplace competencies versus what experiential experiences in an educational environment may do.

In the second case study, we investigate whether the 19th century accommodation offered to the medical students serves not only as a charming and comfortable accommodation during their studies but also influences the thinking of the medical students in ways that encourage them to move to the Muncie area to work as medical professionals, after they are done with their educations. This is a salient point, as the funders expect results that lead to their desired strategic goal. To measure this, an exit survey was designed for the medical students staying at the Maplewood Guest House after their short stay in the accommodation. The survey was designed to identify any shortcomings in the accommodation provided and to determine whether the stay in these accommodations influenced the medical students' thinking, prompting them to consider relocating to the Muncie area upon completing their education.

The findings from the 15 respondents collected in 2025 illustrate a high level of satisfaction with the accommodations. Table 1 below illustrates residents' responses to whether they would characterize the Maplewood Guest House using various statements. The findings suggest that the project has been largely successful in creating a welcoming environment. However, there may be room for improvement in fostering a sense of community and encouraging social interactions.

Table 1: Characterizing the Maplewood Facilities as a Living Space

	Number (out of 15 respondents)
Provides an environment where medical students feel at home	15
Provides a sense of community	13
Allows for interactions with medical students and staff	14
Allows for frequent social activities for medical students	12
Hosts interesting events for medical students	15

While these data and other data illustrate a high level of satisfaction with the housing and hospitality supplied to them, the major strategic goal of the Optimus Primary project is to ensure that medical students have a favorable opinion of Muncie and want to live there. While none of the students reported a negative opinion of Muncie, it seems that very few of them envision Muncie being a part of their lives in the future. A significant question posed to medical students who have lived in the facility and seem to show very high levels of satisfaction with the accommodations provided to them is whether they plan to stay in Muncie in the long term, as Table 2 below illustrates. According to the data gathered so far, the data show that only a minority of those who have stayed in Muncie and have enjoyed the facilities remain open to moving to Muncie as a place for their long-term professional goals.

Table 2: How Likely would you be to Relocate to Muncie when your Education is Done?

	Number (out of 15 respondents)
Extremely unlikely	5
Somewhat unlikely	3
Neither likely nor unlikely	5

Somewhat likely	2
Extremely likely	0

Conclusion

While this paper is illustrative of the preliminary findings of a tri-sector collaboration that involves experiential learning, it raises both encouraging and cautionary issues for discussion. First, the preliminary data suggest that the experiential learning approach may have some advantages for students, and they appear to recognize this. While there may be reason to believe that students are reporting this based on a false sense of self-confidence, future research can uncover whether this is the case by comparing students who have had experiential learning experiences with those who have not. Increased research into whether experiential experiences can have a positive impact in more objective ways may also be warranted, as actual ability in various competencies may be more relevant and valuable than a person's self-confidence.

Additionally, there is an issue with the state university's role in providing accommodations in this example. While medical students appear to be satisfied with the lodgings provided to them and appreciate all the amenities offered at the Maplewood Guest House, the comforts and pampering do not seem to translate into an intention to relocate to the Muncie area to live and work. While this illustrates considerable success in providing medical students with housing and comforts while living in Muncie, it is not the primary aim of the Optimus Primary Project.

In closing, the tri-sector approach may have some advantages and can be utilized in ways that support quality learning experiences for students. While it is in the interest of state universities to provide quality education to their students, hands-on experiences may have some advantages over traditional teaching practices, which often involve lectures, quizzes, tests, and research papers. However, there are also concerns. One concern is that students may enjoy hands-on learning, but the ecosystem that supports it has to be supportive. Future research really should look into the resistance of faculty to take on experiential learning. It may well be that the instructors see the value in experiential learning but involvement in such experiences require more work on the part of the faculty and there are not tangible rewards for faculty involvement. But there may be other reasons for this, as well.

A major concern is that the ultimate institutional support may be contingent upon the self-interest of the actor that financially supports the ecosystem. Those who enter such an ecosystem should be cautious, as even if many stakeholders are satisfied with the outcomes, the longer-term needs of the funders must be taken into consideration. The logic behind this approach is that the tri-sector approach emphasizes the self-interest of those involved in the ecosystem. While funders may be happy to experiment with different projects, those involved in such projects should be aware that the self-interest of the funder and the strategic goals of the funder must be taken into consideration. To ensure a more sustainable system, all stakeholders should receive a return on their investments, whether these investments are in cash, time, or other tangible or intangible forms. The risk of donor fatigue is a reality, particularly in the face of projects that may appear successful on the surface but fail to deliver on a funder's strategic goals.

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