

On the Agenda? Deliberations on Experiential Learning at Canadian University Senate Meetings, 2012-2022

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Abstract

The university's core teaching mission is being reshaped by the proliferation of experiential learning (EL) pedagogies. The rise of EL is also constituting new connections between the university and its local community, relationships necessary for EL itself to be delivered. This research examines how universities confront these new and mutually interdependent dimensions of teaching and societal engagement. Using qualitative thematic content analysis, the paper documents and analyses university senate deliberations on EL at twelve (12) representative institutions in Canada for the period from 2012 to 2022 (n = 922 monthly meetings). Focusing on senate discussions on matters such as internal university EL governance, engagement with community partners, and impacts on learners and learning, the paper presents a novel analysis of the Canadian university's understanding and development of EL in this phase of expansion. The paper concludes with a discussion of institutional and sector policy implications for the teaching and learning mission.

Keywords: Higher education, teaching mission, experiential learning, community engagement

Introduction

Experiential learning (EL) has gained breadth and depth across the Canadian university campus in recent years. Incorporating a variety of models such as paid and unpaid work-integrated learning (WIL) as well as community service work, EL can relocate teaching and learning outside of the classroom and often off campus. Increasingly, EL is where the university and community must come together to deliver on the teaching mission with, ideally, learner support and exposure to work experiences. In addition, EL is reaching beyond disciplines traditionally characterised by required practice, including counselling psychology and social work, to spread through the humanities and arts as well as basic social and physical sciences. These trends bear close scrutiny for their impact on the educative mission of the university and the place of the university in its local community.

We may situate the proliferation of EL in long-standing debates over the autonomy and "uses" of the university as an institution (Collini, 2012; Fallis, 2007; Newfield, 2016). Institutions have demonstrated a willingness to accept and promote EL to their students. As EL unfurls across academic programmes and locates learners in the community, the university is engaging in relationships with community organisations of various kinds to fulfill its core mission. Those relationships may include complex processes, goals, and understandings (Baldwin, 2021; Gavazzi, 2015; McNeil et al., 2022); new power relations not historically present in teaching and learning. How does the university confront these new and mutually interdependent dimensions of teaching and societal engagement?

Building on a previously published pilot study of six (6) cases (Buzzelli, 2025), we seek to answer this question by examining university senate deliberations on EL at twelve (12) representative institu-

tions in Canada over the last decade. Focusing on senate discussions on such matters as internal EL governance, engagement with community partners, and impacts on learners and learning, we develop a novel analysis of the Canadian university's understanding and development of EL in this phase of expansion. The paper presents an empirical analysis after first locating our research question in the literature context. We conclude with a discussion of institutional and sector policy implications for the teaching and learning mission.

Locating EL for Teaching and Learning

EL of various types has deep roots in Canada and abroad, and its scope has accelerated in breadth, depth, diversity, and hybridity in recent years. The University of Waterloo is often seen as the “co-op” university (Weingarten, 2021), having initiated this modality in 1957 and holding nearly half of all reported co-op placements in Canada in 1987 (totalling 9,111). The [Cooperative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada](#) was established over fifty years ago, in 1973. McCallum and Wilson (1988) trace decades of cooperative education in Canadian higher education and show that 60 institutions had offerings in this space by the late 1980s. EL's history is deep, though its recent growth in Canada—our focus here—is in keeping with international trends and demonstrates the recent push for ever more EL in higher education. For example, the [International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning](#) was established in 2000 with various WIL arrangements represented in early journal issues in Oceania, Africa, and Europe. Perlin's (2012) popular treatment of internships critically traces a similar timeline in European and North American contexts. In Canada, by 2015, EL had grown such that about half of undergraduates had some form of an experiential component in their degree programme (Galarneau et al., 2020). Part of this expansion, importantly, came by way of institutions and systems responding to resource infusions by provincial and federal governments starting in 2012 for the development of WIL, community-engaged learning (CEL), and related modalities referred to here under the general umbrella of EL. Universities' response to these incentives meant that staffing and resources were added to help with the expansion of this suite of teaching modalities. The expansion of EL continued up to and through the COVID-19 years of 2020-2023 (Buzzelli & Asafo-Adjei, 2022; Buzzelli & Songsore, 2022), as we shall see in the senate documents of our empirical analysis. Our purpose is to document and understand the institution's engagement with this expansion.

With this growth of EL as a backdrop, this paper locates the question of EL's development in two necessarily intertwined contexts: the university's proximate geographical community and its external relationships as based on the teaching and learning mission. Said another way, EL by its nature necessitates the consideration together of its geographies and networks. The growth and expansion of EL is based on the educational philosophy that the learner's development and professionalisation require both theory and practice in mutual interdependence (Kolb, 1984). The influence of this philosophy can be seen in institutions' promotion of EL, such as this definition proffered by the University of Western Ontario:

An approach that educators use to intentionally connect learners with practical experiences that include guided reflection. Experiential learning allows learners to: increase and apply disciplinary knowledge, develop transferable skills, clarify interests and values, strengthen career engagement and employability, and collaborate meaningfully with communities. (University of Western Ontario, 2019)

EL enables the learner to test their skills and interests while also permitting the development of professional contacts. The appeal to students is apparent, and institutions are ready to meet this demand, but the question remains: how do institutions engage the community and the partners needed to deliver EL in all its forms?

