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Experiential Learning Final Report: ASE Leadership and USRI

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SASAH Experiential Learning

Dr. Barbara Bruce

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EL Final Report

Introduction

As I conclude my SASAH experiential-learning journey, I am reflective of the learning and opportunities I have gained as a student and employee during the last few years. This program has contributed to my success throughout my undergrad in countless ways. Having the unique opportunity to gain experience in the workforce with professional guidance has allowed me to foster, develop, and apply skills in various fields and settings. From my first experience as an ASE Transition Leader at the end of my first year of undergrad to my last as a USRI intern at the start of my fourth year, I have witnessed growth in my academic abilities, such as writing and synthesizing, professional growth through collaboration, and overall interpersonal development and maturity. These opportunities have given me a taste of the real-world application of my academic knowledge. Writing and synthesizing are no longer abstract skills confined to essays; they're tools I've used to communicate and navigate in professional settings.

Collaborating and learning from diverse perspectives and navigating the complexities of teamwork have been a cornerstone of this journey. Collaboration has taught me not only about the complexities of work but also about myself. These jobs have taught me lessons in adaptability, resilience, and understanding the human aspect of every project. Furthermore, engaging with professionals, understanding workplace cultures, and facing the uncertainties of real-world situations have contributed to a sense of self-awareness and maturity.

As I approach the end of undergrad, I realize that SASAH Experiential Learning has been a holistic journey that has shaped my perspective, skills, and personal development. This growth will accompany me into the next phase of life, making this experiential-learning journey an invaluable part of my undergraduate experience.

Developing My Skills

As an ASE Transition Leaders, my co-workers and I applied leadership, interdisciplinary skills, and knowledge of Western campuses and facilities to support incoming undergraduates' academic, personal, and professional growth. ASE introduced me to numerous events and sessions such as Community Connections, Smart Start Academics, Second Year Welcome Week, Faculty Day, and a project with Accessible Education, where I had the opportunity to build connections with various people in the Western community as well as set and achieve goals. My first job as a Transition Leader was through Community Connections, a one-day intensive for students to learn about Western and form relationships with other students in similar faculties.

After a few weeks of online and in-person training, I started my role as a facilitator for Western's Community Connections. During these sessions, I worked with co-workers to introduce students to Clifton Strengths, Life Design, CLC, and the Western community. During these few weeks, I had the opportunity to connect with members of the Western community, gain more comfort in my role, and focus on the goals I had formulated during training. My main goal as a Community Connections facilitator was to regain my comfort as a public speaker, as I felt my ability to speak in front of large groups had diminished during online school. I accomplished this goal by speaking to medium-sized groups during this time and the adaptability necessary to make sure each event ran smoothly and ended successfully. I can confidently say that I met and continue to achieve that goal throughout my contract. An

example of this occurred when my co-facilitator was called to another job while in a session. I then had to improvise to finish the presentation. The ability to improvise came with the comfort I had gained through practicing the material and hosting these sessions and the support I received through the connections I made with students, co-workers, and supervisors. These connections also benefited my other roles, especially within the activities and events through Smart Start Academics.

Smart Start Academics is an online program that provides incoming students with the opportunity to practice and relearn skills in various courses such as math, science, and English that Western professors believe students should be comfortable with before starting the classes in the fall. My role with Smart Start Academics was virtual for the duration of the program, which overlapped with Community Connections. Throughout the four weeks that Smart Start was active, I posted weekly forum posts for the course I oversaw. I posted regularly to engage, check-in, and support the students enrolled in the program.

The course I oversaw was Physics, and I worked with four other people, where we alternated watching and posting on our forum. We spent a few hours organizing how we would run our course before the start date to ensure students had a smooth and positive experience starting their academics at Western. I quickly realized the importance of collaboration. Even though my group had carefully planned and formatted our jobs for this program, we didn't necessarily take into account time management as we had more than one project happening during that time.

