

Handbook for Experiential Learning and Civic Engagement – GenEd 27 Implementation

This handbook was created to explore how varied forms of experiential learning and civic engagement (ELCE) can be integrated into the new learning outcomes for Illinois State’s general education framework that will be implemented in the fall of 2027. This document has three specific aims:

1. To define experiential learning and civic engagement
2. To identify the characteristics and benefits of experiential learning and civic engagement
3. To provide examples of approaches that can be used to meet each of the eight experiential learning and civic engagement objectives along with strategies to support success in meeting each of those objectives

Note: The document will continue to evolve as the Council on General Education begins to review proposals.

Category Description

Description

How can you use what you learn in the classroom to make a difference in the world? How can you use your knowledge, skills, and values to address complex topics with civility? How can you enact the values of democracy and justice? Experiential Learning and Civic Engagement courses help students address local, state, national, or global challenges through reflection on learning by doing.

Courses in this Category

Courses in this category cultivate civic skills by providing opportunities to apply course material to address opportunities and challenges and use experiential learning (EL) to engage students in hands-on activities and structured reflection. EL generally consists of concrete/hands-on experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization (analyzing concepts), and active experimentation (applying knowledge in new contexts). This category encourages interdisciplinary problem-solving, personal development, and ethical and informed civic engagement.

Examples of Experiential Learning and Civic Engagement courses may include course-based undergraduate research; study abroad; applied or community-engaged research; gen-ed designated internships; case studies (based on societal concerns); social entrepreneurship; field experiences; interactive simulations; service-learning; performance-based learning (such as activities/works of art performed for an audience and revised based on reflection and experimentation).

Student Learning

Students will learn to address complex challenges, reflect on their lived experiences, and explore how to transform their knowledge into ethical action. Students will learn to apply knowledge to new and complex contexts and will develop skills that prepare them to be informed, ethical, and engaged community members and life-long learners.

Assessed Learning Outcomes

Courses in this category must meet at least two of the following learning outcomes:

- 2.5 Collaborate in diverse teams
- 2.6 Transform knowledge into judgment and action.
- 2.7 Derive meaning from experience and information gathered through observation.
- 3.1 Demonstrate responsibility for contributing to a more just, equitable, and sustainable world.
- 3.2 Demonstrate respect for the complex identities of others, their histories, and their cultures.
- 3.3 Enact values and practices reflecting democratic processes.
- 3.4 Listen and engage respectfully to multiple perspectives.
- 3.5 Justify a position based on ethics, consequence(s) of decision, or personal values.

Defining Experiential Learning & Civic Engagement

Experiential learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes learning through direct experience, reflection, and application. With a focus on developing students' self-efficacy, faculty engage students in hands-on, often real-world activities—such as structured internships, service learning, authentic research projects, simulations, fieldwork, or collaborative problem-solving—and then critically reflect on those experiences to deepen understanding.

Core characteristics of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) include:

1. Engaging in an activity or real-life task through specific, concrete experiences.
2. Reflecting on experiences intended to support student learning and success.
3. Making explicit connections to theories or concepts that are important to student learning and success.
4. Applying what was learned to new situations through active experimentation and engagement.

Civic engagement involves developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and addressing shared problems through both political and non-political processes. Civic engagement helps students become informed, engaged, and responsible community members who are prepared to thoughtfully address local, national, and global issues. Through civic learning, students gain an understanding of democratic principles and develop collaborative problem-solving skills in real-world contexts (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023). The Center for Civic Engagement uses the [SEED Wheel of Social Change Model](#) as framework for mapping different types of engagement.

Experiential learning that addresses civic engagement objectives helps students to:

1. **Deepen understanding and retention:** Engaging directly in experiences helps students internalize and retain content and civic knowledge more effectively than passive learning methods.

