

A Look at Experiential Education in Nonprofit-Focused Graduate Degree Programs

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Abstract

This study documented how experiential education is defined, the setting and support for experiential education, and the types of experiential education approaches offered within nonprofit-focused graduate degree programs associated with the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC). A comprehensive review of 49 program websites, 405 course syllabi, and 12 qualitative interviews with master's program representatives revealed challenges with experiential education terminology but a variety of experiential education approaches being used within each program. Both support and evaluation for experiential education were primarily informal. The experiential learning approach was listed most frequently and the service-learning approach was rarely listed or mentioned. Further analysis revealed low levels of interactions between students and community organizations.

Keywords: *nonprofit education; experiential education; service-learning*

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Experiential education has been defined as “a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values” (Association for Experiential Education, 2010, par. 2). There has also been a great deal of discussion and confusion over the meaning of *experiential education*. One proponent of experiential education defines it as a methodology or teaching approach (Furco, 1996); another classifies experiential education as a form of outdoor education (Fox, 2008), and another defines it in more general terms as a philosophy of education (Itin, 1999). In addition to having multiple definitions associated with the term *experiential education*, the term is often used interchangeably with the term *experiential learning*. In this paper, *experiential learning* refers to the intended outcome of experiential education, whereas *experiential education* refers to the process, grounded in an educational philosophy, and operationalized in specific pedagogical techniques.

Experiential education pedagogical techniques can take many different forms (Gazley, Littlepage, & Bennett, 2012). The forms, also called approaches, include internships, service-learning, outdoor education, work experience, field work, adventure education, vocational education, lab work, simulations, games, cooperative learning, problem-based learning, and action learning (Crowe & Adams, 1979; Itin, 1999; Wurdinger, 1994). In addition, each experiential education approach can vary depending on course, degree, and program within each university.

Research shows that experiential education approaches can be beneficial to the students who participate in them, the universities that implement and oversee the approaches, and the nonprofit community (e.g., Bacon, 2002; Bright, Bright, & Haley, 2007; Bushouse, 2005; Gazley, Bennett & Littlepage, 2013; Perry & Imperial, 2001; Schachter & Schwartz, 2009; Walder & Hunter, 2008). However, virtually all of the research has focused on experiential education used within a single university or a single approach (i.e., service-learning) implemented within a limited number of universities.

Consequently, up until now there has been no comprehensive picture of the various experiential education approaches employed in nonprofit-focused master's degrees (master's degrees in nonprofit management and masters' degrees with a specialization in nonprofit management), the programmatic and institutional contexts in which these approaches are being implemented, and the support—or lack of support—these contexts provide. Paton, Mordaunt, and Cornforth's (2007) article discussing the future of nonprofit education called for increased partnerships and students working alongside organizations. In order to respond to this call, faculty and program administrators need to ask hard questions about what levels of interactions they want their students to have with nonprofits and what role their programs are to play in the nonprofit community. Responding to this need, this study gathered information from 49 program websites, 405 course syllabi, and 12 interviews of master's program representatives about a) how experiential education is defined, b) the setting and support for experiential education, and c) the types of experiential education approaches offered within nonprofit-focused graduate degree programs.

The nonprofit-focused master's degree programs affiliated with the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council were a logical starting point for this study. NACC was created in 1991 with the mission to “support academic centers devoted to the study of the nonprofit/nongovernmental sector, philanthropy and voluntary action” (NACC, 2014,

par. 1). Since its inception, NACC has worked to standardize nonprofit management education by developing curricular guidelines and indicators of quality for member centers. Many of the nonprofit-focused master's degrees associated with NACC are highly ranked with *U.S. News and World Report* and thought to be example programs.

The paper will inform program directors and faculty members in the planning and implementation of experiential education and provide a foundation for future studies of the impact and use of experiential education within nonprofit-focused graduate degree programs. This study is important and needed because no one previously has comprehensively researched experiential education in graduate nonprofit education.

Literature

Today there are over 208 programs at the master's level that offer a concentration (three or more courses) in nonprofit management (Mirabella, 2014). There are also over 45 institutions that are members of the Nonprofit Academic Center's Council (NACC, 2014). After viewing all the websites of the master's degrees associated with NACC, the researcher determined the following types of master's degrees were granted:

- Master of Nonprofit Management or similar
- Master of Public Administration or similar
- Master of Social Work or similar
- Master of Business Administration or similar
- Master of Public Policy or similar
- Master of Human Services or similar
- Master of Philanthropic Studies or similar

In some cases, more than one master's degree program at a university is associated with a NACC member center. For example, at one university, both a master of nonprofit management and a master of public administration are associated with a NACC member center. Master's degrees associated with NACC are housed in a variety of colleges, schools, and departments and cover a broad range of academic disciplines (Dobkin Hall, O'Neill, Vinokur-Kaplan, Young, & Lane, 2001; Mirabella, 2007; Mirabella & Wish, 2001; Wish & Mirabella, 1998). Because of the diversity of nonprofit-focused master's degree programs, there has been much discussion over where nonprofit management education degree programs should be housed (Long, 2010; Mirabella & McDonald, 2013; Mirabella & Wish, 2000).

