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A Case Study for Experiential Teaching and Learning at the Doctoral-Level: A Hybrid Community-Based Research Approach

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Abstract. This study investigates experiential learning's role and efficacy at a doctoral-level leadership studies program concentrating on a compulsory externship. The key to this work is the enlightening environment and collaboration between the doctoral students and many participating organizations. This study employs hybrid community-based participatory research (incorporating graduate student, organizational stakeholder, and instructor perspectives) to increase knowledge and understanding of doctoral-level experiential learning and integrate that knowledge to benefit pedagogy, leadership development, and organizational-university partnerships. Results indicate that experiential learning builds robust collaboration between institutional and organizational settings. Moreover, the experiential learning experience provides a distinctive approach for doctoral students, enabling them to make better work-context decisions and advance science by asking better, more salient research questions. Experiential learning also enriches the course context, encouraging students to marry their technical and academic expertise to make practical, positive changes.

Keywords: experiential learning, externship, higher education, doctoral level, community-based participatory research

It is essential to highlight that the effectiveness of experiential learning is well-established at the undergraduate level and in specific disciplines. Currently, a variety of professional graduate programs (master's level, certificate programs) in nursing, public administration, social work, public health, nonprofit management, education, and business utilize experiential learning practices (McGuire et al., 2015; Thomas, Erdman & Burke, 2016; Boyatzis & Boyatzis, 2008). Nevertheless, there needs to be more research focusing on the practice and efficiency of experiential learning at the doctoral level. Anecdotal evidence does indicate positive effects. Graduate programs seek to identify the most effective strategies and determine the best teaching methods for students based on programmatic needs. Before implementing new teaching methodologies, educators may search out similar examples from other universities and discuss their experiences with colleagues but do not often share the knowledge learned with other institutional colleagues in a public and accessible manner. For this study, we explore the efficacy of experiential learning at the doctoral level within a specific Ph.D. program, highlight the advantages and challenges of experiential learning within a specific setting, and communicate the results of this nascent study to colleagues. Addressing this paucity to advance higher education practice, we ask: RQ1: What effect does the externship course have on doctoral students' experiential learning within a Ph.D. program? RQ2: What experiential learning experiences are faculty members reporting? RQ3: What experiences are organizational leaders who worked with Ph.D. students reporting? RQ4: What resources or strategies could improve experiential learning within the organizational and academic setting? To answer these questions, we employ a hybrid community-based participatory research study.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon Kolb's experiential learning theory perspectives. Kolb's experiential learning theory consists of six propositions: Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes; all learning is relearning; learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world; learning is a holistic process of transformation to the world; learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment; and learning is the process of creating knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.194). The experiential learning theory guides us to provide a distinctive approach that enables us to identify better work-context decisions, advance science by asking better, more salient research questions, and permits us to share meaningful results from rich recommendations. Experiential learning links cognitive learning and research to knowledge transfer issues involving knowledge translation to domains outside the university where it can be taken up and applied (Adkins, 2009).

Literature Review

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning in higher education not only enhances "habits of mind" but "habits of action" as well (Roodin, 2001, p.101), enriching community-university engagement and relations. Many professors and supervisors accept the importance of experiential learning for undergraduate and professional students. Several additional scholars (Scott, Brown, Lunt, & Thorne, 2004) have highlighted that practice-based knowledge provides dominant and disciplinary expertise and may be accredited by universities. The education system without practice-based knowledge is "linear, causal, cumulative, a closed system, rooted in disciplinary authority" (Gibbons, Armsby, 2012, p. 135). The practice-based knowledge adds a "multi-variant, unsystematic, and open system where the users are creative rather than passive beneficiaries, multi-disciplinary, produced in a wide range of social contexts" (Gibbons et al., 1994; Armsby, 2012, p. 135).

Role of Experiential Learning at the Undergraduate and Graduate Level

According to scholars (El-Tawab et al., 2018; Armsby & Dreher, 2011; Scott, Brown, Lunt, & Thorne, 2004;), experiential learning is considered the most effective approach to enhance the effectiveness of undergraduate and graduate education. They believe experiential learning significantly improves critical thinking skills for the current generation of students. It involves immersing oneself in an experience and then reflecting on it to gain new insights, attitudes, or ways of thinking. Some universities embrace experiential learning experiences at the undergraduate level by expanding short-term placements (externships) and internships (Balleisen, 2022). The benefits of externships are that they are short-term and flexible, help individuals connect with field experts, network, teach professionalism, which is the non-curriculum side, and help individuals rule out jobs (Tallo, 2020). The benefits of internships are long-term, more in-depth than externships, lead to a job, may count towards training hours, and are part of degree requirements in many undergraduate and graduate programs (Tallo, 2020).

Role of Experiential Learning at the Doctoral Level

Short-term placements have become common in humanities and the social sciences, and internships are mainly in medical and engineering fields.