2. **Bridge theory and practice:** Students see how abstract concepts apply in real-world contexts, helping them connect course content with professional practice and public relevance and helps them gain a sense of personal responsibility as members of a community.
3. **Enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills:** Through reflection and real-time decision-making, students develop higher order thinking skills (analyzing information, evaluating evidence, posing solutions) and learn how to leverage knowledge in diverse settings.
4. **Promote engagement and motivation:** Students often find experiential learning more meaningful and personally relevant, increasing motivation and investment in their learning.
5. **Foster career readiness and professional identity:** By participating in activities aligned with their future careers, students develop professional competencies and a clearer sense of their vocational paths and how they can integrate civic engagement into their professional life.
6. **Encourage civic and social responsibility:** Civically engaged experiential learning promotes empathy, cultural competence, and ethical decision-making.
7. **Support equity and inclusion:** Experiential learning connected to civic engagement goals can validate diverse ways of knowing and empower students from underrepresented backgrounds by valuing lived experiences.

ELCE Pedagogy and Learning Outcomes

Experiential Learning and Civic Engagement courses are required to select 2+ of these learning outcomes. While there is no percent of a course that has to be ELCE, the course should reasonably meet the two learning outcomes to receive the ELCE category designation.

Below are examples of how the learning outcomes can be implemented into an Experiential Learning and Civic Engagement course.

LO #2.5: Collaborate in diverse teams.

To meet the learning outcome the most effective learning opportunities are those that require students to engage meaningfully with others across differences (e.g., cultural, disciplinary, socioeconomic, or experiential backgrounds) toward a social or community goal and facilitate students developing skills to do so. Below are several types of learning activities that support this objective:

1. Team-based service learning
2. Collaborative or group based research projects
3. Study abroad or virtual exchange programs
4. Internships or co-ops
5. Design thinking or innovation challenges
6. Role play or simulation activities
7. Capstone projects
8. Course based undergraduate research experience (CURE)

Keys to success in achieving this learning outcome:

- Teach about positive teamwork
- Scaffold development of skills needed for effective collaboration
- Intentional team formation to ensure diversity
- Guided reflection on team dynamics and communication
- Provision of opportunities to practice feedback and conflict resolution
- Faculty support or coaching on inclusive collaboration

LO #2.6: Transform knowledge into judgement and action.

To meet this learning outcome, the most effective learning activities require students to analyze information, make informed decisions, and apply their learning in real or simulated contexts. These experiences should engage both critical thinking and ethical reasoning while prompting students to take responsible, purposeful action. Learning activities that support this outcome include:

1. Case-based learning or simulations
2. Community engaged projects
3. Research-to-practice initiatives
4. Entrepreneurship or innovation challenges
5. Clinical, practicum, or fieldwork placements
6. Policy advocacy or debate projects
7. Prototyping and testing in design-focused courses
8. Authentic research experiences

Keys to success in achieving this learning outcome:

- Provision of authentic stakes or consequences to actions taken
- Structured opportunities for reflection on decisions made
- Mentorship or feedback from professionals or community members
- Integrations of ethics, equity, and social impact in decision-making
- Opportunities to identify problems, formulate hypotheses, and devise methodologies

LO #2.7: Derive meaning from experience and information gathered through observation.

To meet this learning outcome, the most effective learning strategies engage students in close observation, analysis, and interpretation of real or simulated situations. These experiences help students move from simply noticing or recording information to developing insights, recognizing patterns, and drawing conclusions about experiences with public or social relevance. Learning activities that support this outcome include:

1. Structured observation exercises
2. Reflective journaling and field notes
3. Participant observation in fieldwork, public meetings, or other relevant contexts

4. Simulation with debriefing
5. Site visits or walk-along interviews
6. Video analysis or recorded observations
7. Artifact or document analysis
8. Data analysis and revision

Keys to success in achieving this learning outcome:

- Providing scaffolded prompts or observation protocols to guide focus
- Engaging in facilitated reflection to support sense-making
- Ensuring opportunities to link observation with theory or prior knowledge
- Providing iterative opportunities to learn from mistakes and refine approaches
- Providing feedback or peer discussion to explore multiple interpretations of individual experiences

LO #3.1: Demonstrate responsibility for contributing to a more just, equitable, and sustainable world

To meet this learning outcome, the most effective learning activities should engage students in real-world contexts where they confront social, environmental, or economic injustices—and are challenged to act ethically, collaboratively, and reflectively. These experiences should promote critical self-awareness, systems thinking, and community engagement. Students can demonstrate responsibility in a variety of ways: such as holding themselves accountable for their actions and statements; reflecting on ways their behaviors affect others, identifying problems and offering ways/performing actions to remedy them, acknowledging their mistakes and working to correct them. Examples of activities that could help accomplish this outcome include:

1. Community-engaged learning or service learning
2. Social justice advocacy projects
3. Critical reflection assignments
4. Sustainability-focused fieldwork or projects
5. Internships with social impact organizations
6. Participatory action research
7. Structured-decision making (such as in a policy-paper)
8. Study abroad
9. Research ethics and integrity training

Keys to success in achieving this learning outcome:

- Creating an intentional focus on equity, justice, and sustainability goals
- Providing opportunities to build partnerships with impacted communities
- Engaging in structured reflection on ethical dilemmas, identity, and impact
- Ensuring accountability for action, not just awareness

LO #3.2: Demonstrate respect for the complex identities of others, their histories, and their cultures

To meet this learning outcome, the most effective learning activities should immerse students in diverse perspectives, foster intercultural empathy, and challenge them to reflect critically on their own assumptions. The goal for this objective is not just awareness, but rather the development of relational skills grounded in humility, listening, and mutual respect. Examples of activities that could help accomplish this outcome include:

1. Intercultural exchange or study abroad (including virtual exchange)
2. Community-based learning in diverse settings
3. Identity-focused dialogue or storytelling projects
4. Cultural immersion and ethnographic observation
5. Theatre of the oppressed or arts-based learning
6. Oral history or testimony projects
7. Critical heritage or museum studies experiences
8. Creative or artistic works, exhibits, or portfolios
9. A focus on the importance of cultural knowledge in scientific problem-solving
10. Case studies and problem sets that involve global scientific challenges, such as climate change or public health issues, requiring students to consider cultural and ethical implications in their solutions.

Keys to success in achieving this learning outcome:

- Fostering intentional relationship-building and reciprocity
- Facilitating pre- and post-experience reflection on bias, privilege, and identity
- Using ethical engagement frameworks (e.g., cultural humility, decolonizing methods) ensuring that engagement does not unintentional cause harm
- Providing mentorship or facilitation by culturally knowledgeable partners
- Training in cultural competency and ethical considerations in scientific research

LO #3.3: Enact values and practices reflecting democratic processes

To meet this learning outcome, the most effective learning activities should engage students in collaborative, participatory decision-making, civic dialogue, and collective problem solving. These experiences help students internalize democratic principles -- such as equity, accountability, voice, and deliberation – all through real or simulated engagement in public life. Examples of activities that support this learning outcome include:

1. Voter education and mobilization projects
2. Deliberative dialogue and public forums
3. Mock government or policy simulations
4. Participatory budgeting or campus decision-making
5. Coalition-building or grassroots organizing
6. Journalism, media, or public information campaigns
7. Restorative justice or conflict resolution circles

8. Structured decision making (deliberative process to weigh pros and cons/possible outcomes of complex public decisions)
9. Citizen Science Initiatives

Keys to success in achieving this learning outcome:

- Providing opportunities for shared decision-making and power-sharing
- Supporting systematic reflection on fairness, voice, and structural inequalities
- Exposing students to diverse viewpoints and lived experiences
- Practicing with consensus-building, compromise, and civic action

LO #3.4: Engage respectfully with multiple perspectives

To meet this learning outcome, the most successful learning activities should place students in situations where they encounter, consider, and respond to differing viewpoints, especially across lines of identity, ideology, or lived experience. These experiences help develop intellectual humility, empathy, and the skills required to communicate across difference with curiosity and care. Examples of learning approaches that would be appropriate for this outcome include:

1. Intergroup dialogue or facilitated conversation circles
2. Perspective-taking case studies or role play
3. Cross-cultural learning experiences
4. Structured controversial issue discussions
5. Comparative analysis assignments
6. Theater, storytelling, or oral history projects
7. Active Listening workshops
8. Deliberative dialogues, citizen assemblies, or structured decision-making forums/activities
9. Collaborative multicultural research projects

Keys to success with this learning outcome:

