

**The Experiential Learning Lab: A Pathway to Real World Experience**

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### **Introduction**

The opportunity to gain real-world experience in industry while still in college is invaluable for students. A dilemma arises when students need experience to obtain jobs in today's market, but they have never had a job to obtain adequate experience needed to get the position they want. A study compiled by the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture in 2010 reported that a significant increase in communications-related jobs will be seen over the next five years. An escalation of 28% in communication-based jobs, like public relations professionals and market research analysts, is foreseen in the coming years. Also, each year, more than 6,200 jobs in agriculture related to communications, education, and government operations are filled by professionals who are entering the workforce for the first time. To better equip students with the skills they need to compete, the hands-on and real-world dynamic of the Agricultural Communications Experiential Learning Lab (ELL) offers individuals a learning opportunity that will likely make them more marketable as they enter the workforce.

### **How it Works**

The ELL is an entrepreneurial organization that capitalizes on the frequent requests by organizations who need agricultural communications students to perform small-scale, low-cost communications services. Clients are both on- and off-campus and include commodity groups, government agencies, and research, extension, and teaching programs on campus. Patterned loosely after the University of Florida's Center for Public Issues Education (as described by Goodwin et al., 2012) the ELL is based on Kolb's Experiential Learning model. The model includes active experimentation, concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization (1984). In the ELL, active experimentation is seen when student employees are assigned to take on jobs requiring skills they may have only studied in the classroom but need to put into action. The ELL provides the opportunity for students to work for actual clients on a cost-recovery basis, giving them the realistic, concrete experience in the industry they need. Students are given time to reflect on their work by meeting frequently with clients to get feedback and to report progress; they also meet at least weekly with the supervising faculty member, who is ultimately responsible for quality control on all projects. A key feature of student learning is the conceptualization involved in their work. Students must meet with potential clients to identify their needs, which are often "fuzzy" because of the client's lack of experience with public communications. From these meetings, students must then create a description of the work and consult with the supervising faculty to estimate the number of billable hours that will be required to complete the project, resulting in an estimate for the client, which, when signed becomes a working contract between the ELL and the client. Students are paid an hourly wage, and clients are charged based on total billable hours plus 30% indirect costs to pay for hardware, software, and other operating expenses. Other agricultural communication students have the option to work in the ELL for special problems course credit as opposed to hourly wages, which allows the ELL to accept a small number of *pro bono* jobs assisting both the student with experience and the client.

### **Results to Date**

Currently in its second semester of existence, the Experiential Learning Lab has made successful strides on the path to success. Two paid undergraduate students are on staff working approximately 20 hours per week. Students thus far have begun filming and creating educational videos for the local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service office. They have also developed promotional advertising and produced flyers, newsletters, a blog and a technical manual. After the first few months of operation, ELL clients include USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Food Safety Consortium, and the college's equine and horticulture academic departments. During "lulls" in client projects, the students develop marketing and business development materials to be used in recruiting new clients to the ELL.

*I am getting a lot of experience in InDesign, Photoshop, and Illustrator. Since I want to do something with graphic design, I really believe it will benefit me in the future. I see the lab as the connection providing clients with professional quality work at a lower cost while giving students like me experience to work with actual clients.*

–Lindsey, agricultural communications junior and ELL employee

Difficulties with this project have been related mostly to finances. Establishing billing procedures that fit within the University's non-profit setting has been cumbersome but not impossible. Custom invoices and a university "service center" account were created to support the ELL's entrepreneurial approach.

### **Future Plans**

The vision of the lab is to employ more students with hands-on experience in the industry by increasing the number of clients and maintaining a high standard of quality among the services provided. It is anticipated that in the future, potential clients will include the lab's services as they develop the outreach and teaching aspects of integrated grant projects. Another goal for the ELL is to begin to integrate applied research as a service for clients, including audience analyses, public relations and branding audits, much like the PIE Center at the University of Florida has done. In some cases, the PIE Center's research has been publishable, as in Goodwin et al.'s (2012) work. The ELL will strive to create exceptional work and student experience, which will lead to valuable research in the field of agricultural communications.

*Hopefully, we will continue to grow and do more projects for more clients and employ more students giving them valuable experience in the field.*

–Lindsey

### **Costs/Resources**

A small initial startup fund was needed to provide hourly wages for student workers before work contract funds began to flow. A rate of \$11.25 is charged per hour to the clients, which includes student hourly wages and a 30% overhead cost for equipment and other needs for the lab. Each student was supplied with a laptop computer, two monitors for layout and design, and a professional office space. These resources, especially a professional office space, were considered to be an important part of providing a "concrete experience" as highlighted by Kolb (1984) by the faculty supervisor.

## References

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