

# Experiential Learning to Increase Student Motivation and Engagement in an Introductory Computing Course

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## Abstract

This paper examines the impact of a career-focused experiential learning (EL) assignment on student engagement and motivation in ITEC 1001 – Introduction to Computing, a general education course. This study details the design and implementation of an EXACT assignment, part of Georgia Gwinnett College's Quality Enhancement Plan, which integrates practical application of course concepts with critical self-reflection on career choices. Students develop career readiness skills by creating artifacts such as resumes, LinkedIn profiles, and ePortfolios. Survey data collected from 386 students after completing the assignment indicates a strong positive perception of engagement and the development of real-world skills. Students found the assignment engaging and valuable, particularly in enhancing their understanding of course content's relevance to their future careers. The paper concludes by discussing implications for incorporating EL in introductory computing courses and proposing future research directions.

**Keywords:** experiential learning, career readiness, critical thinking, student engagement, general education

# Experiential Learning to Increase Student Motivation and Engagement in an Introductory Computing Course

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The integration of experiential learning (EL) into higher education curricula has been increasingly advocated for its potential to enhance student engagement, motivation, and the development of critical skills (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Kong, 2021). Recognizing these benefits, Georgia Gwinnett College (GGC) implemented the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) known as the EXACT Program (Experiential and Critical Thinking), aiming to cultivate students' critical thinking abilities through intentional experiential learning activities. While the theoretical advantages of EL in general education (GE) courses are acknowledged (Green et al., 2022), empirical studies specifically examining the impact of targeted EL interventions on student motivation and engagement within introductory computing courses remain relatively limited.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the implementation and student perceptions of a key experiential learning assignment embedded within ITEC 1001 – Introduction to Computing, a 16-credit hour core GE course at GGC offered in both 16-, 8- and 4-week formats. This EXACT assignment was intentionally designed to integrate practical application of course concepts, such as software proficiency, with critical self-reflection on major and career choices. By focusing on a career readiness project, this study also contributes to the understanding of how EL activities within foundational computing courses can foster students' preparedness for future professional endeavors (NACE, 2023).

Specifically, this paper explores the following question: ***How do students perceive the impact of a career-focused experiential learning assignment on their engagement and motivation in an introductory computing course?*** To answer this question, we detail the design and implementation of the ITEC 1001 EXACT assignment and analyze student survey data collected after its completion.

The subsequent sections of this paper will first provide a review of relevant literature on experiential learning in general education and technology disciplines, highlighting the theoretical framework and existing research. Following this, we will describe the context of

ITEC 1001, the motivation behind the design of the EXACT assignment, and its detailed components. We will then present the methodology used to gather student feedback, followed by an analysis of the survey results. Finally, we will discuss the implications of our findings for the integration of experiential learning in introductory computing courses and suggest directions for future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN GENERAL EDUCATION AND COMPUTING

Although general education (GE) courses are foundational to a student's academic journey, they are frequently perceived as irrelevant to their career pathways (Arum, Roksa, & Cho, 2020). This perception can be attributed to the lack of clear connections between course content and real-world applications. Another challenge lies in the continued reliance on passive teaching methods, such as lectures and traditional assessments, which often position students as passive recipients of information, thereby reducing engagement and motivation (Freeman et al., 2014). For example, Cope, Whalen, & Humbert (2021) examined student experiences in GE programs and found that many students viewed these courses as impersonal, disconnected, and lacking meaningful interaction. However, their study also noted that students reported more positive experiences when they had opportunities to apply their learning in meaningful contexts. Similarly, Lowenstein (2005) calls for intentionality in students' planning when selecting general education (GE) requirements and emphasizes the importance of facilitating students' integration of all their educational experiences into a coherent whole. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating teaching strategies in GE courses that promote student engagement, interaction, and active learning.

Experiential learning (EL), a pedagogical approach defined in the work of Kolb (1984), states that learning is most effective when students actively engage in an experience, reflect upon it, develop abstract concepts, and then apply those concepts in new situations (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). While Experiential Learning (EL) refers to implementing learning through doing

and experiencing, Experiential Learning Theory (ELT; Kolb, 1984) provides a framework that explains how this cycle of learning occurs. In other words, ELT serves as the theoretical foundation that guides the implementation of EL.