For purposes of this research, the term externship was used versus internship. Internships are typically dictated, directed, and often chosen by the specific undergraduate program or major, i.e., social work and nursing (CSWE,2022; Gallagher et al.,2023). Externship, as used in this work, is driven by student interest with no specific program requirements beyond meaningful experience, tasks, exposure to the organization, or networking. The practical implementation of experiential learning at the doctoral level appears in pharmacy education (Kearney,

2008; Brown et al., 2007), law (Katz, 1997), and psychology (Chin & Lewis, 2012). Externships provide an essential opportunity for doctoral students to gain valuable industry-specific knowledge and insights (Katz, 1997; Chin & Lewis, 2012). With the right externship, students can achieve exposure, build connections with industry leaders, and even secure job offers in their desired fields upon graduation. Furthermore, externships enable students to determine their career paths and switch directions without wasting years in the job market (Katz, 1997; Chin & Lewis, 2012).

Regardless of the doctoral students' background or current position, externships are a universally beneficial learning tool. They equip students with the skills necessary to assess their self-skills, to observe themselves as a leader, and to expand their network by stepping out of their comfort zone and building relationships with other leaders in the industry.

The successful implementation of experiential learning in undergraduate and graduate programs has been widely recognized. However, there are significant concerns regarding its credibility in doctoral programs, which vary among stakeholders in academia and academic institutions. Although experiential education at the doctoral level is not new, enabling a whole array of 'multi-variant, unsystematic, open, multi-disciplinary systems' in the educational environment requires an in-depth evaluation to understand the perspectives of a range of internal and external professionals. Thus, faculty advising, and departmental culture are affected by the uncertainties surrounding how to integrate experiential learning into the doctoral degree requirement without extending the degree completion timeline. As a result, experiential learning opportunities for doctoral students have often been limited or optional as a part of the degree.

Research Limitation

When it comes to implementing experiential learning at the doctoral level, various factors can limit its effectiveness. These limitations can be classified as individual, intervention, and system-level factors. Individual-level factors include a need for more research on university cultural factors that may impact the implementation of experiential learning and faculty-doctoral student relation factors that may hinder the approach's effectiveness. These limitations can pose a challenge to the successful implementation of experiential learning and addressing them is crucial for ensuring its effectiveness (Salib, et.al, 2019; Volpe & Chandler, 2001). Intervention-level limitation for the study is the effort of the research focuses on one university. Including several universities in the region may improve the methodological perspective. This would minimize bias and provide more transparency about the implications of doctoral-level externship, ultimately helping scholars generate new hypotheses and methods of measuring the impact of interventions (Brown, et.al, 2007). System- level limitations are a broad need for

the flexibility of doctoral students and awareness of the realities of program dynamics (Viswanathan, et al., 2004). Challenges exist regarding scheduling, administration completion, program disruption, and postgraduate students (Viswanathan, et al., 2004).

Community-Based Participatory Research

This study employed a hybrid community-based participatory research study to help address some of these limitations by enhancing the relationship between faculty members, company mentors and doctoral students and understanding of experiential learning experience in doctoral level. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a research methodology that involves both researchers and communities in the research process. By engaging in respectful communication, education, and action, both parties can work together toward making positive changes (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2002). The core principles of CBPR involve recognizing the community's identity, leveraging its strengths and resources, and forming collaborative and equitable partnerships in all research phases. It is essential to share the knowledge gained and findings with all partners, and it requires a long-term commitment to sustainability (Wilson, 2019).

Experiential Learning Cycle

In this case study, the externship course is ideally taken in concert with the capstone leadership course, which introduces new organizational leadership readings and exposes students to leadership literature from the other concentrations in the degree program. The experience represents the culmination of the student's formal course of study where the student will have an opportunity to witness and evaluate some of the leadership and management issues facing their externship organization.

Synthesizing the literature with foundational theory, Kolb's experiential learning, the definition of experiential learning in the study is used: experiential learning is inductive, beginning with the raw experience (externship); it is processed through an intentional learning format (course syllabus) and transformed into actionable, practical knowledge (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). Critical to this study was transferring theoretical and practical knowledge beyond the wall through the involvement of doctoral students and participating professional organizations. This idea of transfer and practical knowledge beyond the walls of the academe is called a pracademic orientation (Posner, 2009) and represents the pedagogical orientation of the degree program under this case study in all of its concentration areas (nonprofit, organizational, and postsecondary leadership). Focusing on today's nonprofit arena, agencies are shifting toward evidence-based policymaking practices as well as program development, highlighting the importance of a pracademic orientation. In the meantime, the pracademic in the postsecondary world often exclaimed to help resolve certain disputes and identify sources of