As peer support for Smart Start, part of our job was to plan at least two events for our group to attend. Our first event focused on meeting different professors in the Faculty of Science and allowed students to ask questions before classes. This event went off seamlessly with few errors, as it was scheduled at the beginning of Smart Start. Unfortunately, our

second event, "Velocity Friending," was scheduled in the middle of Smart Start, Community Connections, and other outstanding projects, causing multiple problems.

As a research intern, I was responsible for writing various sections of our handbook chapter, including Grand Theories, Modernization Theory, Disengagement Theory, Activity Theory, Critical and Postmodern Paradigms, Ageing bodies, Ageing and Media, Political Economy of Ageing, and Feminist Paradigms and Intersectionality. As this was my first time collaborating on a research chapter, I came into the job with few expectations and an open mind toward what the project would entail. As a student going into my fourth year, I have written many research papers; however, writing a chapter has taught me new ways of synthesizing literature, managing my time, and working through personal challenges such as academic imposter syndrome and burnout. I have also reflected on my last experiential learning internship and how I have not only witnessed personal growth but also noticed my abilities as reflected in my CliftonStrengths adapted with my new goals and skillsets. Although there have been challenges that I have faced and overcome, the skills I have gained in working and writing from this internship are not only transferable to the different career paths I am considering but have also provided me with new insights into my plans for post-grad.

CliftonStrengths:

CliftonStrengths was very pertinent to both of my experiential-learning opportunities. I was fortunate enough to attend extensive workshops to familiarize myself with the concept and teachings as we had also been learning and applying CliftonStrengths to our jobs; we emphasized the importance of Strengths by working together and using everyone's unique strengths to overcome challenges and weaknesses. As I have Communication, WOO (Winning others over), Strategic, Emotional, and Analyse as my top five, my strengths lie in

personability, so I engaged with the students waiting for breakout rooms. Other facilitators, whose top five were more logistical, worked on Zoom to fix our technical problems. By quickly applying our strengths to our work, we could get our event on a better track and connect the different areas of our jobs as Transition Leaders. The ability to quickly adapt and use our knowledge from other work was beneficial for our final few events of ASE. As for USRI, I continued to utilize the benefits of being in tune with my strengths and how they contribute to my work; I also noticed an evolution of how my strengths manifest in my life.

Halfway through my USRI contract, I lost sight of one of my top 5 CliftonStrengths, Strategic, as I was experiencing a seemingly non-remedial feeling of being overwhelmed. As Dr. McMullin and I started working on concluding the chapter, I noticed my strategic strength getting stronger again as I was feeling less overwhelmed due to sticking to a schedule and planning ahead. Yet, this experience was helpful as I utilized and garnered different strengths. I witnessed my Achiever Strength become more pertinent in my day-to-day, and Adaptability, a Strength in my top 10, helped me work through my time-management challenges. Seeing this change has encouraged me to re-evaluate my top 5 CliftonStrengths as I have grown, gained experience, and adapted drastically throughout my undergrad. I have not officially retaken the quiz as I have been preoccupied with graduating and applying to law school; however, before I start working or going to school, I plan to retake it so I can adequately utilize my strengths that have grown and changed with me throughout my undergrad.

Strengths and Weaknesses:

During ASE, towards the end of our contract, we had a short break from in-person activities, and then we returned to campus for Second Year Welcome Week. This event was hectic, and there was not as much communication with the Transition Leaders in advance.

My job for Welcome Week was to go to some of the events, such as Drag Queen Bingo, Silent Disco, and the bonfire, to ensure the events ran smoothly and the students followed COVID protocols. As we formed relationships with our supervisors, they trusted our ability to execute our tasks without much oversight and guidance. I felt comfortable with my previous training and experience to help run these events, and it was a successful few days. I also had the unique opportunity to work and engage with fellow second-years at the event. It was a fantastic experience as I had the chance to build relationships with people outside of work and my faculty. Unfortunately, my last job as a Transition Leader did not go as smoothly, yet it allowed me to reflect on the past couple of months and what I had learned.