There have also been studies that discuss the student and faculty demographics of nonprofit-focused master's degree programs (Dobkin Hall, O'Neill, Vinokur-Kaplan, Young, & Lane, 2001; O'Neill, 1998). For example, in 1998 it was reported that master's degree programs in public administration or business administration that offered a concentration in nonprofit management primarily had full-time faculty members teaching within the program, while other master's degree programs primarily had adjunct faculty members teaching in the program (O'Neill, 1998).

Experiential Education within Nonprofit Management Education

Scholars often discuss the processes and challenges of creating nonprofit courses, programs, and specializations within universities, the types of nonprofit courses offered and student and alumni outcomes (Dolch, Ernst, McClusky, Mirabella, & Sadow,

2007; Fletcher, 2005; Herman & Renz, 2007; Mirabella, Gemelli, Malcolm & Berger, 2007; Stephenson Jr., 2007; Wilson & Larson, 2002; Wish & Mirabella, 1998). However, there is little literature that focuses on experiential education within nonprofit management education. In the literature that does exist, scholars discuss one or two types of approaches implemented in a nonprofit-focused master's degree program; for example, service-learning implemented in a MPA course (Walder & Hunter, 2008), the capstone approach used within a MPA program (Schachter & Schwartz, 2009; Smith 2005), or the experiential learning approach used within a nonprofit master's degree program (Carpenter & Krist, 2011). There is little research that discusses the variety of experiential education approaches used within multiple nonprofit-focused master's degree programs across the United States.

There is also a scarcity of literature about setting and support for experiential education within nonprofit-focused master's degree programs. The majority of the literature focuses on general factors important for the success of experiential education approaches in a program, department, college, and university setting. Some of these factors include the emphasis of service within the university's mission (Bucco & Busch, 1996); support for service by the dean or department chair (Holland, 2009); service-learning (or other) service activities evaluated at the program level (Dicke, Dowden, & Torres, 2004); service included in tenure and promotion policies (Holland, 2009); and service activities and research documented by the department (Kecskes, 2006). The setting and support variables are helpful for understanding the variety of factors important for the successful implementation of experiential education approaches.

Methods

The methods involved three steps to gain an understanding of the experiential education approaches in nonprofit-focused master's associated with U.S.-based Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) member centers. First, 49 program websites of nonprofit-focused master's degree programs associated with NACC were reviewed. This review provided surface level descriptions of the types of approaches (e.g., service-learning, experiential learning, internships, fieldwork, capstones) that were used by each master's degree program type. Second, 405 course syllabi were reviewed. This review provided more detailed information about approach types, approach descriptions, and approach grade point value per course. Third, 12 one-hour qualitative interviews were conducted with master's program representatives associated with NACC member centers.

Website Review

The websites of the 41 U.S.-based NACC member centers were reviewed to identify the nonprofit-focused master's degree programs associated with each member center. Master's degree association was determined by either the NACC member center listing the nonprofit-focused master's degree program on the member center website, or the department that houses the NACC member center listing the nonprofit-focused master's degree(s) on the departmental website. This review revealed that 49 master's degree programs were associated with the 41 NACC member centers as shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Nonprofit-Focused Master's Degree Programs Associated with NACC Member Centers*

Degree Type	Master's Degree Programs Associated with NACC (Per University)	Master's Programs Associated with NACC
Master of Public Administration or similar	13	19
Master of Nonprofit Administration or similar	13	15
Master of Public Policy or similar	5	8
Master of Business Administration or similar	3	4
Master of Social Work or similar	1	1
Other		2
2 Degrees	4	
3 Degrees	1	
4 Degrees	1	
Total	41	49

The website review also involved scanning experiential education approaches that were similar to what were described in the scholarly literature. The website review provided a good first step in determining the types of approaches (e.g., service-learning, experiential learning, internships, fieldwork, capstones) that were offered by each master's degree program and how these approaches were described on websites.

Syllabi Review

Syllabi were provided by 30 of the 49 master's degree programs associated with 41 NACC member centers. The syllabi review included 405 courses. The syllabi collected were for courses that took place between 2006 and 2010. Master's degree programs provided between 1 and 45 course syllabi, with 15 being the average number of syllabi provided by each program.