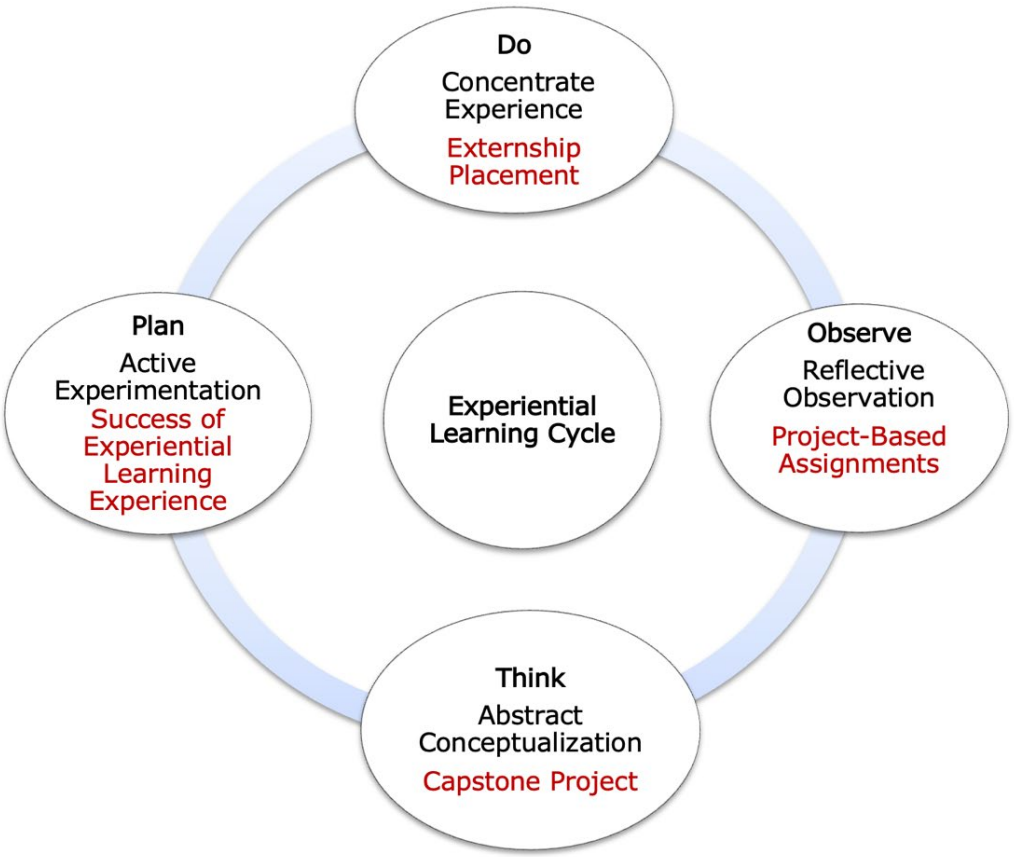
problems among the many layers of organization found in the academic setting (Volpe & Chandler, 2001). Accordingly, pracademics require changes (such as practical training for students) in pedagogy in many academic institutions at all levels (i.e., internships, externships) (Runkle, 2014).

The Figure 1 chart, adapted from Kolb's experiential learning cycle by Abdullah (2010), identifies experiential learning as the central idea and shows the four peripheral factors of experiential learning. These factors present an overview of the fundamental considerations to be kept in mind while implementing an experiential learning experience and guide the externship components and continuing developments for the course requirements in this case study.

The experiential learning cycle encourages critical thinking and analysis at every factor point, which can involve revisiting factors multiple times. In this case study, Concentrate Experience factors were translated as Externship Placement. Reflective Observation refers to common characteristics and considerations of the new experience. Part of this knowledge translation takes place in the case under study through reflective journaling and project-based assignments. Developing meaningful Observation between experience and learning is necessary, empowering significant empirical and experiential knowledge. Abstract Conceptualization supports gathering a new, valuable idea(s) in the reflection stage and modifying existing abstract concepts. Active Experimentation refers to the conclusion of accumulated ideas that are important determinants of experiential learning knowledge and experience success. In this state, learners apply new ideas to the world and analyze the results. The chart is presented in a cycle format, indicating that the process is not linear but recursive, allowing multiple entry points and experiences. The factors of the cycle are a strong chain, and the experiential learning process integrates from one stage to another with mutual support and cultivated information (Kolb, 1974). Practical, experiential learning occurs when the cycle factors are followed as one completes the process (McLeod, 2013).

Figure 1

Experiential Learning Cycle Adjusted for the Case Study (Abdullah L., 2010)



Methodology

The sampling method employed in this study is convenience sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). In convenience sampling, the units are selected for inclusion because they are accessible to the researcher (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). This can be due to various reasons, such as proximity, time availability, or willingness to participate in the research. Convenience sampling is often used in qualitative research studies, particularly in social sciences and education, where pre-existing groups, such as students, can be conveniently used (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). While convenience sampling has its advantages, it should be noted that it can introduce several types of research bias, such as selection bias and sampling bias, which can impact the accuracy and generalizability of the results (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Sample

This emergent case study work describes the use of experiential learning in a mid-Atlantic comprehensive university's researched-based leadership studies doctoral program, focusing on a required externship. The externship model used is based on a consulting format given the experience level required of the students enrolled in the program. The externship typically takes place after completing formal class work and before the comprehensive exam and dissertation proposal. The leadership studies Ph.D. at the institution admitted its first students in 2009, and the externship requirement has been in place since the launch of the Ph.D. program. However, several administrative and oversight changes have been instituted over time.