- Intentional inclusion of multiple authentic perspectives
- Developing, adapting, or using extant norms or protocols for respectful dialogue
- Ensuring facilitated reflection on bias, identity, and assumptions
- Providing opportunities for students to listen before responding
- Establishing research teams with diverse members to investigate topics requiring intercultural collaboration

LO #3.5: Justify a position based on ethics, consequence(s) of decision, and/or personal values

To meet this learning outcome, the most successful learning activities should place students in situations that require ethical reasoning, value clarification, and the evaluation of real, potential, or simulated consequences. These experiences help students connect abstract moral

frameworks with real-world complexity, fostering thoughtful, principled action. Examples of learning activities that support this outcome :

1. Ethics simulations or moral dilemma scenarios
2. Deliberative Dialogues
3. Values clarification and reflective writing
4. Structured debates or position papers
5. Real world case study analysis
6. Research ethics or IRB simulations
7. Literature, film, or media critique from an ethical lens
8. Community-based projects with an ethical impact
9. Structured decision making

Keys to success with this learning outcome:

- Using an ethical framework for design and implementation of activities (e.g., utilitarianism, care ethics, justice theory)
- Explicit articulation of reasoning and value-based justification
- Providing opportunities to discuss and debate ethical tensions
- Systematically reflecting on outcomes, responsibility, and personal growth

Ideas to support experiential learning in large classes

- Case studies can provide problem-based learning opportunities and discussions. Students can work in teams to develop solutions. Classroom technology can provide methods for many groups or individuals to contribute to polls or reflections to progress through different stages and tasks working through the case study.
- Feedback on reflections can use AI, natural language processing and machine learning to help instructors provide feedback (Gerard et al., 2015). Normalizing rubrics with teaching assistants to assess reflections and contributions in large classes can also help with assessing experiential learning.
- Design scaffolded projects that provide checkpoints throughout the project that can be assessed through peer evaluation.
- Structure project teamwork and peer collaboration ensuring that students have specific responsibilities within the group to engage all group members.

Potential examples in introductory or first year courses

- Writing: Partner with a local nonprofit to write grant proposals, newsletters, or blog posts.
- Introductory Sociology: Conduct mini-ethnographic studies of campus spaces or student subcultures.
- Environmental Science: Participate in a campus sustainability audit or local conservation project.
- Communication: Deliver speeches to real audiences, such as student organizations or community groups.

- Math or Statistics: Analyze real datasets from campus services (e.g., dining, transportation) and present findings.
- Community-Based Projects: Collaborate with local organizations on short-term service-learning initiatives.

Scoring Rubric

The following rubric will be used by the Council on General Education to score applicant responses to EL/CE-designation application questions. A score of 7 or higher is required to receive the designation, with no entries in the (0) column.

	2	1	0
Connection Between Academic Content and Experiential Learning	One or more of the learning outcomes reflects the presence of experiential learning in the class, and the experiential learning clearly connects to key academic themes in the course.	One or more of the learning outcomes reflects the presence of experiential learning. There is some evidence that the experiential learning enhances the academic learning.	There are outcomes listed, but none reflect the presence of experiential learning in the class.
Civic Engagement Outcome(s)	One or more of the outcomes listed clearly reflect the creation of opportunities that advance the student's role as an informed, engaged, and responsible community member.	One or more of the outcomes listed somewhat reflect the creation of opportunities that advance the student's role as an informed, engaged, and responsible community member.	The outcomes listed do not reflect any connection to civic engagement.
Continuous Reflection	The application clearly states how the continuous, structured reflection connects to academic content/civic and experiential learning goals.	The application mentions continuous, structured reflection, but could be clearer as to how reflection connects to academic content.	The application does not mention reflection assignments/course activities or does not clearly connect reflection assignments to experiential learning and academic content.
Connection to at least two of the learning outcomes in the EL/CE Gen Ed category	The application includes at least two EL/CE learning outcomes and clearly indicates which assignments/course activities address the outcomes. The assignments/activities substantively address the chosen outcomes.	The application includes at least two EL/CE learning outcomes but could be clearer about which assignments/course activities address the learning outcomes and how they meet them.	The application does not include learning outcomes related to at least two of the EL/CE outcomes or does not contain any significant assignments/course activities that address at least two of the EL/CE learning outcomes

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