

REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article examines the evolving concept of experiential learning and its application in higher education, particularly in public administration programs. It highlights how hands-on experiences, such as internships and policy simulations, bridge theoretical knowledge with real-world application, fostering critical skills like problem-solving, adaptability, and leadership. Drawing on initiatives at Babeș-Bolyai University, the analysis highlights how experiential learning supports career readiness and fosters interdisciplinary approaches, both of which are crucial for tackling governance and policy challenges.

Public administration's practical nature makes it uniquely suited for experiential methods, offering students opportunities to engage with community projects and governance systems. Despite its transformative potential, challenges include resource demands, academic rigor, and inconsistent quality. The article emphasizes the need for institutional support, partnerships, and emerging technologies to enhance accessibility and scalability. By documenting and assessing these efforts, universities can validate their impact, share best practices, and better prepare students for dynamic, impactful careers.

Keywords: experiential learning, higher education, public administration, competence-based education, career readiness.

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1. Introduction

This essay explores the integration of experiential learning in higher education, with a specific focus on its application in public administration. Experiential learning¹ has emerged as a transformative approach in higher education, offering students the opportunity to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application (Northern Illinois University Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2012). Grounded in Kolb's experiential learning theory, this pedagogical model emphasizes learning through direct experience, reflection, and active experimentation (Kolb and Kolb, 2017).

This essay is by no means a comprehensive analysis of experiential learning in higher education. It is rather an effort to critically reflect on a couple of aspects related to this new pedagogy as they emerged from the activity of the Department of Public Administration and Management (DPAM) at Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania, and of the larger school in which it is housed (Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences –FPACS).

2. A changing landscape of higher education

The landscape of higher education is currently undergoing a significant transformation, driven by the increasing demand for practical, skills-based learning that aligns with the complexities of a rapidly changing world (World Economic Forum, 2022). Traditional lecture-based methods, while foundational, are being complemented and, in some cases, replaced by innovative pedagogies that emphasize experiential learning. Universities are recognizing the need to prepare students for real-world challenges by embedding hands-on activities, internships, simulations, and community engagement into their curricula. This shift reflects a broader trend toward learner-centered education, where students actively construct knowledge through experience and reflection (Shah, 2020).

While there are numerous studies worldwide documenting this transition (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2019) little research exists in Romania on this topic. In an effort to close this gap, FPACS initiated a massive research study in 2023, composed of several sub-studies, titled 'Why we work' (2024) which seeks to determine, among others, the type of skills considered critical by both employers on the one hand and students and employees on the other hand. The main findings allow us to have a more nuanced understanding of the systemic transformation higher education goes through, partially also as a response to pressures coming from the job market. Points 1–3 below were drafted taking into consideration the findings of this study.

1 Other similar terms include applied learning, hands-on learning, practical learning, learning by doing, immersive learning, work-based learning, action learning, engaged learning. While we acknowledge that these are not perfect synonyms and that differences exist, in this essay we are going to use them interchangeably.

Below we are trying to offer more insight into five trends which we think are changing higher education today.

