



**EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING 2.0
AT
MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY:
A DISCUSSION PAPER**

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Introduction

Since its founding in 1839, Mount Allison University has provided generations of students with exceptional learning experiences. The university's commitment to education in the liberal arts and sciences in an enriched living and learning environment has meant that Mount Allison graduates acquire career-related skills coupled with a broad education that serves them well in a variety of fields. Mount Allison's graduates now populate leadership and decision-making positions in business, government, and public sector organizations, and the professions. They are also advancing knowledge in the academy and the private sector in Canada and around the world.

The University's Strategic Statement summarizes well what makes the Mount Allison experience distinctive:

Mount Allison's differentiation lies in its intimate nature and smaller scale, which fosters meaningful engagement between students, and between students and their faculty and community. The immersion of engaged students into a total academic and community experience provides a positive momentum for future success (graduate/professional programs or career), personal growth, and engagement in society domestically and internationally.

This brief discussion document sets out a plan for building on Mount Allison's commitment to providing students with an exceptional undergraduate experience. It focuses in particular on enhancing Mount Allison's programs and curricula by introducing or augmenting experiential education for students. It builds on ideas articulated in *Changing to Preserve: Renewing Academic Programming at Mount Allison* (2008).

Changing to Preserve: Renewing Academic Programming at Mount Allison

Nearly a decade ago, Dr. Stephen McClatchie outlined an ambitious plan to renew academic programming at Mount Allison. *Changing to Preserve* involved the renewal of the academic mission and identity of Mount Allison, and the fostering of program development and renewal for the benefit of students and faculty alike. A number of task group reports were developed out of this process, and following a period of consultation, the Provost outlined several actions to be taken as part of the academic renewal process. Many of the changes proposed as a result of *Changing to Preserve* are now an integral part of program delivery at Mount Allison. A few actions remain outstanding (e.g., distribution requirements, changes to the academic judicial policy, etc.), and are expected to be completed in 2015-2016. The changes that resulted from this process have brought us to where we are today.

A few of the key areas identified in *Changing to Preserve* remain important today, and some would say are perhaps even more critical at a time when the post-secondary sector and the economy at large are facing tremendous challenges. *Changing to Preserve* signaled a commitment at Mount Allison to the core areas of the university's mission – the relationship between teaching and learning,

and the importance of faculty research. In addition, *Changing to Preserve* identified learning outcomes as critical to the academic mission of the university.

In the years since *Changing to Preserve*, the focus on teaching and learning, pedagogical best practices, and the professional development of academic staff (and to a degree, Mount Allison students) has continued. Mount Allison boasts many gifted teachers, several of whom have been recognized with teaching awards locally, regionally, and nationally. As well, the Purdy Crawford Teaching Centre (PCTC) has supported the academic mission by providing an evidence-based approach that supports individual faculty members (on matters related to pedagogy) as well as departments (on matters related to programs and curricula).

With respect to research, a majority of Mount Allison faculty maintain active programs of research and creative activities. Several Mount Allison faculty members have been successful in securing national research grants that provide them with the essential supports to carry out nationally and internationally recognized research programs. Not insignificantly, such awards have been used to provide Mount Allison students with exceptional research experiences that, at other larger comprehensive and research-intensive universities, would be restricted to students in master's and, more likely, doctoral programs. Mount Allison students who have enjoyed a research experience and associated rewards (including peer-reviewed publications, for example) find themselves highly sought-after in graduate and professional programs across Canada and around the world. Research-active faculty inevitably bring their own professional engagement in research into the classroom as well, thereby enriching the experiences of all Mount Allison students.

The focus on outcomes articulated in *Changing to Preserve* remains an area for development. The action advocated was the inclusion of learning outcomes in all course syllabi, but this has yet to be fully realized. Several departments, in the course of academic program reviews, have carried out important work to identify the ways in which disciplinary curricula should be sequenced, and the various learning outcomes expected at different levels of study. More work is needed to complete this work.

In the meantime, there is increasing emphasis on the outcomes not only of courses but of university degrees. In public discourse, students, their parents, government, and the public at large have challenged universities to demonstrate the value of university degrees. Discussion of skill shortages proliferates, and there continue to be concerns that students – particularly those earning degrees in the liberal arts and sciences – are ill-prepared for the workforce. Community colleges have expanded significantly in recent years, and their leaders trumpet the fact that students earning degrees and certificates in the college system are “job-ready” and that there is close to 100% employment for their graduates relatively soon after graduation.