Experiential education approach descriptions were identified in the course syllabi. These descriptions were similar to the scholarly literature (e.g., Edmond, Rochman, Megivern, Howard, & Williams, 2006; Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001; Miller et al., 2005). References to experiential education approaches were found on average in 44% of the syllabi for each program. For example, if a program provided 10 syllabi, experiential education approaches were identified in approximately four of the syllabi. The syllabi review provided a good understanding of how experiential education approaches were being implemented within individual courses.

Interviews

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 representatives from nonprofit-focused master's degree programs associated with NACC. The qualitative interview method was selected due to the definitional issues of experiential education. It allowed for program administrators to describe experiential education approaches as well as the setting and support for experiential education in their own terms.

The interview selection process involved two parts. First, through the preliminary analysis of program websites and course syllabi reviews, 11 programs were identified and invited to participate in the study. Programs were selected based on the variety of experiential education approaches listed on websites and/or included in course syllabi. All 11 programs were contacted, and eight agreed to participate in the interviews.

The second part of interview recruitment and selection process involved sending an invitation to the directors of nonprofit-focused master's degree programs associated with U.S. NACC member centers. For this part, four program administrators from master's degree programs associated with NACC responded to this invitation. In total, 12 telephone interviews were conducted from June through September 2010. Table 2 shows the number of programs and interview selection method.

Table 2

Interview Program Sample Selection

Number of Programs	Selection Method
8 programs	Syllabi review/website review
4 programs	Degree type

The interviews were digitally recorded and followed an interview protocol that included major questions and related follow-up prompts (available from the researcher). The interview protocol was developed based on the review of literature and included the following sections: about the master's degree program, institutional support for experiential education approaches, and experiential education teaching approaches used within nonprofit-focused master's degree programs. The first two interviews were pilot interviews, and the interview protocol was slightly revised based on feedback from those interviews. The goal of these pilot interviews was to test the interview questions for content validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

The interview recordings were summarized and then coded thematically. The thematic coding involved looking for similar findings or categories in the interview summaries (Creswell, 2003). During the thematic coding, similar words and phrases (or, at least, apparently synonymous words and phrases) were identified to describe experiential education approaches. These similar words or phrases were organized into themes and were used to cross-define each type of experiential education approach. These similar words and phrases were then interpreted and compared to the words or phrases used to describe the experiential education approaches on the program websites and within course syllabi provided by programs. Similar themes and categories describing the institutional setting and support for experiential education also emerged during the analysis process.

Interviewees included representatives from 12 master's degree programs associated with NACC member centers. Each interviewee played a significant role in the program administration of the master's degree program and reported to the Dean of his or her respective school or college. In two cases, the director or coordinator of the nonprofit specialization was interviewed.

Six programs offered a nonprofit/philanthropic master's degree or similar, three offered a public administration master's degree or similar, two offered a public policy master's degree or similar, and one offered three different types of master's degrees. Table 3 shows how many interviewees represented each type of master's degree program.

Table 3

Master's Degree Program Type and Number of Interview Respondents

Master's Degree Program Type	Number of Respondents
Master of Nonprofit Administration or Similar	6
Master of Public Administration or Similar	3
Master of Public Policy or Similar	2
Other	1

The 12 master's degree programs were housed within a variety of department and school settings. Seven were housed within private universities, and five were housed within public universities. Eleven of the programs were housed within a specific school or college, and the other master's degree program operated across two schools. Three were housed within a School of Business, three were housed within a College of Arts and Sciences, and two were housed within a School of Public Service. These differences in programmatic setting are consistent with previous research by Wish and Mirabella (1998) that explains the different settings of nonprofit-focused master's degree programs.

In seven of the programs, 50% or more of the students worked full time in the government or nonprofit sector while enrolled in the program. The rest of the programs had the majority of students working part time while going to school.

Findings

This section of the paper includes findings that describe experiential education definitional issues, setting and limited support for experiential education, informal evaluation of experiential education and the variety of experiential education approaches used by nonprofit-focused master's degree programs associated with NACC.

Experiential Education Definitional Issues

The definition of experiential education provided by the Association for Experiential Education states, "[Experiential education is] a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values" (Association for Experiential Education, 2010, par. 2). From this definition, experiential education can be interpreted as an activity that occurs either inside or outside of the classroom setting. Interview participants were asked to provide their own definition of experiential education. Interestingly, half of the interviewees described experiential education different from the association definition. They defined experiential education as being activities that occurred outside of the classroom, specifically within a nonprofit organization. One respondent said,

[Experiential education is] practical-field based, more than just sitting in a room and reading a book. Every one of our courses involves working with a live example of either going into an organization or doing a project within an organization or at the very least, having board or staff members come into the classroom and discuss a current issue they are dealing with.

