

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY | Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning | Office of
Experiential Learning

Equitable Pathways to Experiential Learning

Final Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The University of Calgary's [Experiential Learning Plan \(2020-25\)](#) strives to make experiential learning (EL) a cornerstone of the UCalgary experience. The *EL Plan* has two targets: by 2025, all undergraduate students will participate in two EL activities, and all graduate students will have the opportunity to participate in at least one EL activity. Drawing on an earlier pilot project to provide financial support to equity-deserving students involved in unpaid Work-Integrated Learning courses, the Office of Experiential Learning (OEL) initiated a research project in the fall of 2021 to capture feedback from students on barriers to participating in EL along with their recommendations for enabling student participation in EL at UCalgary. This project, Equitable Pathways to Experiential Learning builds on priorities in UCalgary's EL Plan and draws on UCalgary's strategic directions in Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility as established by the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. This report is a compilation of students' responses to and feedback on the issues of access and inclusion in EL.

This project was also inspired through UCalgary's participation in the Future Skills Innovation Network for Universities (FUSION) which was funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Centre. Partial funding for this project came from the FUSION Network. This project was approved as [REB20-2047 REN1](#) by the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research and Ethics Board.

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

The Equitable Pathways to EL project embodied accessible and inclusive values and research practices including a project team that was composed of diverse backgrounds and expertise with representation from graduate, undergraduate students and various staff. A key element of the project's research design were the broad conversations with students, student groups and student service teams used to develop survey questions and focus group protocols and scripts. A total of 2,002 valid survey responses were received which represents approximately 5.5% of the UCalgary student body. Additionally, 26 participants across eight focus groups were engaged to further explore some of the common themes that came up in the survey responses.

Through closed and open-ended survey questions and the focus groups, participants were asked about what they perceived as preventing all students from accessing and feeling included in EL activities across UCalgary. Both methods explored three main ideas; to what extent EL activities at UCalgary are accessible to (and inclusive of) all students, to learn the barriers students perceive to engaging in EL, and to understand the solutions students recommend minimizing those barriers. These ideas became the themes used to code the qualitative and quantitative data and from that coding the following eight challenges and six solutions were unpacked.

Eight challenges were identified through analysis of the survey and focus group responses:

- Design of EL Activities, Policies and Processes
- Lack of Time and Energy
- Fears, Uncertainty and Imposter Syndrome
- Lack of Financial Resources
- Limited Understanding and Awareness of EL
- EL Activities are Limited and Difficult to Find
- Mental Health Concerns
- Need Guidance from a Mentor or Advisor

Participants also recommended solutions to reduce barriers in EL. Some of these recommendations could be easily adopted, like a review of eligibility requirements or the application process while others, like increasing EL opportunities might be more of a long-term project for the institution.

- Follow Principles of Universal Design for Learning in EL Activity Development

- Increase Communication and Promotion of EL Activities
- Provide Financial Supports to Enable Participation
- Enhance Information and Resources About EL Activities
- Increase Number and Variety of EL Activities

NEXT STEPS

The Office of Experiential Learning will continue to engage members of the UCalgary community and other invested audiences with the student feedback and recommendations compiled through this project. To date, this work has been shared at various conferences, such as the Society for Experiential Education (SEE), the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), the Canadian Association College and University Student Services (CACUSS) and Cooperative Education Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL).

We welcome further opportunities to explore this rich student feedback with other teams and groups, and to explore specific strategies to enhance participation and belonging in EL. This student feedback is also relevant to several parallel projects at UCalgary. These projects, such as the Work-Integrated Learning for Neurodiverse Students Initiative and the development of several new WIL opportunities, like the UNIV 304 – Experiential Learning in the Workplace course, the Ready for Research micro-credential, and the Explore Micro-placements program present opportunities to act on student feedback related to access to, participation in, and belonging in EL at UCalgary.

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Calgary's [Experiential Learning Plan \(2020-25\)](#) strives to make experiential learning (EL) a cornerstone of the UCalgary experience. The *EL Plan* has two targets: by 2025, all undergraduate students will participate in two EL activities, and all graduate students will have the opportunity to participate in at least one EL activity. Achieving these targets requires a fulsome understanding of barriers to accessing EL, and a cross-campus commitment to inclusive access for all students to EL. The Office of Experiential Learning (OEL), located in the Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, supports UCalgary in building capacity for, enhancing access to, and promoting high-impact EL for all UCalgary students.

