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Beyond the Classroom

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Beyond the Classroom

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Friday September 29, 2017

By Eric F. Spina

Karen Velasquez had never recorded a podcast or produced a video, but if you're the director of experiential learning (EL) on campus, hands-on learning is what it's all about.

Quietly but effectively as a new member of our UD community, Karen is promoting the new Office of Experiential Learning by showcasing the "voices" of students whose lives have been transformed when they venture outside their comfort zones and learn by experience.

In a podcast and videos produced through the "EL Lab" in the Learning Teaching Center inside Roesch Library, students reflect on how their academic journey has introduced them to hands-on learning experiences, inside and beyond the classroom. These narratives tell a story of personal discovery, of powerful applied learning, that truly distinguish the University of Dayton in their depth and level of impact.

Learning by Doing — and Reflecting

Whether students tutor inmates at the Montgomery County jail, work alongside experienced researchers in labs across campus, or navigate China's Grand Canal, they are learning life's greatest lessons. We learn best by doing — and reflecting on those experiences. This is the future of learning, and we want to infuse these types of experiences in every major.

Take, for instance, Allyson Pacifico, a student research assistant in the EL office. She embarked on an immersion trip to Ecuador and honed her leadership skills as a Neighborhood Fellow. She says these experiences will help her interact effectively with diverse co-workers when she takes her applied math economics degree to the workplace. She's currently collaborating with Karen on a study of how EL supports student success and retention.

Developing Corps of Faculty Mentors

We want to provide these kinds of hands-on experiences to all students. The Office of Experiential Learning recently launched a [website](#) with resources for students and faculty, hired a student peer adviser, and awarded grants to a dozen professors who are creatively integrating EL experiences in their classes — and showing other faculty how to do it.

An EL advisory group and two faculty fellows, Kevin Hallinan and Joel Pruce, are engaging faculty in creating EL opportunities, assessing their impact, and advising and helping students reflect on their experiences.

For example, this semester, faculty are using grants to provide students with hands-on practice debugging Virtual Reality applications as well as creating a Dayton Public Library exhibit of posters that typographically illustrate human rights issues through the personal stories of those who live in Dayton neighborhoods.

Taking Experiential Learning to the Next Level

I'm energized when students describe how their professors encouraged them to stretch themselves, to learn from these experiences. They use words like "transformative," "engaging," even "life changing." Students are linking their passions with the world's needs — and gaining valuable résumé-building experience.

Our faculty and staff have long prided themselves on mentoring students through these value-added experiences, and now Karen and the Office of Experiential Learning are available to systematically support faculty and students to take us to the next level.

This is the power of a Marianist education. When students discover their passions — and a higher calling in life — it's transformative.