- The trends toward experiential learning in higher education reflect a significant transformation in how universities prepare students for the demands of the modern world. One key focus is the emphasis on competency-based education, which prioritizes equipping students with skills that transcend theoretical knowledge, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration (Rajaram, 2021). The study ‘Why we work’ validates this trend in the Romanian context as well—employers, students, and employees alike confirm that these competencies are essential. Moreover, employers argue that as employees advance towards managerial positions such competencies become a must. Experiential learning plays a pivotal role in achieving these goals by providing opportunities for students to engage in internships, service-learning, and simulations, where they can apply their knowledge and develop practical, transferable skills.
- Another driving force behind this shift is the increasing demand for career readiness. Employers are seeking graduates who possess not only academic knowledge but also hands-on experience in their field. Universities are responding by incorporating applied projects, case studies, and fieldwork into their curricula to help bridge the gap between theoretical education and professional application. In fields like public administration, this approach is particularly relevant, as students must be prepared to tackle real-world challenges in governance and policy-making.
- The push for lifelong learning has also influenced this shift. In an increasingly dynamic and uncertain world, the ability to adapt and learn continuously is more important than ever. The study quoted before (‘Why do we work’) clearly spells out that CEOs and managers are interested in employees who are able to look at things and understand them from a systemic perspective, which goes beyond the limits defined through the job description, the product they are working with, or the client’s needs. Those interviewed for the study connect this ability with the ability and willingness to learn and a proactive attitude on behalf of employees which includes the drive to know more, explore things, curiosity, and self-actualization (p. 36). Experiential learning fosters this adaptability by equipping students with practical, real-world skills that remain relevant throughout their careers. Moreover, it nurtures habits of self-directed learning and critical reflection, enabling students to navigate diverse professional contexts and respond to evolving challenges.
- European and global initiatives have further reinforced the movement toward experiential learning. Policies like the European Strategy for Universities emphasize innovative teaching methods, such as ‘living labs’, where students work on interdisciplinary, real-world projects. Transnational collaborations and exchange programs, such as Erasmus+, offer students opportunities to gain hands-on experience in diverse cultural and governance systems, fostering skills that are both practical and globally relevant. Similarly, international organizations like UNESCO promote experiential learning as a means of advancing sustainable development goals, particularly through community-centered projects. It is important, however, to note that such experiential learning

strategies cannot be implemented by universities in the absence of a sound partnership with industry and public administration, mostly at local and regional levels. The European Strategy for Universities uses the term ‘local innovation ecosystems’ and credits universities to be central nodes in these ecosystems. Cluj-Napoca, the city that is home to six main state universities, among which Babeş-Bolyai University is the largest, is a great case study with respect to this sound partnership among community stakeholders from varied fields (LSE Cities, 2024).

- Finally, the rise of multidisciplinary and practical education models has transformed how universities approach teaching and learning (Klein, 2022). Public administration, which inherently intersects with fields such as economics, law, sociology, and environmental science, benefits greatly from these models. Interdisciplinary projects, capstone experiences, and collaborative team-based learning mirror the complexities of real-world governance challenges. By synthesizing knowledge across disciplines and applying it to tangible problems, students not only deepen their understanding but also enhance their ability to work effectively in diverse and dynamic environments. In Eastern Europe, immediately after the fall of communism, when PA departments were reestablished, the battle for recognizing the need for multi- and interdisciplinary approaches in PA has been fierce. In certain cases, the battle is still ongoing. FPACS and DPAM pride themselves on being at the forefront of this movement, with the PA curriculum being even in the early 2000s like the one taught in Western Europe and the United States of America.

3. Is PA different than other fields with respect to experiential learning?

More than a decade ago, the Department of Public Administration and Management (DPAM) at Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania, implemented over the course of several years one large EU funded program aiming at increasing the quality of higher education programs in public administration (PA) from Romania. While DPAM was the lead partner, other major PA schools from Romania were involved as well (Bucharest University of Economic Studies and ‘Alexandru Ioan Cuza’ University, Iasi). During the project, several assessments of students’ satisfaction with teaching and overall, with the programs offered, were conducted. One recurring finding was that students wanted more applied learning as they perceived their programs to be too oriented towards theory rather than towards practice. This finding was puzzling for most faculty involved since they perceived the curriculum of their schools to be more applied and centered on action learning than in other university programs and fields of study. Several focus groups with students from PA programs revealed that they perceived PA to be different from other fields of study in terms of the amount of practical or hands-on learning it requires. Students justified this need both in terms of future employability but also in terms of better understanding the problems PA is called upon to solve in contemporary societies. This has triggered us to reflect in this essay if we can really claim or argue that PA is a prime candidate for experimenting with experiential learning. We think that we can reasonably make this claim due to five main reasons.

The first reason has to do with the PA's practical nature (Denhardt, 1997). Public administration is a field that bridges academic inquiry and practical application. Unlike purely theoretical disciplines, it is intrinsically focused on addressing real-world issues such as urban planning, policymaking, and governance. Students recognize that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient to address the dynamic challenges faced in public service. Experiential learning immerses students in the complexities of public systems, allowing them to observe how theoretical frameworks are applied in practice. For instance, an internship with a municipal government offers insights into how budgets are allocated, or policies are implemented. Applied learning empowers students to design solutions for specific governance challenges. For example, a project analyzing a local community's public health infrastructure provides hands-on experience in addressing systemic issues.

