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Experiential Learning in Collegiate Academia: The Silicon Valley Immersion

A Thesis presented for the graduation from the
Lee Honors College, Western Michigan University

Kirsten Settle
December 2018

This work is in dedication to God, my parents, brother, mentors, friends and everyone else who have supported me in this journey of immersion.

There are not enough words to express my gratitude for the unconditional support I have received. I sincerely thank you for your love.

Experiential Learning in College Academia: The Silicon Valley Immersion

Kirsten Settle

Western Michigan University

Abstract

A thesis in an examination of experiential collegiate learning, specifically that are found within the vocational field of entrepreneurship and business management. This student-driven project's objective primarily is to recruit a dedicated team of diverse students from Western Michigan University (WMU) to engage in a systematic, site-based experiential learning in one of the world's biggest tech-metropolitans, San Francisco, California. The mission is to stimulate an experience-based approach to studying a business centered curriculum through field research with some of the country's most successful companies. Participants evaluated company culture in diverse business settings to comprehend professional prospects and project management best practices. Western Michigan alumni executives were contacted to inquire about the organization's interest in participation of hosting a group of WMU business students for a tour of the business, following a professional mentoring session as well as an alumni-student networking event. By doing so, students are given real-life insight on what hard and soft skills companies in the technology-business industry are seeking in a prospective employee, such as technical skills, behavior, communication, responsibility, social skills, professionalism, teamwork, and work ethic. Students will evaluate company culture in diverse business settings to recognize professional prospects and demonstrate learned qualities assuredly. Participants will be academically delving into the career pathways of Western Michigan alumni in technology and entrepreneurship, then assessed using a Likert scale to measure a pre-, and post-self-assessment on personal career readiness and overall project evaluation. The hypothesis was that if students are taught a curriculum centered around experiential learning in an active company setting, then they will be able to demonstrate learned qualities more assuredly than they would before the experience. Furthermore, students were able to apply to learn through reflection on doing for personal application and have a more comprehensive understanding of vital business lessons.

The students are recruited by word of mouth amongst peers, via student presentations during class lectures at WMU, and through electronic and hard copy marketing, such as posters around campus. After expressing interest in participation, each student was interviewed to discover they're in-depth academic, career, and personal goals and merits, as well as to determine their fit and viability as participants in this study. My honors thesis chair professor in the Haworth College of Business at WMU, Barclay Johnson, acted as a project mentor, guide, and chaperone. The participants were assessed on multiple fronts: career readiness, project satisfaction, project educational applicability, and program outcomes after the completion of travel.

Mémoire

Inspiration

As I sit on Pier 39 listening to the barks of hundreds of seals curled up next to each other on the floating docks, I am filled with gratitude. The sun is setting, and the sky is lit with the beauty of fading orange. The way the sunset's colors fill backs of the California hills, outlining in a way that highlights each beautiful distinct feature. I see the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance, its road of illuminating lights slowly begin to flicker on as the sun disappears into the horizon.

I have just completed ten interviews in three days. I packed up my bags and journeyed to the place I have always known I wanted to be in searching opportunity. I know it is out here, I just need my break. I am grateful to God for giving me the aspiration to travel, open-mindedness to accept the San Franciscan culture, and the courage to journey alone. Everybody says they want to do big things, move to their dream city, and make a lot of money at a job they love. I do not want to be a person that just talks about dreams. I strive, and plan, to make my dreams reality.

I walked past the building where I first attended the Lean Startup Conference with what was the WMU E-Team, in October 2016. Two years later, I now realize how revolutionary that involvement was to my life. That is where I got my first exposure to the most intelligent people in the world, all with the desire to change the world for the better. They talked to me as if I was their equal when I knew that I had not yet achieved the level of success these people have made for themselves.

A Thank You to my Mentors

To my mentors; thank you for everything you have done for me. Whether you are a passenger that I shared a Lyft ride with, or a professor deeply invested in my success, there are truly no words to express my level of gratitude for all that you have done for me. I am inspired by the culture I have been immersed in. "How can I be of help to you" is the theme that I experience nothing short of all the time here in the Bay Area. I am inspired by the acceptance of diversity, culture, opinion, and background that is promoted constantly as a concrete value to the community. I am grateful every day to my encouragers at home that has sacrificed a lot to be able to give me the opportunities that I have. The support and sacrifice that I have received unconditionally are beyond what I could have created for myself. I vow to those who will be in my shoes in the future, I will take a chance on you because so many people have taken chances on me.

The 4th Journey

As of November 8, 2018, I have successfully completed four San Francisco immersions, one as a participant, two as a leader, and one on my own accord fulfilling personal agenda. In four days I completed a total of thirteen in-person interviews, informal meetings over coffee, and phone interviews. I am swamped but proud, and I know it is because of my experience with the TechNext team. Not many people have the ambition to pack their bags and head to San

Francisco on a career seeking mission. I laugh at myself because I realize, I have done something extraordinary, something I should share with the rest of my peers, for when it is their time to lay the foundation for their professional path, too.

I used to always think I was different, in a bad way. Being a member of the Lee Honors College was one of the best parts about my experience at Western Michigan University, not only because I was challenged, but because I was surrounded by intelligent, driven people. I believe you are a direct product of your environment and the people you surround yourself with. So, I choose to be surrounded by the brightest of people. I was provided that being an honors student, and it helped continuously spark my drive, and is the exact reason I am relocating to San Francisco post-graduation.

Wednesdays with Barclay

On Wednesday, Barclay inspires me to be like Da Vinci. A vital lesson is preached that it is okay to be smart and different and do things that are out of the ordinary. Consider carrying around a notebook everywhere you go, your mind might be overwhelmed by vibrant thoughts and ideas.