Drawing on an earlier pilot project to provide financial support to equity-deserving students involved in unpaid Work-Integrated Learning courses, the Office of Experiential Learning (OEL) initiated a research project in the fall of 2021 to capture feedback from students on barriers to participating in EL along with their recommendations for enabling student participation in EL at UCalgary. This project, Equitable Pathways to Experiential Learning builds on priorities in UCalgary's EL Plan and draws on UCalgary's strategic directions in Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility as established by the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. This report is a compilation of students' responses to and feedback on the issues of access and inclusion in EL.

Three research questions structured this project:

1. To what extent are EL activities at UCalgary accessible to, and inclusive of, all students?
2. What are the actual and perceived barriers faced by students in participating in EL activities at UCalgary, particularly students from groups conventionally excluded from such activities, and/or traditionally underrepresented in post-secondary education?
3. In what ways might EL activities at UCalgary become more accessible and inclusive for all students?

This report focuses primarily on the student qualitative feedback received from the survey. Through this work we explore: how students experienced accessing EL at UCalgary, their feelings of belonging when engaging in EL, and their recommendations for making EL more welcoming and available to all students at UCalgary.

This project was also inspired through UCalgary's participation in the Future Skills Innovation Network for Universities (FUSION) which was funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Centre. Partial funding for this project came from the FUSION Network. Between 2019-2022, the FUSION Network focused on inclusive skills development practices. This project was approved as [REB20-2047_REN1](#) by the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research and Ethics Board.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (EL) AT UCALGARY

UCalgary has a long history of offering diverse EL in curricular and co-curricular programs. In UCalgary's [EL Plan](#), EL is defined as:

... learning-by-doing that bridges knowledge and experience through critical reflection. EL activities are intentionally designed and assessed. As such, they empower learners to enhance individual and collaborative skills such as complex problem solving, professional practice skills, and teamwork. Reflecting critically on these activities helps individuals develop higher-order thinking to challenge and advance their perspectives. The EL process prepares students to take on roles as active citizens and thrive in an increasingly complex world.

In addition to the aspirational targets for students completing EL, campus consultations for the EL Plan identified three priorities for EL: (1) Expanding capacity and reducing barriers; (2) Increasing student opportunities and (3) Tracking and ensuring high-quality EL.

The benefits of students engaging in EL are numerous and include skill development related to career readiness (teamwork, complex-problem solving, and collaboration), civic consciousness, interpersonal skill development, and self-efficacy (Eyler, 2009; Kuh, 2008; McRae, 2015). EL supports students in discovering a sense of purpose (personally, professionally, and academically) and prepares students to make meaningful contributions to their fields and communities.

In the 2020 National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), UCalgary undergraduate students reported being aware that EL opportunities provide impactful learning experiences and are valuable in preparing them for their future ([NSSE + EL Report, 2022](#)). Students also repeatedly stated that they want more of these opportunities. Students who engage in EL activities suggest that it is the hands-on opportunities that make space for deep learning and allows them to develop skills like critical thinking, complex problem solving and communication. One NSSE 2020 respondent suggested that it was a research experience that was both the most difficult and the most rewarding while at the University of Calgary. This EL environment was ‘significant’ and as they suggest, “Being thrown headfirst into the world of research has allowed me to learn a vast amount more than I ever expected. My critical thinking skills have improved, I am more creative, and my scientific communication skills are far beyond where they were when I first arrived at the university.” Another student suggested that participating in senior-level capstone projects taught them the value of hard work and the rewarding nature of a good work ethic.

In the last three reporting periods, UCalgary has seen little change in the number of first and senior years completing EL activities, and in the most recent NSSE reporting period all four main EL activities see a gap between first year respondents desire to participate and fourth year respondents' completion (see Table 1). 2020 NSSE respondents illuminated some of the barriers students face in accessing EL activities, including (but not limited to) lack of financial resources, limited promotion of EL activities, and strict GPA requirements ([EL and 2020 NSSE Final Report, 2022](#)).