EL may include co-ops, internships (paid or unpaid), community-engaged learning (CEL), and other pedagogies that usually take place off campus (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2016). EL's geographical scale may span local to global (cf. Curran et al., 2018; Tiessen & Huish, 2014), yet the university's proximate community is where relationships are most developed, and the student may have the greatest access to placements (Lazzeroni & Piccaluga, 2015). To be sure, in the current swell

of EL development, the types of arrangements available to learners are many and varied. For example, although co-ops and internships may differ, they can also be seen as forms of WIL for their shared career and labour force targets. This may be the view of those promoting CEL who instead focus on the civic contributions of teaching and learning in the community. Community service learning (CSL) extends this further still in arrangements by explicitly supporting a range of not-for-profit organisations, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs; Brabazon et al., 2019). Thus, we use EL in the present paper to encompass a variety of teaching and learning situations, usually taking place outside of the classroom, where the university and community are married, ideally with learner support and engagement via work experience (Billett, 2009).

Together with a local focus—arguably a local imperative—is the unique nature and substance of relationships imbued in EL. The university's place and roles in cities and regions are most often addressed not in terms of teaching and learning but as attraction points for talent and human capital (Narh & Buzzelli, 2022, 2024) and about research spillovers and economic development (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Lazzeroni & Piccaluga, 2015). The deep roots of this tradition (Piore & Sabel, 1984; Storper, 1997) include research on industrial parks and regional innovation systems, for example (Asheim & Gertler, 2005; Cooke, 2001; Gunasekara, 2006; Mowery & Sampat, 2005). The Canadian reader will be familiar with the Kitchener-Waterloo exemplar for its high-technology ecosystem from the 1980s (Bramwell & Wolfe, 2008; Howitt, 2019), leading to the development of Research in Motion (Blackberry), a case that continues to attract attention for its potential for development elsewhere (e.g., Leibovitz, 2003; Ornston & Camargo, 2021). In addition, the Kitchener-Waterloo experience also signals the priority usually afforded to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines as the basis for community relationship-building and economic development (Nelles, 2005; Perkmann et al., 2013).

Our interest is to widen this debate beyond economic development terms and to do so through the lens of EL rather than research-based societal engagement. Regional political economy (Harvey, 2001; Keating & Loughlin, 1997; Logan & Molotch, 1987), particularly its emphasis on the institutional bases of local governance (Amin, 1999; Harvey, 1989; Storper, 2013), offers a fruitful avenue forward to understand the nature and scope of local EL growth and development. An important theme in this literature is the need for associative forms of governance for successful collaboration (Gertler & Wolfe, 2002; Leibovitz, 2003; Wolfe & Gertler, 2016). Institution-building is key to local governance and relies upon adaptations by constituent organisations (Taylor, 2019). As seen through the lens of EL, internal institutional adjustments and community collaborations are related in the teaching and learning domain rather than in research and scholarship and are based on the full breadth of campus disciplines rather than being primarily STEM-focused. The university (or types of universities; see Rantisi & Leslie, 2013) is one such agent, and we ask how it confronts the imperative of local engagement for EL (Buzzelli & Allison, 2017). Organisational research suggests that institutions will find difficulty in adapting to deliver EL (Crain, 2008; Hearn, 1996; LaCroix, 2021; Milian et al., 2017). A useful parallel, perhaps, is the challenge of implementing interdisciplinarity at the university, arranging academic work and units for outputs and rewards outside of existing structures and traditional professional affiliations (Hemstrom et al., 2021). Similarly, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) asks that the usually separate core missions of teaching and scholarship be intertwined: rewarding the engineering professor, for example, for their dissemination of teaching and learning inquiry as we do with their scholarship on materials and structures. Community-based research also has deep roots and ushers in, perhaps, examples to the university of means and ways of community engagement as well as insights into internal organisational adaptations. With respect to EL, then, how do deliberations at the highest academic level—the university senate—reflect or indeed lead the change and adaptation necessary to reconfigure the teaching mission?

For associative governance to be effective, internal organisational adaptations must be married to external collaborations. EL may be the site of growing local institutional accountabilities demanding societal engagement and contributions (Meusberger et al., 2018). As EL reshapes the core teaching and learning mission, we see signals of the potential for associative governance to deliver EL meaningfully for institutions and learners. For example, in Montreal, the École nationale de cirque (an institute for higher education) is an institutional intermediary whose teaching mission is key to the successful cultural economy of circus arts (Rantisi & Leslie, 2013). In Kingston, Canada, Massey et al. (2014) demonstrated that post-graduation student retention can rely upon the learner's sense of community and inclusion, tenets

of the creative class informing university-community relations. Katz and Nowak (2018) made a similar argument—one they term the “new localism”—to help explain Pittsburgh’s rebirth after the decline of steel manufacturing and the role in particular of universities and students in addressing local challenges such as poverty and social inequalities. EL is, therefore, a particular new site of associative governance; one growing out of the teaching and learning across the breadth of campus for a novel positioning of the university’s place in its local political economy. As seen through the lens of university senates, we ask how institutions themselves understand the need for associative governance to develop and deliver EL successfully for students and the community.