Another respondent said, “Any time a student is not in a classroom but working within a nonprofit, or volunteering in a nonprofit, or on site in the community for work-related nonprofit studies.”

Additionally, four interviewees said they had not thought about or discussed experiential education prior to the interview. These responses possibly could be explained by the interviewees’ unfamiliarity with the terminology and the words “experiential education.” For example, interviewees may have thought of experiential education previously, but used different terminology to describe experiential education. The terms *community engagement* and *service-learning* are used more frequently in the literature, therefore interviewees may have had more familiarity with those terms.

Another explanation of experiential education not being discussed formally at the program level could be because experiential education was primarily implemented at the course level. Interviewees had little knowledge about the experiential education that occurred at the individual course level.

The lack of familiarity with experiential education in the case of one-third of the interviewees was surprising because experiential education was in fact taking place within their programs (as evidenced by the program websites, course syllabi, and examples provided during the interviews). Additionally, 10 interviewees (including two interviewees who said they had not thought of experiential education prior to the interview) were able to explain how experiential education was tied to master’s degree program goals. One interviewee said, “We want students in the program to come out with a portfolio of skills that are not just academic skills and theoretical concepts, but also real skills and how you relate the theories and concepts to solve real-world problems.” The other interviewee said, “Part of what we want our students to do is to know how to manage organizations, and their being in there and getting their hands dirty is a really good development tool for them.” It can be inferred from the interviews there was a clear disconnect between experiential terminology and programmatic practices, in at least these two cases. The definitional issues provide some insight into setting and support for experiential education within nonprofit-focused master’s degrees.

Setting for Experiential Education

As indicated in the methods section, master’s degree programs were housed in a variety of settings (e.g., departments, schools, and colleges). Another indicator of setting for experiential education was the program mission statement. The program mission statements were similar and were described as: to train/prepare/develop nonprofit/public managers or leaders. Previous research by Mirabella and Wish (1999) explains that mission and goals should differ by degree type (e.g., master’s of public administration, master’s of business administration, or master’s of nonprofit administration). However, in this case, the nonprofit-focused master’s degree programs all had similar mission statements even though they were housed within a variety of settings.

Additionally, in three instances, interviewees indicated a strong connection between the master’s degree program mission and the mission of the university. One

respondent said the setting of the university being a land grant institution influenced experiential education within the master's degree program. Land grant universities were created to connect and serve the community (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002).

Limited Programmatic Support for Experiential Education

Data related to support for experiential education was generated by the interview questions, "*What types of support is provided your faculty that engage in this experiential education?*" and "*Have there been impediments to implementing experiential education in your program?*"

The interviewees explained there was limited support was available for experiential education at the program, department, and university level. For example, three interviewees indicated that no support was available for experiential education, and one respondent said there was not enough support. The remaining eight interviewees indicated that support for experiential education was available through the service-learning center on campus. Consistent with the literature that primarily describes service-learning as an undergraduate activity (e.g., Killian, 2004; Imperial, Perry, & Katula, 2007; Lambright, 2008; McCarthy & Tucker, 1999; Miller-Millesen & Mould, 2004; Nichols & Monard, 2001), service-learning centers generally cater to undergraduate students and programs. Therefore, it was not surprising when one respondent said, "There are resources available, but we haven't taken advantage of these resources." Four interviewees indicated that support available at the program level was informal. For example, one interviewee explained that faculty members share experiences with one other about developing experiential education approaches within the course curriculum.

Five interviewees identified specific impediments to implementing experiential education. These impediments included student time and availability to complete projects, faculty age, and limited access to resources and community organizations. One respondent said, "It is often difficult for students who are working full time and then come to class in the evening to ask them for another day or a weekend for a project." Another respondent indicated that younger faculty members were more interested in using experiential education approaches within the classroom. Limited support for experiential education was an expected finding because the literature emphasizes support for service-learning at the university level (e.g., through service-learning centers) (Heffernan, 2001; Howard, 2001).

Informal Evaluation of Experiential Education

One indicator of support for experiential education is ongoing evaluation. Interviewees indicated that assessment of experiential education took place in each program, even within the programs where interviewees who had not previously thought of experiential education. The majority of respondents (10) indicated assessments occurred informally. Six programs engaged in assessment by requesting informal feedback from community organizations, and four programs evaluated experiential education approaches through student evaluations. Two programs that formally evaluated experiential education, evaluated one type of approach (e.g., the capstone). Interviewees also explained the difficulties of evaluating experiential education through grading. For example, one respondent said,

Grading experiential learning in my opinion is very difficult. Either they did what they were supposed to do and wrote something about that experience that shows some level of reflection, or they didn't and what that falls on a grade scale is very difficult.

