On 'Experiential Learning'

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In his classic 1963 study *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter convincingly argues that Americans' suspicion of purely intellectual pursuits extends even to our thinking about how to structure and value higher education. He might not have been surprised at the currently popular movement on college campuses that goes under the banners of "experiential learning," "service learning" and "engaged learning."

I'm not referring here to perfectly legitimate collaborations between communities and higher education institutions in such areas as research centers, clinics or legal programs. My concern is with how the experiential learning movement affects how administrators, some faculty members and the public think about what is most valuable in undergraduate education. Over the past 15 years, in my roles as faculty member and then dean of arts and sciences at two different universities, I have observed proponents of this movement gain more and more credence in their assertion that what undergraduate students need most is more "real-life" experience as a part of their college education -- often at the expense of important academic work.

This admonition to give undergraduate students plenty of real-life experience is justified by a high-minded claim that it is in the service of a higher good. Such experience, it is argued, will help students by giving them a leg up in their careers and making them more useful people. And although that may often prove true in the short term, I am convinced it is not reliably the case when we consider a longer time frame -- particularly for students in the foundational arts and sciences disciplines.

Take, for example, the following three situations. In each one, the student must select between an "academic" and a "real-life" experience, each offered for college credit. My examples do not represent false dilemmas. In an ideal world, one would want to select both, but time is limited, and students, in an understandable desire to graduate on time, are forced to make such choices.

- A junior majoring in political science can either: (a) take a nonrequired upper-division course in statistical analysis (taught by a professor of statistics, not a political scientist) or (b) do a service-learning experience with a state legislator.
- A junior majoring in environmental science can either: (a) take a nonrequired upper-division laboratory course in the biochemistry of water-based environmental toxicity or (b) work with the Fish and Game Department monitoring the impact of pollution on the local duck population.
- A senior history major can either: (a) spend the summer at the Middlebury College Language Schools to become competent as a reader, writer and speaker of French or (b) work with an archivist at a local historical library.

Although each of the activities listed above is worthy, it is clear to me that, in the long term, the (a) options will serve the student much better than the (b) options. Each (a) option provides the student with the opportunity to study and learn a difficult subject matter, something valuable that can't easily be learned "experientially." But in the climate that currently exists on so many campuses, the student will likely be pushed toward taking the "real-life" option that has short-term, rather than long-term, benefits.

Around the country, numerous higher education institutions boast that all of their students have had at least one "experiential learning" experience, sometimes in the form of an extended internship. One of the current goals of the State University of New York System, for instance, is "to ensure that every SUNY student has the opportunity to take part in at least one applied learning experience before they graduate." Other institutions trumpet their experiential learning approach in their marketing materials as a distinctive, overarching characteristic that sets them apart. Drexel University highlights the "Drexel Difference" on its website, proclaiming, "Our interdisciplinary approach to applied education is part of what makes us stand out, in Philadelphia and around the world. At Drexel, we value experiential learning, which is a process through which our students develop knowledge, skills and values from direct experiences outside a traditional academic setting."

These experiences are, of course, valuable, but they should not be done at the expense of credits that could be devoted to learning difficult intellectual skills within a traditional academic setting. Many of the same programs that require or strongly recommend "engaged learning" also allow students to graduate who are unable to read or speak proficiently any language other than English, whose quantitative abilities don't allow them to understand even midlevel mathematical analysis, and who are not demonstrably able to write clearly and persuasively about complex topics.

Undergraduates are enrolled in our colleges for usually about 120 credits hours, and before we stress too emphatically the value of "real-life" engagement, we should have the intellectual commitment and confidence that we can offer students many things in our classrooms that are even more valuable than what can be learned on the job.

Almost all of us will eventually have to work for a living, and that will always require sustained "real-life, engaged learning." It will also call for immersion in interactions with average minds (like most of our own) working toward mundane ends. As educators, we should be proud that we give our students, while they are students, the opportunity to interact -- through their reading and writing, their laboratory work, and our instruction -- with what the best minds have discovered and developed within our various disciplines. This is something the "real world" is unlikely to offer them regularly once they leave college.

Oscar Wilde once said (contradicting Goethe) that it is much more difficult to think than to act. The most valuable thing we can teach students is the ability to think through, with patient focus, demanding intellectual challenges. Solving a difficult linear algebra problem, working to understand an intricate passage from Descartes, figuring out how, exactly, the findings of

evolutionary morphology explain the current human stride -- all these are examples of the sort of learning that we should be proud to provide our students. And not one of them features “real-life” engagement.