Research Methods: On the Senate Agenda? Experiential Learning

Deliberations and Matters Arising

Canadian university governance is most often, though not exclusively, structured by a bicameral model composed of both an academic senate and a board of governors. The senates and boards are nominally equal in institutional governance but with different responsibilities (Cameron, 1991; Jones, 1996). Whereas boards typically oversee financial and operational matters and are usually composed of provincially appointed members, senates are populated by internally elected and appointed academic staff for oversight of the academic mission (Eastman et al., 2022). Although some observers question the status and authority of academic senates (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2009; Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2009; Hurtubise, 2019; MacKinnon, 2014), they “...are responsible for matters such as admissions policy, academic programs and curriculum, academic quality, scholarships and awards, student appeals, and granting of degrees [and further] strategic academic direction, policy, approvals, and oversight” (Eastman et al., 2022, p. 79; see also Pennock et al., 2015). Thus, amidst the rise of EL across the sector, academic disciplines, and communities, we seek to document and understand the extent to which the Canadian university senate deliberations reflect or steward EL development and implementation. Do we find a discussion of internal organisational adaptations necessary for EL pedagogy? Is there consideration of the nature and logistics needed to engage with community partners—as partners—so that learners can be appropriately and meaningfully hosted? What at all is said of EL?

To answer these questions, monthly senate meeting records (i.e., meeting minutes) were sampled from twelve Canadian universities over the 2012–2022 period. It is important to note that data were collected from university senates except for the University of Toronto, where a unicameral governance system sees its Governing Council—a body that oversees senate-like matters but also board-related matters as at other institutions—all of this with a mandate that spans its three main campuses (see Eastman et al., 2022). The institutions were sampled both for national representativeness as well as coverage of three institutional categories originally in the US Carnegie classification of universities and used by Maclean’s magazine in its annual ranking publication. The Maclean’s ranking is Canadian-focused and includes teaching metrics, rendering it the most relevant ranking approach for identifying institutions for analysis. The twelve institutions sampled here are the lead-ranked universities in each category of the 2022 Maclean’s ranking: (1) four “medical-doctoral,” incorporating universities with a medical school and a research profile (the University of Alberta, University of Manitoba, McGill University [McGill], and the University of Toronto [U of T] where the Governing Council is the most closely related site of academic governance as with senates at other institutions); (2) four “comprehensive” institutions, those with a balance of research and teaching, including graduate teaching (the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Simon Fraser University [SFU], University of Regina, University of Victoria [Victoria]); (3) four “primarily undergraduate” institutions with an undergraduate teaching focus (Mount Allison University [MAU], Saint Mary’s University [SMU], University of Northern British Columbia [UNBC], University of Prince Edward Island [UPEI]).

Senate meeting minutes are generally publicly available on institutional websites. For the University of Regina and Mount Allison University, records for the 2012-17 period were requested but unavailable (MAU records are available starting with September 2017). There were 118 meeting records for SFU, 81 for Victoria, 97 for McGill, 65 for U of T, 33 for MAU, 94 for UNBC, 93 for Memorial, 15 for Regina, 135 for Alberta, 103 for Manitoba, 94 for SMU, and 86 for UPEI. Once collected and cleaned of visual and other ancillary materials, the document texts were analysed using qualitative thematic content analysis, as shown with the representative example of the University of Alberta in Table 1. Document

coding started with a comprehensive reading of all records ($n = 1014$) to determine if EL and community (in relation to EL specifically) were present. Records of multiple meetings held in the same month were aggregated. For example, the University of Alberta's 135 records translate to 99 monthly meetings. In all, the 1014 records sum up to 922 monthly meetings used in the analysis. Then inclusive document coding was based on terminology both common to the EL domain (e.g., co-op) and inductively added as terms arose when reading the documents and as they appeared to be relevant to the discussion of EL-related matters (e.g., "non-traditional"). A few instances serve as cases in point. First, in SFU's April 2012 senate meeting, the Chair noted, "...new funding has been allocated for internships through Mitacs, a national, not-for-profit research organization" (p. 2). Second, at the February 2015 senate meeting at the University of Prince Edward Island, one lecture hour per week and 60 hours of field placement were noted in the senate academic planning and curriculum committee report for the approval of changes to a course in Clinical Exercise Physiology and Fitness Assessment Practicum. And last, during a discussion surrounding tuition and new market modifier proposals at the University of Alberta's November 12, 2014 general faculties council meeting, members commented, among other things, "to develop further on-campus employment opportunities, including possible internships, for international students" (p. 3). Finding no other mention of EL, these instances were nonetheless included but marked in the table as limited discussion. As demonstrated in the subsequent section, senate deliberations were often more substantive. The examples serve to underscore the inclusive approach to coding, which in turn aids in interpreting the quantity and texture of senate discussion of EL.

