

Connecting Learning to Life:
Evaluating Opportunities for Learning
Outside the Classroom
at UW—Green Bay

A Report Prepared by the Student Affairs Committee

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Introduction

Experiential, community-based learning has always been a defining dimension of the learning experience that UWGB aspires to offer. Founding Chancellor Weidner's early vision was of a "communiversity" in which a mutually beneficial relationship existed between the university and the community. In the formative years of the institution, there was a prominent curricular emphasis on "applied problem solving" and "problem-focused education," using the community as a classroom and a laboratory. More recently, the university's Guiding Principles challenged students to prepare themselves to become "engaged and contributing citizens" and challenged the University to cultivate campus-community partnerships to that end. Today, the overarching goal of our collective efforts is to "Connect learning to life." UWGB has proudly championed the primacy of experiential learning for more than three decades. We continue to do so by providing a diverse array of learning outside the classroom (LOC) opportunities for its students.

This year, the Student Affairs Committee undertook a systematic review and analysis of the variety of LOC opportunities available to students in an effort to answer three questions:

1. What LOC opportunities are available to students at UWGB?
2. Who participates in them?
3. With regard to LOC opportunities, what works, and what could be improved?

In its review, the committee identified and evaluated:

- The inventory of LOC opportunities available to students, and their *source*;
- The *channels* (e.g., faculty, staff, family members) who influence and facilitate (or inhibit) student participation in LOC;
- The ways in which students *find out about* and *access* these opportunities (or don't);
- The *participation rate* in the various forms in which LOC is experienced by students; and
- The *challenges* implicit in making LOC a central dimension of the learning experience for all students.

The Student Affairs Committee concluded that: (1) There is a diverse array of LOC opportunities available to students, and (2) there is vast unrealized potential for LOC to be an identifying

dimension of the learning experience for *all* students at UWGB. A summary of the committee's review and recommendations follows. The Student Affairs Committee encourages a larger dialogue to frame this issue in a larger institution discussion.

What is LOC?

The Student Affairs Committee defines “LOC” activities as opportunities for learning outside the classroom that may or may not link with specific classroom experiences or course-based learning outcomes. Included in this definition are such activities as service learning, student employment, internships, community service and volunteer work, independent study, honors projects, fieldwork, student teaching, student organization involvement/leadership, learning communities, performing arts, research with faculty members, and teaching assistantships. The figure in the Appendix visually depicts the relevant stakeholders and activities at UWGB identified by the Student Affairs Committee.

Principles for LOC at UWGB

After careful reflection on the state of LOC at UWGB, the Student Affairs Committee proposes the following principles with regard to learning outside the classroom opportunities.

1. LOC should be a central component of the campus' commitment to “Connect learning to life.” Students, faculty, staff, and community members should think of LOC when they hear about “connecting.”
2. *All* UWGB students should have the opportunity to have educational experiences that incorporate learning outside the classroom.
3. UWGB should offer structured opportunities for learning outside the classroom.
4. Information about LOC opportunities should be readily accessible to all students, faculty and staff. Individuals seeking information should be able to find needed information without having to “jump through” multiple hoops. Individuals wanting to share information should not have to “wander about” the campus, trying to determine the best way to promote their activity or opportunity. How to connect learners to learning opportunities and v.v. should be obvious to members of the campus community, including the regional community of which UWGB is a part. Access is key.
5. Learning outside the classroom is not limited to any one type of activity, but rather refers to a range of activities: formal and informal, for credit and not for credit, research-focused and service-focused.
6. Learning outside the classroom should be linked to learning inside the classroom (broadly defined) to maximize student engagement and learning. Links may range from the informal and unstructured, to the formal and structured.

7. Faculty and staff involvement in learning outside the classroom should be recognized and rewarded, in the same way that involvement in classroom-based teaching and learning is recognized and rewarded. If faculty and staff want students to be involved in LOC, they must be as well. Actions speak louder than words.

Expected Student Outcomes

While there is no single outcome of LOC for all students and all LOC activities, the following outcomes, taken individually or in combination, present compelling arguments for why LOC should be central to the student learning experience.

