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APPLIED AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

How to Create Access to Experiential Learning Opportunities for Non-Traditional Students

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For many learners today, the debate about the value of higher education ultimately settles on how well a college degree successfully bridges the gap between education and employment. One surefire way to ensure learner success from the classroom to the workplace is to provide them with real-world work opportunities. Nothing elevates a job candidate from an *also-ran* to a *finalist* like meaningful work experience. In fact, many employers rank experiences such as co-ops, internships, and project-based learning over and above traditional performance indicators like academic major, GPA, and college reputation.

Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence that experience matters for today's learners, the question of how learners get real-world work experience remains difficult for many postsecondary institutions to answer.

Certainly, many learners gain work experience through co-operative education, internships and practicums, but these programs typically best fit traditional, full-time undergraduate students who have the freedom and financial leeway to engage in months-long co-ops or unpaid internships. However, non-traditional learners, who make up more than 70 percent of the US college population, are often unable to take advantage of these traditional programs. These learners must juggle the demands of school, work, family, and life while they complete their

degrees, so they have little opportunity to participate in high-threshold, time-consuming experiences like co-ops and internships. What these leaners need is a flexible and more accessible option for applying classroom skills in the workplace to gain the experience potential employers expect in entry-level job candidates.

At Northeastern University, we answered the question of how to provide non-traditional learners with work experience when we launched an ambitious and innovative approach to experiential learning called the Experiential Network (XN). This experiential learning approach allows learners to engage in short-term, all virtual, project-based opportunities, working with business sponsors to solve real workplace problems with real-world consequences. Real-world, project-based experiential learning allows participants to demonstrate in-demand skills, gain confidence, acquire resume credentials, and expand their potential employer networks—all while completing their degrees.

Since its inception in 2015, XN has grown from 50 learners across a handful of academic departments to serve more than 6000 learners across 90 academic programs at both the graduate and undergraduate level. XN was added to a wide array of existing experiential learning options at Northeastern University, referred to as the "experiential

difference" by the university's president, Joseph Aoun. We have seen first-hand how our learners, both international and domestic, gain confidence, expand their potential employer networks, and apply the skills they learned in the classroom on a contextual basis by completing real world challenges for actual workplace sponsors. Of course, Northeastern University's broad array of experiential opportunities is led by our hallmark co-operative education program, which offers workplace experiences to more than 11,000 learners each year. Many of these experiences help learners graduate into jobs with their former co-op employers.

XN is a scalable and sustainable model of experiential learning that very much mirrors the project-based workplace opportunities found in today's gig economy. Because of its virtual nature, XN is flexible, accessible, and adaptable to the needs of both the employer sponsors and the students.

Typically, XN projects are six weeks long, embedded in a credit-bearing course as a team-based or individual project with a workplace sponsor. XN project types include marketing research, white papers, data analytics, engineering solutions, data science, health science, regulatory affairs, and project management, among others. The XN team scopes all the projects with sponsors and faculty to ensure that the experiences align with academic outcomes and meet students' expectations for relevance and rigor, while providing a meaningful deliverable for the workplace sponsor. Students spend about five to six hours per week working virtually on a project with their sponsor for a total of 30 hours, all while they complete

their studies, work their jobs, or attend to their families. Further, XN is a low threshold alternative experiential opportunity for both students and sponsors because it requires a limited number of hours per week of engagement between the sponsors and students, relies on the same tools and resources used in the real world, and is completely virtual. Therefore, students apply their classroom learning with the same approaches, tools and skills they will use in the real world workplace once they graduate.

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Finally, because of its virtual nature, XN makes it possible to extend experiential learning across time and space to serve students all around the world, by connecting US-based businesses with international learners and domestic learners with international employers. XN is a low-cost, highly scalable approach for experiential learning whereby both the sponsor and the student can engage in meaningful project work without a huge investment of time, money, or management. It results in a workplace deliverable that sponsors appreciate and work experiences students need to demonstrate skills to future employers and curate their emerging professional identities.

While many vendors have sprung

up in the private sector with similar project-based approaches to fill the experiential learning gap for students seeking work experiences their former institutions were unable to offer, there is a difference between what has been developed at NU and what commercial enterprises provide. Typically, vendors provide one-time project experiences for students independently outside the classroom, or as stand-alone one-time classroom projects that aren't aligned with overall academic program outcomes. The NU approach is to thoughtfully and meaningfully embed XN projects within an academic program's curriculum at key points to help scaffold learning as activities and signature assignments, or as capstone projects to enable learners to demonstrate the skills they learned in the classroom. Learners apply their skills within the context of an academic experience, and these experiential opportunities become an integral part of the learner's degree.

At a time when most employers prefer to hire recent college graduates with tangible work experience, XN has emerged as a best fit opportunity for learners who want to fine-tune their growing skills in collaboration, communication, problem-solving and leadership skills on real-world projects as part of their academic experience. It has become a significant advantage for all learners in today's competitive job market.