TABLE 1 NSSE 2020 COMPARISON BETWEEN FIRST-YEAR INTENTION AND SENIOR-YEAR COMPLETION OF EL

TYPE OF EL	First-year Students: Intention to Participate	Senior-year Students: Completed Activity
Internship or Field Experience	68%	46%
Study Abroad	37%	16%
Culminating Senior Experience (Capstone, Senior Project, Thesis, Comprehensive Exam, Portfolio)	40%	38%
Research with a Faculty Member	41%	24%

This project was initiated in part to explore why there was such a gap between a first-year student’s intention to complete an EL activity and actual completion rates of EL by the end of senior year. Why were certain students not following through with their desire to complete an internship or field experience? Were there barriers for students who wanted to engage in Undergraduate Research that the institution should be aware of? Did students have any suggestions on how UCalgary could make EL more accessible and more welcoming to all students? With these questions in mind, the Equitable Pathways project began, and the results and findings proved to be informative and enlightening to how students perceive access and belonging in the EL space.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The Equitable Pathways to EL project embodied accessible and inclusive values and research practices including a project team that was composed of diverse backgrounds and expertise with representation from graduate, undergraduate students and various staff. A key element of the project's research design was initiating conversations with student groups, student services teams and student facing units. These conversations were used to develop survey questions and focus group protocols and scripts. Two conceptual elements helped shape the inclusive methodology the team adopted for the project: researcher reflexivity in the form of the developmental evaluation process and a students-as-partners model (Healey et al., 2016) for the research design.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via two means: an online survey and focus groups. Both methods explored three main ideas; to what extent EL activities at UCalgary are accessible to (and inclusive of) all students, to learn the barriers students perceive to engaging in EL, and to understand the solutions students recommend minimizing those barriers. In total, 3,868 survey responses were received and after data cleanup there were 2,002 valid responses. This response rate represents approximately 5.5% of UCalgary student enrolment (Office of Institutional Analysis, 2020).

The last section of the online survey included a separate link for survey respondents to express interest in being part of a focus group. Twenty-six participants across eight virtual focus groups participated in conversations that further explored access and inclusion in EL activities at UCalgary. Focus groups were facilitated by student members of the Project Team who could share their personal experiences throughout the conversation. This reciprocity helped to mitigate perceived power differences and create a respectful and conversational focus group environment. All focus groups were transcribed by student members of the project team.

NVivo software was used to analyze and code qualitative responses to survey questions related to barriers, and separately to questions related to barriers. Separately, focus group transcripts were analyzed to identify codes related to barriers and solutions shared during the small group discussions. Similar themes emerged from qualitative data drawn from survey responses, and those from the focus groups; further iterative coding was carried out to combine codes from both datasets, resulting in analytic themes and core categories on barriers and solutions across qualitative data collected.

FINDINGS

This section of the report will primarily focus on student responses to perceived access and inclusion issues in EL across UCalgary.

Student's Perceived Challenges in Accessing EL

Through closed and open-ended survey questions and the focus groups, participants were asked about what they perceived as preventing all students from accessing and feeling included in EL activities across UCalgary. Eight challenges were identified through analysis of the survey and focus group responses:

- Design of EL Activities, Policies and Processes
- Lack of Time and Energy
- Fears, Uncertainty and Imposter Syndrome
- Lack of Financial Resources
- Limited Understanding and Awareness of EL
- EL Activities are Limited and Difficult to Find
- Mental Health Concerns
- Need Guidance from a Mentor or Advisor

Design of EL Activities, Policies and Processes

EL activity design was the most common and complex theme. A total of 435 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme (See Figure 1). This theme was also where students shared spending the most time and effort making decisions related to EL, e.g., whether to apply or participate. Subthemes within this barrier group included eligibility criteria, commitment, and intensity of the activity among other commitments, a lack of inclusive spaces and a lack of flexibility within the activity.

Eligibility Criteria

The application process and eligibility criteria for EL activities received many critical responses that illustrate the frustration students feel with such a process. Application processes were described as ‘long and tedious’ with ‘short deadlines’ that made it hard to complete if you were a full-time student or a student with other commitments beyond school. Students often had trouble navigating the application process and one survey respondent suggested that the applications were filled with ‘jargon’ that they couldn’t understand. When students attempted to reach out for help, they found it difficult to find someone who could help them. As one respondent described it,

Every time you email someone that you think will help you, they say, “I don't know what you're talking about. You need to talk to someone else.” They put you to someone, and then it's just like a whole cycle of being transferred, and you just don't get the information or the right person to help you, to sit you down and say, “Okay, this is what you need to do.” It is kind of annoying how we have to do everything ourselves, even though we're putting so much time and money and patience, for them to just say, “Good luck. Have fun figuring it all out. We'll just be choosing whoever we think is okay.”

