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## Article

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# Experiential learning for societal impact

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper examines how business schools can respond to calls to increase their impact by effectively leveraging experiential learning approaches that address complex societal issues. It develops a comprehensive framework that categorizes student roles in experiential learning for societal impact (ELSI).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper synthesizes multiple theoretical frameworks of societal impact competencies and analyzes various experiential learning modalities in business education. It presents a typology organizing experiential learning activities along two dimensions: classroom-based versus community-based experiences and students as investments versus agents of change.

**Findings** – The analysis reveals three distinct roles students play in ELSI: as investments in future impact, as current agents of change and as beneficiaries of societal impact initiatives. The paper demonstrates how different experiential learning modalities serve these roles and how they contribute to developing crucial competencies for addressing complex societal challenges.

**Practical implications** – The paper provides business educators with an actionable framework for designing and implementing experiential learning activities that foster societal impact competencies. The typology of learning activities offers practical guidance for curriculum development and program design across different institutional contexts.

**Social implications** – The framework addresses how business education can contribute to achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals through experiential learning while also highlighting the potential for business education to reduce inequalities and create pathways out of poverty for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Originality/value** – To the best of the authors' knowledge, the paper presents an original conceptual framework that integrates multiple theoretical perspectives on societal impact education and provides a practical typology for implementing experiential learning initiatives in business schools. This integration of theory and practice advances understanding of how to effectively prepare students for making meaningful societal contributions.

**Keywords** Experiential learning, Sustainable development goals, Implementation challenges, Societal impact, Student roles

**Paper type** General review

In recognition of the significant, complex, ill-structured and pervasive challenges currently facing the world, such as climate change, poverty and gender inequality, business schools have



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been called to increase their focus on societal impact. The first significant impetus was the release of six principles for responsible management education in 2007 created by the United Nation's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) task force composed of academic administrators ([unprme.org/history-of-prme/](http://unprme.org/history-of-prme/)). Business schools around the world joined the PRME initiative and subscribed to its principles, such as partnership and engagement with external stakeholders. Reinforcement of the importance of societal impact came in 2020 when the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) added "Engagement and Societal Impact" to its standards. Its guidance pointed to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) for selecting focus areas for initiatives and monitoring subsequent impact ([aacsbedu/-/media/documents/accreditation/2020-interpretive-guidance-July-2021.pdf](https://aacsbedu/-/media/documents/accreditation/2020-interpretive-guidance-July-2021.pdf)).

As with most AACSB standards, latitude is given on how best to integrate sustainability goals and societal impact initiatives throughout the institution. Some business schools have supported faculty research related to sustainability in their respective fields (for an analysis of research from European public business schools, see [aacsbedu/insights/articles/2024/01/whats-your-business-schools-sdg-score](https://aacsbedu/insights/articles/2024/01/whats-your-business-schools-sdg-score)). Others have established centers, initiatives, investment funds or programs focused on sustainability. Nearly all AACSB accredited business schools have revised their curriculum to incorporate sustainability principles in their courses and/or created new courses explicitly focused on the issue (see, for example, Sustainability Across the Curriculum, [aacsbedu/insights/articles/2022/03/sustainability-across-the-curriculum](https://aacsbedu/insights/articles/2022/03/sustainability-across-the-curriculum)).

As a result of this attention, several student-focused frameworks of societal impact have emerged. For example, Pappas & Pappas (2014, p. 12) focused on the student (intrapersonal level). They note, "individual sustainability includes possessing a well-developed and demonstrated value system that acknowledges the importance and interconnectedness of all global biological and social systems and our appropriate place within them." Another framework, outlined in a 2022 AACSB Briefing, proposed a set of key competencies that societal impact leaders need to be successful ([aacsbedu/insights/briefings/competencies-for-societal-impact-leaders](https://aacsbedu/insights/briefings/competencies-for-societal-impact-leaders)). The three intrapersonal competencies are developing a deeper understanding of societal impact, fostering a deeper understanding of self and acquiring an understanding of the bigger picture. The three interpersonal competencies are: exhibiting a growth mindset, taking a human centered approach to leadership and sharing knowledge with others. In another model, Aidhaen (2023) mapped education skills for digital and sustainable societies that included adaptability and motivation, resilience, connectivity and networking, engagement, local/global citizenship, research, ethics and human rights, as well as gender equality.

