

ABSTRACT

Assessing Student Learning Outcomes in an Interdisciplinary Experiential Course

Using survey data from students pursuing their undergraduate degree from an urban, public university, we develop a conceptual model and empirically examine the impact of interdisciplinary studies, participating in experiential learning, and the mitigating role of student demographics on student learning outcomes. While some existing theoretical literature cites the need for experiential learning and interdisciplinary studies in higher education, there needs to be more empirical research papers to support the claim. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first research paper that assesses the interaction effect of being enrolled in an interdisciplinary course and participating in experiential learning on student learning outcomes.

Experiential learning refers to learning through hands-on experiences, where students apply the theories learnt in the classroom to real-life situations using higher-order thinking (DiCecco et al, 2004; Krane, 2005; Gilbert et al, 2014). It leads to higher student engagement in coursework, enhances their problem-solving techniques, hones their ability to do critical thinking, and increases their likelihood of doing well in their studies in general (Cross, 1991; Kaufman and Klugar, 2009; Kolb, 2008; Saltmarsh and Zlotkowski, 2011; Kirkpatrick and Lucas, 2002; Sibthorp et al, 2011; Coker et al, 2017).

Interdisciplinary studies refer to studies between two or more fields of study and involve students working in an environment transcending disciplinary boundaries. It is believed to promote greater collaboration, cooperation, improved communication, critical thinking, and better preparedness to join the workforce (Colton et al, 2022; Looney, 2011; Wall and Shankar, 2008; Bastedo, 2002; Erickson and Strommer, 2001).

Factors that affect student learning outcomes in higher education have been identified as lacking knowledge in other disciplines (Fruchter and Emery, 1999) and working with an actual client (Coker et al., 2017). Other factors include effective team collaborations (Machemer and Crawford, 2007), student engagement (Kuh et al., 2008; Letterman and Dugan, 2004), motivation (Pintrich and DeGroot, 1990; Deci et al, 1999), study habits and strategies (Dunlosky et al, 2013; Kember and Kwan, 2000), feedback and assessment (Black and William, 1998), instructor-student interaction (Felder and Silverman, 1988), class size (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005), technology (Warschauer and Matuchniak, 2010), diversity (Gurin et al, 2002).

The proposed research will contribute to existing academic literature by adding new findings to support the vital role of interdisciplinary studies and experiential learning in achieving favorable student learning outcomes. In addition, it will provide empirical support for Universities to offer more interdisciplinary courses and experiential learning opportunities to students. There is considerable debate about whether higher education adds significant value to student learning,

enough to offset the increasing costs of pursuing higher education. As Universities look for new ways to provide that added value to attract new students, retain existing ones, and prepare students for future success through enhanced student engagement and higher graduation rates, the role of experiential learning via internships, research opportunities, and interdisciplinary studies assumes importance as potential contributors to student success (Malesic, 2023).

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