Not knowing how someone is selected for EL activities came up frequently and eligibility criteria were often described as ‘mysterious’ and ‘confusing.’ If the information provided about the eligibility criteria were unclear, students assumed they were not eligible to participate or in some cases were discouraged from participating because of their ‘chosen academic path.’ One respondent suggested that the application process contributed to their ongoing mental health concerns and caused a great deal of ‘distress.’ Other respondents self-selected out because they already determined based on previous experiences their application would not be fairly considered because of their identity preferences. As one survey respondent suggested, they go into the application process already expecting to be rejected:

I don't expect to be selected for anything. If I were to be selected for further interview, I expect I will be rejected because of any requested accommodations. Additionally, despite consistent correction, there are individuals in my Department that are incapable of using the correct pronouns to address me, so why would I risk going into a new environment where the same thing will more than likely continue to occur?

GPA requirements strongly impacted whether students saw themselves as potential participants in an EL activity. Some respondents described how one bad academic year could affect a person’s GPA and then that becomes the determining factor as to whether or not they can apply and participate in EL activities for the duration of their program:

My GPA took a toll in the year after transferring, for adjustment reasons alongside the personal matters that triggered my transfer. My GPA is permanently damaged from this one year. It's difficult to apply myself when my GPA is not a direct reflection of my capabilities, yet it is the most valued metric for selecting students.

Other participants described how a poor first year performance can impact how faculty and staff see them and that, even though they may have improved significantly since then, one respondent summed it up as stigmatizing and Professors still “dismissing my ability.” Even if their GPA was below the required threshold by a marginal amount (in some cases as marginal as 0.01 points), students wouldn’t apply because they felt their GPA alone would disqualify their application. Strict GPA requirements particularly impacted students who needed to work

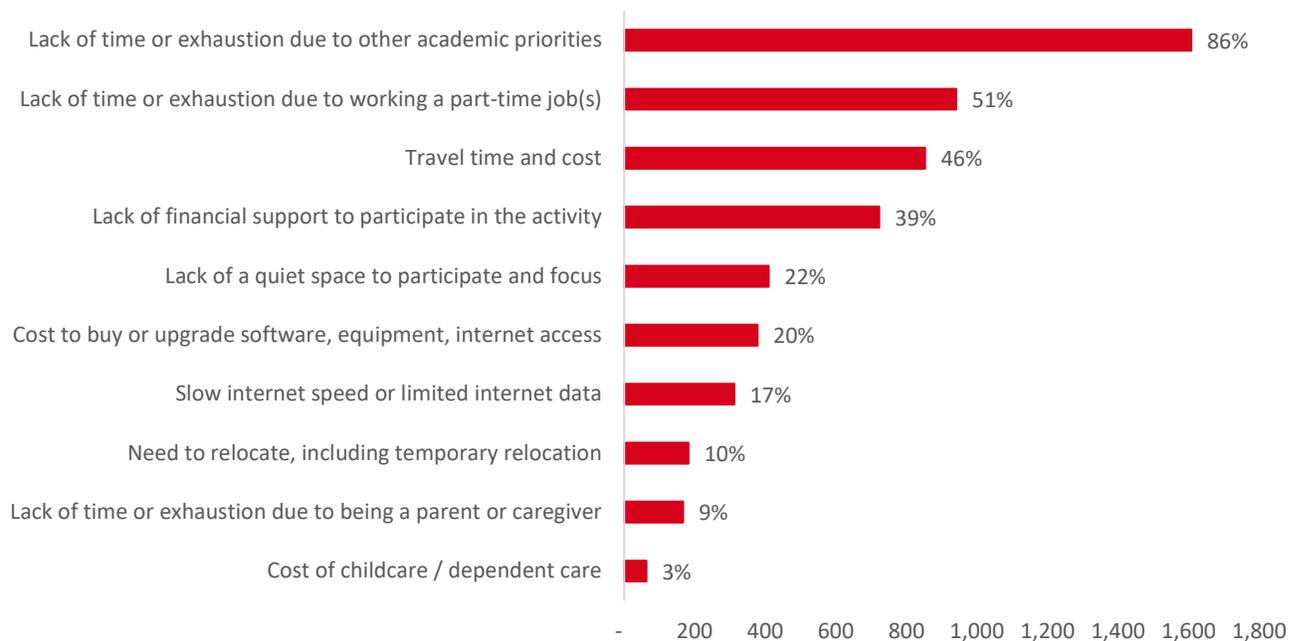
while attending university to pay tuition, or students who had a semester where their grades were impacted by personal circumstances.