Experiential Learning

Experiential Education

The Faculty Innovation Center at The University of Texas at Austin defines experiential learning as “any learning that supports students in applying their knowledge and conceptual understanding to real-world problems or situations where the instructor directs and facilitates the learning” (Gollwitzer, Mack & Mack, 2017, p. 6). In very simple terms, experiential learning is a meaningful discovery. Occurring when learners uncover knowledge on their own, this culture of education is a timeless and ubiquitous psychological process where learning takes place from experience by a process that can be conducted almost anywhere and via almost any type of activity or learning medium.

Experiential education, according to the Association for Experiential Education, is “a philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities” (Kurka, 2012, p. 9). Experiential education is an intentional educational process that relies on experiential learning theory, common to these models is the idea that experiential learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience through reflection (Itin, 1999, p. 91). The theory focuses on the experience of the individual that is then reflected upon critically for learning to occur. Common features of experiential education include individual development, student-centered teaching, individual challenge and learning, and reflection/processing activities.

History

Experiential learning, as a named phenomenon and concept, began in 1946 as a form of social practice influenced by Kurt Lewin's action research agenda applied to problems of

intergroup conflict. “The experiential learning movement of the mid-nineteenth century represented an attempt in the United States to shift from formal, abstract education, where teachers present information and hope that students will later apply the knowledge, to more experience-based approaches” (Lewis & Williams, p. 6).

Research Pioneers

The first models of experiential learning rose in the mid-nineteenth century as efforts to change its formal trajectory toward an immersive method of instruction from teachers merely presenting students with abstract concepts. Students would “learn by doing”, applying knowledge to experience to develop skills or new ways of thinking” (Lewis & Williams, 1994, p. 6). “Four educational philosophers were involved in identifying the four pillars of experiential learning in adult education: John Dewey, Seaman Knapp, Rufus Stimson, and William Lancelot. These pioneers founded the four pillars of experiential learning: learning in real-life contexts, learning by doing, learning through projects, and learning by solving problems (Knobloch, 2003a)” (Steiner, 2004).

These provisions of experiential learning have been common within the realm of informal adult education but also have opportunities for growth and development within formal education. One of the major assumptions about adult education is that it is the resource of the highest value in adult education is the learner's experience (Lindeman, 1926). The importance of past experiences and their impacts on learning have been researched and documented, leading to a continuous need in support of experiential learning to define the process in which a student has a valuable, novel experience, reflects on that experience, and draws concepts which can be applied to their future (Steiner, 2004).

Dewey

John Dewey, a pioneer in the idea of learning through experience, proposed that the knowledge and skills that a person learns in a situation can help them understand and react to subsequent experiences. He postulated that all genuine education comes from experience and stressed that the creation of new knowledge or the transformation of oneself through learning, to perform new roles, was more fundamental than simply learning how to do it (Dewey, 1938).

Kolb

David Kolb's *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* is one of the more influential works linking theory to actual practice. Kolb proposed learning as the progression where comprehension is created through the alteration of experience. In his model, learners first have concrete experience. After they reflect on the experiences from a variety of perspectives, and from these reflective observations, they thirdly engage in abstract conceptualization. Lastly, they use these to create generalizations or principles that integrate their observations into theories and can act as a guide in solving complex situations (Kolb, 1984).

Experiential Learning in Academia

Our society has moved away from the behaviorist philosophies that teachers are sources of knowledge and students are the passive receivers. Educators are being held accountable for what learners know and can do, but in experiential learning, the student is able to manage their own learning, rather than being told what to. The relationship between student and instructor is different, with the instructor passing much of the accountability on to the student. Experiential learning can be thought of as the channel through which various educational practices are implemented. The context of learning is different, for example, by way of learning not taking place in the classroom. Finally, the curriculum itself may not be clearly identified, the student may have to identify the knowledge they require and then acquire it themselves, reflecting on their learning as they go along (Moon, 2004, p. 165).

From the university's point of view, experiential learning can help institutions stay relevant to students by providing them with the necessary skills to transition into the workforce. For institutions concerned with issues of inclusion, experiential learning can promote "the value of diversity that brings together people of different social, ethnic, and economic classes," preparing students for entry into the world at large (Cantor, 1995, p. 79). Because students must take control of their own learning, the instructor must work to both relinquish their authoritarian influence and become, instead, "an integral member of the evolving group" (Warren, 1995, p. 251).

Relevance to the Future

Experiential approaches appear to be more effective in developing skills that employers seek, such as communication skills, the ability to work in teams, and workplace literacy. "In today's rapidly changing environment, there is an increased demand for flexibility and the capacity to leverage previous knowledge and experience in new and different ways" (Lewis & Williams, p. 5). Today, education no longer prepares students to work in factories, but for focused vocations. Although some factory jobs still exist, academia's primary aim is to prepare graduates to work in fields which cannot be automated, and which must have some sort of human element.

Business students are no longer competing against their human peers, but an ever-improving convoy of AI that may eventually immerse the whole industry. The Executive Office of President Obama wrote an extensive report on AI and the Economy in 2016, which predicted many of the economic challenges faced when dealing with machine intelligence. "Today, it may be challenging to predict exactly which jobs will be most immediately affected by AI-driven automation. Because AI is not a single technology, but rather a collection of technologies that are applied to specific tasks, the effects of AI will be felt unevenly throughout the economy" (Furman, 2018, p. 19). As AI evolves in the succeeding future, students decide how the transition from information to information technology will affect the economy.

One of the single most important personal connections a person can make with others is having gone to their hometown or mutual places they have traveled. Having the ability to share a change in cultural perspective is unique to only those that have been lucky enough to live in the highlight of another society. This experience is profound and recognized as special among people.