Because support for experiential education is limited at the master's degree level, it was expected that few programs would engage in assessment of experiential education. However, this was not the case; evaluation of experiential education still occurred, but on an informal basis. The definitions and setting and support for experiential education in nonprofit-focused master's degrees provides context for the types of approaches that are offered within each program.

Variety of Experiential Education Approaches

Approaches listed on program websites. The experiential education approaches listed on master's degree program websites included capstone, internship, experiential learning, practica and fieldwork. Table 4 shows the number of times each approach was listed on one or more of the 49 master's degree program websites.

Table 4

Approaches Listed on 49 Master's Degree Program Websites

Degree Type →	MPA or	MNA	MPP or				
Type of Approach ↓	Similar	Similar	Similar	MBA	MSW	Other	Totals
Capstone	11	8	4			1	24
Internship	8	2	5				15
Experiential learning	1	3	1	6			11
Practicum	2	2	1			1	6
Fieldwork		2			2		4
Other	1	2	2	3			8
Totals	23	19	15	9	2	2	58

Numbers in the table add up to more than 49 master's degree programs because some master's degree programs used more than one type of approach.

The approach descriptions from the website review were then compared to the literature.

The capstone approach. In the literature, capstone courses or experiences may or may not be experiential in nature. Sometimes, the capstone includes a review of theories and major literature covered in the program in preparation for students taking a comprehensive exam at the end of their program. Or in some cases, students conduct projects within local organizations. The majority of the capstone approaches described on program websites indicated the capstone approach was experiential in nature.

The capstone approach was often described as the "last course" or "culminating experience" on the website. The capstone approach was listed on 24 different program websites and was used most frequently by MPA programs. This is not surprising, because the capstone course came out of public affairs education (de Leon & Protopsaltis, 2005) and the capstone is offered in approximately 80% of Master's of Public Administration programs (Garris, Madden, & Rodgers, 2008).

The websites of nine programs explained that the capstone was an opportunity for students to integrate or apply knowledge learned throughout the program. Often, according to the website accounts, experiential education approaches were also used within the capstone approach. Most notably, the experiential learning approach was used. This approach involves students conducting a project within the course. In eight websites, students conducted a real-world research project addressing a problem within an organization. In nine websites, students were required to conduct a policy project. In five websites, students were required to work in teams and present the results of their work of their projects. This is consistent with previous research stating that the types of experiential education approaches used within each capstone course differ greatly among programs (de Leon & Protosaltis, 2005).

The internships approach. Internships were the second most frequently listed approach among all program websites and were listed 15 times. Internships were listed on two different nonprofit master's degree program sites and eight public administration master's degree program sites. The prevalence of the internship approach in nonprofit-focused master's degrees has been written about previously. In 1998, Wish and Mirabella reported that 60% of nonprofit management education programs offered internships.

In five websites, internships were described as being for students who have minimal work experience, also known as preservice students. In four websites, internships were described as giving students an opportunity to apply theory to practice. Students needed to complete, on average, 300 hours within an organization for the internship requirement.

Experiential learning. Experiential learning is described in the literature as "any learning activity that directly engages the learner in the phenomenon being studied" (McAleavey, n.d., par. 1). The scholarly definition of experiential learning is very broad; the term is arguably best characterized as students conducting projects within specific community organizations as part of a course. Consequently, the experiential learning approach also is known as a project-within-a-course approach.

Experiential learning approaches were listed on 11 program websites. Six websites stated that students could select a project within a nonprofit organization. The other experiential learning approach website descriptions were more general and explained how students participated in projects throughout the program. For example, one program website stated, "Over 50% of electives make use of hands on projects in the field" and another website said, "Students use their skills to impact the community working with local nonprofits to address concerns ranging from fundraising to strategic planning."

The use of the word project to describe experiential learning approaches on program websites was consistent with the broad definition of experiential learning (McAleavey, n.d., par. 1). However, the number of experiential learning approaches listed on program websites was lower than expected, probably because the majority of experiential learning approaches are offered within a specific class and are probably not listed on program websites.

The practicum approach. A small portion (6) of the nonprofit-focused master's degree programs listed the practicum approach. In one program, the practicum was described as an alternative to the internship. In three programs, it was described as a capstone in which students would complete during their final semester.

Describing the practicum as an alternative to the internship or as a capstone was similar to the discussion of practica in the literature. Often, in the literature, practica encompassed other approaches (Garris, Madden, & Rodgers, 2008). For instance, in the literature, other terms *capstone* and *practicum* are used interchangeably; *fieldwork* and *practica* also are used interchangeably.