Together these frameworks posit a very broad set of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) needed to develop societal impact leaders and change agents. The pedagogies to nurture these KSAs must be equal to the challenge of engaging students cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally, and thus require a requisite shift in instructional techniques. A few sustainability lectures sprinkled throughout the curriculum are not likely to have much long-term effect, no matter how well done. Given the "educating the whole student" nature of these traits, behaviors, mindsets, etc. we propose that experiential learning will be the most effective approach to fostering and enhancing the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies (Burch et al., 2019). In the section below, we outline modalities for experiential learning for societal impact (ELSI), organized around two concepts: students as investments and students as agents. In the next section, we then discuss how students may also be beneficiaries of ELSI. We then outline the challenges of implementing ELSI and suggest some ways to mitigate them.

### **Capacity building, agents and beneficiaries**

While definitions of experiential learning abound, we define it as a structured, student-focused activity with explicit learning objectives. The pedagogy "combines direct experience that is

meaningful to the student with guided reflection and analysis” (Proudman, 1992, p. 20). It is predicated on carefully chosen experiences with active student participation that engage students cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally (Burch et al., 2019; Hoover & Whitehead, 1975). During the learning activity, students may succeed, fail or likely a combination of both, which is why explicit student reflection, critical analysis and synthesis (Kolb & Kolb, 2017) are key to extracting learning from the process.

Given this broad definition, it is not surprising that experiential learning is a “big tent.” It spans both quick, 5-min, in-class exercises to semester-long, community-based internships, with both of these contexts having shown the potential for robust learning outcomes (Burch et al., 2019). Experiential learning exercises also vary in terms of their overall purpose. Some are meant to help students acquire and develop new proficiencies, like practice drills help players develop fundamental soccer skills. Other experiential learning activities are meant to provide students with a context for applying their abilities, like the skills developed during practice or training drills that are then leveraged in a competitive soccer match.

To instill the depth and breadth of sustainability KSAs students need, schools of business should use multiple experiential learning modalities (Molderez & Fonseca, 2018, p. 4397), especially at different stages of student formation. Table 1 below presents a typology of experiential learning activities designed for societal impact, organized by purpose (building versus applying KSAs) and context (classroom versus community based). While not exhaustive, the typology includes examples of common activities that may result in societal impact, either now (students as agents of current impact) or in the future (students as investments in future impact). Each quadrant in the typology is described in more detail below.

#### *Students as investments in societal impact*

When experiential learning is focused on developing students’ nascent knowledge about societal impact and teaching them the skills and abilities needed to enact change, we are, in effect, actively investing in them and their future. We are building their capacity ([un.org/en/academic-impact/](http://un.org/en/academic-impact/))

**Table 1.** A typology of experiential learning activities for societal impact

Student roles	Classroom-based experiences	Community-based experiences
<i>Students as an investment in future societal impact</i> (building KSAs)	<i>Quadrant 1</i>	<i>Quadrant 2</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active learning exercises focused on sustainability concepts</li> <li>• Sustainability simulations</li> <li>• Decision-based sustainability case studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability case competitions</li> <li>• Social entrepreneurship pitch competitions</li> <li>• Sustainability hackathons</li> </ul>
<i>Students as agents of current societal impact</i> (applying KSAs)	<i>Quadrant 3</i>	<i>Quadrant 4</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem-based or challenge-based courses focused on sustainability issues</li> <li>• Sustainability-related nonprofit consulting courses</li> <li>• Sustainability research projects for an external audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability internships</li> <li>• Service learning</li> </ul>

**Source:** Authors’ own work

*capacity-building*) to address complex, ambiguous societal-impact challenges after graduation, whether they join a for-profit, governmental or nonprofit organization or launch their own venture.