The duration of the externship course is one semester; during the course time, the students are required to complete work of a minimum of 100 hours. Students are not permitted to do their externship within their current organization. The required externship is intended as a capstone course and experience. The goal of the externship is to integrate prior knowledge (both tacit and explicit) and current work experience with more advanced leadership concepts and applications. The externship can be accomplished in several ways depending on the needs of both the organization and the student. Most of the externships were hybrid (online and face-to-face) approaches. Allowances have been made for students to take advantage of exceptional time-sensitive opportunities.

Procedures

To better understand the applicability of experiential learning at the doctoral level, this case study adopted a hybrid form of community-based participatory research by incorporating graduate students, organizational stakeholder (company mentors), and instructor perspectives, using the insights of participants to evaluate the efficacy of experiential learning within a leadership Ph.D. program and integrate that knowledge to benefit pedagogy, leadership development, and organizational-university partnerships. As a first step of this study, doctoral students were survey-sampled from the program graduates and current students who had completed their externship when the study began. After completing the first step, the next phase involves two separate face-to-face interviews - one with program faculty members and another with company mentors. Table 2 displays the study sample participants' information. (University Institutional Review Board approved the research No. 18-0110).

Table 1

Design of the Survey Questions

Domains	Questions	Rank
Experiential Learning Experience	The experiential learning helped me to - increase my understanding regarding organizational behavior - learn how I can become more involved in my organization - learn how to address organization issues	Strongly Agree 1 – Strongly Disagree 7
	The experiential learning component had a positive effect on helping to integrate the program curriculum.	
	The use of experiential learning opened new research possibilities for you as doctoral students?	
	Did your experience increase your level of commitment to "get involved" in your field?	
	The experiential learning experience increased - awareness to openness to new and diverse experiences - ability to take responsibility - capacity to be productive in a new organization	
	How will the course material and externship alter your future behaviors/attitudes/ and career? - increased knowledge of the work world - increased ability to work corporately - increased familiarity with leadership at various levels - increased building a network	
Education	In what way did you as a doctoral student incorporate externship projects into the program curriculum?	Open-ended question
	In what way did your experiential learning experience change your career or educational plans?	
Overall	What resources or supports do you think could be offered-formally or informally to make the program doctoral students' experience better?	

To capture the faculty's and company mentors' experience the second step followed with two parallel face-to-face interviews. Given the 58 doctoral student participants from a single doctoral program, these findings are preliminary. The findings do, however, present promising reasons for both continuing and adopting doctoral-level externships.

Table 2

Participant Information of the Sample

Doctoral Students			
		(N=58)	
		n	***%***
Program Concentration			
	Nonprofit Leadership	10	
	Organizational Leadership	17	
	Postsecondary Leadership	31	
Participated Organizational Setting for the Externship			
	Postsecondary		39%
	Organizational		23%
	Public		12%
	Private		10%
	For profit		4%
	Non-profit		5%
	Governmental		7%
		Yes	**No**
Students' Previous Work Experience		58	
		(N=6)	
Faculty Members		5	
		(N=58)	
Company Mentors		45	78%

Findings and Insights: Experiential Learning

RQ 1: Doctoral Students' Perspectives

All participants stated that the experiential learning experience was critical for their expertise. Some believed the externship increased their understanding of organizational behavior (49%) and guided them to apply their theoretical knowledge to administrative issues in new ways (22%). Some participants responded that the externship trained them to become more involved in the organization (29%). The salient point here is that those in the sample had an average of eight years of increasing leadership roles in various organizational settings before beginning their Ph.D. studies. The students also emphasized the externship, particularly the experiential learning component, helped them integrate the leadership curriculum; 81% of students agreed. The authors posit that the journaling requirements—with their mandatory inclusion, discussion, and integration of prior and current readings and meetings with the instructor of record—assisted in integrating the curriculum. Specifically, reflection papers (28%), class discussions (27%), and externship journals (21%) were selected as playing critical roles in the integration. The authors continued by questioning whether or not the externship opened up new research possibilities for doctoral students. Participants' responses were exciting and differed depending on how the student perceived the question. At this point in the curriculum, most students have begun to narrow down their dissertation topics, which may have impacted their responses significantly (Somewhat agree 27%, Agree 24%, and Strongly Agree 18%).