Experiential Travel Programs

Throughout time, travel has been educational, yet there is a belief among many that education happens primarily in the classroom. Although learning can occur in many contexts, traveling directly broadens the mind and allows people to learn from and interpret the experiences (Stone & Petrick, 2013, p. 11). “A significant aspect of Kolb’s model is a reflection, a necessity for experiential learning. The concrete experience of travel and discovery provides an avenue where the traveler can reflect on the experience, thus creating learning” (Mouton, 2002, p. 36).

Best Practices & Current Assessment Methods

“A significant strength of experiential education is its ability for a learning process to be student-centered and to allow space for individual student experience, interpretation, and learning” (Kurka, 2012, p. 4). Although different than traditional academic assessment, methods of measuring the objective value of experiential learning can include various self-awareness tools and exercises, such as questionnaires about learning patterns and self-reflection on personal behavior or performed tasks.

Experiential learning is best practice, for it prepares students to enter the workforce post-graduation and excel at their jobs more effectively than a traditional classroom. Rebecca Carver proposed a framework in 1996 that articulated how experiential education promotes the development of student agency, belonging, and competence by utilizing the four pedagogical principles of experiential education: authenticity, active learning, drawing on student experience, providing mechanisms for connecting experience to future opportunity (Carver, 152). The end goal of college is to secure a job and positively contribute to society using the skills you developed in your academic studies.

Attending a multitude of conferences gave me the confidence and practice to network with peers and alumni to make projects with a mission for experiential learning realities. Current assessment methods for experiential learning found to be consistent with using a Likert-scale to measure pre and post-self-reflections for participants. This study also paralleled the commonly implemented practice of survey by Likert-scale.

Existing Problems

Professional educators are just beginning to understand the importance of experiential learning and its relationship to collegiate students. The National Society for Experiential Education Research Collaborative states that while there is an increasing number of researchers who are investigating various important issues in experiential education, its research continues to remain at the periphery of most institutions. At some organizations, scientists are even dejected from investigating issues in experiential education. As explained in “Experiential Learning and its Place in a Quality Business Education,” higher education administrators who attempt to integrate experiential learning in their curriculum often struggle with a congruency factor, for it can be seemingly difficult to making policy revisions on a university-wide level that would allow for experiential education to be more attainable for a greater number of students. Having immersive experiences while taking a full class load introduces many conflicts such as obtaining hosting sites, acquiring a significant amount of space required for lodging and activities, or the lack of ability to miss time in traditional coursework. Additionally, despite decades of research investigations in this field, relatively little experiential education research is well-supported

financially and is one of the deterring factors for a student considering an experiential learning experience (Gollwitzer, Mack, & Mack, 2017, p. 16).

WMU TechNext

TechNext is an experiential, student-driven learning team from Western Michigan University that focuses its curriculum on Silicon Valley immersion specifically in the industry of technology, where students will be able to learn hands-on about specific management styles and how technology integration has worked and failed in today's leading companies on the West Coast. The team consists of a multi-disciplinary group of WMU students that desire a quest for openness in ideas and experiences, and opportunity for critical thinking outside the realms of traditional academia. This team gives students the opportunity to learn about the potential, successes, and failures of technology along with a personal experience of WMU alumni from the alumni themselves.

The mission of TechNext is to bring together a diverse group of WMU students that aspire for openness in ideas and experiences, critical thinking, and be willing to engage in experimentation that encourages positive failure equally with success. Our faculty leader and mentor, Professor Barclay Johnson, strives to give students the opportunity to learn. TechNext has evolved from what was formerly known as the E-Team, and prior to that the Lean Methodology Team.

Participants

It is the TechNext motto that extroversion is not a required trait to be a member. Each team is split between extroverts, ambiverts, and introverts that bring a special "mental process" and not all correlate with traditional academic GPA. That said, even without a consideration for GPA, some of the finest academically astute students at WMU have chosen to participate in a role on the experiential learning team. In 2018, the team includes three students using their team members to strengthen their Honors College Thesis research.

Becoming a member of the TechNext team does not involve an intricate application process instead, the team simply seeks out and recruits interesting perspectives. The entry does not discriminate based on gender, socioeconomic status, race, religion, culture, or sexual preference. The purpose of this experiential learning is to allow students to create an opportunity for themselves by giving them a new perspective on a way of life they might not otherwise be able to attain. Senior Alexis Lenderman recalls,

“For someone like myself, the opportunity to study abroad and participate in experiential learning activities allowed me to discover new and different capabilities that I would've never known because most of my life was focused on surviving. During my time at WMU, my paradigm began to change, I began to thrive because of the network that the university provided and the culture of: “What can I do for You?” After being encouraged to pursue big and bold dreams, I am now pursuing a dual degree in Entrepreneurship and Global & International Studies with minors in Nonprofit Leadership and Political Science. There is a strong direct value in having business students gain different cultural experience, empathy for other beliefs, and working in

dynamic environments. We have received overwhelming support from Western Michigan for this endeavor, but more specifically the Haworth College of Business, for they recognize the impact experiential learning has at its core, a complete benefit to the students. Experiential learning programs like this are critical for developing life-long learners and students are yearning for opportunities like this every day because it pushes the status quo of what a higher education institution is and should offer to its students” (A. Lenderman, personal communication, October 17, 2018).

Curriculum

Underlying each mission, the team undertakes are rigorous academic current standards that are taught or experienced generally out of the classroom with a curriculum based on the future. The average team member devotes about twice the amount of time to these classes than a non-participating student in traditional lectures. The objective learning aspects the students will gain are centered around building interpersonal relationships with industry successful university alumni, who are willing to invest their time and provide mentorship. Students also will gain hands-on practice as to how specific management styles and technology integration have worked and failed in today’s leading companies on the West Coast.