Month	Year										
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
January	o	o	o	L	o	o	C, E, B	o	o	o	o
February	o	o	H	o	A, B, C, E, N	A, B, H	L, N	o	o	o	o
March	o	o	o	X	o	o	A, B	A, B	o	o	B
April	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	A, B	o
May	o	o	o	o	o	o	L, H, A, B	o	o	B	o
June	C, D, E, L	o	o	o	o	o	C, E, B, A	A, C, E, B	M	x	
July	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
August	x	x	x	o	x	x	x	x	x	x	
September	M	o	o	o	o	o	M, A, B, C, E	o	o	o	
October	o	o	o	o	o	o	A, B	B	o	L, M	
November	o	o	K, L (l.d.)	x	M	o	o	o	o	B, A, L, I	
December	x	o	x	x	0	o	o	o	x	B, F, N, L	
Total meetings (EL discussed)	9 (2)	10 (0)	9 (2)	8 (1)	10 (2)	10 (1)	10 (7)	10 (3)	9 (1)	9 (5)	5 (1)

Note. 'o' represents a meeting in which EL was not noted/discussed. 'x' indicates no Senate meeting held. Blank cells indicate no data.

Document coding: A= experiential; B= learning' C= community; D- engage*; E= service; F= co-op*; G= applied; H= field*; I= experience; J= incubat*; K= industry; L= intern*; M= practic*; N= placement; O= work-study; P= non-traditional; Q= out of classroom. 'l.d. indicates limited method of the coded element nonetheless included. See text for further discussion.

Empirical Findings

The example of Alberta (short-hand name used henceforth) is provided in Table 1, given that 25% of its 99 meetings included discussion of EL-related issues, a fairly typical marker across the sample. Alberta also captures the typical frequency (9 months in a year) of senate meetings held in Canadian universities. Memorial had the highest EL-related discussions (65% of 83 meetings), followed by SMU (51% of 90 meetings) and Manitoba (48% of 98), which is closely followed by SFU (36% of 113), and Victoria had the lowest (15% of 80). The reader is reminded of the unavailable records for Mount Allison and Regina. In addition, the breadth of terms captured in the Alberta example is evident across the selected institutions, indicating that when EL-related matters were discussed, they tended to cut across a variety of arrangements and community issues. It is noteworthy that institutions of all types—not just those considered most teaching-focused, as one might surmise—showed relatively consistent coding of a variety of EL arrangements. In other words, the inverse is also true: even medical-doctoral university senates deliberated EL notwithstanding their more research-focused profile. Given the growth of EL on the higher education agenda during the 2012–22 period, it is not surprising to find that when EL was discussed, it appeared to encompass a variety of issues independent of institution type. Indeed, the substantial government funding—both provincial and federal—directed toward EL and WIL programs in universities prompted institutions to create dedicated units, hire staff, and support faculty. This funding marked a shift in universities’ roles, increasingly positioning them as sites for career readiness and citizenship preparation, a focus previously associated mainly with college programs (with exceptions like the University of Waterloo’s co-op programs).

Table 2 recasts the institution-level data for a more composite portrayal of the 2012–22 monthly senate data. Viewed in this way, one can see that senates hold meetings during the academic year but often do not meet in the summer months. In addition, some of the data gaps noted already also appear again due to the lack of publicly available records or responses from some institutions. The table shows that EL was discussed at 37% (339) of the 922 meetings over the 2012–22 study period. This could be interpreted as an ample presence of EL-related discussion, given it is consistent across institutional types and represents one suite of pedagogies within the wider teaching and learning ambit of senate business, to say nothing of the senate’s domain, including research and scholarship as well. That said, the inclusive coding strategy, together with the sampling of top-ranked institutions in the various Maclean’s ranking categories, might lead one to see the inverse—the 63% absence of EL-related discussion—also as noteworthy, summing to 583 of the 922 meetings in which EL was not touched upon at all. Noting again that since about half of Canadian baccalaureate students had some exposure to EL already by 2015 (Galarneau et al., 2020), it suggests that institutions might have done well to turn to senates for more deliberation and guidance on this very different pedagogy, its community connectedness, and, above all, the impact on learners’ degree pathways and experiences. From the point of view of the Canadian university senate’s role as academic guardian and steward, it could be argued that EL was evident in its deliberations; however, it appears that EL expanded in breadth and depth quite independently of its engagement and stewardship on internal organisational issues, external relations, and impacts on learners and learning.

In addition to this interpretation based on the descriptive text coding, the content of senate discussions offers an equally mixed picture of engagement with EL issues. A helpful starting point involves senate discussions of the meaning and aims of EL. While discussing a proposal for the Faculty of Law at Memorial University, its senate noted that “with this program, Memorial Law students will be able to undertake internships throughout the province (and beyond) and gain legal experience working as court clerks and in a proposed legal aid clinic to support Newfoundland and Labrador communities” (Memorial University of Newfoundland Senate, 2018, p. 119). This example underscores the classic meaning and aim of EL to provide students with out-of-classroom “work” experience and at the same time offer professional services to communities. In August 2013, UNBC’s Provost expressed concern about flagging enrolments in its Co-op Education program in the face of growing opportunities in other forms of EL. By contrast, Simon Fraser’s senate noted the 25% growth of its co-op education offerings in the four years up to June 2016, and two years later, its senate asked, “How can we on Senate facilitate, or reduce the barriers to, experiential programs/ways of teaching?” (Simon Fraser University Senate, 2018). This appears to be a reaction to growth, along with an acknowledgement of organisational and access