1. To help students become better citizens and proactive problem-solvers.
2. To link theory to practice by making the abstractions of classroom learning real for students.
3. To foster personal growth and development in students.
4. To provide professional practice and training for careers.
5. To contribute to the betterment of an increasingly diverse community (including both the campus community and especially beyond).
6. To increase student satisfaction and its consequent correlates: student retention, loyalty to the institution, expansion of active alumni and donor base, etc.
7. To enhance specific knowledge and skills (e.g., communication, teamwork).
8. To link service and research to the classroom.
9. To enhance and enrich classroom learning experiences.

Support for many of these outcomes is demonstrated by research on student engagement, such as that facilitated by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE is administered to first-year freshmen and seniors. As described by its authors, the survey is “designed to obtain ... information from scores of colleges and universities nationwide about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development” (<http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/facts.shtml>). Five areas are assessed, as suggested by theory and research on student success: (1) level of academic challenge; (2) active and collaborative learning; (3) student-faculty interaction; (4) enriching educational experiences; and (5) supportive campus environment. Together, these five areas comprise student engagement.

In looking at specific questions asked by the NSSE, a high percentage relate to student involvement in LOC activities. For example, students are asked to identify whether they have or plan to: (1) participate in a practicum, internships, field experience, or clinical assignment; (2) participate in community service or volunteer work; (3) participate in a learning community; (4) work on a research project with a faculty member outside of class or program requirements; (5)

participate in study abroad; and (6) take an independent study or create an individual major. That these questions are asked in the NSSE attests to the perceived importance of LOC opportunities to student success.

Research conducted on both national and UWGB samples supports the belief that student engagement is significantly and positively correlated with several desired outcomes of the college experience. Specifically, research at UWGB using NSSE data suggests a significant and positive correlation between student engagement and their acquisition of academic skills, and between student engagement and their knowledge of self and others. Importantly, the research conducted at UWGB goes beyond the NSSE data set and incorporates students' grades. Thus, when we say that student engagement is positively related to acquisition of academic skills, this finding holds true with respect to student perceptions – as measured by the NSSE, and “reality” – as measured by students' grades. In brief, students who are engaged in learning outside the classroom perform better in the classroom.

Support for the outcomes listed above is found also in results generated by UWGB's Graduating Senior Survey. Administered each semester to all graduating seniors, this survey asks students about their involvement in a variety of LOC activities (e.g., internships, independent study, study abroad). The survey also asks students to share their reactions to a number of outcome-based statements. Results for the past several years suggest significant and positive correlations between amount of student involvement in LOC activities and students' beliefs that: (1) learning is a lifelong process; and (2) their UWGB experiences have helped them to think creatively and innovatively. Further, students who are more involved in LOC activities also report: (1) more interaction with people from different backgrounds; (2) more involvement in community affairs; and (3) more opportunities to apply their classroom-based learning. Finally, students who are more involved in LOC activities report stronger positive feelings about UWGB and their overall educational experience. Thus, the students who benefit the most from LOC activities appear to be those who participate to a high degree in LOC activities. More is better.

Besides national and local research using student surveys like the NSSE and our own Graduating Senior Survey, researchers throughout the U.S. have studied students' involvement in a range of specific LOC activities such as: service learning (e.g., Rama et al., 2000), internships (e.g., Young & Baker, 2004), learning communities (e.g., McKibben, 2004; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), and study abroad (e.g., Ingraham, 2003). Strong associations between these LOC activities and the expected student outcomes listed on the previous page are generally found.