Several experiential learning modalities are most appropriate for fostering students' new, emerging societal impact KSAs. First, classroom-based experiences can include active learning exercises focused on sustainability concepts. For just two examples, [Bérubé \(2024\)](#) published an exercise that explores invisible disabilities in the workplace, and [Rusinko \(2024\)](#) shared an activity that develops students' climate literacy. Second, sustainability-focused simulations are offered by numerous vendors (e.g. Conscious Capitalism) and represent another avenue for students to gain and develop new KSAs via classroom-based experiential learning activities ([Gibbons, Fernando, & Spedding, 2022](#)). Finally, faculty members can use social-impact-focused, decision-based case studies, published by Columbia University, Harvard Business Publishing, Ivey Publishing and many others, to gain societal impact knowledge and acquire new skills and abilities relevant to this arena.

Second, community-based experiential learning experiences are another avenue for introducing students to societal impact KSAs. There are multiple sustainability focused, intercollegiate case competitions hosted by universities such as New York University's Stern School of Business and Boston University's Questrom School of Business, to name a few. Similarly, universities and nonprofit organizations run pitch competitions focused on social enterprises, such as the Holt Prize ([Hultprize.org](#)). Finally, sustainability hackathons are gaining popularity, with some universities (e.g. Seton Hall's Stillman School of Business, Monash Business School) hosting hackathons explicitly focused on sustainability goals. These kinds of learning experiences enable students to gain new societal impact KSAs as they engage in the community-based experiential learning activity.

#### *Students as agents of societal impact*

As [Rimanoczy & Ivanova \(2022, p. 316\)](#) noted, "by remaining within the intellectual realm [...] we [are] missing out on in terms of students' passion, engagement, emotions and energy." Indeed, students can go beyond simply gaining KSAs to be applied sometime in the future. They also can apply them and thereby have agency regarding societal issues while still in school. These kinds of pedagogies are more challenging for faculty members to implement ([Tyran, 2017](#); [Wright, Forray, & Lund Dean, 2019](#)), but they also have the potential to provide much deeper learning for students ([Yorio & Ye, 2012](#)).

In the classroom, this can take the form of consulting projects for nonprofits, governmental agencies and other organizations whose missions are related to the UNSDG ([Desai & DeArmond, 2021](#); [Litzky, Godshalk, & Walton-Bongers, 2010](#); [McCrea, 2010](#)). It can also include problem-based learning, challenge-based learning experiences and/or societal impact focused research projects (PjBL) for the benefit of external entities ([Gallagher & Savage, 2023](#)). In most of these externally focused but classroom-based experiences, students have indirect agency because the solutions will be implemented by the clients, not the students themselves.

In community-based modalities, students become direct agents of societal impact as they engage in either service-learning or complete internships in organizations focused on societal issues. In service-learning, students work as "mutually contributory partners with organization staff and clients" ([Kenworthy-U'Ren & Peterson, 2005, p. 275](#)). Reciprocity between all the stakeholders is expected ([Fougère, Solitander, & Maheshwari, 2020](#)), as is reflection and responsibility on the part of the students ([Godfrey, Illes, & Berry, 2005](#)), which leads to both a breadth and depth of experience. Likewise, internships, especially those in organizations whose mission directly addresses one or more of the UNSDG, are also fruitful areas for students to actively participate in enacting societal impact.

### Students as beneficiaries and equity challenges

In addition to being investments in and agents of current societal impact, as outlined in the typology in [Table 1](#) above, students may also be beneficiaries. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, graduating and then attaining a career-related job has the potential to lift that individual from poverty, enable that student to pursue decent work and reduce inequalities (UNSDG goals 1,8 and 10). Experiential learning, as a High Impact Practice ([Bray, Kuh, & Kinzie, 2018](#)), can help improve retention and graduation rates ([McDaniel & Van Jura, 2022](#)). In addition, students with experiential learning experience, especially paid internships, are more likely to receive multiple job offers and higher starting salaries after graduation ([Gatta, 2023](#)).