Secondly, public administration requires a nuanced understanding of bureaucratic systems and governance structures (Dzhurova, 2020). These systems are often opaque when studied purely through textbooks, making hands-on experience invaluable. PA students are aware that public administration involves navigating bureaucratic systems, stakeholder dynamics, and political influences. This means that there is a growing need for a more experiential understanding of bureaucracy and governance. Applied learning offers insights into how public agencies operate and helps students learn how to manage resources, balance competing interests, and work collaboratively with stakeholders.

Thirdly, PA students, especially at the graduate level, enter this field with specific career-oriented goals (Pitts and Wise, 2010) and with the desire to create an impact (Garth-James, 2017). The same holds true for students who have been working in public and/or non-profit jobs and are returning to school to complete their education. PA students pursue the field with specific career aspirations, such as working in government, non-profits, or international organizations. Applied learning provides them with hands-on experience that enhances employability. It also offers them opportunities to build networks with professionals through internships or community projects. Lastly, it gives them practical skills that are directly transferable to their future roles. PA students are also typically driven by a strong sense of purpose and a desire to contribute positively to society. This motivation makes applied learning especially appealing, as it enables them to engage directly with communities and see the tangible effects of their work. Projects like drafting a policy proposal for a local council or conducting surveys to inform public decision-making give students the chance to see their contributions in action. Also, hands-on learning gives them a chance to understand how their work impacts on the communities they serve. By working with underserved populations or tackling pressing issues like environmental sustainability or poverty, students gain a deeper appreciation for how policies and programs shape lives.

Fourthly, PA programs prepare their students for leadership and decision-making roles/positions (Rainey, 2014). Public administrators are often tasked with making critical decisions in uncertain and high-stakes environments. Applied learning opportunities allow students to practice and refine these skills before entering the workforce.

Finally, there is a growing emphasis on innovation in public administration (both social and technological). Modern public administration requires innovative thinking to address emerging issues like climate change, digital governance, and global health crises. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development highlights that in the face of ongoing ‘permacrisis’, including climate change and digital disruption, understanding and implementing new approaches is more important than ever (OECD, 2023). Similarly, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) notes that the COVID-19 pandemic compelled public institutions to break from conventional norms and embrace experimentation and innovation, underscoring the need for adaptive and innovative public sector responses (United Nations, 2023). Applied learning fosters creativity by encouraging students to experiment with new approaches and by exposing them to diverse perspectives through hands-on collaboration (López, Vázquez-Vílchez and Salmerón-Vílchez, 2024).

4. Why is it important to document and assess experiential learning undertaken by universities?

DPAM as well as the other departments under the umbrella of the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences (FPACS) have long been interested in applied learning as well as in engaged scholarship and research. Created in the mid-1990s with American support, FPACS has been promoting among its core values the idea of community engagement (loosely defined). For FPACS, it was clear from its establishment that universities should not be ivory towers, completely separated from the communities in which they are located. They should rather be partners for these communities and try to support them as well as the public institutions in these communities with expertise and know-how. DAMP and FPACS also understood the value of such an approach from the perspective of a new way of teaching their students, in fact a new pedagogy based on applied learning. Working closely with the community provided faculty and students with numerous opportunities to carry out various applied learning programs. In many instances, this meant that communities would become their labs, a space for innovation and creative thinking in close partnership with the communities. Some of these pilot programs included adopting a rural community and working with it in various areas where the school had expertise, working with the City Hall of Cluj-Napoca and other communities in the area of strategic planning, supporting rural communities to develop services such as their tourist offering, etc. Very little has been done, however, to document and assess these efforts in terms of the benefits they bring for students and faculty as well as for the communities involved. Very often there was a rush to implement new innovative pilot projects and the need to document and assess them was secondary. Assessing these efforts is, however, important because on the one hand, there is criticism and doubt with respect to whether they really deliver the promised results and even if they do there are serious concerns regarding the costs involved. Second, in order to be able to scale up and replicate these pilot projects, other higher

education institutions need to know about them and have enough information about what and how was done at FPACS.