The university sector has not been idle in the debate about the return on investment of a university degree. There is extensive research showing the value of a university degree, and that business leaders consider liberal arts and sciences graduates as highly attractive. Writing in *Forbes* magazine in 2012, Vivek Ranadivé wrote, “If you teach students one trade, that skill might be obsolete in a few years. But if you teach people how to think and look at lots of information and connect dots – all skills that a classic liberal education gives you – you will thrive.”

Universities of every type (liberal arts, comprehensive, and research-intensive) have, in recent years, renewed their focus on the undergraduate experience and the importance of providing students with a foundational education in the arts and sciences. In addition, there is growing attention and programming to providing students with experiential learning opportunities. The reason for this emphasis: that by teaching students to learn by doing, they will be better prepared for the world they

will enter upon graduation. Not insignificantly, universities will also be better placed to demonstrate the value of a university degree, and that a university degree *is* a pathway to a vocation.

Experiential Learning: What is it?

The great teacher and philosopher Aristotle was among the first teacher to propose that the best way to learn was by doing. He said,

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyreplayers by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. (Book II: Moral Ethics, Nicomachean Ethics)

This principle is the heart of experiential learning. Many definitions of experiential learning have been advanced. The Association for Experiential Education says that “Experiential education is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in **direct experience** and **focused reflection** in order to **increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values**” (<http://www.aee.org/what-is-ee>). Conceived in this way, experiential education involves the student in his/her own learning, the acquisition of specific skills (related to tasks, for example), experimentation (and not only as this term is understood in scientific research), risk-taking, reflection, the building of relationships, and much more. It can involve discovery of things, about things, and about oneself. It can lead to innovation through the application of knowledge. It can involve creation – of concepts, ideas, things, and relationships. And it is a powerful vehicle for transformation. Experiential education places the student at the centre of learning.

Experiential Education at Mount Allison University

The University’s Strategic Statement includes the following commitment:

Mount Allison offers a robust liberal arts and science curriculum that enhances learning and enriches the university experience, thereby providing a living/learning environment where career-related skills are developed alongside critical thinking skills and the broad perspective that a liberal education encourages.

Changing to Preserve outlined a set of “essential outcomes and literacies” for all Mount Allison graduates, regardless of their area of study or degree program, viz.

- a. Effective and ethical work habits;
- b. Scholarly knowledge and methods;
- c. Critical and creative thinking; and
- d. Citizenship and engagement.

Over a number of years, the core curriculum and various co-curricular activities and programs have encouraged Mount Allison students’ acquisition of these essential outcomes and literacies.

Principally, experiential education has occurred through:



Research Experiences are made available to Mount Allison students within courses (e.g., labs), volunteer and employment opportunities, and research grants held by faculty and students. Mount Allison is differentiated from many universities by its commitment, particularly in the sciences, to laboratory-based education to demonstrate theoretical concepts. In addition to course-based research experiences, several students acquire experience in research through volunteer opportunities and employment in faculty labs. Mount Allison has a very robust program of research awards for students in 3rd year. Approximately 45 awards are made annually to students who carry out independent research projects that are supervised by a faculty mentor.

Internships have been established in some programs (e.g., the Ron Joyce Centre for Business Studies, the Politics, Philosophy and Economics program), and still others are available to any student at Mount Allison (e.g., the Mansbridge Internship, the Layton Fisher Internship in Philanthropy). Internships provide students with workplace-integrated learning opportunities. In addition to applying learning in a workplace environment (either in the private sector, government department, non-governmental organization, etc.), students have the opportunity to gain valuable experience in an organization, learning its culture, developing significant relationships, and so on.

Service Learning involves taking what is learned in the classroom out to the community. The idea behind service learning is to demonstrably benefit individuals in communities while also encouraging problem-solving, civic engagement, the development of leadership skills, and self-reflection. Mount Allison students have numerous service learning opportunities outside of the classroom through Leadership Mount Allison, the many student groups on campus, and activities organized through Student and Residence Life (e.g., Global Medical Brigades, Habitat for Humanity, SMILE, etc.).

Field Trips and Study Abroad opportunities provide students with a variety of experiential learning opportunities. Some of these may involve research; others may involve service learning; and still others involve cross-cultural learning.

The four broad classes of experiential learning – research experiences, internships, service learning, and field trips and study abroad – all typically afford students with opportunities for one-on-one mentoring, personal growth, “real world” experiences, and/or leadership development. And in each of these types of experiential education provided to Mount Allison students, the various learning outcomes and abilities that we would wish for students to experience – effective and ethical work habits, the understanding and use of scholarly knowledge and methods, critical and creative thinking, and citizenship and engagement – are not only possible, but very much assured.