George Hoyem, the head WMU alumni partner for the project, tapped into his connections at major startups and companies in San Francisco and packed the agenda with a full schedule of visits and meetups (See Appendix A). Some of the companies include Primer AI, Mesosphere, Silicon Valley Bank, In-Q-Tel, MapBox, and Omni Sci.

Each member of the TechNext team was delegated a variety of assignments and projects to complete before the arrival in Silicon Valley. Every member was assigned a specific company to do thorough research debrief on. Information such as employees, company history, its mission and values, and what they are currently working on was thoroughly delved, memorized, presented to participants and faculty. Along with this, alumni attendees for the engagement dinner were also studied and remembered by all associates.

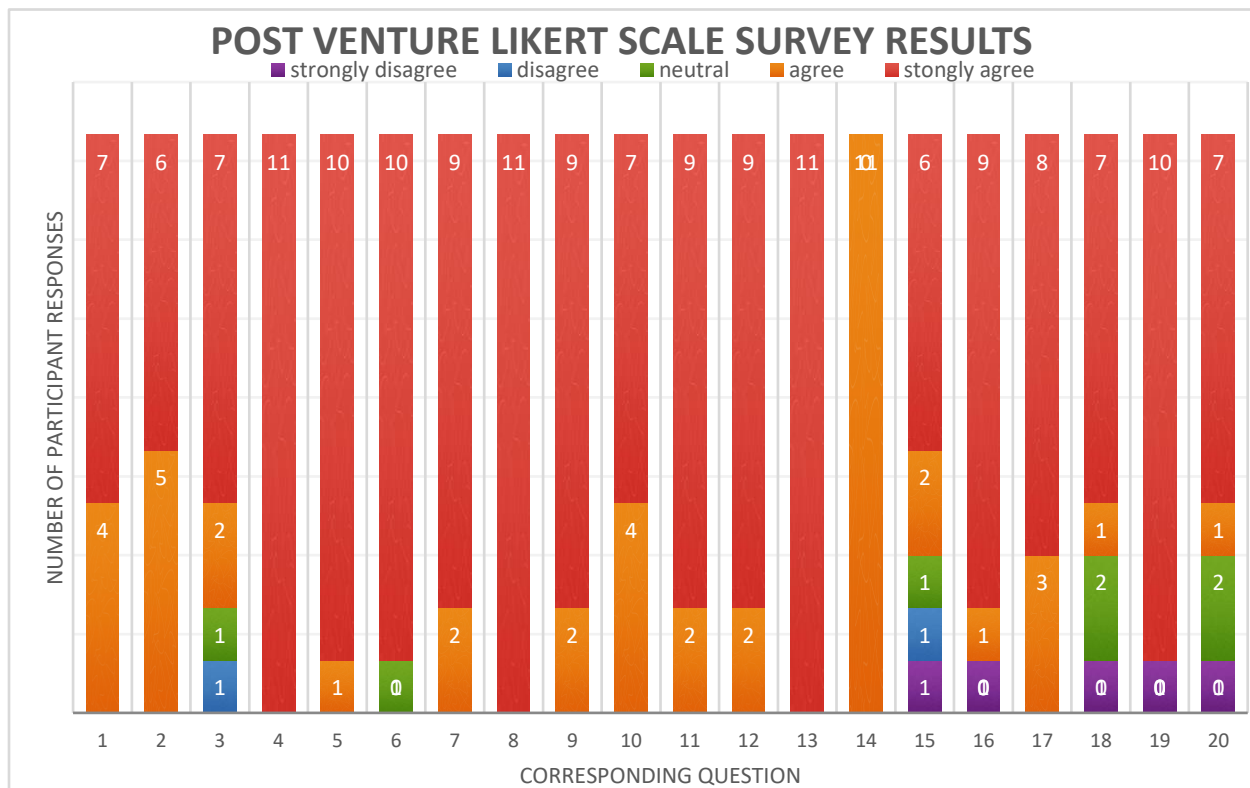
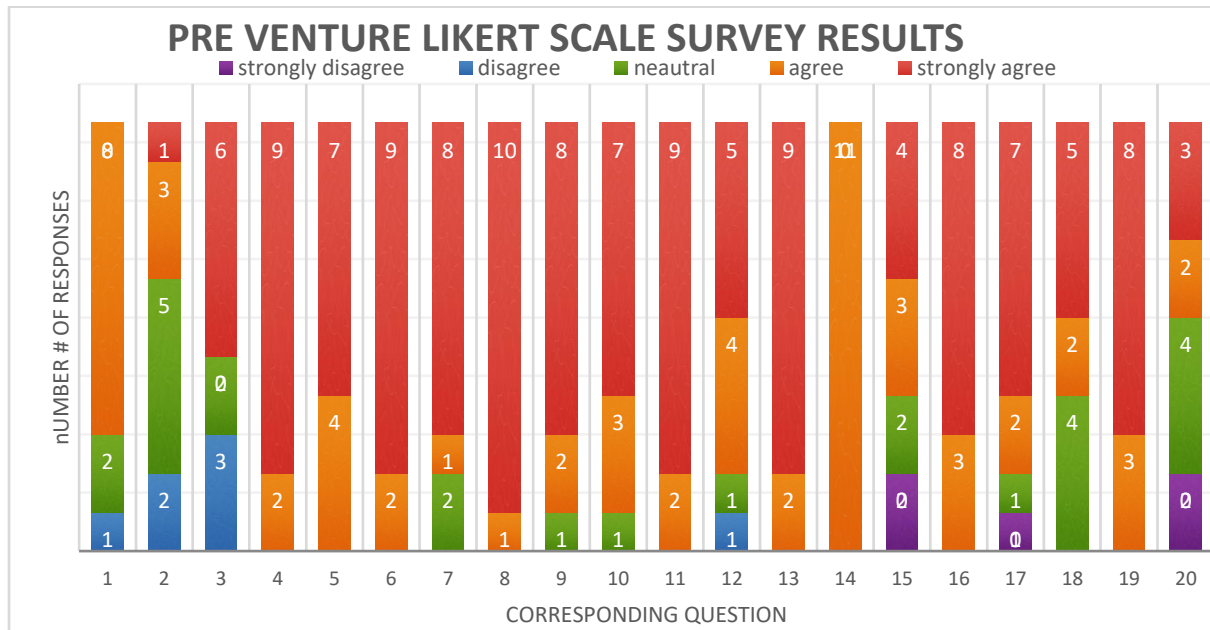
First Annual WMU Alumni & Student Engagement Event