This cyclical process emphasizes the learner's active participation in knowledge creation, moving beyond passive reception of information to a more dynamic and applied understanding (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

The benefits of EL extend to student motivation and engagement, as highlighted by Kong (2021). Their work emphasizes that by connecting classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios, providing opportunities for autonomy and choice, and fostering deeper involvement with the subject matter, EL can significantly enhance students' intrinsic motivation for learning (Kong, 2021). Similarly, Freeman, et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of 225 studies to evaluate the effectiveness of active learning compared to traditional lecture-based learning. They found that active learning strategies such as those used in EL significantly enhanced student performance in STEM disciplines and reduced failure rates. This learner-centric approach contrasts with traditional teacher-centered methods that may not adequately cultivate these crucial factors for academic success.

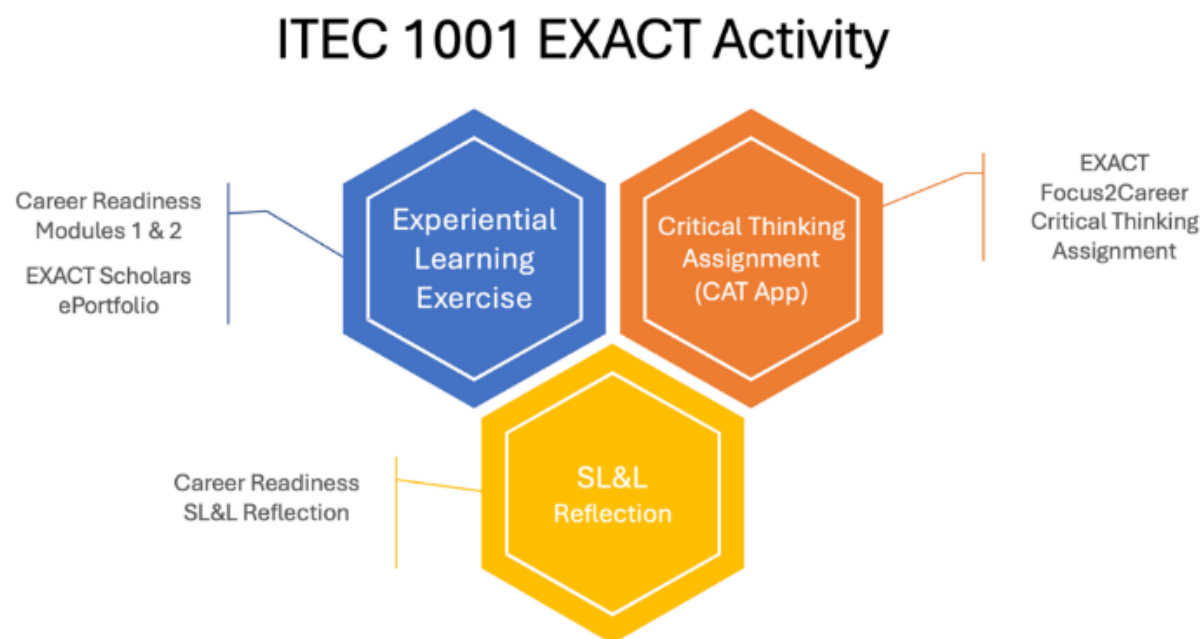
The application of EL is particularly relevant within technology disciplines, where "learning-by-doing" has long been a common practice (Sendall et al., 2019). However, Sendall et al. (2019) argue that truly effective EL in these fields requires a deliberate integration of hands-on experience with structured reflection, meaningful feedback, and comprehensive assessment. For example, Kerven et al. (2017) examined the role of scenario-based inquiry as an experiential learning strategy in a general education computing course. The study implemented hands-on, inquiry-driven activities in which students engaged with realistic challenges mimicking those encountered by professionals in the technology field. According to Kerven et al. (2017), the active learning approach had a positive impact on student interest in computing, while also positively engaging students in real-world, multidisciplinary content.

The growth of EL in higher education encompasses a wide array of high-impact practices, including internships, project-based learning, service learning, and capstone projects, all of which, when combined with intentional reflection, can reinforce theoretical

understanding and cultivate practical skills essential for the technology industry (Sendall et al., 2019). Jonathan and Laik (2024) explore the application of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) in preparing graduates for increasingly complex and unpredictable work environments. Their research suggests that ELT, with its focus on active experimentation and reflection, can better equip students with critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability skills that traditional teaching methods often struggle to develop (Jonathan & Laik, 2024). Case studies involving business simulations and overseas learning programs demonstrate the potential of ELT to improve learning outcomes and enhance student engagement by simulating real-world complexities and encouraging guided reflection (Jonathan & Laik, 2024; Kong, 2021).