Importantly, the positive outcomes associated with LOC opportunities accrue to stakeholders other than students. Faculty, staff, and community members benefit as well. “Community-based research” is a particular form of LOC activity that involves the application of joint faculty and student research and learning interests to community-based issues. The intended result is “positive community transformation” (Peterson, 2004). At its best, community-based research represents a “Win-Win” for all affected parties. Students learn how to conduct problem-based research. Faculty members augment their research portfolio with work that is civically relevant (Peterson, 2004). Institutions receive expanded community support. Communities benefit from the research findings – especially when they are involved throughout the research process: from problem identification to data collection and analysis, and continuing with interpretation and

dissemination of results. Besides the direct benefits described here, everyone involved also gains from the opportunity to interact with and understand each other's needs, expectations, and priorities. Placed in the context of the larger community, LOC opportunities such as community-based research help students to be better, more engaged students now – and not just in the future.

Summary of LOC Findings and Observations

Having determined the activities that comprise LOC (e.g., internships, service learning), and having considered the research on the outcomes of LOC, the Student Affairs Committee decided to assess the state of LOC at UWGB. Specifically, each LOC activity was evaluated with respect to level of student participation, criteria for participation, funding, and apparent challenges. Individual reports on these various activities were prepared by members of the Student Affairs Committee (reports available on request).

In its review of LOC activities, the Student Affairs Committee found that:

- The Student Affairs Committee is not the first committee to review and make recommendations on LOC opportunities. A subcommittee of the Student Learning Experience (“Putting Learning to Work”) did an extensive review and offered recommendations for providing professional practice opportunities for all students (<http://www.uwgb.edu/sofas/campusReports/LEProject/index.htm>). In a May 30, 2000 report sent to the Chancellor, a Community Service Research Project conducted by students with “Serve to Learn” grant funds arrived at substantively similar conclusions.
- A FIPSE grant proposal submitted in Fall 2003 at the direction of the First Year Experience Planning Committee sought funding to pilot a service-learning seminar for first year students. Unfortunately, the proposal was unsuccessful.
- The number and breadth of LOC opportunities that currently exist for students at UWGB is substantial, and includes internships, field placements, student organizations, community-based research, student teaching, leadership training, and community service.
- There are gaps in students’ participation in these experiences: Many students appear unaware of these experiences (especially those that are not connected to specific classes or program requirements), and many do not avail themselves of these opportunities for a variety of reasons (e.g., existing workload, lack of familiarity with benefits).
- The campus has committed to participation in projects that have the potential to broaden LOC opportunities (notably, the Campus Compact and the American Democracy Project), but has not acted formally on these commitments. Obvious connections to the rest of the campus’ learning structure have not been created.
- The challenges to broadening LOC for all students are many, and include:
 - Improving access to information about LOC opportunities.
 - Expanding the total number of LOC opportunities available to students.

- o Clarifying expectations. Is LOC a tacit expectation on the part of faculty and staff, an explicit one, or not an expectation at all?
- o Creating and managing incentives: for students to participate or faculty and staff to organize and structure LOC activities.

Recommendations

Having evaluated the state of LOC activities at UWGB, and given the research on LOC outcomes, the Student Affairs Committee offers the following primary and supporting recommendations for connecting learning to life through LOC activities. Essential to the full articulation and implementation of these recommendations will be the engagement of UWGB faculty, staff, and students, along with members of the larger community.

1. Create a centralized clearinghouse of information about learning outside the classroom opportunities that would serve as the “hub” for learning outside the classroom at UWGB. A logical home for such a clearinghouse would be the Teaching and Learning Center proposed by the *Task Force on Teaching Evaluation* in fall 1998 (<http://www.uwgb.edu/assessment/repwww.htm>). Creation and support for such a Teaching and Learning Center has been actively advocated by the Faculty Development Council (a.k.a., the Instructional Development Council) since spring 1999. A physical location, with a human “director” (i.e., staff), would make visible the campus’ commitment to teaching and learning, regardless of whether it happens inside or outside the classroom. Some of the functions to be fulfilled by a Teaching and Learning Center would include:
 - a. Serving as a proactive liaison between on-campus stakeholders (i.e., faculty, staff, and students) and off-campus stakeholders (e.g., for-profit and non-profit organizations, government agencies) so that those seeking opportunities can readily find them, and those offering opportunities can easily promote them.
 - b. Developing a website to make information about learning outside the classroom opportunities accessible to all students, faculty, staff, and community members. Ensuring that the website is readily located within the larger campus website.
 - c. Actively seeking support for, and recognizing and rewarding, faculty and staff involvement in learning outside the classroom initiatives. Identifying relevant resources, both internal and external to the institution (e.g., grants) that may be used to stimulate and support learning outside the classroom opportunities.
 - d. Hosting a campus forum or series of forums to discuss ways to make learning outside the classroom a defining dimension of the UWGB learning experience.
2. Create a culture that supports learning outside the classroom as a fundamental activity of the institution. To this end, we should consider:
 - a. Making the development of learning outside the classroom experiences an explicit expectation of faculty and staff, and a central, defining element of their roles.