With the partnership of the Haworth College of Business administration, especially Dean Satish Desphande, Professor and Chair of the Department of Management Robert Landeros, George Hoyem, and the generous participation of inspirational Western Michigan University alumni, the TechNext team was able to successfully coordinate the first annual WMU Alumni-Student Engagement Event, hosted in San Francisco. Strictly with a mission to engage in conversation and mentorship, the team members were able to engulf themselves in wisdom and experience that generous alumni donated as tokens of insight and as an investment into the minds of the future. This first yearly WMU Alumni and TechNext student engagement event was hosted at the Interval at Long Now in San Francisco, October 17, 2018 (See Appendix B). This arrangement was an opportunity for conversation for the students to gain the advice and mentorship from the attending Western alumni. No solicitation of donations took place, for the event was singularly fixated on the council from those that were experienced.

Invitations were sent out via LinkedIn message (See Appendix C). A spreadsheet was created and constantly updated on RSVP responses. Once an alumni guest confirmed plans to attend, a specific team member was assigned to gain as much knowledge on them as possible and send a personalized message over LinkedIn or email thanking them for their willingness to participate and expressing our team’s eagerness to meet them.

Pre-& Post Venture Likert Scale Survey

A survey using a 5-point Likert scale was administered during an in-class time, a week before the immersion and the post-survey was administered during the class time following the immersion experience.



Results

Analysis of the assessment results indicates a relationship between student confidence in self-evaluation and experiential learning. Out of twenty questions, 80% of the prompt responses revealed an increase in growth.

The responses for the pre-experience survey scaled at a relatively high standard, but this can be expected, due to the high-achieving student population participating in the study. Prompt #2 that states, “I can explain technical concepts to other students” increased six-fold in response for “strongly agree” compared to the pre-experience survey results. Along with that, prompt #12, “I am confident with my ability to do sufficient research when I am entering a new market” almost doubled in response rate for “strongly agree,” as well as question #20, “I have plans to relocate to a state I’ve never lived in after graduation,” which increased by more than double.

These three significant questions clearly support the benefits of experiential learning. Before the immersion, students had relatively low self-confidence explaining technical concepts that are a part of the general entrepreneurship and management business curriculum. Post experience, they reflect and grow exponentially in their evaluative capacity for understanding procedural ideas. Being a participant in the TechNext team gave students practice in completing field research during the preparation aspect of the curriculum and the assignments regarding formatting company and event attendee debriefs. This can explain the double increase of “strongly agree” responses for that corresponding aspect of the survey. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, is the response rate more than doubled in agreement with “strongly disagree” for question #20, “I have plans to relocate to a state I’ve never lived in after graduation.” A significant number of participants in this experiential learning curriculum have never traveled anywhere outside of the Midwest. Getting young, malleable minds exposed to the way others’ lives in different parts of the country inspires vision to extend beyond the limits of their comfortable home regions.

Remarks from the First Annual WMU Alumni-TechNext Student Engagement

I was asked to be a keynote speaker at the First Annual WMU Alumni-TechNext Student Engagement event, as I was graduating senior leading my fifth TechNext Immersion. “Thank you, Dean Deshpande. My name is Kirsten Settle and I am honored to be the student coordinator for my fifth and final TechNext Team adventure. On behalf of the student group, participating faculty, and the Haworth College of Business, I genuinely thank you all for your dedication of time, energy and resources that you have contributed to our mission. You are helping us to stimulate an experience-based approach to studying a business centered curriculum through field research of the country’s most successful tech companies and with affluent Western Michigan University Alumni executives. Without your efforts to make this exemplary vision of experiential academia a reality for these students, including myself, this event nor the endeavor to San Francisco at all would be possible, so I sincerely thank you again.

Being a partner in this project alongside George Hoyem has been the most vital part in the quality of my collegiate education. I have received incomparable hands-on familiarity with what a traditional lecture room could ever provide for me and my fellow student colleagues. The opportunity to indulge ourselves in the Silicon Valley culture has presented a whole new world we didn’t even know existed. Every time I travel somewhere around the world with the team, I realize more and more that there is simply more to life than the Midwest. This has inspired my post-graduation goal of permanently relocating to San Francisco to begin my career and life after

college and has also allowed me to find my passion in helping other students have their own type of greater life recognitions that comes with exploring a new way of living.

Western Michigan University has guided the evolution of my thoughts to this awareness and for that, I am eternally grateful to be a Bronco. Western Michigan is uniquely dedicated to student success in a way that exceeds many, even more, prestigious schools. The faculty is individually invested in the future of the ones they are guiding, developing and preparing students for the challenges their versed field of study will behold. Without the support of this type of faculty, such as my honors thesis chair, mentor, and TechNext OG Team Leader Barclay Johnson, students like us would never get the opportunity to expand our minds and explore the world of tech outside of what Michigan can offer us. Successful alumni such as yourselves play such a key role in this experience. We need your continuous support and mentorship, it is crucial to the support of our studies.