In addition, eligibility criteria often state that experiential learning opportunities are not open to international students. On this topic, some students perceive discrimination due to factors out of their control, e.g., no internship contracts beyond the legally permitted 20 hours per week, prioritization of Canadian experience, and Visa requirements. International and permanent residents/Canadian students also expressed concern about application processes that require academic and/or professional references. Considering the predominately remote learning and working formats that resulted during the pandemic, many students felt they could not approach course instructors or supervisors for reference letters, as they lack the confidence to make such a request and had concerns about whether the reference letter would accurately portray their abilities.

Commitment and Intensity of EL Activity

Students also reported having to self-evaluate the commitment and intensity of an EL activity’s design. Navigating this challenge requires students to determine whether their responsibilities, resources, and priorities could accommodate the energy and the overall commitment some EL requires. Students shared that regardless of whether the EL activity was a few hours or several months, coursework, personal responsibilities, and wage-earning work make it difficult to participate in EL. See Figure 1 for a full breakdown of the responsibilities and priorities that influence students’ decisions to participate in EL activities.

FIGURE 1. Responsibilities and priorities that influenced your decision to participate in EL (N=1,863)



Being able to commit to a certain EL activity meant that students needed flexibility from the university which was not available to some respondents. The institution’s lack of flexibility in EL opportunities came up multiple times throughout the survey and during the focus groups. One survey respondent suggested that the lack of flexibility in EL programs means they are not able to participate as much as they would like. One student suggested that, “Sometimes I simply don’t have the time every week to give to EL activities - some weeks I have ten free hours, others I have one - and the programs aren’t very flexible with that.” Another respondent suggested that flexible options be considered ‘best practice’ and more ‘commonplace’ in EL offerings:

The university needs to provide flexible support for all students. Flexibility is not a perk that only falls under the category of inclusivity. In order for flexibility to be accepted it must be universalized, it must be

commonplace. I should not have to ask for flexible arrangements based on my specific case; it should be a best practice.

Lack of Inclusive Spaces

Students also described barriers in a lack of inclusive spaces in EL activity design. Inclusive spaces refer to whether students feel their identity(ies) will be respected in an EL activity, through interactions with others or the physical space in which the EL activity is happening. Students stated that their physical differences make them feel less included in EL activities, whether that was because they identified as wearing a hijab, a woman, a person of colour or as non-binary. One respondent suggested that often, “it’s majority white men who end up getting selected for EL programs and activities and that for them the selection criteria is ‘political and discouraging.’ In addition, students shared concerns and experiences of discrimination based on gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation. This concern included fears and personal experiences of transphobia and homophobia from peers and course instructors, and concerns about gendered accommodations or shared spaces that respect gender identity/expression. One student who identified as transgender suggested that they didn’t apply for Group Study Programs because of the roommate policy and asked the question, “Who would I be put with in terms of sharing spaces? Would my identity be respected?”

Students also reflected on how non-inclusive spaces may be normalized for women in male-dominated fields, where they have experienced being overlooked, encountering explicit and implicit judgment, and feeling pressured to be silent or take up less time and space. The lack of gender representation can put students off from trying EL activities like undergraduate research or feel uncomfortable if they are in that space. One focus group participant describes this overall feeling of not being welcomed,

In fields with fewer women, there tends to be this overall feeling... like, I've heard words that are not as welcoming of me actually trying research. I find that that mental aspect of it can really put people off from engaging in experiential learning. When I was in the class, it was mainly just me and three other girls. So, to begin with, the atmosphere felt a little bit disproportionate, which I don't blame anyone for, but it kind of cultivated that feeling that you had to be quick with what you were asking. You had to be a little bit more quiet when you were in a class setting, or when I asked the instructor (male) a question. Kind of like, be brief with what you're going to say, versus him working with other (male) students where it would be full conversations.

Lack of Time

This theme refers to whether students felt they have the time and energy to engage in EL. A total of 417 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. As one focus group participant suggested, managing EL opportunities while maintaining a strong GPA is challenging. Another suggested there was little time or energy left after family commitments to engage in extra EL opportunities. Students reflected on the need to maintain wage-earning work to afford university and living expenses, reflecting that they felt EL would likely only be possible at the cost of something else. They expressed apprehension at taking time and energy away from their academic courses and graduation timeline, which they viewed as their top priorities. As one focus group participant described it there is only so much time in a degree program and a student cannot do everything and expect to keep their A grades:

I've been in labs and those have been the only EL I've done, since you're kind of forced to do them. Those of my own volition haven't really happened. It feels very hard to do because University is already a lot. So, if there are bonus things to do, even though it'd be good for me, I don't feel like I have time for that. I don't see myself necessarily as someone who can manage school and do extra activities; someone that's able to get straight A's and also do other things. I mean, it's like I can do one thing at a time and that's pretty much it.

