

Program Development Launch Weekend: Engaging students in community-engaged learning to promote career readiness

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Introduction

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) identifies eight critical competencies required for a career-ready workforce; career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology (www.NACEweb.org). One high-impact practice that can promote student engagement and increase the likelihood students will develop these competencies is community-engaged learning. Community-engaged learning (sometimes referred to as service learning) is a pedagogical approach that integrates community engagement into coursework, resulting in mutually beneficial partnerships and strengthening of student learning (Kuh, 2008). A program development course at the University of Missouri utilizes community-engaged learning and provides students the opportunity to lean into career-readiness competencies. The course includes an overview of theory and practice applicable to communicating and facilitating youth and adult training and leadership programs in communities and organizations. The most innovative aspect of this course is student teams engaging with Missouri agriculture industry stakeholders at *Program Development Launch Weekend* to design a program that will meet stakeholder needs.

How it Works

During the first eight weeks of the course, students are introduced to the Interactive Model of Program Planning (Cafarella, 1994) and the Human Centered Design Process (Boller & Fletcher, 2020). These frameworks guide students as they design their own educational or leadership workshop on a topic of their choice to master basic program development skills. Students identify program needs, determine their target audience, create goals and objectives, draft logic models, craft instructional outlines and narratives, develop budgets and timelines, consider logistics and timelines, design evaluation plans, and adjust throughout the design phase. Students turn in small portions of their program at a time for feedback and complete an initial draft of all materials before *Program Development Launch Weekend* occurs. This scaffolded design prepares students with competence and confidence in program development and evaluation they need to work effectively with small student teams and industry stakeholders at *Program Development Launch Weekend*.

During week six of the semester, stakeholders send one-paragraph descriptions of their program idea/need to the course instructor. The course instructor may ask for clarification or tweaks to ensure it is appropriate for the course before providing the description to students. Students rank their top three stakeholders and provide justification of why they are a good fit to work with that topic or how it will help them reach their career goal. Based on this information, the instructor assigns them to a student team. Throughout launch weekend, student teams gain

understanding of their stakeholder's desired outcomes, define the target audience, conduct interviews with target audience members, and develop tools like empathy maps and learner personas. They also set clear program goals, objectives, and deliverables. At the conclusion of *Program Development Launch Weekend*, students propose an initial program plan to stakeholders, including a timeline and concise list of mutually agreed upon deliverables. The weekend concludes with a stakeholder/student team celebration brunch and team pictures. During the final eight weeks of the semester, student teams complete the program design according to the agreed-upon timeline, being intentional about maintaining regular communication with their stakeholder. At the end of the course, student teams formally present their completed programs to the stakeholders face-to-face with the goal of stakeholders implementing aspects of the program, or the program in its entirety, within the next year. The faculty member uses authentic assessment throughout the course to assess student understanding and consider the student-team/stakeholder partnership as well as written project materials.

Results and Implications

During the spring of 2024, eighteen undergraduate students worked with five unique Missouri stakeholders to develop programming ranging from an alumni engagement program for an agricultural leadership program to a social media training program for a commodity organization. One of the 2024 students reported landing her first job because her interviewer was impressed with the individual program she had developed in the course. Another student from the 2024 course has used her knowledge to develop and lead floral design programs on her family farm. Anecdotally, several students who took the class and are pursuing graduate school have also shared that this course sparked their interest in learning more about program development and program evaluation. Four of five stakeholders implemented the programs student teams developed during the summer or fall of 2024.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

We encourage other instructors to consider how real-world community projects can be incorporated into their courses. We have found our students want to impress stakeholders with their projects; they are highly motivated to perform at a high level. It is also critical to carefully select industry stakeholders that students will admire and respect and that enjoy providing opportunities for students to grow and learn.

Cost/Resources Needed

The cost of *Program Development Launch Weekend* has been minimal due to the generous donations of some of our agricultural stakeholders. One stakeholder located near campus generously provides all meals, snacks, and the meeting space. We budget \$100 for supplies such as markers, post-it notes, flip charts, and printing costs. It is important to communicate the date for an event like this well in advance since many students have weekend jobs or other responsibilities.

References

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- Kuh, G.D. (2008). *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities.
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