The fieldwork approach. The review of program websites suggested that four programs used fieldwork; two of these programs offered a social work degree and two offered a nonprofit degree. On all of the websites *fieldwork* was described as an off-campus experience. In one program, it was described as students “applying classroom knowledge to the field.”

The website descriptions of fieldwork were similar to the descriptions in the literature (Edmond et al., 2006; Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001; Miller et al., 2005), with the exception of nonprofit administration programs. These programs used the term *fieldwork* informally and described fieldwork as a field experience rather than a formal field internship in which representatives from community organizations supervised students.

Other approaches. Other types of experiential education approaches were also listed on program websites. These other approaches included public service immersion, organizational experience, simulations, and assistantships. Simulations were not described in enough depth on program websites to be able to compare to the literature.

Interestingly, the service-learning approach was not encountered at all during the program website review. The absence of the service-learning approach may be because service-learning approaches are primarily used within course contexts, and they therefore are not discussed on program websites.

Approaches listed in course syllabi. Experiential education approaches were listed in 178 of the 405 course syllabi. Evidence of experiential education was found in as little as 12% of the course syllabi for a program and as high as 100% (or all) of the course syllabi provided by a program. Table 5 summarizes the approaches and approach descriptions that were obtained from the syllabi. The words and phrases were common words used to describe the approach in each syllabus. These words were selected because they match up with the definitions of each approach taken from the literature.

The other approach listed in the table primarily includes interviewing a nonprofit leader. Practicum approaches were listed the least frequently. This may be because practicums, like capstone, are usually an entire course and may not be listed as an approach within a specific course. Interestingly, the fieldwork approach did not appear in any of the course syllabi. This absence may be because no MSW programs contributed any syllabi to the collection that was reviewed. The fieldwork approach is primarily included within social work education literature.

The experiential learning approach was the most frequently listed approach in course syllabi. Various project types were also listed within the experiential learning approach descriptions. Experiential learning project types are shown in Table 6.

Fundraising and development projects, organizational assessments, and marketing projects were listed most frequently. It is also important to note that nine course syllabi explained that the student could select any type of experiential learning project.

Table 5*Approaches Listed in Course Syllabi*

Type of Approach	Approach Descriptions	Number of Syllabi
Capstone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrative experience • Solve a real-world management or policy issue • Combine theory and practice • Integrate concepts studied throughout the program 	6
Internship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultant to a nonprofit organization • Preservice students • Apply theory to practice to a nonprofit organization • Apply graduate level education in a nonprofit organization 	3
Experiential learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applied learning experience • Design a project for a nonprofit • Create a plan • Students acting as consultants • To be done on behalf of the client “nonprofit organization” • Develop a project for a particular service or program • Apply one of the methods studied in the course to a real decision • Working with a nonprofit • Each team will present their plan and product 	125
Service-learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflections • Provide a consulting project to a nonprofit 	9
Practicum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural immersion • Grantmaking practicum 	2
Simulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer exercises • Lab reports • Role play • Policy simulation 	6
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer • Interview a nonprofit leader • Develop a case • Scenario • Examine the facilitator’s role • Speech 	27

Table 6
Types of Projects Within Experiential Learning Approaches

Type of Experiential Learning Project	Number of Times Listed
Fundraising or development (e.g., fundraising plan, grant proposal)	19
Organizational assessment	17
Marketing (e.g., marketing plan, communications plan, online newsletter)	12
Policy (e.g., policy process, analysis)	10
Evaluation	9
Human resources (e.g., assessment, develop personnel policies)	9
To be decided by the student	9
Financial analysis	8
Strategic planning (e.g., plan, feasibility study)	8
Advocacy campaign	4
Performance management system	4
Board/governance	4
Earned income (e.g., business plan, social entrepreneurship analysis)	3
Cultural audit	2
Other (e.g., ethics, risk management, gubernatorial transition)	7
Total	125

Approaches described in the interviews. Interviewees were asked to describe how experiential education takes place within their programs. Interviewees responded by describing a variety of approaches. Table 7 shows the approach descriptions that emerged during the interviews along with the number of programs that mentioned each approach.

Eleven respondents indicated that students did a project within a course. Six respondents indicated that the capstone approach was used within their program. Some respondents explained an applied capstone approach that involved students conducting a project within a nonprofit organization, and other respondents described the capstone approach with students conducting a research or case based project. Only one respondent indicated their program used service-learning.

Several non-credit experiential education approaches were also described during the interviews. These approaches included research projects with community organizations, fellowship program, and student clubs. This study focused on experiential education approaches used as part of a course, therefore the non-credit approaches were not included in Table 7.