Experiential learning (EL) has a positive impact on students' career readiness by equipping them with the skills necessary to meet workforce demands. Career readiness refers to students' preparedness to transition successfully from college to the workforce and can be evaluated through competencies such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, leadership, and professionalism (NACE, 2023). Assignments that focus on fostering career readiness are a strategic way to integrate EL into GE courses. Specifically, activities such as resume building, mock interviews, and reflective career mapping enable students to connect professional competencies to the GE course content. These types of assignments are particularly relevant in GE courses because they apply to all students, regardless of their major or background (Sachdeva & Latesh, 2023). EL activities that are aligned with students' future goals also help them recognize the value of their education and enhance their overall learning experience (Green, Castor, Leyburn, DeMaria, & Jaime, 2022).

Although institutions acknowledge the benefits of experiential learning (EL) in general education (GE) courses, its integration has been gradual. Several challenges contribute to this slow adoption, including rigid curricular structures and a lack of faculty development. Furthermore, there is a notable need for empirical studies that examine the impact of EL within GE settings (Green et al., 2022). This study aims to address that gap by detailing the implementation of an experiential learning project in a general education computing course. Additionally, our study also sheds light on EL activities with a focus on equipping students with career readiness skills.



**Figure 1. Three key components for the ITEC 1001 EXACT activity.**

### **3. CONTEXT AND DESIGN OF THE ITEC 1001 EXACT ASSIGNMENT**

The Exact assignment is designed to introduce students to the career services of the college and to help students get started with creating their ePortfolio. The objective of the assignment is to introduce students to the college career services and available resources and to help students enhance career readiness by completing and reflecting on various career readiness activities. The activity is completed over a 4-week period and concludes with students reflecting on the activity in the Student Learning & Licensure (SL&L) system. Over time, we've observed that many students either enter college unsure of their career goals or have limited understanding of what their chosen careers actually involve. Additionally, students often overlook the valuable resources offered by our Career Services Office (CSO) (Georgia Gwinnett College Career Services, n.d.). This assignment was designed to address both of these issues. We wanted to encourage students to reflect critically on their career interests early in their academic journey. Our aim is to help them make more informed decisions and take advantage of the support available to them. In addition, by introducing Career Services through this activity, we hope students will become familiar with its offerings and use them throughout their time at GGC. Since ITEC 1001 is a required general education course

for all freshmen, it provides an ideal opportunity to incorporate this Career Readiness component. Further, research has demonstrated that students often do not feel engaged in general education courses. Experiential learning provides a mechanism to potentially improve engagement in classes. As part of GGC's quality enhancement program, EXACT, faculty developed and incorporated an experiential learning activity that applied knowledge and skills from the learning outcomes from GGC's Introduction to Computing general education course in the context of career readiness (Table 1). All EXACT activities include three interrelated parts (Figure 1):

1. Experiential Learning Exercise
2. Critical Thinking Assignment (CAT App)
3. SL&L reflection

The ITEC 1001 EXACT activity involved the student carrying out a number of discrete career readiness tasks within these three interrelated parts.

#### **Experiential Learning Exercise**

The experiential learning exercise is comprised of three components: Career Readiness Modules 1 and 2 and creating the EXACT Scholar ePortfolio. GGC's Career Services Office offers all currently enrolled students access to their Mastering Career Readiness Course—a series of six self-paced modules designed to help students build essential employability skills. The EXACT Activity

incorporates the first two modules of this course. In Career Readiness Module 1, students complete the Focus2Career assessment. Focus2Career is a comprehensive online career and education planning system designed to help college students make informed decisions about their future. It's a self-paced, interactive tool that guides users through a series of self-assessments and provides resources to explore potential career paths. (Georgia Gwinnett College Focus2Career, n.d.)

**Table 1**

Students respond to a self-assessment provided

<b>General Education Domain Career Competencies</b>	<b>ITEC 1001 EXACT Task(s)</b>
Critical Thinking	1. Focus2Career Critical Thinking Assignment 2. Career Readiness SL&L Reflection
Teamwork	Focus2Career "Am I Career Ready" results
Time Management	Completing the task over 4 weeks

by GGC's Career Services Office that provides a report of potential careers and majors based on self-reported personality traits, interests, hobbies, and talents. In addition, they create their Handshake account to facilitate early interaction with the CSO. Handshake is a prominent online career platform specifically designed to connect college students and recent graduates with employers. It serves as a centralized hub for university career services, students, and companies. (Handshake, n.d.)