I am truly overwhelmed with gratitude to be a part of the 13 out of 25,000+ students at WMU who have the privilege to attend such an event. I am honored to work alongside the most brilliant, creative, unique, and hardworking group of scholars that is the TechNext team. I am constantly inspired by their ability to combine precision problem-solving skills and teamwork to accomplish the organization's goals to successfully complete the Silicon Valley endeavor mission.

Being a leader in the project's operations has helped direct empirical learning that parallels my motivation behind my honors college thesis research in experiential learning for collegiate with a curriculum focused on technology management and entrepreneurship. I want to be a part of the revolution that changes the way our students of today are receiving a higher education. If we wish to promote growth within the minds of our students, why aren't we matching that with the way they're learning. To quote Common in Microsoft's 2018 AI Commercial, "Technology is possibility, adaptability, capability, but in the end, it's only a tool. It's not about what technology can do, it's about what you can do with it. We are living in the future we have always dreamed of. AI is empowering us to change the world we see. The world around is evolving, so why hasn't our general view of how learning happens grown with it? We must push to progress our learning, in the way AI has advanced our world. For future generations to continue the intellectual foundation of understanding our world's continuously evolving technology, education must be equally as innovative, and the TechNext Team is leading the way for doing such a thing with experiential learning" (K. Settle, Personal Communication, 17 October 2018).

Alumni Testimonials

The most profound way to document the true essence of the mission of the TechNext team is by student-alumni testimonials. 2018 Haworth College of Business graduate Devin Merz, Entrepreneurship and Event Management major, recaps her two experiences with the team and San Francisco 2017 in an interview.

"The experience and opportunities throughout the trip went exceptionally well. It was easy to get along with my peers and engage with them in the exploration of these new industries we were discovering. We learned what these companies do to succeed and took ways to apply those concepts to our own lives and aspirations. Not only did we get to immerse ourselves into a new city and area, but we also got to engage with real start-ups and corporate companies, which compared two different ends of the business

spectrum and how they each became successful. We saw company culture, the atmosphere and the way they operate and run things individually at the companies. Even though some of the companies or employees we engaged with at the companies were sometimes seemingly underprepared, the knowledge and lessons we walked away with were applicable and real-life. I absorbed how to utilize what I learned, and I even began to open and ask more questions as the trip progressed and I became more comfortable in the atmosphere I was in. My involvement in this experiential learning program has allowed me to continually reflect and review the progress I make as I implement these life lessons into my life, which help me to continue to strive towards fostering my knowledge” (D. Merz, Personal Communication, 14 September 2018).

Business Management major and former Western Michigan University Women’s Varsity Soccer Captain Olivia Volmers also gave powerful insight on her experience with the TechNext, known as E-Team at the time of her participation. She participated in two experiential learning trips with the team, Silicon Valley Immersion 2016 and the London Excursion of 2017;

“I was able to explore different cities around the world while learning about entrepreneurship and business management and speaking with entrepreneurs and business owners and taking note of what habits they have and what worked best for them while they were creating their startup. It was nice being so trusted by Barclay, as he allowed us to find our own way and participate in as much as we wanted. It was entirely up to us how much we got out of the trip, and I feel that encouraged us, even more, to participate in as much as possible. I observed the way my classmates interacted when they were in a new environment, and how some flourished in all the freedom, while others lost sight of why they were there. I felt that I grew during each trip I took. I like to think that I took full advantage of everything provided to me and was able to see and do as much as possible in the time we had. I also feel that I became more responsible in my actions and was able to make the right decisions with the amount of freedom I was given. My decision was made to participate from the enthusiasm given by Barclay and the rest of my classmates. I am always ready to try new things and go places I haven’t before, but if it wasn’t for the support and enthusiasm given by Barclay and the rest of the class, it would not have been as easy of a decision. I was trying to achieve a higher understanding of the way different people thought and how they lived. By going to San Francisco and London, I was able to observe people in their daily lives and work environments and compare it to the way I live my life. I achieved a greater understanding of more than the world that is immediately around me and appreciate how different people do things in business practices. It is important to me to know that there are so many people with the same fears and doubts about starting a business that I have, and by talking to everyone that I did on these trips, and being immersed in their culture, I know that anything is possible because everyone had to start from nothing at some point. If you are passionate, driven, and have a creative idea that you love, you can accomplish almost anything you put your mind to. I am currently trying to start my own startup, and it is reassuring to know that there are millions of people out there doing exactly what I am doing and trying to start up something they are passionate about. Not giving up is the key” (O. Volmers, Personal Communication, 18 September 2018).

Former Varsity Captain for Women's Track and Field, Sarita Dotson participated in a Silicon Valley Immersion in the fall of 2017 during her undergraduate coursework seeking a Bachelor of Business Administration.

“In my experiences, it has always been a controversial topic of whether or not effective learning can be conducted outside of four walls. When I went to San Francisco we were given the opportunity to ask successful individuals how their journey brought them to where they are now. This allowed me to expand my perspective of what “success” is. What I learned in a week in San Francisco is far more valuable than what I took from textbooks during my 4 years of college. During the trip, I observed a hunger for the next “big thing” in individuals. Technology has no limit in San Francisco. There is an atmosphere that drives people to be resourceful, proactive and innovative. The trip had an impact on my behavior. I wanted to adapt and be different, be motivated, wise, intuitive, inspirational. My decision to participate in my role was made because I have a vision and plan, and if I were to do this activity again I would do a better job of preparing and studying each company by rationalizing what I could bring to each company and explain how I could be an adequate recourse. What’s important to me about the experience is that it allowed me to apply knowledge. It tested my ability to be a problem solver, a risk taker, a thinker. I was able to see how well I could interact and merge in professional settings with individuals who had different majors. The alumni and other company executives we met during our trip were able to influence the group so well because they were able to elaborate on what it might take for us to one day be in their shoes. They were influential because they too went to WMU and are now pillars in their careers. The benefits of applying this learning to my life are endless, and because of this trip I was inspired and encouraged to start my own business. Every new experience might not go my way, but regardless, every new experience will have a positive impact on my success. Life is all about perspective and this trip taught me to look in the opportunity of every ‘no’ and take full advantage of every ‘yes’” (S. Dotson, Personal Communication, 18 September 2018).