In the meantime, it was interesting how externship and course materials helped shape students' knowledge and experience. Consequently, 37% of respondents reported that the externship and course materials increased familiarity with leadership at various levels, and 27% said their building a network behavior increased. Accordingly, 20% reported that the externship and course materials increased their knowledge of the work world, and 16% reported an increased ability to work cooperatively. These reports indicate that students' experiences in the externship have presented additional ways to view organizational issues from their concentration perspectives for the future. The question that asked which discrete ways the externship projects were incorporated into the leadership curriculum yielded multiple comments related to dissertation work, including opportunities for beta-testing instruments and the identification of research participants. Conference presentations, post-externship published articles, and case study development were also noted. More than half of the respondents, fifty-nine percent, indicated an increase in their commitment to "get more involved" in their field based on experiencing different or expanded views. The remainder experienced little or no change in their commitment level. This is not surprising given the experience and commitment many brought to the program on enrollment. The finding that the externship/experiential learning experience did not affect most respondents in

terms of changing career or educational goals was not unexpected. This finding speaks to the clarity of purpose when pursuing doctoral education and hoping for career outcomes. The externship opened a space for many students to experience expanded options and opinions regarding their field. Conversely, for several students, the externship provided a place to reflect and act (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), leading them to change career plans within their concentration and also to change plans dramatically.

The externship's experiential learning experience afforded the students, all adult learners, opportunities for increased insights into themselves as professionals in a new setting and a new and temporary role. The students overwhelmingly reported that the externship experience increased their familiarity with leaders and leadership styles at various organizational levels over the one-hundred-plus hours. An additional bonus said was the expansion of their professional networks. If employed, students are not permitted to do their externship within their current organization, providing them with new organizational experiences and a broader view of the work world.

As noted earlier, there have been significant changes in the implementation of the externship requirement due almost exclusively to formal and informal student input. This study provided a more structured opportunity to capture input. While students reported significant benefits regarding the externship's pedagogical aspects, the respondents had suggestions for the program's faculty and administration regarding organization and support. Comments were divided between a desire for more structure and oversight and keeping structure and oversight at a minimum, indicating that perhaps more attention needs to be paid to individual students' desires. This is possible in the program under study. A common request was for an accessible listing of previous externship (company) mentors' contacts and projects, which is easily accomplished.

Consequently, several scholars (e.g., Kearney, 2008; Brown et al., 2007) highlighted that student who takes leadership in their externship process improve their capability to collaborate with the field mentors, better manage time, and gain experience with mentorship. Those are valuable skills for individuals. From this perspective, the advisors encourage Ph.D. recipients to build connections with nonacademic employers and individually follow the externship course requirements. Over the years of program experience displays, the doctoral students completed the course successfully. Also, students wanted more opportunities to connect with their advisors and the instructor of record to discuss their experiences. The student responses have answered the first research question: *What effect does the externship course have on doctoral students' experiential learning in a Ph.D. program?* Students have also answered the fourth research question: *What resources or strategies could improve experiential learning in organizational and academic settings?*

Concerning combining doctoral students' externship experiences, the notion that providing supportive and reinforcing course materials such as assignments, journal reporting, and capstone project hold value finds theoretical support in Kolb's Experiential Learning Perspectives (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Following the steps in Kolb's cycle sequence (Externship Placement, Completing Project Based Assignments, Capstone Project, and Successfully Completing the Externship) is powerful and crucial. In terms of combining externship experiences with advocated course materials, doctoral students already appear to be able to implement theories in their work environment and use out-of-class contacts to spur personal development and advance career opportunities (Armsby, 2012). To that end, these findings from the doctoral students (58 students) support that the goals of the program under investigation are to create *pracademics*: *individuals who can transfer, translate, and apply knowledge beyond the university's walls*. The externship experience is one part of the making of a pracademic. Pracademics span the boundaries of academia, practice based on their experience in both settings, and move effectively between both worlds, as necessary.

RQ2: Faculty Members' Perspectives

The open-ended interview questions were crafted carefully to encourage faculty members to provide detailed answers. The interview questions were divided into four parts to lead the conversation in a logical manner: Introduction, Experience, Constraints, and Conclusion. An applied thematic analysis was performed to analyze the responses to the open-ended questions (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). The participants in this part of the study were five full-time tenure-track faculty members and some program concentration mentors. Besides their teaching and research roles, while carrying out academic work at their respective institutions, these faculty members have been actively engaged with organizations outside the university in numerous service and research projects, including strategic planning, leadership assessment, board development, performance evaluation, management model transitions, fundraising, and marketing assistance.

All faculty members identified experiential learning as vital to incorporate into the department curriculum. The faculty members emphasized that the primary purpose of experiential learning is to add opportunity to the doctoral students' experience and give a new approach to exploring other areas. Concerning course materials, every faculty member stressed that they believe course materials and activities are connected to providing theory, scientific tools, and creativity for doctoral students. The latter already have leadership and management experience to develop, exercise and unleash complex issues in distinctive ways. Regarding the positive connection between course materials and experiential learning outcomes, faculty members consider that experiential learning experiences bring opportunities to educational environments, providing newly learned knowledge and skills in real-world contexts. As detailed in our literature, the course materials are familiar

vehicles for learning in higher education, focusing on the doctoral level; however, they are not "taught" as hands-on, real-world experience (Walsh, 2007; Armsby, 2012).