In Career Readiness Module 2, students create a resume, a list of professional references, and develop and publish a LinkedIn Profile with guidance from the Mastering Career Readiness course materials provided by GGC's Career Services. Students also create their EXACT Scholar ePortfolio to showcase the artifacts created while completing the EXACT activity.

#### **Critical Thinking Assignment (CAT App)**

Students complete the EXACT Focus2Career Critical Thinking Assignment by reviewing the report and engaging with a critical thinking activity focused on evaluation and interpretation of information provided in the Focus2Career results report.

**Table 1: Course Outcome Activity Mappings**

#### **SL&L Reflection**

Students are asked to reflect on the Career Readiness portions of the EXACT Activity by answering reflective questions in SL&L. These tasks inherently apply a variety of concepts and skills from the course's learning outcomes. Specifically, the students interacted with a computer system to generate a report to support decision making, developed a resume using word processing document design concepts and Microsoft Word skills, and applied concepts of professional social media in developing a LinkedIn Profile. In addition, the student organized and presented these artifacts in an ePortfolio.

ITEC 1001 is GGC's required course in the general education domain. As such, the course supports the development of career competencies associated with that domain, specifically critical thinking, teamwork, and time management. The EXACT activity contributes to ITEC 1001's incorporation of these career competencies (Table 2).

#### **4. METHODOLOGY: STUDENT SURVEY ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PERCEPTIONS**

The EXACT activity was first implemented in all ITEC 1001 sections during the Fall 2024 semester. Faculty teaching the course were asked to attend a training session before classes began to learn about the assignment: its purpose, its implementation within their classes, the timeline for execution, and how to grade the activity.

**Table 2: GenEd Activity Mappings**

<b>ITEC 1001 – Course Outcome</b>	<b>ITEC 1001 EXACT Task(s)</b>
Describe ethical issues surrounding the uses of digital information	1. Resume 2. LinkedIn Profile
Demonstrate proficiency in the use of various personal productivity software	1. Resume 2. Reference List
Acquire basic knowledge of computer security, protection mechanisms and privacy threats on the Internet	1. EXACT Scholars ePortfolio 2. LinkedIn Profile

As stated previously, the EXACT activity requires students to complete a Career Assessment, reflect on that career assessment, and complete several tasks that will help with future job searches such as creating a resume, a list of references, a LinkedIn profile, and a Handshake

## EXACT Activity Timeline



**Figure 2. Timeline to implement the EXACT activity.**

account. Most of these tasks are quickly graded; however, GGC's Career Services Office took on the monumental task of evaluating and providing feedback for all student resumes, so the timing of that assignment drove the timing for the entire activity.

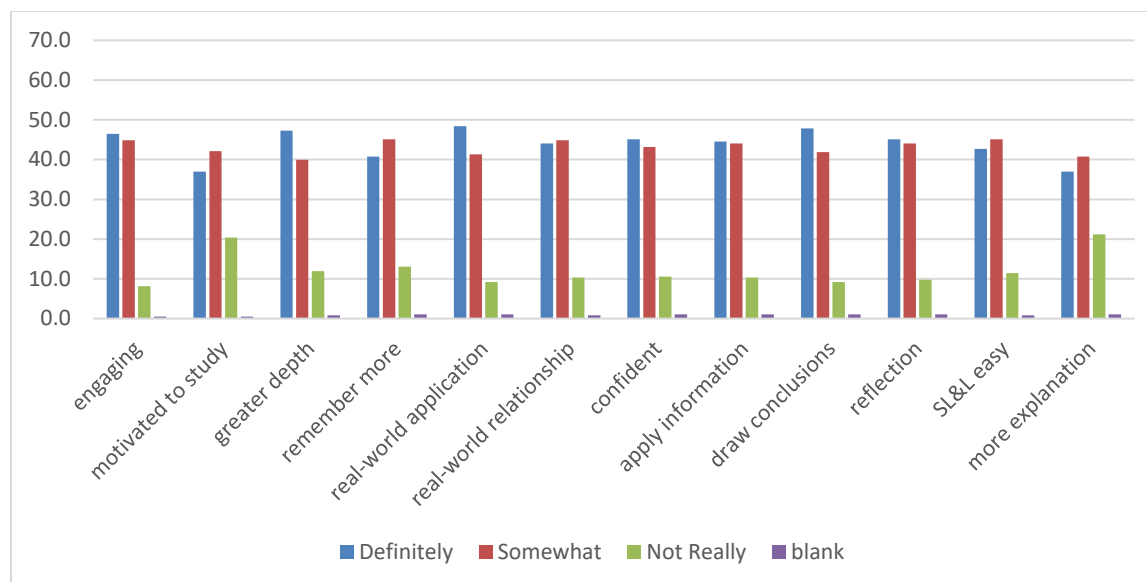
In Week 1, students completed Mastering Career Readiness Module 1, which involved completing the career exploration assessment, creating their Handshake accounts and completing the resume activity. It was vital that the resume activity was completed by the end of Week 1 to allow two