challenges. Meanwhile, other senates embraced the rising tide of EL and sought to marry placements with research-based experiences (Toronto, October 2014; Victoria, January 2014). Others still sought to nest growing EL opportunities with particular segments of the campus curriculum, with environmental education, in particular, emerging at Simon Fraser (June 2013, and April 2018), McGill (May 2013), and Victoria (December 2018). Notably, despite their differences, as discussed earlier, community-engaged and community-service learning were occasionally noted, though scarcely distinguished. The implications for pedagogy, curriculum, learning outcomes, and community connections are important, though the differences amongst alternative forms of EL were rarely acknowledged. To be sure, Mount Allison (May 2019), McGill (April 2021), and UNBC (June 2020) discussed grading and credentialing to reflect the many and varied forms of EL. Simon Fraser went further in March 2014, discussing whether to cancel a study abroad programme given the unresolved debate over its academic rigour. Taken as a whole, these are very different experiences in confronting the growth of EL. The variety can be expected and might even be interpreted positively, though it bears also stating that senate documents present a reactive posture following institutional commitments to students and the communities that host them.

One motivation for this empirical exercise is to examine senate deliberations over internal organizational adaptations, including EL planning and resourcing. On these themes, several meeting minutes come to the fore, such as (i) strategic planning and lobbying Universities Canada in federal budget submissions at Victoria (February 2016; December 2018; January 2019); and (ii) incorporating EL into academic planning at Simon Fraser (June 2013; May 2014). Mount Allison did the same and went further to suggest EL be part of its advancement (fundraising) targets as well (September 2017). As if to reinforce the growth of EL during this period, the Chair of Mount Allison's senate remarked that EL should be a dedicated focus of that body's work going forward (October 2017; September 2018). Toronto's Governing Council also made similar points (2013 meetings; March 2021) and went further with a resource announcement marking the creation of a multi-campus Experiential Learning Hub "... for students, faculty and staff, and external partners..." (Office of the Vice-Provost, Innovations in Undergraduate Education, 2019), adding to its earlier announcement that it would include EL into future campus development plans (Office of the Governing Council, 2019). Memorial University's senate opted to situate a proposed law faculty on its St. John's campus to maximize already existing resources and also enable students to take advantage of the rich legal expertise in the city. In general, the place of EL in institutional planning and resourcing proved to be a consistent but uneven theme over the study period. Indeed, in some instances, senate documents portray a symbolic and performative stance. For example, UNBC (December 2013) noted the importance of EL in its National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results. Victoria's senate (November 2020) noted, "The Maclean's ranking shows UVic as holding second place among Canada's comprehensive schools with notable highlights on experiential learning..." (University of Victoria Senate, 2020, p. 2). From these examples, it appears that the senates were tuned in to the emergence of EL, but perhaps in a reactionary posture and for its reputational value.

Related to institutional planning and resourcing of EL is a further motivation of this study: the university's understanding of its need for and responsibilities to community engagement. This theme too yields some important but also varied evidence. Simon Fraser's senate minutes include ample discussion of EL, as noted earlier, as they did of community engagement, but the themes only ran in parallel and did not intersect substantively (e.g., February 2020). Others offered more direct connections, including Mount Allison's community engagement via newly developed courses (February 2020); similarly, UNBC's revamped Office of Regional Programs aimed at EL and regional development issues through continuing studies courses (May 2015). In June 2012, Alberta's senate noted that although community engagement in North America has roots in the land-grant colleges and the extension movement, a master's program in community engagement is needed because scholarship and fields of practice have emerged to fill the need for some theoretical grounding and disciplinary rigour regarding the nature of co-created knowledge. The senate at Manitoba also considered EL and faculty engaged in applied research, such as involvement in community-based studies to be important in the university's research metrics. While these are important, they are arguably only rare examples across the suite of documents and institutions examined.

Finally, we arrive at what is arguably the primary goal of EL and the aim of this paper: the learner's EL experiences and outcomes. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic offers a particular window on this theme, given institutions' struggles—as seen in Senate document content—with adapting in-communi-

ty placements and arranging placements in the face of social distancing guidelines/orders, not least to ensure that students could complete EL requirements to earn their degrees. The pandemic brought this issue into sharp relief even if it appeared from time to time since 2012, such as: (i) whether and how to recruit and retain students via the promise of EL (UNBC, September 2018); (ii) ensuring equitable inclusion and access for all students (Victoria, March 2013 and January 2014); (iii) minimising the risk of degree non-completion as a result of difficulties with their EL placements such as, for example, a problem with a community partner (SFU, March 2017; Victoria, January 2019; Toronto, October 2021); (iv) relatedly, consideration for students to create paths that avoid EL and perhaps requiring students to withdraw from their EL placements if they do not progress on their placements there (Saint Mary, October 2019; UNBC, January 2017); (v) incorporating elements of open pedagogy into course design (Saint Mary, March 2021). That the senates would be concerned with these core questions is entirely reasonable and expected, yet it seems prudent for institutions to have had senate forethought and proactive guidance for senates to have raised these concerns before and not after commitments to learners and partnering with community organisations.