> Within the classroom, we frequently call back to work and leadership experiences students have experienced to reinforce that leadership is often messy and varies from context to context. Experiential learning strengthens those lessons, encouraging students to marry their technical and academic expertise to make practical, positive change (Faculty Member #1, 2019).

Along with incorporating the curriculum with experiential learning for students' benefit and well-preparedness, faculty members noted that experiential learning also enhances faculty members' teaching and research strategies, consistently adding motivation to improve their course contents and enlarge their research interests. Consequently, faculty members use data from real-world organizations in their class projects and application exercises to assess organizational health, work with organizations to design evaluations often utilized by organizational leadership, and consult with organizations on impact evaluation, financial strategy, and other managerial strategies. Those motivations are just as valuable for faculty members as students (Balleisen, 2022).

> As a faculty member, seeing how science can be brought to bear on practice through these exercises is motivating. As an academician, much scientific advancement is made in the weeds with relatively minimal direct practical implications. Experiential learning exercises can help to ground our research interests (Faculty Member #2, 2019).

Building on previous efforts (Armsby & Fillery-Travis, 2009), experiential learning impacts doctoral teaching and learning in different ways, such as providing a foundation for further research and practice development, revealing rich practice knowledge and student-centered pedagogic approaches, and accelerating the explication of learning. Accordingly, the faculty members were also questioned whether they observed that their students' experiences differ from that of other doctoral programs that do not have an externship. According to faculty members, the experiential learning experience provides a unique approach to the students; they can make better decisions in their work context and advance science by asking better and more salient research questions. Additionally, the faculty members emphasized that experiential learning also urges students, who often have many years of practical experience, to leave their comfort zone and apply the knowledge they have learned from the course context. Often, they receive positive feedback from the organization that they have consulted. With such an experience, the students gain considerable confidence in their problem-solving and leadership abilities and a solid supplement for their resume and future interviews. Sometimes,

the externship links to an organization where the student wants to establish a longer-term relationship.

> For programs that do not require organizational leadership experience before entering doctoral work, the value of an externship would be priceless. Students need a unique context to apply for their work not only to make better decisions in their work context but also to ask better and more salient research questions if they continue as researchers. Even though our students have such experience coming into the program, sometimes that experience is tied to only one or two organizations. The externship allows them to see and experience another organizational context to apply their acquired knowledge deliberately and intentionally (Faculty Member#3, 2019)

Experiential learning at any level implements the context of work and experiences and implies action, practical application, and social development (Walsh, 2007; Armsby, 2012). The nature of practice means valuable experience if the practice can be verified as authentic (Armsby, 2012). With these opportunities for experiential learning in the course context in mind, the faculty members have questioned the challenges of this process. The faculty members highlighted two constraints: timing and finding the right organization. Matching an organizational need with the student's academic timeline is sometimes challenging. Several scholars (Walsh, 2007; Armsby, 2012; Balleisen, 2022) also stressed a similar fear that time is critical, and it sometimes can take longer for students to complete their degrees. The second concern is to find the right organization. The faculty members emphasized that "sometimes opportunities arise before students are ready in their course progression or vice-versa a student is ready, but the organization is not looking to accomplish the project for several months in the future." Sometimes organization leaders announce the hiring of qualified students a semester earlier. In this case study, the faculty members provide several recommendations for students, encourage students to communicate with previous cohort students to get advice about the process, list the number of organizations that are planning to apply a semester earlier, and communicate with faculty members often.

According to faculty members, experiential learning are developing work-readiness skills and graduate knowledge at the doctoral level providing wide-range opportunities for doctoral students upon graduation (Costley & Stephenson, 2009). To establish those relationships, find the right person within the organization to sponsor the externship, educate that person about our program and process, and determine a project within that person's department suitable for a short-term externship. Indeed, it requires faculty members' dedication (long time and energy) to the process.

RQ 3: Company Mentors' Perspectives

Of 58 completed externships in the program, 52 company mentors were contacted, and 45 company mentors were successfully interviewed. The selected Midwest institution leadership department students have served profit, non-profit, governmental, public, private, postsecondary, and organizational institutions (A state-level higher education agency (5 times), a local community college (3 times), the sponsoring university (10 times), a community foundation (4 times), a consulting company (4 times), public school division (4 times)).

All company mentors (leaders) expressed that the externship was a unique and rare opportunity for their company. The doctoral students worked in different areas and projects with company mentors, such as policy documents, strategic plans, new assessment systems, and so on, around a self-selected theme. Typically, the doctoral students are individuals with more than seven years of experience in the field, so these years of experience and course knowledge provide opportunities for the students to lead the projects and consult as external practitioners. Using experiential education for doctoral learning is familiar (Costley & Stephenson, 2009), but requiring it as a degree requirement has potential concerns for higher education leaders (Bailey et al., 2009). More importantly, the company leaders endorse the value of externship by confirming that doctoral students' work-based learning and knowledge are enhanced and shaped during their externship.