Modules 1 and 2. In addition, they completed the Career Readiness Reflection in SL&L. This assignment provided the students with two prompts to choose from:

- What piece of information was particularly challenging for you to understand? Explain those challenges and how you made sense of that information.
- What information was most important in working through the experience and why?

These prompts were designed to enable the students to reflect on the Career Readiness activities that they had completed thus far. Two prompts were given to allow students to pick which question that they found 'easier' to answer, thereby encouraging reflection. By Week 4, Career Services has returned their resume feedback. So, in that week, students revised their resumes and created their EXACT Scholar ePortfolios in SL&L. Students were provided with

weeks for Career Services to evaluate the resumes and provide feedback. While waiting for their resume feedback during Week 2, students created their LinkedIn profiles, their list of references, and completed a critical thinking assignment where they reflected on the results from the career assessment they took in Week 1. These activities were part of Mastering Career Readiness Module 2, which allowed them to complete both modules and earn both certificates required for their ePortfolios. In Week 3, students began gathering the materials needed to create their ePortfolios, such as the certificates of completion for Mastering Career Readiness a template to create these portfolios where they uploaded the artifacts that documented their Career Readiness journey. On page 1, they uploaded professional photographs of themselves, their revised resumes, their list of references, and they provided a link to their LinkedIn pages. Page 2 was devoted to the ITEC 1001 EXACT activity. On this page, they uploaded the certificates they earned by completing Mastering Career Readiness Modules 1 and 2. They also listed the class (ITEC 1001) and semester in which they completed these activities. And lastly, they linked their Career Readiness Reflection. The entire timeline can be seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 3. Summary of student survey results. (N=386)**

## 5. RESULTS OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EXACT ASSIGNMENT'S IMPACT

A total of 437 students accessed the survey link during Fall 2024, with 386 respondents completing the post-activity survey. Among the 386 completed responses, approximately 12% of participants left one or more questions blank, suggesting potential benefits from implementing mandatory response requirements for future iterations of the survey.

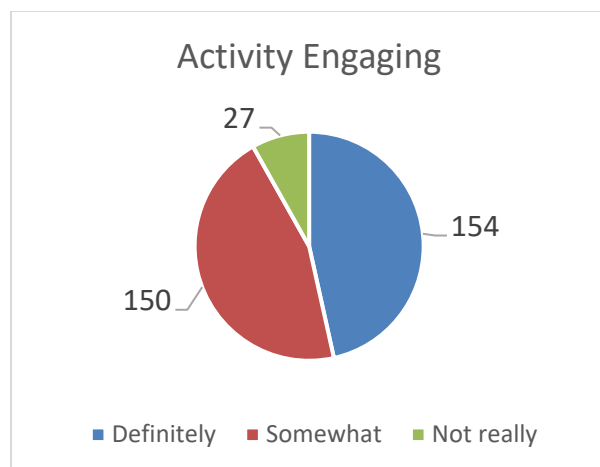
The survey assessed student perceptions of experiential learning assignments using 12 Likert-scale questions (three-point scale: definitely agree, somewhat agree, not really; see Figure 3). Questions focused on engagement, motivation,

Conclusions). Similarly, 90% agreed they engaged in purposeful reflection (Reflection).

A notable exception was the statement, "The experiential learning assignment(s) motivated me more to study the course material" (Motivated to Study), where approximately 20% of respondents selected not really. For user experience, 80% of participants definitely or somewhat agreed that they needed more explanation on how to do the reflection activity in the SL&L program (More Explanation). In contrast, responses to the statement, "Doing the reflection activity in the SL&L program was easy to do" (SL&L Easy), aligned with the broader trend of high agreement (Figure 3).

depth of learning, retention, real-world application, self-efficacy, reflection, and user experience with the Student Learning & Licensure (SL&L) program.