TechNext 2018 Member Testimonials

Experiential learning is a powerful mechanism that stimulates academic motivation, increases self-awareness, and holism of values that is extremely beneficial to collegiate. Academia tends to focus on being fantastic only during the four or so years it takes students to complete an undergraduate degree but lacks in providing quality preparation for post-graduation. Although there are many events hosted on campuses such as career fairs, industry days, and even interview practices, they are all inevitably limited to the resources near the university. Giving students the opportunity to go out and experience the world gives them the confidence to consider a whole new outlook on what their post-college prospects can be.

Maisie Blaukamp, a brand-new member to the TechNext 2018 team stated in a blog she drafted about the cultural endeavor to San Francisco;

“Amid being out of my element, I learned how to efficiently adapt to different situations and make a name for myself while doing it. I learned that people want to know my thoughts and value my opinions, and I saw more potential in myself that I have ever

before. I used to let discomfort shut me down, but while on this trip, I learned how to make discomfort wake me up and push me even harder. This class and this trip have the strength to benefit any and every student at the University. No matter what the student's major is, every person can learn and grow from getting outside of their comfort zone and seeing who they are when they aren't in their ordinary day-to-day lives. Seeing yourself in a different light can change your whole mentality. I am more motivated, more self-determined, and more excited for my future. I could not be more grateful for TechNext and for learning that being uncomfortable is truly a blessing in disguise" (M. Blaukamp, Personal Communication, 12 November 2018).

Maggie Blaukamp, sister of Maisie and a new member to the 2018 TechNext team, describes the San Francisco immersion as the following:

"The best way to learn about something is first hand. In the case of this trip, we learned about entrepreneurship, startups, business, and technology by going to the center of their innovation. This class allowed us to see the cutting-edge technology we learn about in class first hand and in use. An additional advantage is we get to learn how it is currently developing, something a textbook cannot teach. We also got to talk to people who have worked their way up through many different positions. These people are successful businessmen and women who have excellent advice. Listening to their insight and being able to freely ask questions as a team was an impactful way to learn. This experience broadened my view of the world and showed me that life is different outside of the Midwest. San Francisco is a place that is changing the world. Being taught right in the middle of that is intangible. Our hosts gave us real information and let us in on the good, the bad, and the ugly involved in entrepreneurship. Many of our hosts talked in some way about how they had failed at some point in their entrepreneurship history but how that failure contributed to where they are now. We learned about the stages of startups, the exiting parts and the hard and were given tips about how to get through them all successfully. I also learned that innovation is constant. There are new possibilities in technology every day, seeing this first hand changed my ideas about innovation and technology companies. I had a basic conception that these big data companies were boring offices filled with coders typing away frantically on their screens, never communicating. It was amazing to see the reality of how intricate technology companies are and how many different people and positions are involved in producing products in this industry. It makes me excited to start working in it" (M. Blaukamp, Personal Communication, 14 November 2018).

The impact of this higher-level technology and innovation curriculum does not discriminate in benefit to students based on their major of study. The lessons gained for each student are unique but equally impactful and dire to the trajectory of their futures.

"If a student is interested in technology, how the world is developing and changing, how businesses run, and is willing to work extremely hard I would suggest they do everything they can to become a part of this team. The selection process is tough, and the workload is nothing light, but the payoff is so great. Learning this way is impactful. Also, everyone who goes on these trips takes something different away. Along with important curriculum, experiential learning allows you to learn what you need to learn for yourself and your personal growth," affirms Maggie Blaukamp.

Participating in the TechNext team's program also benefits students socially, for strong bonds and interpersonal relationships are made between the members. Freshman Megan Gesler writes, "My expectations were exceeded, not only academically but even through the friendships I made with the other students on the trip. We supported and rooted for each other the whole time, it was really empowering." Colleague, Brennan Wieber, a graduating senior, expresses "I wish I would have gotten involved with the TechNext team earlier."

Conclusion

Based off the results of the statistical data and personal testimonies gathered, it can be concluded that there is a strong correlation between a rate of self-reflection considering personal strengths and future goals and opportunity to partake in an experiential learning curriculum.

I claim with confidence that being the lead student coordinator for the TechNext team for the last five semesters of my undergraduate career shaped my future and laid the foundation for the steps necessary for my professional success. Because of the influence the startup culture had on me, my future post-graduation goals are to relocate to the Bay Area to begin my career. I am inspired by the humanitarianism, innovation, and creativity that is constantly promoted in the area, for the culture of business is like nothing even comparable to the Midwest. As quoted by world-renown entrepreneur Steve Jobs, "The people who built Silicon Valley were engineers. They learned the business, they learned a lot of different things, but they had a real belief that humans if they worked hard with other creative, smart people, could solve most of humankind's problems. I believe that very much" (WIRED, 2017).