Experiential Learning 2.0 at Mount Allison University

Mount Allison is already a leader in student-centred experiential learning. This is true with respect to course-based activities as well as the various extra-curricular options available to many of our students (e.g., student government, student groups, etc.). Although the university currently offers a wide array of opportunities for experiential learning, there is no guarantee that experiential learning will be a part of a student’s experience while at Mount Allison. Whether and when students have opportunities for experiential education depends on:

- The programs and courses we offer;
- The availability of resources to support experiential learning;
- The particular interests of students; and/or
- The interests and availability of faculty (and in some cases, peer) mentors.

Whether and how to change or expand experiential education are the questions before the Mount Allison community now. This is what is meant by “Experiential Learning 2.0.” Is there more that Mount Allison can do? Are there different things that we can do? What is the next generation of experiential education at Mount Allison? The task forward is to build on the very solid foundation of programs and opportunities that already exists, ensuring that we continue to support exceptional learning experiences for Mount Allison students.

If we want to enhance students’ opportunities for experiential learning, we need to consider several questions.

1. What new opportunities should be developed?
2. How will experiential education be organized? (Operationally, what is required to ensure that the program is of high quality and sustainable in the long-term?)
3. What resources are needed to support experiential education? (Can this initiative be supported through the budget process? Are new funds required, and if so, should experiential education be a priority in future fundraising?)
4. What are the implications for students, faculty, and degree programs?

The remainder of this document sets out some goals and associated actions for consideration by the community.

Goal #1: In order to more fully integrate experiential learning at Mount Allison, it is proposed that experiential learning become an integral aspect of all degrees awarded to Mount Allison students.

BEGINNING IN THE 2016-2017 ACADEMIC YEAR, ALL MOUNT ALLISON STUDENTS SHALL, BY THE END OF THEIR DEGREE PROGRAMS, HAVE AT LEAST TWO CONSEQUENTIAL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN RESEARCH, INTERNSHIPS, SERVICE LEARNING, AND/OR FIELD TRIPS/STUDY ABROAD.

Actions Required:

1. There must be clear definitions and guidelines on what constitutes a “consequential experiential learning opportunity.” A task group (advisory to the Provost) shall be established to develop a conceptual framework for experiential learning at Mount Allison. The work of this task group shall be completed by October 31, 2015.
2. “Consequential experiential learning opportunities” must be catalogued. A comprehensive survey of courses shall be completed by October 31, 2015.
3. Faculty will be encouraged to modify existing courses or develop new courses that contain an experiential component.
4. A process for the notation of courses with an experiential learning component shall be established by the Senate Committee on Experiential Learning, in consultation with the Senate Committee on Academic Matters.

Goal #2: Mount Allison’s experience in providing students with research opportunities should be increased substantially (currently approximately 45 awards are made each year), and particular efforts should be directed at not only increasing the number, but also the range of research opportunities for Mount Allison students.

BY 2019-2020, THE NUMBER OF RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO MOUNT ALLISON STUDENTS SHALL BE AT LEAST DOUBLE THAT AVAILABLE IN 2015-2016.

Actions Required:

1. The Senate Committee on Research and Creative Activities shall review the program architecture for the Independent Student Research Grants (ISRG) program, considering the following matters:
 - a. Eligibility (currently, the ISRG gives preference to 3rd year students): Should eligibility be expanded to include 2nd year as well as 3rd year students? Could a student hold ISRGs in consecutive years?
 - b. Supervisors can supervise no more than two students holding ISRGs. Should the limit be lifted, and if so, under what circumstances? How would supervisor capacity be determined?
2. The Senate Committee on Research and Creative Activities shall explore ways to encourage broader engagement in the ISRG program by both students and faculty across the disciplines.
3. The Senate Committee on Research and Creative Activities shall explore all possible sources of support for student research (e.g., NSERC programs involving industrial research opportunities, the MITACS program, etc.).
4. The Senate Committee on Experiential Learning shall establish a set of guidelines for the awarding of academic credit for work (e.g., honours thesis work) completed while holding a ISRG award.
5. The Senate Committee on Research and Creative Activities shall explore the ways in which faculty research grants (through the President's Research and Creative Activities Fund) and ISRG awards to students might be coupled.

Goal #3: Internships provide students with “real-world” opportunities to apply knowledge and to gain important professional skills (e.g., communications, teamwork, problem-solving, etc.). Internship opportunities should be increased substantially university-wide. In addition, a comprehensive program to support student interns should be established. This includes professional development workshops in advance of the internship, supports in the development of learning objectives and learning outcomes, and templates for supervisors and mentors in host organizations.

BY 2019-2020, AT LEAST 50 INTERNSHIPS SHALL BE AVAILABLE TO 3RD YEAR MOUNT ALLISON STUDENTS.