One company leader noted: "It was a unique experience to have a doctoral student in our organization. The individual brought a new approach to the project and supported the approach theoretically. As a leader, I was pleased with the performance and contribution to the organization. Our comprehensive organization structure and setting also added value to the individual's experience."

Along with the faculty members, the company mentors (leaders) also emphasized that a solid connection between the organization and academia is vital. This connection benefits both sides by adding a dynamic fusion of professional practice and academic knowledge (Guile, 2003). Specifically, in this case, study, the connection is vital for the department as experiential learning is associated with a formally taught curriculum. Another company leader noted: "I am grateful for the work the individual did for us. It has been helpful! I enjoyed getting to know that person and would happily work with these individuals and other doctoral students from that department again."

There were some comments regarding the externship timeline. Some company mentors noted a perceived standpoint about the length of externship and recognition of professional contribution within the organization. It requires a particular amount of time (sometimes a short period but sometimes longer than expected) for company mentors to decide how the doctoral student will be involved and contribute to the project and team. When this period was not used efficiently, it

was considered an unproductive phase for both sides. A company mentor emphasized that point in their interview:

> I wish the timing had been better to allow the person to be engaged longer in work. When the person joined our team, we were too early in the project to define several aspects and roles to contribute to it (Company Mentor #3, 2018).

This relationship inspires company mentors to consider and assign doctoral students to their projects and support the experiential learning process for the department. Correspondingly, the completed externships and mentors' satisfaction invites consideration of expanding experiential learning in doctorate education (Usher, 2002).

Interpretation of Findings Related to the Literature

This study explored the efficacy of experiential learning at the doctoral level within a specific Ph.D. program, highlighting its advantages and challenges. It included doctoral students' perspectives toward experiential learning, considering faculty members' and company mentors' perspectives complementary. The department formulated the program's experiential learning process based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984) framework. This case study confirms that experiential learning benefits the doctoral degree program (doctoral students and faculty) and the organizations.

Academia’s benefits include real work experience, mentorship skills, opportunities to utilize and test data for research purposes, application of theoretical knowledge to real projects, and more. The findings support that an externship is one of the critical learning tools that allows doctoral students to gain practical experience and learn through hands-on training. The doctoral students work or lead actual cases under the guidance of experienced supervisors and faculty, which enables doctoral students to develop practical skills and a deeper understanding of the field. The multi-faceted supervision and feedback from externship students from their supervisors and faculty members contribute to their professional identity formation and growth, enabling them to navigate their future careers successfully. Consequently, if a doctoral student holds a higher leadership position while studying for their Ph.D., they may need to realize the true value of an externship experience. However, an externship can be an invaluable experiential learning tool that allows these students to observe and experience legal and organizational culture firsthand. This experience can lead to a greater understanding of professional norms and enhance their comprehension of the subject matter. Additionally, externships are a helpful teaching tool for faculty members to accommodate doctoral seminars. By incorporating externships into their curriculum, faculty members can provide students with a practical and hands-on learning experience that complements their academic coursework.

Looking at it from an organizational perspective, hiring external, motivated, and well-educated consultants (doctoral students) for their projects can bring fresh perspectives and ideas to the table. Moreover, these consultants (doctoral students) can offer their expertise and knowledge to help organizations achieve their goals more efficiently. Additionally, hiring external consultants can be a worthwhile investment for organizations providing outside observations, which can be invaluable in identifying areas for improvement and growth.

This study also confirmed Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984) framework as vital and accurate for the experiential learning process. This learning cycle's factors are a strong chain integrating each stage through mutual support and cultivated information (Kolb, 1974). Practical, experiential learning succeeds when the cycle's factors are followed to complete the process (McLeod, 2013).

Kearney (2008) and Brown et al. (2007) endorse the externship process for improving students' capability to collaborate with field mentors and gain experience through mentorship. Armsby (2012) supports the externship experience of learning with course materials and indicates that it advances career opportunities and personal development. The doctoral students' responses confirmed that the externship learning in the program eased them into connecting with the real-world environment and field mentors and provided an opportunity for applying the course knowledge. The students also corroborated that the experiential learning cycle sequences and course materials were essential to complete the externship successfully. Meanwhile, the doctoral students' responses confirmed that the individual approach is vital to the process, as some students desired more structure and oversight in their experiential learning process. Still, some indicated preferring keeping structure and oversight to a minimum. To that end, these findings from the doctoral students' perspective support the program's goals under investigation to create *pracademics*: individuals who can transfer, translate, and apply knowledge beyond the university's walls (Posner, 2009; Runkle, 2014). The externship experience is one part of the making of a pracademic.

Armsby and Fillery-Travis (2009; 2011) underline that experiential learning provides a foundation for further research and practice development, revealing rich practice knowledge and student-centered pedagogical approaches and accelerating the explication of learning. A strength of this study is that faculty members and company mentors support well-prepared doctoral students for real-world work environments, using real case studies and data from real-world organizations to assess organizational health. Faculty members commented that experiential learning also adds value to the curriculum, improves the course contents, and expands the research interests.