Table 7*Experiential Education Approaches Described in the 12 Program Interviews*

Type of Approach	Words used to describe approach	Number of programs that mentioned approach
Capstone/ practicum/ summary project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students engage in consulting project for a nonprofit • Students work as a team • Live case • Case analysis • Students choose a topic • Workshop class 	6
Internship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students perform x hours for an organization • Prepare students for practice roles • Relating curriculum to professional development • Student driven • Semester-long internship in practice setting 	5
Project within a course/ Experiential learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop x for a nonprofit organization • Interact with organization • Oral presentation • Students act as consultants for a nonprofit, • Students volunteer x number of hours for a nonprofit, • Students research, interview and write a case study of a real-world management issue facing a nonprofit • Develop professional product • Students work on project for a govt. agency or nonprofit. 	11
Service-learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service-learning experience within the course 	1
Simulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simulations focus on topics of group and individual decision making 	1
Other: Leadership course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group relations 	1
Other: International Course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students work within a community • Students do projects within international setting 	2
Other: Presentations from nonprofit professionals within a course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations from well-known CEOs/executives on specific topics (x2) 	2

Data triangulation. The data gathered during the interviews were also used to triangulate the data gathered during the website and syllabi review. The data about the experiential education approaches during the 12 program interviews matched up quite well with the findings that were generated through the review of the course syllabi and program websites.

Table 8 shows number of times each approach was listed on the program websites, syllabi and interviews.

Table 8

Number of Times Approach Triangulation

Type of Approach	Number of Times Listed on Program Websites (49)	Number of Times Listed in Course Syllabi (405)	Number of Times Mentioned in Interviews (12)
Capstone	24	6	6
Internship	15	3	5
Experiential learning	11	125	12
Service-learning	0	9	1
Practicum	6	2	1
Simulation	1	6	1
Fieldwork	4	0	0
Other	7	27	4

The experiential learning approach was listed frequently during both the syllabi review and by the interviewees. The capstone approach was listed most frequently during the program website review but not during the syllabi review or interviews. The other approaches category came up frequently during the syllabi review because there were approaches that emerged in the syllabi that did not match up with the standard approaches of capstone, internship, experiential learning, service-learning, practicum, field work or simulation.

Figure 1 shows a word cloud of the experiential education approach descriptions across 49 program website reviews, 405 course syllabi and 12 interviews; and Table 9 compares approach descriptions.

The approaches described during the interviews were similar to those found in the website review and course syllabi review. Two key findings emerged from the triangulation process. The first key finding was the service-learning approach was rarely listed on course program websites. This should not be surprising because service-learning is primarily discussed in the undergraduate context (e.g. Killian, 2004; Imperial, Perry, & Katula, 2007; Lambright, 2008; McCarthy & Tucker, 1999; Miller-Millesen & Mould, 2004; Nichols & Monard, 2001). The second key finding was that there were low levels of student engagement with organizations as indicated by the experiential learning approach described in course syllabi.

Table 9

Approach Description Triangulation

Type of Approach	Website Approach Descriptions (49)	Syllabi Approach Descriptions (405)	Interview Approach Descriptions (12)
Capstone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Last course Culminating experience Integrate or apply knowledge learned throughout the program Conduct a real-world research project addressing a problem within an organization Conduct a policy project Work in teams Present the results of project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrative experience Solve a real-world management or policy issue Combine theory and practice Integrate concepts studied throughout the program Consultant to a nonprofit organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students engage in consulting project for a nonprofit Students work as a team Live case Case analysis Students choose a topic Workshop class
Internship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required for students who have minimal work experience Opportunity to apply theory to practice Complete 300 hours internship within an organization For course credit Not required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preservice students Apply theory to practice to a nonprofit organization Apply graduate level education in a nonprofit organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students perform x hours for an organization Prepare students for practice roles Relating curriculum to professional development Student driven Semester-long internship in practice setting
Experiential learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students select a project within a nonprofit organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applied learning experience Design a project for a nonprofit Create a plan Students acting as consultants To be done on behalf of the client “nonprofit organization” Develop a project for a particular service or program Apply one of the methods studied in the course to a real decision Working with a nonprofit Each team will present their plan and product 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interact with organization Oral presentation Students act as consultants for a nonprofit Students volunteer x number of hours for a nonprofit Students research, interview and write a case study of a real-world management issue facing a nonprofit Develop professional product Students work on project for a govt. agency or nonprofit
Service-learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> n/a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflections Provide a consulting project to a nonprofit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Service-learning experience within the course

Table 9 (cont.)*Approach Description Triangulation*

Type of Approach	Website Approach Descriptions (49)	Syllabi Approach Descriptions (405)	Interview Approach Descriptions (12)
Practicum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An alternative to the internship • The capstone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Immersion • Grantmaking Practicum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of capstone
Fieldwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Off-campus experience • Learning experience in the field • Apply classroom knowledge to the field 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n/a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n/a
Simulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • see below 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer exercises • Lab reports • Role play • Policy simulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simulations focus on topics of group and individual decision-making
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public service immersion, organizational experience, simulation, and assistantship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer • Interview a nonprofit leader • Develop a case • Scenario • Examine the facilitator's role • Speech 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group relations • Students work within a community • Students do projects within international setting • Presentations from well known CEOs/executives on specific topics

Note: The descriptions reflect the words that were used to describe each approach and do not reflect the number of times the term was used.