Actions Required:

1. A working group consisting of one person from each faculty and two persons from University Advancement (including personnel in Alumni Affairs) shall collaborate in establishing a framework for securing internship placements and the funding of Mount Allison's internship program. This working group will also outline supports for interns and a template for the creation of all new internship opportunities.
2. The Senate Committee on Experiential Learning shall develop guidelines for “Build Your Own” Internships.

Goal #4: Service learning offers students opportunities to learn through civic or community engagement. Some forms of service learning are curricular; others are extra- or co-curricular in nature. Service learning opportunities shall be expanded.

BY 2016-2017, A MOUNT ALLISON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY SHALL BE DEVELOPED WITH CLEAR TARGETS FOR INCREASING THIS TYPE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING.

Actions Required:

1. A working group consisting of two faculty members, two individuals from Student Affairs, and two students shall collaborate in establishing a Mount Allison Community Engagement Strategy. This strategy shall be presented to Faculty Council by May 2016. This strategy shall inform practice beginning in the 2016-2017 academic year.

Goal #5: Field trips provide students with opportunities to learn both in and outside the classroom. Field trips can be linked to teaching, learning, and course curricula, or to the research programs of faculty. Field trips may involve visits to research sites, communities, or lectures, or they may be central to intensive courses (offered usually during spring/summer session). Growing field trip opportunities may provide learning possibilities for students, opportunities for community engagement, research and/or service learning.

BY 2016-2017, OPPORTUNITIES FOR FIELD-BASED LEARNING AND EXPERIENCE SHOULD BE SUBSTANTIALLY INCREASED.

Actions Required:

1. The Provost's Curriculum Innovation Fund will be renewed. A call for proposals will be issued during the summer of 2015.

Goal #6: Mount Allison has a number of international exchange and study abroad opportunities for students. Mount Allison's Internationalization Strategy supports the development of exchange programs, international research opportunities, etc. Where feasible, new opportunities for international exchange should be explored.

BY 2019-2020, INTERNATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES SHOULD BE INCREASED, AND AS IMPORTANT, PARTICIPATION BY MOUNT ALLISON STUDENTS IN INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE AND STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM SHOULD BE INCREASED.

Actions Required:

1. The International Programs Committee, in consultation with the International Centre, and appropriate departments and programs should identify new opportunities for international exchange and study abroad.
2. The International Programs Committee, in consultation with the Scholarships and Bursaries Committee and/or the Financial Aid and Awards Counsellor, shall explore opportunities to establish travel bursaries for students interested in international exchange and study abroad.

The Way Forward

This document sets out a number of goals designed to build on the strengths that already exist in the area of experiential education at Mount Allison. Achievement of these goals would position Mount Allison as a leader in experiential education in this region and the country.

The enhancement of experiential opportunities, and changes to how experiential education is recognized at Mount Allison (changes to degree credit, for example) require consideration of a multitude of issues that include, but are not limited to:

- Are changes required in courses and programs?
- What are the essential competences and learning outcomes that are expected of students engaged in various forms of experiential education?
- To what degree should experiential education be structured within the existing curriculum vs. being developed as a “build your own” experience on the part of students?
- Should experiential learning be a graduation requirement?

Questions such as these require a collegial discussion. Some proposals related to experiential education will need to come before Senate for its approval.

Some aspects of this program also very significantly affect faculty in their work. For example, some would argue that involvement in experiential education involves different skills and abilities (calling for specialized training facilitated by PCTC or other professional consultants), a different kind of time commitment, and access to resources. Questions related to faculty workload and the evaluation of faculty work will require collegial discussion and possible review of contract language in the collective agreements.

There will inevitably be resource implications associated with the extension of activities involving experiential approaches. It will be important to ensure that experiential education is properly resourced (this includes providing appropriate organizational supports in addition to the financing of research awards, internships, travel grants for international exchange activities, etc.). The success of these initiatives will also depend on developing strong relationships with a number of external partners (particularly in connection with internships, service learning, and international exchange).

Finally, the long-term sustainability of experiential education at Mount Allison requires not just resources; it also requires ongoing evaluation to ensure that only the best quality programs are available to our students.

Some Concluding Thoughts

At Mount Allison, we say that we educate the whole person in an immersive environment, and that education takes place both inside and outside the classroom. Over many years, we have maintained a balance between preserving the core disciplines that define a liberal education, and providing students with skills that will serve them well in their future endeavours, whether that involves more advanced education or entry into the labour force.

Public discourse increasingly challenges universities to demonstrate the value of a university degree. Yet in many ways and for many years, Mount Allison has been offering students experiences to learn by doing, giving them practical skills alongside a broad liberal education. This discussion paper suggests a number of ways in which we can do more, and contribute further to enhancing the experience of current and future generations of Mount Allison students.