

# Experiential Learning at Virginia Tech

## By the Faculty Subcommittee of the Experiential Learning Steering Committee<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Tech's Beyond Boundaries vision builds on our foundation of educational excellence and aims to prepare students for the complex world in which they will work and live. As faculty, we help graduates rise to our global land-grant mission and address an array of twenty-first-century challenges to health, sustainability, resilience, creativity, and security by reflecting on how our curricular offerings encourage purpose-driven choices and anticipate post-graduation possibilities. We use deliberate and thoughtful strategies to facilitate student transitions from general critical skills and content to more discipline-specific learning outcomes.

Experiential learning encompasses many of these approaches, focusing especially on pedagogical strategies that are interactive, grounded, iterative, and pragmatic. In short, **experiential learning offers students opportunities to develop their understanding and skills as they address problems and concepts in context.**<sup>2</sup> Students who learn through hands-on endeavors develop transferable competencies, but experiential learning is more than simple "job training." Instead, it comprises a spectrum of opportunities in curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular spaces. Tackling concrete, contemporary issues can motivate students to synthesize theory, concepts, and habits of mind in the context of their own interests.

In an effort to ensure broad access to these learning opportunities, the Beyond Boundaries strategic plan asks that *50% of academic degrees have a required experiential learning component by 2026-2027.*

The many experiential learning opportunities that have developed organically across Virginia Tech's campus testify to faculty interest, strengths, and belief in this mode of teaching. We introduce students to practical challenges and professional contexts in many ways: through undergraduate research, internships, cooperative education, externships, study abroad, industry-sponsored capstone design experiences, service learning, and the like.

Experiential learning also takes different forms at different points along a student's developmental path, varying both in content and in physical context, and integrating different combinations of *theory* (rational contemplation and abstraction of general principles) and *praxis* (informed and reflective action toward specific ends)(refer to Figure 1). In addition, experiential learning can be more or less intensive and focused on specific career pathways. **Exploratory Experiential Learning Opportunities** encourage students to discover options and aptitudes. They emphasize guided practice and exposure to new disciplines, ways of thinking, cultures and contexts, problems, and potential career paths. Faculty-led Exploratory Opportunities--such as short field trips and site visits, in-depth case studies, and public-facing writing assignments--go beyond important classroom-based "active learning" strategies such as think-pair-share, minute papers, and discussion activities. The latter are crucial to helping students process new materials, but do not necessarily include the kinds of context-based problem solving that is characteristic of experiential learning. **Bridging Opportunities** help prepare students for post-graduation life and develop a professional identity. They are generally student-directed intensive experiences, apply specific disciplinary knowledge to contemporary questions and pressing problems, and often take place in the final years of a student's academic journey.

In an ideal scenario of holistic student development, all Virginia Tech undergraduates would be guided from a range of exploratory opportunities through to meaningful bridging opportunities. Because skills, opportunities, and professional expectations often differ along disciplinary lines, departments and units across campus should retain the freedom to design experiential learning paths most appropriate for their students.