Table 2

Coding of senate discussion of experiential learning at twelve (12) Canadian Universities, 2012-22

	2012			2013			2014			2015			2016			2017			2018			2019			2020			2021						
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar				
SFU	a	a	a	a	a	a	y	a	y	a	a	a	y	a	a	y	a	a	y	a	a	y	a	y	y	a	a	a	y	y	a			
Victoria	a	a	a	a	a	y	y	y	y	a	x	a	a	y	a	a	a	y	y	a	a	a	a	a	x	a	a	a	a	a	a			
McGill	a	a	a	a	y	a	y	a	a	y	y	a	y	a	y	y	a	a	a	a	a	a	y	x	a	a	a	a	a	a				
UofT	a	x	a	x	y	a	a	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	y	x	y	a	x	a	y	x	a	x	y	a	x	y			
MAU																																		
UNBC	a	a	a	y	a	a	y	a	a	a	x	a	a	a	y	y	x	x	x	a	y	a	x	y	a	a	a	a	y	a				
Memorial	a	y	y	y	y	y	x	y	a	y	y	y	x	y	y	a	y	y	y	x	y	x	y	x	x	y	y	y	y	x	x			
Regina																																		
Alberta	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	y	a	y	a	y	a	y	a	y	y	a	y	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	y	a			
Manitoba	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	y	a	y	a	y	a	y	a	y	y	a	x	y	a	a	y	a	y	a	y	y	y	a				
Saint Mary	a	a	a	y	x	a	y	a	a	a	y	y	y	a	a	y	a	y	a	y	y	a	a	a	y	y	x	y	y					
UPEI	a	a	a	a	y	a	y	y	a	y	y	a	y	a	x	a	y	y	y	a	x	x	y	y	x	a	a	a	a					
Unv. SM held (EL discussed)	10 (0)	9 (1)	10 (1)	9 (4)	10 (4)	10 (2)	9 (5)	9 (5)	10 (2)	10 (4)	7 (3)	9 (4)	9 (4)	7 (2)	10 (6)	9 (6)	9 (6)	9 (5)	9 (5)	11 (6)	9 (5)	10 (6)	9 (6)	10 (6)	10 (6)	11 (6)	9 (3)	8 (4)	8 (3)					
	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun	Apr	May	Jun				
SFU	y	a	y	y	y	y	a	y	a	y	y	y	a	a	y	y	a	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	y					
Victoria	a	a	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	y	a	x	a	x	a	a	x	a	a						
McGill	y	a	x	a	y	x	y	a	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	y	a	x	a	x	y	a	x	y							
UofT	a	y	x	x	a	a	x	a	a	a	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	y	a	x	y	a	x	a	a	x	y	a						
MAU																																		
UNBC	a	a	a	y	a	y	a	a	a	a	y	y	y	a	a	a	x	x	x	a	a	y	y	a	a	y								
Memorial	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	x	a	y	a	y	x	y	y	x	a	x	a	x	y	y	y	y	x	y	x							
Regina																																		
Alberta	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	y	a	a	y	y	x	a	a							
Manitoba	a	a	y	a	a	y	y	y	y	a	y	a	a	a	a	a	y	y	a	y	a	y	y	y	y	y	y							
Saint Mary	x	x	x	y	y	x	x	a	x	y	a	y	x	a	y	x	y	y	x	a	y	x	a	a	y	y								
UPEI	a	y	x	y	a	a	a	x	a	x	y	a	x	y	x	y	x	y	x	a	x	y	x	a	x	a	x							
Unv. SM held (EL discussed)	9 (2)	9 (2)	5 (4)	9 (4)	10 (3)	7 (3)	8 (2)	9 (2)	6 (1)	10 (4)	9 (3)	6 (2)	10 (5)	10 (2)	4 (0)	8 (1)	9 (4)	3 (1)	11 (6)	10 (4)	5 (2)	7 (3)	11 (3)	5 (2)	8 (3)	10 (4)	8 (6)	10 (5)	10 (3)	5 (3)	7 (4)	4 (2)	1 (1)	
	Jul	Aug	Sep	Jul	Aug	Sep	Jul	Aug	Sep	Jul	Aug	Sep	Jul	Aug	Sep	Jul	Aug	Sep	Jul	Aug	Sep	Jul	Aug	Sep	Jul	Aug	Sep	Jul	Aug	Sep				
SFU	y	x	y	y	x	y				a	x	y	a	x	a	x	x	a																
Victoria	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			
McGill	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	y	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	a				
UofT	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				
MAU																																		
UNBC	x	y	a	x	y	y	x	a	a	x	y	a	x	a	x	x	a	a	y	x	a	x	y	x	a	a	a	x	a					
Memorial	x	x	y	x	x	a	x	x	y	x	x	y	x	x	y	x	x	x	y	x	x	y	y	x	y	x	x	a						
Regina																																		
Alberta	x	x	y	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	a	a	x	x	a	x	x	a	y	x	x	a	a	x	x	a	x	a						
Manitoba	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	y	y	x	a	x	x						
Saint Mary	x	x	a	x	x	y	x	x	y	x	x	a	x	x	y	x	x	y	x	a	x	y	x	a	a	x	x	a						
UPEI	x	x	y	x	x	y	x	x	a	x	x	y	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	a	x</td												