Documentary of Immersion

Allow me to express zealous appreciation and gratitude for TechNext Team member Jordan Cardenas for his dedication of time and resources to assist in the production of the 2018 Silicon Valley Immersion Project. The film recaps the journey to Silicon Valley, following the students in their voyage from start to finish with the TechNext team, as well as footage from the First Annual WMU Alumni-Student Engagement event. <https://vimeo.com/305519466>

Appendix A

2018 TechNext Agenda

<u>Me eting #</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Compan y</u>	<u>URL</u>	<u>Invitat ion Sent</u>	<u>Confi rmati on</u>	<u>Contact</u>	<u>Address</u>
Tuesday, October 16 – San Francisco							
1	9:00 - 10:00a m	Primer	www.primer.ai	YES	YES	Barry Dauber	
2	10:45 - 12:00p m	MapD	www.mapd.com	YES	YES	Todd Mostak	
	12:00- 1:30 pm	Lunch		YES			
3	1:30 - 2:30p m	Mapbox	www.mapbox.com	YES	YES	Marc Priolea u & Christi na Shieh	5, 2nd Street, Third Floor, San Francisco, CA.
4	3:00 - 4:00pm	Mesosphe re	www.mesosphere.com	YES	YES	William Freiberg	
Wednesday, October 17 – Peninsula							

1	9:00 - 10:00am	IQT	www.iqt.org	YES	YES	George Hoyem	800 El Camino Real, Menlo Park, CA, Suite #300
2	10:45 - 12:00pm	Silicon Valley Bank	www.svb.com	YES	YES	Khanh Truong	3000 Sand Hill Rd, Menlo Park, CA
	12:00-1:30 pm	Lunch		YES			
3	1:30 - 2:30pm	Forward Networks	www.forwardnetworks.com	YES	YES	David Erickson	550 California Ave #200, Palo Alto, CA 94306
4	3:00 - 4:00pm	Orbital Insight	https://orbitalinsight.com	YES	YES	Dave Story	3000 El Camino Real, Building 2, 6th Floor, Palo Alto
	4:00-5:00	Drive to SF					
	6:00-9:00pm	Dinner - Interval	https://theinterval.org				The Interval at The Long Now - Landmark Building A, 2 Marina Boulevard, San Francisco, CA 94123
Thursday, October 18 – San Francisco							
1	9:00 - 10:00am	Safegraph	www.safegraph.com	YES	YES	Alejandro, Rioja	

2	10:45 - 12:00p m	OPEN					
	12:00- 1:30 pm	Lunch		YES			
3	1:30 - 2:30p m	MemSQL	www.memsql.com	YES	YES	Nikita Shamgunov	
4	3:00 - 4:00pm	Swift Navigaiton	www.swiftnav.com	YES	YES		

Appendix B

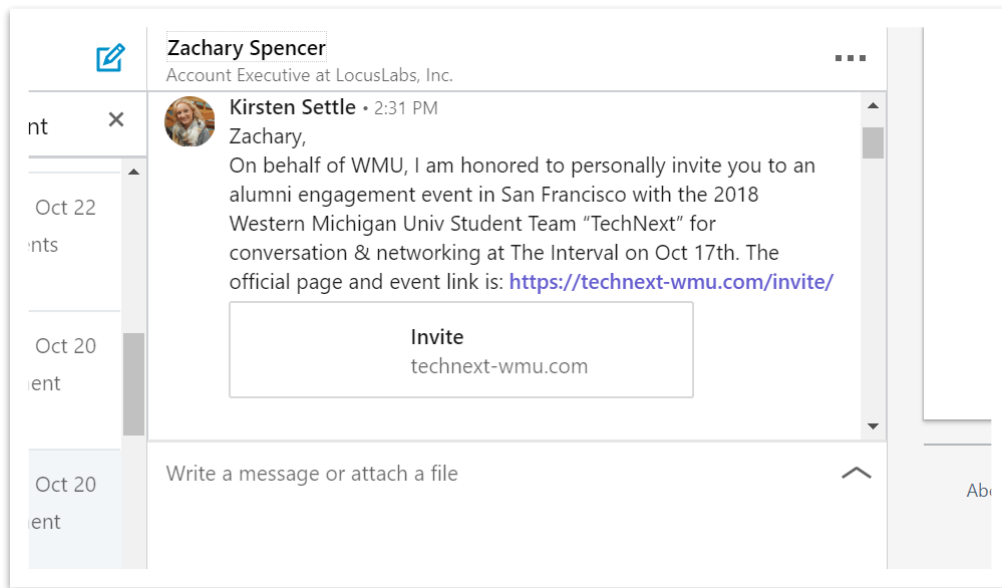
		Strongly disagree	Neutral			
	Question	1	2	3	4	5
1	My understanding of Artificial Intelligence is fluent					
2	I can explain technical concepts to other students					

3	I have confidence in my public speaking ability					
4	I believe experiential learning programs should be permanently tied to academic curriculum					
5	I can apply problem solving skills to situations in my daily life					
6	I try to understand what other people tell me					
7	I am a good listener					
8	There is a benefit to experiential learning					
9	I often prepare before giving a presentation					
10	I play an important role in my team					
11	I devote a lot of energy to my job					
12	I am confident with my ability to do sufficient research when I am entering a new market					

13	I strive as hard as I can to complete my job					
14	Please select 4					
15	I have a plan for after graduation					
16	I am a self-motivated person					
17	Traveling is an important preference in my life					
18	I consider myself organized					
19	Teams contribute to a project success					
20	I have plans to relocate to a state I've never lived in after graduation					

1. What do you expect to personally/academically/professionally gain from this experience?
2. Explain how this experience has already given you new insight on your strengths?
3. How has this experience set you with new insight on your weaknesses?
4. What are you most excited for on this trip?
5. What are your concerns/anxieties/hesitations regarding the trip?
6. Any additional comments...

Appendix C



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