The last event I worked on during my time as an ASE Transition Leader was Faculty Day. As an MC, I introduced over 200 students to the Faculty of Kinesiology. As there were multiple people, faculties, and programs involved in this event, there was a lack of communication which resulted in a lot of stress and improvisation for me and other Transition Leader MCs that day. On the day of the event, I quickly rearranged the slides with the various collaborators, which left everyone frustrated and somewhat distressed. As my confidence in public speaking had been developing during this job, I was able to run the event with some significant modifications and support from the students and sophs who participated. As much as it was not the ideal way to end the job, the challenges that arose forced me to problem-solve and use my strengths to combat the issues at hand. Having to adapt to challenges is a strength that I have utilized in my other jobs, such as interning this summer, so I was fortunate to have the opportunity to manage a challenging problem in an understanding space. As a USRI intern, there were more frequent problems that occurred.

A challenge throughout the writing process was the inaccessibility of literature on my research topics. The Sociology of Ageism is a considerably understudied segment of sociological research and scholarship, which made finding sources quite challenging and

time-consuming. Luckily, my professor has studied sociological gerontology for many years and has an extensive repertoire of literature on different topics of ageism. However, finding papers on specific theories and paradigms took time, making some of my work weeks longer than I was prepared for, especially while balancing studying for my LSAT and managing other small projects. Time management became a recurring theme in my weekly schedule, contributing to a great deal of stress. Another constituent of my struggles with managing my time was my perfectionist tendencies.

My professor and I collaborated on a shared document during the writing process. Although this experience allowed me to edit, work, and witness the process of developing a chapter, I found myself in a constant state of anxiety. I often felt like my work was not good enough or that if I spent all of my time worrying about the paper, even when I was not actively working on it, I was doing myself a favour. I have now realized that, by spending all of my time worrying, I was not using my time wisely, whereas if I had separated my job from my life to establish a better balance, I would have had more productive work time and less stress. Given that I was studying for my LSAT while undertaking the USRI and Top Talent Basics internship and working on side projects, I can undoubtedly say that this summer gave me a better idea of what managing schoolwork, jobs, and life would look like in graduate school. Although I am nervous about these upcoming decisions, the transferable skills such as collaborating, synthesizing scholarly work, and writing a handbook chapter I have gained from this internship and as a double major have set me up for success in whatever graduate path I pursue.

Regarding strengths, I demonstrated a strong work ethic and willingness to learn, which stayed consistent throughout the internship. I tried my best to respond to emails and be on time for meetings, and if there were reasons I could not fulfil that task, I would quickly communicate that with my professor. Although this was a collaborative project, I displayed

independence by setting my own hours and working throughout the weeks we did not meet. I struggled with time management and occasional deadlines when I felt overwhelmed with work, but I always did my best to be as prepared as possible before meetings, even if a section still needed some work. To improve my performance, I could have worked on my self-management so that my other projects did not impede my ability to complete my work in a timely manner. Feedback helps ease anxieties and imposter syndrome, so I welcome and appreciate thorough input to produce work that accurately reflects my abilities and my professor's expectations.

Impact of Experiences

Both ASE and USRI were incredibly impactful to my personal, professional, and academic growth as I was able to nurture and develop skill sets in different ways. As I plan to pursue a career in human-rights law or work with non-profits, these experiences uniquely contribute to either of these fields of work. Before ASE, most of my work involved teaching singing and volunteer work, so this was a new experience for me as I got to expand on some of the skills I had developed in high school and apply them to a more structured and formal job. As for the USRI, thoroughly synthesizing relevant literature and applying it to a research project has impacted my academic performance and will undoubtedly support the next stage of my life post-graduation. Skills that I developed from both of these jobs include the ability to collaborate with those who are like-minded and those who are not, as well as self-paced and online structured work and learning, strategizing, and networking. These experiences have also allowed me to better market myself through my resume and media, such as LinkedIn, where I continue to update and post to appeal to different recruiters.