However, there are potential equity issues regarding access to ELSI. A study of the Class of 2023 by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that 53.5% of Pell grant students had a paid internship, compared to 61% of non-Pell grant students. Similar disparities in paid versus unpaid internships also held for women, LGBTQ+ and students of color ([Gatta, 2023](#)). Other research also indicates that access to experiential learning is not always equitable. Limited resources and a lack of social capital are often obstacles to participation, especially for those from underserved communities ([Finley & McNair, 2013](#)). To that end, business schools should explicitly and proactively support first-generation students and those from underserved backgrounds so that they can meaningfully engage in experiential learning activities. This would increase the probability that they will attain a successful, long-term, professional career.

### Experiential learning for societal impact challenges

While the benefits of using ELSI are many, it is not without its challenges. Some stem from implementation, including faculty and student mindsets, logistics, uncertainty and resources. Other challenges are related to assessment. Given the increased level of uncertainty, measuring student learning and societal impact outcomes may be problematic. Each of these challenges is described in more detail below.

#### *Implementation challenges*

Implementing ELSI necessitates a significant shift in the faculty member's role from teacher-centered to learner-centered ([Villarreal, Benavente, Chuecas, & Bruna, 2020](#)). With the traditional, teacher-centered, lecture-based approach, given they are the "sage on the stage" ([King, 1993](#)), instructors decide the topics covered and are less likely to "waste" time on tangents or irrelevant issues ([Miller & Metz, 2014](#)). Students in this model are relatively passive and well-versed in their expected role in the classroom. This gives faculty members using this modality a sense of control and stability.

With experiential learning techniques, on the other hand, instructors serve as designers and/or curators of learning experiences and then as facilitators and mentors, offering guidance when appropriate. They empower students to take ownership of their own learning. Faculty members also help students organize their reflections, connect them to their subject knowledge base and facilitate the transfer of knowledge. The faculty member provides guidance, support and encouragement throughout the learning process. However, these activities can come with "volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity" ([Jonathan & Laik, 2019](#)).

Instructors using class-embedded experiential learning methods may be faced with activities that run long or, almost as dreaded, run short. Students may be apathetic, rambunctious, distracted or dismissive. Depending on how the exercise unfolds, learners may not achieve the activity's objectives because the session went off on a tangent or the students were not able to connect the dots. The uncertainty multiplies when you are talking

about semester-long classroom experiences, such as consulting or problem-based courses. Clients may quit or disappear, students may drop the course leaving teammates stranded, needed data may not be available, team conflict may arise, there may be scope creep and so on. And community-based experiences, like internships and service-learning projects, even when appropriately structured, are even less under the control of the instructor. Thus, for faculty accustomed to more traditional approaches to instruction, this shift in pedagogy is not easy, even when instructors are motivated to adopt the practice.

A shift in faculty mindset may help. Unexpected outcomes are, ironically, to be expected in experiential learning and should not be seen as failures even if the outcome is due to unforeseen circumstances or the result of a faculty mistake (Edelson et al., 2019). Rather, these situations provide unexpected opportunities for learning, although what is gleaned might not precisely fit with the original objectives stated at the outset. This “growth mindset” (Yeager & Dweck, 2020) toward ELSI requires flexibility and agility from the instructor, as well as the students.

Another approach that can help instructors navigate the challenges of teaching using ELSI is to build a faculty community of practice (Bosman & Voglewede, 2019) focused on ELSI. A community of practice can provide emotional support, disseminate best pedagogical practices, enable instructors to share current challenges and, together in community, brainstorm potential solutions. Experiential learning is often recognized as “whole person” learning, but it also requires “whole person” teaching.

Gaining student “buy-in” can also be a challenge. Buy-in has been defined as student:

Feelings in relation to a new way of thinking or behaving [...] reflecting elements of participation, support, and a sense of commitment to change, as well as a belief that such changes will have a positive impact on [their] learning (Cavanagh et al., 2016, p. 2).