Table 10*Interaction Framework for Experiential Learning Approach*

Interaction Level	Interaction Description
Level 1	Study a nonprofit (or something else) but do not interact with the nonprofit being studied.
Level 2	Study a nonprofit and interact with the nonprofit in some manner (e.g., interview the staff or executives within a nonprofit).
Level 3	Study a nonprofit, interact with the nonprofit in some manner (e.g., interview the staff or executives within a nonprofit), and present findings to the nonprofit.
Level 4	Study a nonprofit; interact with the nonprofit in some manner (e.g., interview the staff or executives within a nonprofit), present findings to the nonprofit, and work collaboratively with the nonprofit to create the project.

Discussion, Recommendations for Future Research, and Practice Implications

The website review, syllabi review, and interview data revealed a variety of expected and unexpected findings based on the literature. Interviewees had challenges with the experiential education terminology but were clearly using experiential education within their programs. Additionally, support for experiential education was formally available at the university level through a campus wide service-learning center, and limited at the program level from individual faculty members and program administrators. Moreover, assessment of experiential education primarily occurred on an informal basis.

Each program used a variety of experiential education approaches. Consistent with the syllabus and website review, the most commonly mentioned approach was experiential learning also known as “a project within a course.” Reviewing the syllabi closer revealed low levels of interactions between students and community organizations. The service-learning approach was rarely mentioned in the website and syllabi review, and in the interviews.

Based on these findings, future studies should focus on more documentation about the informal and formal aspects of experiential education in nonprofit-focused master’s degree programs and on levels of interactions between students conducting experiential learning projects and community organizations (see Gazley et al., 2013 for an example). Future studies can also focus on the impact of experiential education approaches on students. Finally, future studies can explore further which setting and support factors influence the types of experiential education approaches offered within each program.

The findings also have implications on faculty and program administrators. As stated in the beginning of this paper, program administrators need to ask hard questions about what levels of interactions they want their students to have with nonprofits and what role their programs are to play in the nonprofit community. Some programs may not be comfortable having students present findings to community organizations. Other programs may recognize that students would benefit from increased interactions with nonprofit organizations.

Limitations and Delimitations

As with any study, there were some limitations. Using master’s degrees associated with NACC in this study was a challenge. This limitation was addressed by the extensive website review (discussed in the methods section) that identified specific master’s degrees associated with NACC member centers. Another limitation relates to the emergent nature of the data. Since each program administrator may use different vocabulary to describe experiential education, the interviews allowed for program administrators to define experiential education in their own terms.

Another limitation was that not all types of nonprofit-focused master’s degree programs are equally represented in this study. The interview sampling strategy identified programs that used experiential education and some types of degree programs used more approaches than other types of programs. In the second part of this study, not included in this paper, program administrators of all eligible nonprofit-focused master’s degree programs associated with NACC member centers and all other nonprofit-

focused master's degree programs were invited to participate in a survey. The second part of the study made sure that a variety of experiential education approaches descriptions, settings, and support mechanisms were represented. Additionally, the second part of the study and analysis revealed few differences between NACC and non-NACC programs.

Last, there were some limitations in using the syllabi data. It was challenging gathering a comprehensive picture of how experiential education approaches were being used within a program as a whole because some programs did not provide all syllabi. In order to address this limitation, specific examples of experiential education approaches were pulled from course assignments. However, there may have been other experiential education approaches used within a course that were not described in the course syllabi. Even with the limitations described above, the website review, syllabi review and interviews provided a first look at how experiential education approaches were used and described within nonprofit-focused master's degree programs associated with NACC.

Conclusions

The overall purpose of this paper was to define and document the setting, support and types of experiential education approaches used within nonprofit-focused master's degree programs associated NACC member centers across the United States. This paper provides a foundation for understanding experiential education approaches within the context of nonprofit management education. Program administrators and faculty members of nonprofit-focused master's degree programs can use these findings as a kind of lens through which they can look at experiential education in their own programs and courses. The findings also lay a foundation for future studies that will, hopefully, focus on the impact of multiple experiential education approaches on students and on any community organizations with which the students interact.

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