In regard to my academic goals, I plan to finish my dual degree in SASAH and Sociology and hopefully attend Law School. I firmly believe that the interdisciplinary

experiences I gained through SASAH and EL will support me in my applications as I made sure to emphasize all of the amazing things I gained through the opportunities they have provided throughout my degree. Although my main goal is to get into law school, if I do not this year, I will most likely work in a field that pertains to law or non-profit work.

Furthermore, giving back to the community and volunteering has always been an important part of my life whether I am working on my personal projects or I am involved with another. As I have studied the impacts of ageism on society, I could see myself working for a non-profit that caters to geriatrics or, staying true to what I have studied for a few years, advocating for people in the Neurodivergent or differently-abled communities.

Insights, Values, And Lessons

These opportunities enabled a plethora of insights, lessons, and values that I have taken away. When I first applied to ASE, I didn't know how much we would impact students' lives and, honestly, how much they would impact mine. To this day, I run into students that I supported during ASE. It is always amazing to hear them talk about their experience at Western and how the programming helped them connect with the campus community. One of the fundamental values I hold above all else has been making a difference, whether that is as micro as making someone's day or as macro as contributing to the greater good of Western as an institution. Seeing that I had a lasting impact on even just a few students has been incredibly rewarding and further fuels my desire to engage with communities to make a meaningful difference. Applying this value to my research with USRI, as I mentioned earlier, the sociology of ageism is a highly understudied topic of research. The ability to contribute to literature for a highly pertinent and valuable source of academic scholarship to generate more acceptance and consideration of marginalized groups in society ties in with my values.

Regarding insights I gained, I have realized the importance of asking for help and collaboration. As mentioned throughout this reflection, I have experienced imposter syndrome multiple times. During ASE, I felt that I was too young and not involved enough in the Western community to be helpful support for students, and for USRI, my fears of not being good enough to conduct research impeded my ability to efficiently get work done as the fear of failing was constantly on my mind. Talking with my supervisors helped ease these worries. Jeremy Johnston, my ASE supervisor, assured us that we were selected out of a large pool of candidates because they were confident in our abilities to be valuable team members and that we wouldn't be there if we did not have a lot to offer to the job. That advice helped me relax and enjoy the job so much more.

Dr. McMullin was a great supervisor to have on the USRI project. Although we only met occasionally, she provided helpful guidance, reassurance, and constructive feedback and criticism. We did not organize a meeting for the first five weeks of the internship, which allowed me plenty of time to grasp different subjects and gather literature broadly. As we progressed through the summer and met more frequently, we narrowed our thoughts and ideas to be more succinct. In all honesty, sometimes, the infrequent meetings contributed to my anxieties as I was nervous that sections I had been working on for weeks would be insufficient. I would not know until I had already completed them. However, collaborating on a chapter taught me that sometimes changes are made and sections don't make the final cut, but that is not a direct reflection of my work but a typical procedure of collaborating on work. Having time between check-ins also enabled the freedom to go through the process of researching and writing without being given too much direction.

One of the biggest lessons I learned was constantly stressing about your job and not being able to find joy in your work will be your greatest downfall. Experiential learning is a unique opportunity as you choose your internship or job rather than being assigned to a work-

study that you are not interested in. Both jobs aligned with my interests, making it a more enjoyable experience for me; however, I would get so caught up in the stress of deadlines that I would forget to have fun. When I did this, my job seemed more complicated. Whenever I lost sight of why I was doing the ASE and USRI, I would remind myself that I applied to these jobs because I was passionate about what I was doing or researching, which allowed me to enjoy it and be a better employee.

Considerations

For people considering working for ASE or USRI (especially USRI), I recommend embracing the opportunities to collaborate and meaningfully contribute to your work. These experiences go beyond individual contributions, fostering an environment where diverse perspectives create something impactful. The value of collaboration became evident to me during my time with ASE and USRI, where collective efforts amplified the impact of our work. Whether supporting students at ASE or delving into the sociology of ageism at USRI, collaborating with colleagues and supervisors enriched the experience and expanded my understanding, the opportunities to learn from others, share ideas, and collectively contribute to a greater purpose.