Unv. SM held (EL discussed)	1 (1)	1	8 (4)	1 (1)	1	8 (4)	0 (0)	1	7 (2)	1 (0)	2	7 (3)	1 (0)	1	6 (2)	0 (0)	1	8 (2)	0 (0)	0	6 (3)	1 (0)	1	6 (3)	1 (1)	3	8 (2)	0 (0)	2	7 (0)	0 (0)	0	0 (0)
	(1)			(1)			(0)	(0)		(1)		(0)	(0)		(0)	(0)		(0)	(0)		(0)	(0)		(1)		(1)		(0)		(0)			
SFU	y	y	a	a	y	a	y	x	a	x	a	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	a	a		
Victoria	a	a	x	a	a	a	a	a	x	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	y	y	a	a	a	a	a		
McGill	a	y	a	a	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	y	y	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	a	a	a			
UofT	a	a	x	y	a	x	y	y	x	a	a	x	a	a	x	y	a	x	a	a	x	y	a	x	y	a	x	y	a	x			
MAU																																	
UNBC	a	a	a	y	a	y	y	a	y	a	a	a	x	x	x	a	y	x	a	a	x	a	x	x	y	y	x	y	x				
Memorial	a	a	x	a	a	y	a	y	a	y	a	a	a	a	y	y	y	y	x	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	a	y	x				
Regina	a	a	x	a	a	a	a	y	x	a	x	x	a	y	a	y	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	a	x	x	y	x	x			
Alberta	a	a	x	a	a	a	a	y	x	a	x	x	a	y	a	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	y	a	a	x	y	y	y				
Manitoba	a	a	a	y	a	a	a	y	a	y	a	y	a	y	a	a	y	y	a	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y				
Saint Mary	y	y	y	a	x	y	a	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	a	a	a	a	y	y	y	y	a	a	a	a	a	y	a				
UPEI	y	a	x	a	y	x	a	y	x	a	y	y	a	a	x	a	a	x	y	y	y	a	a	x	a	a	a	a	a				
Unv. SM held (EL discussed)	10 (3)	10 (3)	5 (1)	10 (3)	9 (2)	8 (3)	9 (3)	9 (2)	5 (2)	10 (3)	9 (4)	8 (4)	8 (2)	9 (3)	6 (3)	11 (3)	11 (3)	8 (2)	12 (5)	11 (5)	9 (6)	11 (3)	10 (2)	7 (2)	12 (4)	11 (6)	7 (3)	11 (4)	9 (4)	7 (2)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Notes: 'y' indicates a meeting in which experiential learning was noted/discussed. 'a' indicates a meeting in which experiential learning was not noted/discussed, 'x' represents no senate meeting held. Blank cells indicate no data.

Conclusions and Discussion

Senate meeting data and text evidence yield a mixed and rich account of Canadian universities confronting the growth and development of EL. Resourcing questions, including such discussions as EL-related workspace, learner supports, and budget priorities, understandably came to the fore. Beneath this layer, senate discussions were uneven, aspirational, and reactive across the sample of 12 institutions. Students and learning, community engagement, and the definition of EL—when they did appear on the agenda—seemed to place senates in a position to react and “deal with” EL as it arrived from outside of this governing body’s remit. Interestingly, the senate’s experience with the COVID-19 pandemic was laced with urgency, but its posture during the emergency was in principle like that of its response to the advent of EL: absorbing change when faced with pressure from beyond its mandate (Rochet et al., 2008). In general, the advent of EL seems to point to university-community relationships emerging out of necessity to confront rather than proactively steward the teaching mission as it takes shape in the community.

Interspersed in the foregoing discussion are the experiences of two institutions that bear more direct treatment and exposure: McGill and SMU. Their senates held only average numbers of discussions amongst the sample of 12 institutions; however, the quality of their engagement was more critical and comprehensive. SMU initiated deliberate and significant discussions on EL at the beginning of 2016 during the development of a provincial experiential learning strategy for Nova Scotia, significantly amplifying the instances in its senate discussion (33% more than before the 2016 period). There does not appear to be a similar external push at McGill or in Quebec generally to have generated the latter’s discussions. Both, however, are drawn out here for their significantly more engaged level of critical and quality discussion, particularly in:

1. deliberating definitions of “service-learning” and “experiential-learning” while noting that each university develops a definition that works locally (SMU, January 2016, May 2019, September 2019, November 2018);
2. a focus on credentials and curriculum, including revising syllabus templates, pedagogy and curriculum with EL (SMU, November 2018, March 2021), Arts students’ opportunities in light of EL’s usual focus on industry partnerships (McGill, November 2012), the role of EL in graduate education (McGill, April 2019);
3. working EL into institutional/ strategic plans (McGill, May 2013, February 2017; SMU, December 2016, November 2018) as well as strategies to enhance implementation and expansion of EL opportunities (SMU, May 2019);
4. similarly, identifying dedicated campus spaces and resources (McGill, November 2012, April 2014; SMU, October 2019, January 2022) as well as funding processes, administrative and logistical support for faculty, and issues of liability affecting the university (SMU November 2018, September 2019);
5. beyond campus, tighter weaving of EL and community (McGill, April 2012, November 2014, January 2012 and 2017; SMU, October 2019, January 2022), including the identification of a variety of partnering organisations such as municipalities and museums;
6. perhaps most importantly, students’ learning and welfare, including considerations for equitable access (SMU, January 2016, May 2019; McGill, December 2016), student experience and engagement (SMU, September 2019, March 2021), support via platforms to enable students to document their EL accomplishments (SMU, November 2018), risk management for the well-being of students (SMU, November 2018), regulating unpaid internships (McGill, November 2016), and the implications of EL in McGill’s charter of student rights.

The McGill and SMU examples serve several purposes. The most obvious is the “lighthouse” example they provide in this study, but other insights are equally important if less direct. It bears recognising that there is more to university governance than what occurs at the Senate. The empirical analysis in this study clearly does not capture the full breadth of EL-related discussion and development on campus. And yet, this is also precisely the core argument: that if senates do not necessarily lead and steward academic development, they should certainly reflect it. If this minimum expectation is met, evidence documented here may underscore the view that senates have diminished status and importance in Canadian university governance. Yet the McGill and SMU examples are important markers: their unmatched senate discussions of a full suite of EL-related issues can be described as exceptionally engaged and proactive. This holds despite these two cases being different “types” of institutions—the former re-

search-intensive, the latter teaching-focused—and located in very different stakeholder contexts. Going further, direct treatment and exposure here may be regarded as generative cases amongst peer institutions (Bouma, 1988; Zucker, 1987). The more critical and comprehensive stewarding of EL at McGill and SMU suggests a stronger foundation for local associative governance in the development and maturity of teaching and learning via their networks in their respective communities. Equally, these exemplars suggest a greater degree of internal institutional adaptation to the variety of challenges presented to the core mission of teaching by the expansion of EL.

Policy observers, in turn, might ask how generative cases can be measured and replicated—a question worth asking as institutions themselves articulate plans to develop performance metrics (Toronto, April 2022; McGill, April 2014). What is measured and how it is evaluated seem like policy and programme starting points, though these actions were scarcely noted across the sample of 922 instances of EL discussion. Thus, even if these two exceptional cases of McGill and SMU can point the way forward for institutional peers, the balance of evidence as a whole points to very uneven and limited discussion of what are otherwise fundamental changes to the educative mission at the Canadian university. A natural next step to build on the empirical evidence here is perhaps a universal scan of the sector for the identification and development of governance best practices for engagement with and development of core-mission activity in the present case of EL. Given the variety of experiences found here, leaders may welcome a fully developed “toolkit” and/or white paper on internal organisation and external community engagement for EL. The seeds of comparison identified amongst the 12 cases here might be developed into a full in-depth comparative analysis, particularly if conjoined with complementary methodologies alongside senate deliberations, particularly key informant and learner interviews.

At this point, we return to our overarching question as to whether the university recognises and guides EL development and works collaboratively with the community, as this pedagogy must engage with actors off campus for it to function. The answer appears to be only faintly affirmative. Leading and stewarding EL development is scarce in the evidence collected and analysed. Instead, a reactive posture was evident in what amounted to relatively little discussion overall. However, McGill and SMU stand out. By contrast, the evidence shows that EL is “happening to” their committees and campuses rather than being proactively planned for and implemented in advance. Interestingly, the twelve cases reported here seem to conform to the often-cited garbage can model of organisational administration and change—a model invoked by Hearn (1996) to describe research-intensive universities but arguably in evidence here: with respect to EL, institutions seem to exhibit unclear goals, underdeveloped monitoring, and loose governance. One wonders how the rapid deployment of EL will affect students, learning and assessment, academic programmes and disciplines, and community partnerships. Perhaps it remains for the EL programme evaluation to emerge as the vehicle to address these concerns *after* implementation. However, senates or whichever bodies (re)shape EL going forward, one must ask if its emergence reflects the institution responding to external pressure. To demonstrate relevance in teaching and learning? Via decision-making by executive concentration instead of shared governance?

Let us conclude with a consideration of the organisational-ethical dilemmas that will present themselves in the innumerable EL arrangements unfurling across the sector and in communities: arrangements linking institutions to community partners with the learners constituting the connective tissue. Perlin’s (2012) popular account of internships in the US university sector is a window into the variety and depths of potential failures and perverse effects. Proactive planning and implementation do not guarantee that we avoid such problems, but do offer a significant hedge against them. Moreover, proactive planning and development offer opportunities for earlier course correction and implementation on more explicitly organisational-ethical grounds. At present, it seems we may well be headed toward mission drift in teaching and learning, especially with the recent substantial government funding directed toward all manner of EL and perhaps worse as the nexus of courses, programmes, partners, and learners march on with EL in the absence of clearly articulated goals and objectives in the foreground.

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