Below we reflect upon six main reasons why documenting and assessing experiential learning is essential for higher education (Ash and Clayton, 2009; Eyler, 2000; Whitney and Clayton, 2011).

First, it validates learning outcomes by providing evidence that students are achieving the desired objectives and demonstrating the real-world applicability of their knowledge. This process also ensures accountability, confirming that the efforts align with institutional goals and result in measurable student growth. Based on the FPACS's and DPAM's experience with experiential learning it also forces those implementing such programs to clearly spell out the main goals and learning outcomes for students underlying these endeavors.

Second, assessment enables continuous improvement by creating a feedback loop. It allows educators to evaluate what works well and what needs refinement, ensuring programs are adapted to better meet student needs and expectations. Our experience with FPACS Living Lab, a school-wide project currently at the second edition, showed the power of feedback and how it can be used to correct and improve certain activities.

Third, documenting and assessing experiential learning highlights its impact. This not only demonstrates the value of such programs to stakeholders like students, parents, and accrediting bodies but also helps attract funding and partnerships by showcasing measurable success and relevance. At FPACS and DPAM we have numerous examples about how important it is to make impact visible. We will refer here to two such examples. First, DPAM runs a joint graduate program with the University of Delaware aimed at offering PA students with opportunities to conduct applied comparative research and simulate policy advising in an international context. With six iterations so far, the program has already a steady portfolio of student policy papers published and presented at major international conferences. In this case, highlighting the impact helps other universities to emulate this type of joint program. Second, with FPACS Living Lab we are committed to highlight impact mainly through presentations of final solutions to the challenge owners (organizations providing the teams of students with real world challenges to solve). In this way the challenge owners and more broadly other community stakeholders maintain interest in this kind of projects and FPACS can showcase its contribution to solving real world problems.

Fourth, it plays a critical role in facilitating accreditation and benchmarking. Many accrediting bodies require evidence of innovative teaching practices, and proper documentation allows institutions to measure their programs against those of peers, fostering the adoption of best practices.

Fifth, assessing experiential learning encourages student reflection. Tools such as journals, portfolios, and presentations help students deeply engage with their experiences, fostering critical thinking and enabling them to articulate the skills and knowledge they have gained, which is particularly beneficial for their academic and career advancement. In our experience, the best results were achieved with the Delaware program described above.

Student reflection represents in the case of that program a huge part of the grade the students receive. Also, there are numerous opportunities such as informal talks, round tables, and seminars run by the students themselves which allow for various forms of reflection.

Finally, experiential learning documentation and assessment help students connect their education with career readiness. By demonstrating practical applications of their knowledge, students can better understand how their academic experiences translate to workplace skills, making them more competitive and prepared for their professional journeys. We have at least two examples at FPACS and DPAM level which prove how important it is for the participating students in experiential learning projects to have them documented. American students taking part in the graduate joint research project offered by the University of Delaware as well as Japanese students participating in an international internship program run by FPACS offered us insight with respect to the importance of documenting these programs. At least five different students explained to us that during job interviews they were asked if there is some proof of what they did while abroad. In their opinion, the existence of a published book or a recorded session posted on an official university website made their experiences more legit and trustworthy with the potential employers.

5. Instead of conclusions: Some criticism pertaining to experiential learning and how we move forward

We are exploring in this section three main aspects usually discussed as limitations in the context of experiential learning (Radović, Hummel and Vermeulen, 2021; Cox, 2019; Below, 2024). The first limitation refers to how resource-intensive these projects are. It is not just about financial resources/costs (which can be significant) but also about the time investment required from students and faculty. Developing, implementing, and managing experiential learning projects demands significant time from faculty, administrative staff, and participants. Regular collaboration with stakeholders adds to the workload, which can strain academic schedules and other commitments. Moreover, faculty members play critical roles in mentoring students, designing projects, and ensuring alignment with academic goals. This often requires expertise outside traditional teaching responsibilities, as well as a strong commitment. One question we received at a conference when presenting the FPACS Living Lab was whether the results obtained justify the investment (both time and money). What the colleague who asked the question was implying is that costs simply outweigh the benefits. The institutional response to this is that it depends on how you quantify benefits. If you only look at direct benefits, most likely yes, the costs outweigh the benefits. If, however, you consider as benefits for example enhanced cooperation with stakeholders and trust gained, in this case costs and benefits might be more or less at the same level.