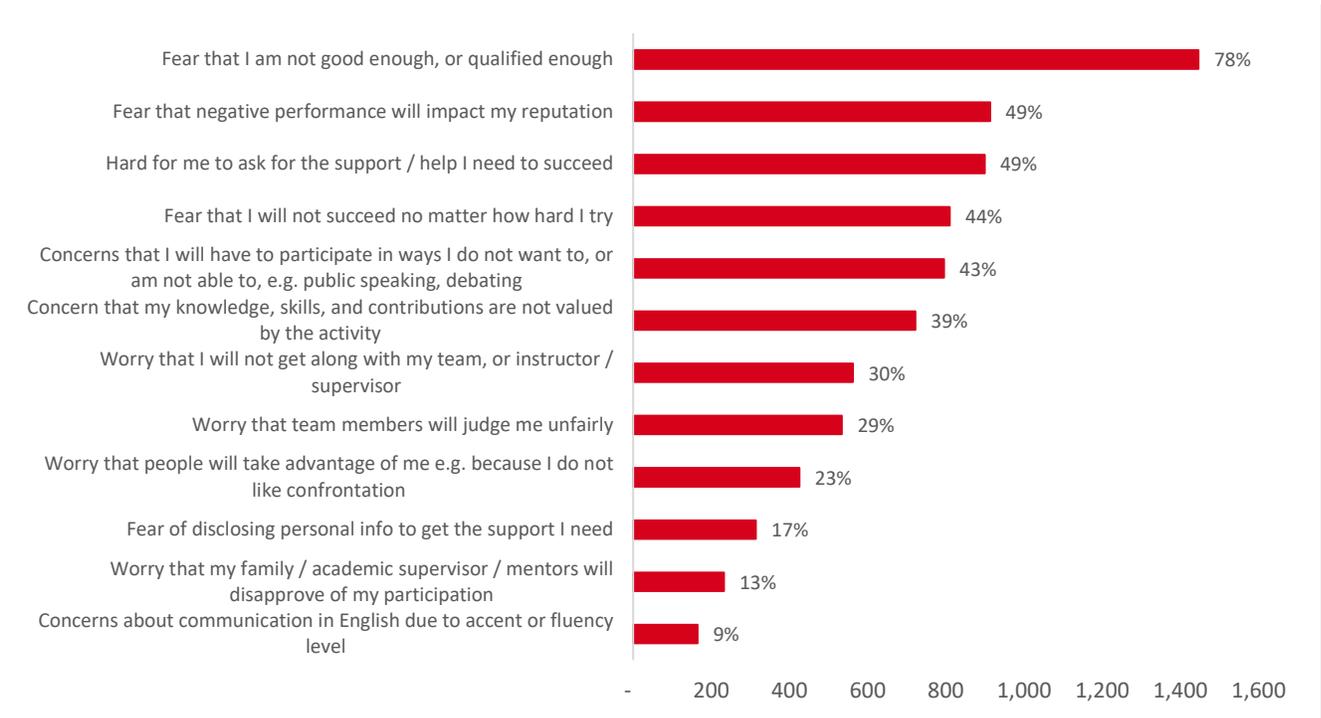
Another survey respondent said that time was an issue because there was pressure as a first-generation student to complete the degree as quickly as possible:

I am managing a part-time job with full-time school, as a first-generation university student with little to no support from family. Barely have time to do anything else even though I want to, but then it would take me longer to finish my degree. Full-time coursework is like a full-time job that leaves very little room to enjoy other activities

Fears, Uncertainty, and Imposter Syndrome

This theme included comments about students feeling out of place, intimidated, and/or unable to compete with other students. A total of 284 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Many students expressed a fear of failure or rejection, fear of talking to supervisors or instructors, uncertainty, and imposter syndrome. These feelings could cause students to experience concern about their “fit” in an EL activity. In the survey, 78% of respondents expressed the concern that they were not experienced or qualified enough to participate in EL (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Concerns that have influenced respondents’ decision to participate in EL (N=1,851)