For example, during my internship with Dr. McMullin, we had different understandings of inclusive language when referring to marginalized groups in scholarship. When revising our paper, I asked if it would be okay to use more current terminology when referring to equity-deserving groups as I want to contribute to normalizing inclusive terminology in scholarship. Dr. McMullin agreed, which showcases the importance of collaboration as working together can spark new ideas that ultimately benefit or change things for the better. Through collaboration, there is an opportunity to enhance the work's quality and cultivate a supportive network that can make the entire journey more rewarding

and fulfilling. I further emphasized the importance of collaboration in my internships during my final presentation in December.

Presentation

My presentation for SASAH's Learning from Experience event started my reflection on all the fantastic things I have experienced and accomplished throughout my undergrad years. I had to go back through my old reports, which forced me to remember what I was thinking and feeling at those times. I remember being so nervous about giving tours and providing valuable insight to incoming first years on the logistics of undergrad when I had barely experienced it due to COVID-19. I was lucky enough to have two of my close friends with me, Anjali and Amber, who were also going through the same process of figuring out how to be the best employee with limited knowledge of campus. Now, as a fourth year, I can confidently say that by networking and working together, we grew individually and together in such a short period, and the experiences we gained contributed to the remainder of our undergrad. As for my research, I completed this job very recently, so we are still awaiting the editors' notes to revise our chapter before it gets published. Therefore, I haven't had as much time to reflect on it. However, since my internship, my academic work has been stronger and more thoughtfully nuanced than before gaining research experience. It also forced me to think about my future and whether applying for my master's and dedicating more time to research or applying to law school was the path I wanted to take. The opportunity to convey this growth with my peers and other people who have supported and advocated for our success was such a valuable experience.

Besides the bug that decided to send my house into dismay, my favourite part of the presentation was the question section at the end. I was asked about my experience with CliftonStrengths and whether I found it to be applicable throughout my degree. Because I

spent so much time learning about CliftonStrengths, it will always be something that I will circle back to when I need clarity in my personal, academic, and professional life. It was great to see that other people who attended the call also considered it a valuable part of learning. The other question that I enjoyed answering was Gray's. She asked me how I managed my stress and what suggestions I had for other people with nerves that impeded their work. I suggested compartmentalizing as that has been a technique that has helped me prioritize and be a better employee and student during university. Overall, the presentation was a great natural way to end our experiential learning with peers, professors, and other important people who have supported us along the way.

Conclusion

These past years of partaking in the SASAH EL journey have profoundly shaped me as a student and employee. This program, offering unique opportunities, allowed me to apply skills across diverse fields, from my initial role as an ASE Transition Leader to my recent job as a USRI intern. In this journey, I've witnessed substantial growth in my academic abilities, professional skills, and overall personal development. Beyond the academic realm, writing and synthesizing evolved into practical tools for professional settings. Collaborative experiences taught me adaptability, resilience, and the human aspect of every project. Engaging with professionals contributed to my understanding of workplace cultures and fostered self-awareness and maturity.

Being an ASE Transition Leader and a USRI intern played a crucial role in enriching my skill sets. Each role contributed to my professional toolkit, from honing in on my public speaking skills to engaging in collaborative research. The CliftonStrengths framework, particularly my top strengths: Communication, WOO, strategic, emotional, and Analytical, proved instrumental in navigating challenges and leveraging collective strengths. In the face

of challenges, whether organizing events during ASE or dealing with inaccessible literature during USRI, I learned the importance of resilience and effective problem-solving. Managing time, handling stress, and addressing perfectionist tendencies became recurring themes that significantly influenced my approach to both work and life. The impact of these experiences extends beyond the completion of tasks; they instilled in me a deep value for making a meaningful difference. The interconnectedness of my roles showcased the transformative power of collective efforts in creating something impactful. The growth and insights gained will undoubtedly support me into the future, making this experiential journey an invaluable and cohesive part of my undergraduate experience.