While some students much prefer the active participation required of experiential learning, others prefer a more passive role. To convince these students that experiential learning approaches will be to their benefit, Cavanagh et al. (2016, pp. 2–3) proposed that faculty implement an “EPIC” model:

- exposure to active learning;
- persuasion that these activities are good;
- identification that the activities are good for them personally; and
- commitment to this way of learning.

In other words, faculty members should not assume that students will see and appreciate the power of experiential learning. Instead, they should actively sell the concept.

Another potential barrier to using ELSI is the faculty time needed to successfully implement ELSI. *First*, in the case of in-class, KSA building (Quadrant 1), faculty members need time to review and select activities and/or cases that support the sustainability learning objectives. While many resources exist, such as specific sustainability case study collections and journals dedicated to experiential learning exercises like the Management Teaching Review, curating these materials takes time. *Second*, arranging community-based KSA building experiences (Quadrant 2) requires faculty time to identify or create appropriate events, to prepare student teams and to arrange for and participate in travel to off-campus case competitions, hackathons and other events. *Third*, for in-class KSA application (Quadrant 3), it takes time to identify the right kinds of problems that will provide the kind of challenge needed to attain the learning objectives. For consulting or research projects, it takes time to find the right kind of clients and get them up to speed regarding their role in ELSI. It is important to set clients’ expectations

regarding the amount of time and/or resources they will need to dedicate to the process and what outcomes they may (or may not) expect to receive from their participation. *Finally*, supervising sustainability internships and service-learning projects (Quadrant 4) takes faculty time. Devising sustainability learning objectives that match the community-based clients' needs, guiding students through the semester and providing the kinds of feedback that are essential for high-quality experiential learning are time-consuming for instructors.

What emerges from this exposition of implementation challenges is that institutional support is critical to the success of ELSI. Class sizes may need to be capped at numbers lower than lecture-based courses so that faculty will have the time needed to support students and provide quality feedback. Administrative assistance may be needed to coordinate travel to competitions and hackathons. Active involvement of other units, like the Career Center, Alumni Relations, Centers for Community Outreach and similar departments, can help build the connections needed to identify potential clients for consulting, research or problem-based courses and internships or service-learning opportunities.

### *Assessment challenges*

Measuring ELSI outcomes can also be challenging, although in the two quadrants focused on KSA building, the same methods as other pedagogies may be used. For example, student attainment of the learning objectives in Quadrant 1 (in-class KSA building) can be accomplished through activity debriefs, case study reports or presentations, multiple-choice responses on exams or quizzes, written responses to prompts, student surveys and so on. Enhancing awareness of systemic sustainability issues and assessing the same can be done by using a free resource, the Awareness Assessment, which is available from Sulitest ([www.sulitest.org](http://www.sulitest.org)).

In the second quadrant, community-based, KSA building, students are engaging with external participants and getting a better sense of their KSAs by way of peer comparisons. Typically, such events include judges' comments, ratings and feedback as well as appropriate metrics that compare students or student teams to their peers at other institutions. Post-competition debriefings may also assess student outcomes and thus provide more learning and reflections.

In the other two quadrants (3 and 4), where students apply their KSAs and are thus agents of current societal impact, there are two salient aspects:

- (1) whether students have achieved the course learning objectives; and
- (2) measuring the societal impact.

In quadrant 3, project-based, research-based and consulting-based courses have a high level of exposure to external stakeholders and entail higher levels of uncertainty. One way of managing this uncertainty is to build in-process assessments through periodic client meetings and structured feedback at key milestones during the semester. Evaluating achievement of the learning objectives at the conclusion is also important. Commonly used approaches include reflective writing assignments or presentations by students and/or student teams, as well as client surveys and/or interviews.

Assessing the resulting societal impact is more challenging, given the variety of projects and their outcomes. One approach is to value students' time at a fixed rate, such as the prevailing minimum wage, and calculate the value of volunteer efforts to the community by multiplying the hours the students worked on the project by that amount (Austin & Rust, 2015). Tangible impact can also be measured in pounds of food collected for a local food bank, dollars raised for UNICEF, number of developmentally disabled adults taught about budgeting and other measurable outcomes, even though common denominators often cannot be found.

