

Experiential learning needs time, experiential learners need support

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Internships and experiential learning programs typically span the length of a semester, but preliminary findings of a new University of Houston study indicate that's not long enough for students to get the full benefits. At issue are the students' expectations and their advisors' guidance.

"There is a gap between the expectation and the reality of the [students' experiential learning](#) opportunities, like internships," said David Walsh, clinical assistant professor in the University of Houston department of health and human performance (HHP). "We have to ask if we are failing to prepare and support them when the newness of the experience wears off."

Walsh says students usually are very excited and eager to begin their internships but don't know how to negotiate the eventual routine of a professional workplace, a necessary skill to be an effective employee. Their disappointment, then, is what they may remember at the end of their semester experiences. He says lengthening an experiential learning program beyond the semester and including structured support throughout the internship, may create more meaningful [experiences](#) for students.

"In learning and [human development](#), the lows are as important as the highs," he said. "Experiential learning has to be long enough to embrace the roller coaster, help students get over the hump. This is the role of education."

Walsh, who studies human development and lifelong development, is investigating experiential learning in a longitudinal study of students participating in a four-semester, field-training experience. Dubbed "The Super Four Experience," students from the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management (HRM) and HHP are working with the staff from The Houston Super Bowl Host Committee and the Houston Local Organizing Committee for the Final Four in the areas of event planning, event management, sports marketing and communications, budgeting, project management, facility management, guest services and sport governance.

Walsh, who is one of the faculty supervisors, interviewed more than half of the Super Four participants. While all are enjoying the experience and recognize the value of the experience as a preparation for professional life, a common response was that they had "unmet assumptions," as the day-to-day routine failed to sustain their initial excitement. Walsh says a graph of their experience might look like a rollercoaster.

"The Super Four Experience requires four semesters to complete, but traditional internships require about 300 hours in only one semester. If an internship ends on a low, the learning opportunity is lost," he said. "One semester may not allow the full experience of the internship to play out, denying students valuable time to work through the challenges."

Walsh says additionally, educators need to ensure their students have active opportunities in their internships and more support to ensure they have the tools to negotiate the highs and the lows of the experience that also translate into a work environment.

"We hope we can set a new trend for teachers, practitioners and students in experiential learning pedagogy," he said.

Provided by University of Houston

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