Over 90% of respondents definitely or somewhat agreed that they "found the experiential learning assignment(s) engaging" (Engaging) as shown in Figure 4. A consistent trend emerged across most questions, with approximately 90% of participants expressing agreement (definitely or somewhat) regarding the assignments' ability to deepen content understanding (Greater Depth), improve retention (Remember More), facilitate real-world application (Real-World Application, Real-World Relationship), enhance problem-solving confidence (Confident), and support knowledge synthesis (Apply Information, Draw Conclusions). These findings underscore strong positive perceptions of experiential learning activities, with variability observed in motivation and clarity of reflection task instructions. Complete response distributions are presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 4. Summary of student responses for active engagement.**

## 6. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT, MOTIVATION, AND CAREER READINESS

The student survey results overwhelmingly indicate a strong positive perception of engagement with the EXACT assignment, with over 90% of respondents expressing agreement that they found the experiential learning activities engaging (Figure 4). This finding aligns with established literature in which EL can capture student interest and foster deeper involvement in the learning process (Freeman et al., 2014; Kong, 2021). The career-focused nature of the EXACT assignment, requiring students to create tangible artifacts like resumes and LinkedIn profiles while reflecting on their future paths, likely contributed significantly to this high level of engagement.

Furthermore, the design of the EXACT assignment, explicitly incorporating career-focused tasks appears to have effectively contributed to students' perceived career readiness. By engaging in these activities, students were actively developing skills directly relevant to their future professional lives, aligning with the competencies emphasized by organizations like NACE (2023). This early exposure to career development tools within ITEC 1001 provides a valuable opportunity for students to consider their career trajectories and begin building essential professional assets.

The positive student feedback on the real-world applicability of these tasks suggests that integrating career readiness components into general education courses is a strong approach to demonstrating the relevance of academic learning. The results indicate that the EXACT assignment helped students develop a greater

sense of preparedness for their transition into the workforce, as supported by research highlighting the benefits of aligning educational activities with future goals (Green et al., 2022).

## 7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This study examined the implementation of a career-focused experiential learning assignment within an introductory computing course, focused on its impact on student engagement, motivation, and perceived career readiness. The findings indicate that students generally perceived the assignment as highly engaging and valuable for developing real-world skills and enhancing their understanding of the relevance of course content to their future careers. The activities, such as resume and LinkedIn profile creation, provided tangible connections to their future careers. However, the results also suggest a more nuanced relationship between the experiential learning assignment and students' motivation to study the core course material. While students appreciated the practical applications, further investigation is needed to determine how to better integrate these career-focused activities with the core course concepts.

Future research can explore the long-term impact of this type of assignment on students' career development and academic success. Longitudinal studies tracking students' engagement with career services, internship participation, and job placement rates could provide valuable insights. Additionally, qualitative research, such as student interviews and focus groups, could offer a deeper understanding of their experiences and perceptions. Further investigation into the impact of different modalities (face-to-face, hybrid, online) on the effectiveness of the assignment would also be beneficial.

## 8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Appendix

Based on the experiential learning assignment(s) you did in your EXACT course THIS semester, please answer the following questions:

1. I found the experiential learning assignment(s) engaging.
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
2. The experiential learning assignment(s) motivated me more to study the course material.
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
3. The experiential learning assignment(s) allowed me to learn the contents of the course subject in greater depth.
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
4. I think that I will remember more of what I learned in the course due to the experiential learning assignment(s).
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
5. I found that the experiential learning assignment(s) allowed me to apply the contents of this course to real-world problems.
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
6. Because of the experiential learning assignment(s), I can clearly describe how a real-world problem relates to this course.
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
7. Because of the experiential learning assignment(s), I feel confident in my ability to develop a logical, consistent approach to address a real-world problem related to this course.
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
8. Because of the experiential learning assignment(s), I am able to identify and apply information from this course to address real-world problems.
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
9. I can draw conclusions from the knowledge that I am learning through the experiential learning assignment(s).
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
10. I purposefully reflected on what I learned from problems I encountered, or knowledge learned during the experiential learning assignment(s).
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really
11. Doing the reflection activity in the Student Learning & Licensure (SL&L) program was easy to do.
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really

12. I felt that I needed more explanation on how to do the reflection activity in the Student Learning & Licensure (SL&L) program.
  - a. Definitely
  - b. Somewhat
  - c. Not really