Regarding the numerous benefits of experiential learning within organizational and academic settings, the faculty members and company mentors (leaders) allocated resources or strategies that could improve learning within the organizational and academic settings 1) to generate strong networking relations between organizational and academic settings and 2) find the right person within the organization to sponsor a short-term externship(s). The faculty members and company mentors (leaders) also highlighted the process's challenges. Both the faculty members and company mentors mentioned that timing and finding the right project at the right time are challenging during this period. Several scholars (e.g., Walsh, 2007; Armsby, 2012; Balleisen, 2022) emphasized that time is critical; sometimes, students can take longer to complete their degrees. Those concerns continue shaping faculty members' and institutional decisions to incorporate experiential learning into the curriculum (Armsby, 2012; Balleisen, 2022). In addition, the externship sites are student selected for the most part and developed in concert with the organization. Faculty members are involved if significant challenges or issues arise.

Implication for Practice

The research findings shed light on several vital considerations for academic doctoral degree programs and institutions that are planning to implement experiential learning into their curriculum.

Academic Component

Implementing an experiential learning experience requires keeping in mind four peripheral factors of experiential learning, as highlighted by Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Figure 1 displayed the cycle, which is presented in a recursive format, allowing for multiple entry points and experiences.

In this case study, the concentration experience factors were translated as externship placements. It is worth noting that this selected doctoral degree program focuses on three areas: Organizational Science and Leadership, Postsecondary Analysis and Leadership, and Nonprofit and Community Leadership. The focus of the doctoral students' externship lies in these areas.

Reflective observation, which refers to common characteristics and considerations of the new experience. Reflective observation is a critical point in this experiential learning process because it allows learners to analyze and evaluate their experiences, which helps them develop a deeper understanding of their learning. Reflective observation involves:

- Examining students' experiences.
- Analyzing the factors that influenced them.
- Reflecting on what was learned.

By engaging in reflective observation, doctoral students identify patterns and relationships between their experiences and their knowledge, which can help them develop new insights and perspectives. Additionally, reflective observation can help doctoral students identify areas where they need to improve, which can lead to more effective learning outcomes. Reflective journaling and project-based assignments were used to facilitate knowledge translation.

Developing meaningful observation between experience and learning is essential for empowering significant empirical and experiential knowledge. Abstract Conceptualization helps gather new and valuable ideas in the reflection stage and modify existing abstract concepts. Active Experimentation is the conclusion of accumulated ideas that are important determinants of experiential learning knowledge and experience success. Learners apply new ideas to the world and analyze the results.

The cycle factors are a strong chain, and the experiential learning process integrates from one stage to another with mutual support and cultivated information. Practical, experiential learning occurs when the cycle factors are followed as one completes the process. Incorporating these peripheral factors can enhance the experiential learning experience, leading to better learning outcomes.

Duration of the Externship

As we mentioned earlier in our paper, the externship course is essential to the academic degree program, providing a capstone experience that integrates the student's prior knowledge and current work experience with advanced leadership concepts. After about ten years of observation, it is confirmed that the duration of one semester and a minimum requirement between 70 to 100 hours of work are ample opportunities to gain valuable insights and skills to advance doctoral students' careers. There are several ways to accomplish this time duration, depending on the needs of the organization and the doctoral student; this externship opportunity could be hybrid - combined with online and face-to-face experiences.

Faculty Role

Faculty members play a pivotal role in supporting students during their doctoral externship experiences. Faculty members provide valuable guidance to help doctoral students identify and achieve their learning objectives, offer resources for research, and provide regular feedback on their performance. By working closely with externship site supervisors, faculty members also ensure that students receive quality training that aligns with their learning objectives. Faculty members help doctoral students maximize their learning experiences by taking a more active role in the externship process.

Field Placement and Logistics

The success of any externship program depends on the effective management of field placements and logistics. To ensure that doctoral students receive the best possible learning experience, it is essential for our doctoral degree program to have qualified and enthusiastic field supervisors who can guide and mentor them. However, finding the right supervisors, advance level projects and securing suitable field placements requires more than luck or chance. It requires careful planning, coordination, and a proactive approach to building relationships with external organizations. By investing time and effort in developing strong partnerships with these organizations, we create mutually beneficial relationships that benefit all parties involved.

We also encourage company mentors to actively engage with doctoral degree program faculty members to share any projects that require external consultants. Meanwhile, the faculty leaders can make an information database available for company mentors to drop proposals anytime. The proposal must explain the project and how external consultants (doctoral students) can be involved. Doctoral students' workload must be up to 100 logged hours at the field placement.

Conclusion

To conclude, while the study may be preliminary, its findings are encouraging and offer potential benefits for academic institutions considering the implementation of doctoral-level externships as part of their degree requirements. The findings of this case study could serve as a pilot for such institutions, providing valuable insights into the benefits of such programs. Overall, the potential positive impact of these externships on students' professional development and career prospects make them a worthwhile consideration for academic institutions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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