Finally, the fourth quadrant also has two dimensions for assessment, the first measuring student learning and the second pertaining to the goals and deliverables from the perspective of the external partners. Student learning can be assessed through journals and other reflective writing assignments. Student peer evaluations can be used in a team context. The satisfaction of external partners can be assessed through surveys, evaluations of the student work product and in-depth interviews that aim to assess and debrief the client's experience. In some cases, there may be metrics available that directly relate to the goals of the service-learning project or internship. It should be noted that, given the uncertainty inherent in experiential learning, success with respect to both student learning and client satisfaction may not be achieved in all cases.

### *Equity challenges*

Experiential learning “[...] may be uniquely positioned to help increase educational equity” (Li-Grining et al., 2022, p. 103). It is personalized and adaptable to students at different levels of achievement, such that students with strong, preexisting skills can develop them further, while novices can build rudimentary foundations. Learners can also focus their attention on areas that most interest them (Philominraj, Quintana, Arrellano, & Ranjan, 2020). These experiential learning characteristics contribute to its ability to increase student engagement and retention, especially for nontraditional students (see, for example, Chittum, Enke, & Finley, 2022; Finley & McNair, 2013; Prussia & Weis, 2004). Unfortunately, as noted above, participation rates for underrepresented and underserved students trail behind those of more traditional students.

For classroom-based experiential learning (Quadrants 1 and 3), faculty training in implicit bias in different learning contexts may be helpful so that instructors can minimize potential biases when guiding ELSI activities, interpreting outcomes and providing feedback to students. Ensuring diversity in student team composition can also help challenge stereotypes and promote understanding of different perspectives. Regularly debriefing after activities can raise potential biases and their impact on the learning process. Finally, instructors design ELSI activities with sensitivity to different cultural backgrounds and experiences. These practices will help underrepresented students feel like a part of the learning community and increase the probability of student buy-in.

For community-based ELSI (Quadrants 2 and 4), institutional support is essential to ensure equal access. It should not be assumed that all students can afford to travel to intercollegiate activities. Institutionally provided travel budgets or scholarships should be provided to support students with financial need. While an unpaid internship may provide a valuable context to apply KSAs, they “incur a real cost that is less affordable to those of more modest means” (Silva, 2021, p. 1291). Stipends or scholarships could help offset these expenses and opportunity costs. Finally, first generation and other underrepresented students may not have the social capital to find their own internships or service-learning opportunities. The support of a Career Center, Community Outreach Center and other campus units can facilitate connections between students and organizations providing quality experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Significant world challenges cannot be resolved without understanding how to get things done through the coordinated efforts of multiple people and/or constituencies. Thus, a business education grounded in ELSI is an investment in the future. After graduation, alumni that can envision, critically evaluate, design and implement effective solutions to complex problems in business and society will be better able to provide living wages and help to raise

people out of poverty, promote environmental sustainability, fight against discrimination and other forms of social and institutional injustice and cultivate meaningful work for themselves and their colleagues.

Our students are not only an investment in future societal impact, however. They can also be current agents of societal change. Leveraging the power of ELSI gives students the tools and perspectives they need to negotiate today's complex, enigmatic challenges that cannot be resolved with formulaic solutions. Giving business students the kinds of experiences that promote moral awareness and empathy, cultivate imagination and creativity, foster diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as develop emotional and cultural intelligence, will help them improve our world now and in the future.

Finally, a quality business education grounded in experiential learning can build a student's path to a career that provides meaningful work and a living wage. For students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, experiential learning can lead to better retention (e.g. Williams & McClure, 2010), improved student learning outcomes (e.g. Brooks & Simpson, 2014; Hamer, 2000), subsequent graduation, and thus lead to a professional career that becomes a path out of poverty. We owe it to our students to support their educational journeys and help them surmount any barriers to graduation and career success, so they can benefit from our societal impact efforts.

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