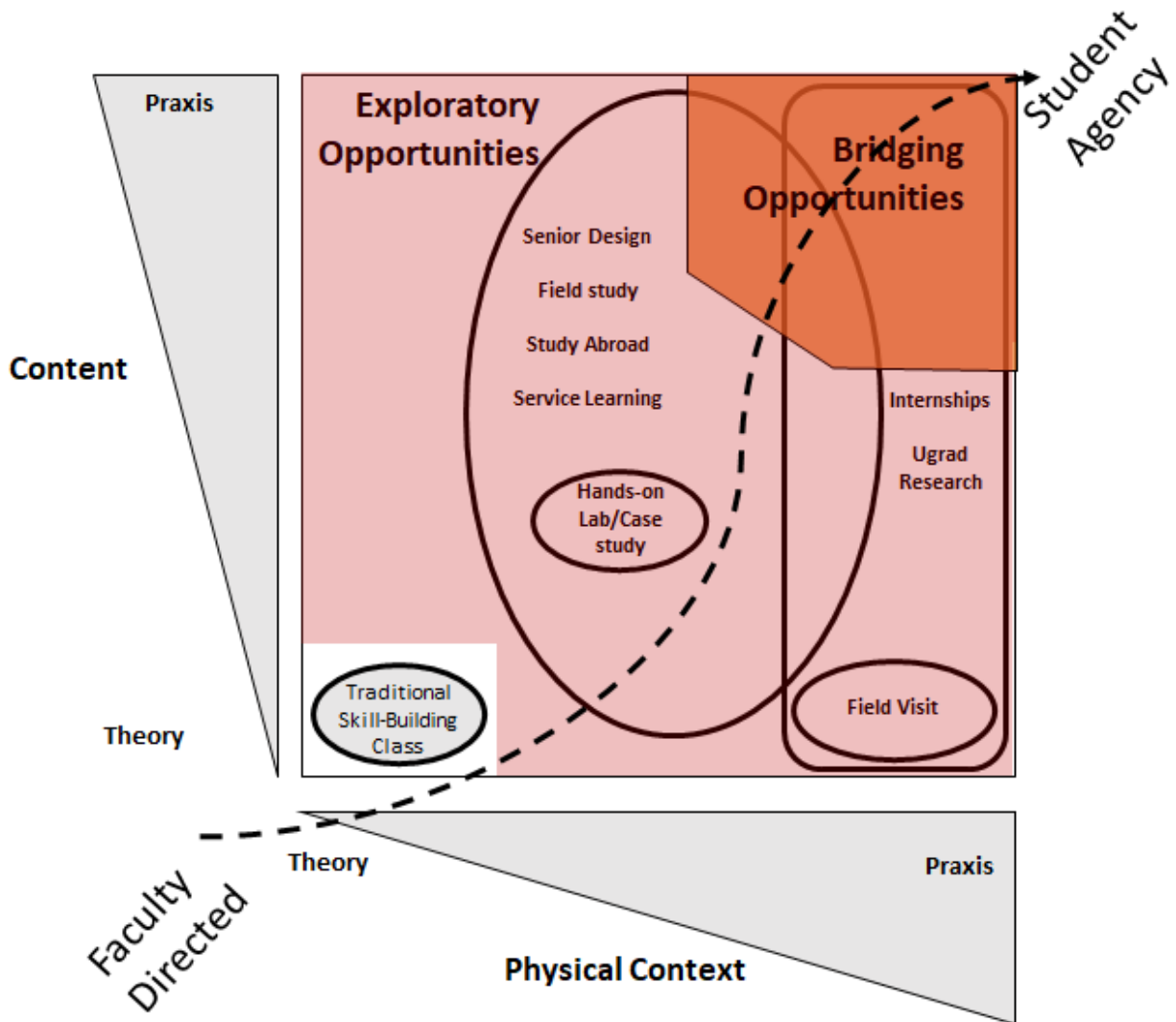
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<sup>1</sup> This summary document is an extension of work submitted to the Faculty Senate for approval in May 2021 by the Experiential Learning Faculty Advisory Board (re-organized as the Faculty Subcommittee for AY 2021-22).

<sup>2</sup> Association for Experiential Education, "[What Is Experiential Education?](#)"; David Thornton Moore, "Forms and Issues in Experiential Learning," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 124 (Winter 2010): 3-13.

**Exploratory Opportunities:** These kinds of faculty-led experiential learning focus on discovery of options and aptitudes and go beyond classroom discussion and comprehension techniques. They emphasize guided practice and exposure to new disciplines, ways of thinking, cultures and contexts, problems, and potential career paths. These experiences can be useful for learning throughout a student's time at Virginia Tech.

**Bridging Opportunities:** These kinds of experiential learning help prepare students for post-graduation life and develop a professional identity. They offer opportunities to apply specific disciplinary knowledge to contemporary problems and questions, and they often take place in a professional environment, during the final years of a student's academic journey. Students may be engaged in several intensive experiential learning opportunities during their time at Virginia Tech, but a Bridge Opportunity is one that a student designates as likely to help them move into specific post-graduation plans.



**Figure 1.** Conceptualization of Experiential Learning at Virginia Tech

(note: these opportunities are examples but not exhaustive; placement on the axes is not meant to be precise)