

Experiential Learning: The Future of the Liberal Arts

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Written by Dylan Matthews on September 20, 2017

We have all been there.

Midnight before an exam in the university library trying to memorize the key concepts of a semester's worth of work. We write the exam. We leave the room. The concepts leave our mind. The cycle continues: record, memorize, forget. In doing so, we lose something essential to education: critical thought. What happened to challenging assumptions and questioning concepts? What about open-ended questions? What about no-answer scenarios? These notions serve as the core of the Liberal Arts and, yet, most existing courses fail to develop these skills.

My name is Dylan Matthews and I am President of the Huron University College Students' Council at the University of Western Ontario. In June 2016, Huron University College established the [Centre for Undergraduate Research Learning](#) (CURL). One of only two of its kind in Ontario, CURL funds up to eight Student Research Fellowships annually and supports several other research projects proposed by Huron undergraduate students. CURL fellows are each provided grants of \$1500 with additional travel grants of up to \$1000. At the end of each grant term, students present their research findings at a tradeshow.

It is important to note that CURL fellows are not research assistants or interns. CURL is an independent student research grant and individual experiential learning is its prerogative. Each CURL student is paired up with a faculty mentor. The mentor, who has experience in conducting research studies, offers advice, consideration and insight into the student's CURL project. They do not lead it, though, as the student chooses the assumptions to challenge and the questions to explore.

Students must be active advocates for experiential learning opportunities, such as those provided by CURL. Research, for us, is not only about adding to the public discourse; it is about curating it. Simply reciting information back to a professor, be it in essay or test form, is no guarantee of critical thought. Finding and organizing information, understanding its complexities and making arguments: that is the skill the Liberal Arts need to teach. But this doesn't necessarily have to take the form of co-op work placements. Co-op opportunities are often portrayed as the gold standard of experiential learning, but research experience is equally significant when evaluated by employers.

So, why choose research experience over co-op? To answer this question, we must ask ourselves, what does the future of work look like? Students are expected to have multifaceted career paths over their lifetime. Teaching students how to do research – without letting them experience the opportunities and challenges that come with the pursuit of research – is akin to teaching someone to drive without a car. Students don't only need knowledge, but also the skills to mobilize that knowledge. This principle is at the core of CURL. Experience in research – that is, experience in data collection, critical thought, effective communication and presentation – enables students to be responsive to the evolving demands of the labour market. Creating more of these opportunities at the undergraduate level will make students adaptable to diverse career paths. As such, our universities should allocate more resources to undergraduate experiential programming that is modelled like CURL.

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