A second limitation concerns the need to balance experiential learning with academic rigor. All experiential learning projects emphasize hands-on, real-world learning, which can sometimes clash with traditional academic standards. For example, in the FPACS Living

Lab students are complaining about time constraints—living lab activities take considerable time, reducing students’ opportunities to focus on other academic obligations, potentially leading to an unbalanced educational experience. Faculty complains on the other hand about challenges pertaining to the assessment of students’ performance. Evaluating student performance in non-traditional settings can be subjective or inconsistent, particularly when projects rely on group dynamics or external factors.

A third limitation is related to the potential lack of standardization in experiences. Experiential learning projects often operate in dynamic, localized contexts, which can result in inconsistent quality. This means that often the educational value of these experiences can vary depending on the project, the community partner, or the level of student engagement. This lack of standardization can lead to unequal learning outcomes. Also, it is possible to have unclear expectations and, in this case, students and faculty may encounter ambiguity in roles, responsibilities, and goals due to the open-ended nature of many experiential learning projects. One final negative aspect that needs to be mentioned concerns the limited transferability of the best practices in this area. The lessons and practices developed in one project may not easily apply to another due to differences in location, resources, or stakeholder priorities.

Despite these limitations, our strong belief is that PA programs and more broadly higher education need to move forward with implementing experiential learning programs. Based on our experience the following things need to be considered:

- Community partnerships are at the core of experiential learning programs. If universities are not connected with community stakeholders, it is very difficult to involve them in experiential learning programs. Building partnerships requires time and effort and it is essential to benefit from institutional support from the university’s leadership. For PA students, collaboration with public institutions is essential to ensure that experiential learning projects reflect real-world challenges.
- As mentioned above, institutional support for experiential learning is a key factor for success. This is because experiential learning requires more than enthusiasm—it demands institutional investment. Universities must allocate adequate funding, staff, and infrastructure to support activities like internships, service learning, and real-world project collaborations. Without this foundation, the quality and reach of such programs can suffer. Moreover, there is a need for administrative support and policy alignment. The integration of experiential learning into curricula often faces bureaucratic hurdles. Streamlined policies and support from academic leadership can help embed experiential methods as a core pedagogical approach rather than an optional add-on. Moreover, there is a need for professional development for faculty: Many educators require training and resources to design and implement impactful experiential learning activities. Institutional support for workshops, mentorship programs, and cross-departmental collaboration can equip faculty with the tools they need. This goes hand in hand also with the need for recognition and incentives. Acknowledging the additional effort faculty invest in experiential learning through promotions, grants, or awards can encourage broader adoption and innovation.

- We also feel that there is a real need to enhance accessibility and inclusivity. From our experience with FPACS Living Lab and other similar projects, it is quite difficult to involve a significant number of students. It is quite difficult to work with many students since there are few trained instructors and in general experiential learning projects require a lot of one-to-one mentoring. When there is competition to get into these projects, most often it is only the best students who succeed in getting accepted. Multiplying experiential learning opportunities and having more trained instructors as facilitators can make opportunities available to a broader range of students.
- Finally, we want to highlight that experiential learning is going to be impacted by AI in the future. We want to refer here for the most part to virtual simulations as well as collaborative platforms and gamification. Virtual simulations provide immersive, risk-free environments where students can practice real-world skills. Virtual simulations make experiential learning accessible to more students by overcoming geographical and logistical constraints. For instance, students in remote locations can access the same high-quality learning experiences as those on campus. Also, many simulation platforms provide real-time feedback, allowing students to learn from their mistakes. Technology facilitates collaboration and gamification makes experiential learning more interactive and social. Platforms like Miro, Slack, or Microsoft Teams enable students to work together on projects in real time, regardless of location. Games and simulations, such as management simulations, make learning competitive and engaging while reinforcing teamwork and strategic thinking.

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