- b. Challenging units to identify examples of learning outside the classroom activities for faculty, staff, and students that will be supported and rewarded. Requesting that units evaluate and list existing learning outside the classroom opportunities for their students as part of their Self Studies.
 - c. Making learning outside the classroom an explicit learning outcome for students. Identifying and implementing formal means for recognizing a variety of LOC activities, in addition to such traditionally recognized activities as internships (which may be recognized on students' transcripts). The Academic Excellence Symposium is an example of one way to recognize students' LOC activities.
3. Continue to work toward incorporating learning outside the classroom into a structured freshman year seminar experience. It is notable that UWGB is among the 10 percent of colleges and universities nationwide that does not have a freshman seminar program. An unsuccessful FIPSE grant proposal submitted in Fall 2003 can be used as a starting point for developing such an initiative.

Conclusion

The Student Affairs Committee expects to continue serving in the role of advocate for LOC opportunities at UWGB. Such opportunities benefit our students, our faculty and staff, and the greater community in myriad ways. As members of the UWGB community, the committee asks the campus to recognize the importance of LOC opportunities, and to create appropriate and formally sanctioned coordinative mechanisms. In this way, we hope to ensure that all UWGB students develop a deep and personal understanding of what it means to “connect learning to life.” Specifically, the Student Affairs Committee asks the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs to initiate a dialogue on the issue of learning outside the classroom, its present and future at UWGB. While many individuals and groups are likely to have a stake in the conversation, we recommend especially the involvement of the Academic Affairs Planning Committee, the Instructional Development Council, and the Student Government Association. We look forward to an energizing exchange of ideas!

References

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Appendix

S T U D E N T

	Communication	Channels	Source	Opportunities
→	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Email ▪ Face-to-face ▪ Information events ▪ Mail ▪ Meetings ▪ Printed materials ▪ Programs ▪ Telephone ▪ Website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advisors ▪ Community members ▪ Courses ▪ Faculty ▪ Governance ▪ Other students ▪ Parents/family ▪ RA's ▪ Staff ▪ Student initiative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interdisciplinary Units: BUA, COA, EDUC, HUB, HUD, HUS, ICS, IST, NAS, NUR, PEA, SCD, SWK, URS ▪ Disciplinary Units ▪ Graduate Programs: ESP, MM, MSW, MALS ▪ Student Affairs: Admissions, Advising, AIC, ARC, Career Services, Counseling, ESS, Financial Aid, Health, Registrar, Residence Life, Student Life ▪ Athletics ▪ CIT / Library ▪ Union ▪ Weidner Center ▪ Outreach ▪ Advancement ▪ Business & Finance ▪ Centers: Center for Biodiversity, Institute for Learning Partnership, International Center, NEWIST, NEW Partnership, Space Grant, Sea Grant ▪ "Orphans" (American Democracy Project, Campus Compact, Phuture Phoenix) ▪ Other Auxiliaries: Bookstore, Shorewood golf course, parking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Athletics ▪ Community Service ▪ Employment ▪ Fieldwork / Student Teaching ▪ Honors Projects ▪ Independent Studies ▪ International Involvement / Study Abroad ▪ Internships ▪ Performing Arts ▪ Research ▪ Research / Teaching Assistantships ▪ Residential Learning Communities ▪ Service Learning ▪ Student Involvement / Leadership