These fears were also expressed in focus group and survey data. Students reflected on feeling out of place or experiencing imposter syndrome due to social anxiety, not seeing people like themselves in the EL activity, not knowing anyone who has done the EL activity, and not wanting to compete with other students. Additional comments connected to imposter syndrome included fear of failure, or rejection, feeling overwhelmed at not knowing what to expect, and fear of talking to instructors or supervisors. One focus group participant discussed what they perceive as the students that participate in EL, expressing intimidation and a perceived expectation of needing to know their end goal before participating in EL:

When I think of those experiential learning programs, I imagine the students to be ‘keeners’ and ‘go-getters’ – they know what they want to do with their degree. I felt like I generally didn't. I was more of a wanderer. I don't even know what I'm doing or what I wanted to do. It felt almost intimidating – I have

to get all of my life sorted out and all of my passions and my career focus sorted out, before even going into something like that. Not for all of them - I did experiential learning just as part of required coursework. That was a bit of a confidence boost, seeing that you can figure this stuff out while you're doing it, and you don't need to have it all before. But before I took the higher-level classes that had that, it really did feel that way

Lack of Financial Resources

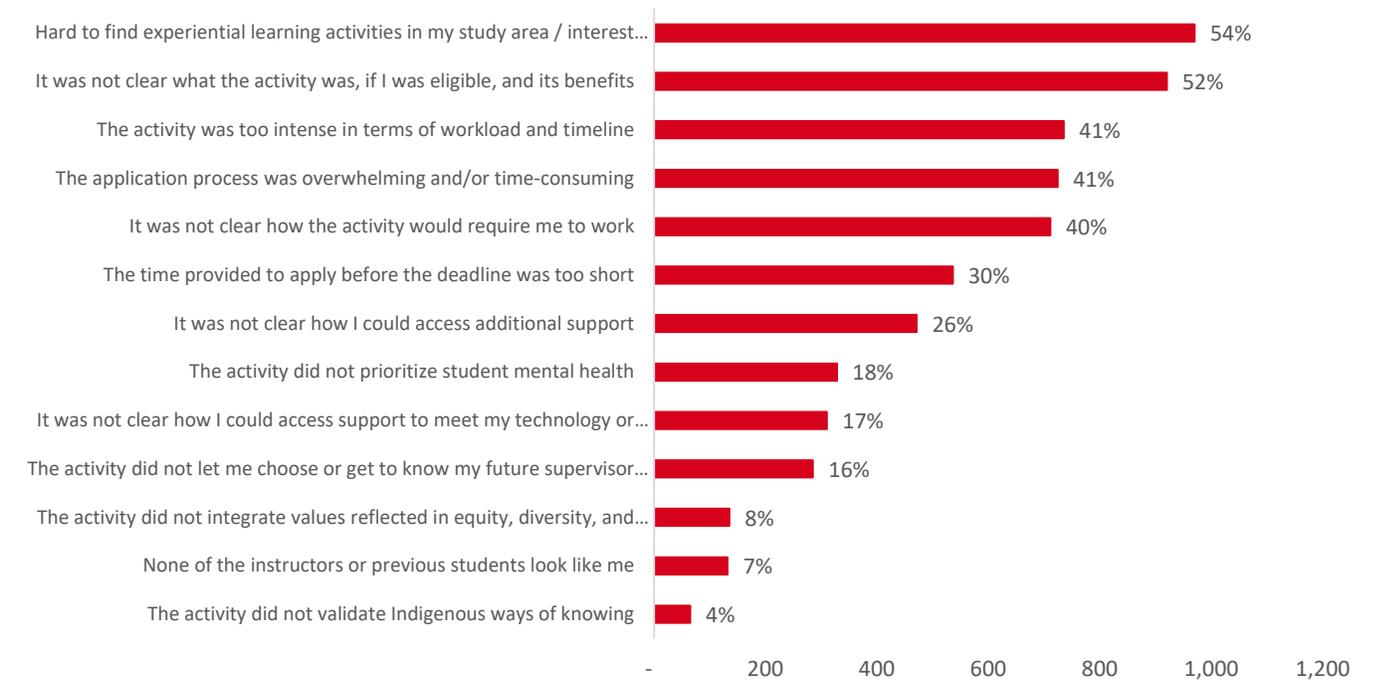
A total of 206 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Throughout, two key subthemes emerged. First, the costs of participating in EL created a significant barrier. This cost included paid experiences or activities with supplemental fees, such as highly sought-after EL activities like study abroad or field schools, and perceived as hidden costs of participation, such as personal protective equipment, specific uniforms or clothing, and parking or transport costs. Second, there were significant barriers created by having to reduce or leave wage-earning work to participate in required EL activities, particularly unpaid practicums, field experiences, and clinical placements. Many students suggested that they could not afford the fees for extra EL opportunities because they needed part-time or summer employment to make enough to cover tuition and expenses. One focus group participant sums this barrier up:

A lot of the research opportunities are summer studentships. If you're lucky enough to get one or to get a little bit of grant money, it's usually below minimum wage. Summer is the peak time for me to work and actually make money so that I can go to school next year. If I can't find a decent job, that puts everything in a bit of a risky situation. It's hard being in that situation, where it's something that I'd really love to do. If I could fit it into the school year it'd be perfect. A lot of us students have a hard time affording just basic everyday things on top of tuition. It's difficult to allocate so much of your time to a position that does not reimburse you, when you could alternatively put that into working, even if it's not so much of an educational kind of position.

Limited Understanding and Awareness of EL

A total of 163 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Throughout, students unanimously reflected on the impact that accessible information about the EL activity had on their decision to apply or participate. Any lack of information on the location, associated costs, expectations, schedule, availability of accommodations, practices for inclusivity, pay, etc., created barriers for students (See Figure 3). Students also expressed frustration at the labour required to identify appropriate EL activities. In the survey, 54% of respondents reported that finding EL in their area of study or interests as a barrier to accessing EL. Conversely, 52% of respondents reported that even if they had basic knowledge of the EL activity, it was unclear what would be required of them, if they were eligible, and its benefits.

FIGURE 3. INFORMATION THAT INFLUENCED RESPONDENTS' DECISION TO PARTICIPATE IN EL (N=1,784)



Respondents also struggled with understanding the benefit of participating in EL, especially when making decisions to sacrifice or balance other activities and commitments to participate. They shared that if they were unable to assess the risk of feeling overwhelmed by participating in the EL activity, they would opt not to apply or participate. This included being uncertain of the commitments the activity necessitated, and if they could balance the time commitment and intensity alongside other commitments, including coursework, off-campus work and other matters. A focus group participant explained the lack of information that comes from departments around EL opportunities:

Every once in a while, we'll get e-mails [from the Department]; at the very bottom there would be in tiny, tiny print, like, 'Oh, there's this opportunity'. But it's implied that you better be the perfect candidate or else don't even bother applying or going for it. That's pretty much what the department feels like always. They don't really talk to us – if we get an email, we're lucky, but other than that, no."

EL Activities are Limited and Difficult to Find

A total of 161 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Students perceived EL activities to be limited and difficult to find, with many students not hearing about opportunities outside their department or faculty. For students who live far from campus, commuting solely for an EL activity posed significant time challenges. Students also expressed frustration at the lack of equity across programs for EL opportunities and perceived that EL is offered in some faculties more than others. Research participants referenced the lack of a co-op program and the limited availability of highly competitive opportunities such as research and internships. Some survey respondents said that many opportunities were 'STEM focused' rather than 'ARTS centred'

Mental Health Concerns

A total of 117 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Students expressed struggling with mental health challenges, including feeling overwhelmed, stress, pandemic fears, anxiety, depression, and mental health conditions. These concerns were coupled with a lack of support, perceived by some students, for mental health at UCalgary. Students expressed uncertainty over whether participation in EL would allow them to manage their mental and physical health without impacting their academic performance. Students also worried about how their health might negatively affect their performance in the EL activity. A survey respondent states mental health concerns might be a reason they will reduce their EL activity:

I am currently employed at the University as a research assistant. I am concerned that I will need to reduce my hours due to mental health reasons. The lack of balance it has introduced into my life is not worth it, but I need it as my resume is currently weak and job applications are competitive. I worry about my reputation amongst my professors as I am reliant on them for references, and I fear that asking for a reduction of hours will damage my reputation and my ability to secure references. But I am tired.

Need for Guidance from a Mentor or Advisor

A total of 74 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Many students expressed a lack of human guidance or connection for EL. Throughout, students shared that this support didn't need to come from a single role, relationship, or advisor, but could be any interaction with a trusted individual that could help them prioritize and pursue EL, such as peers, course instructors, departments, advisors, and community/industry partners. As a survey respondent and focus group participant shared, it was unclear and often confusing who would know the information about EL opportunities and that often felt in competition or in conflict with their schedule, and other EL activities:

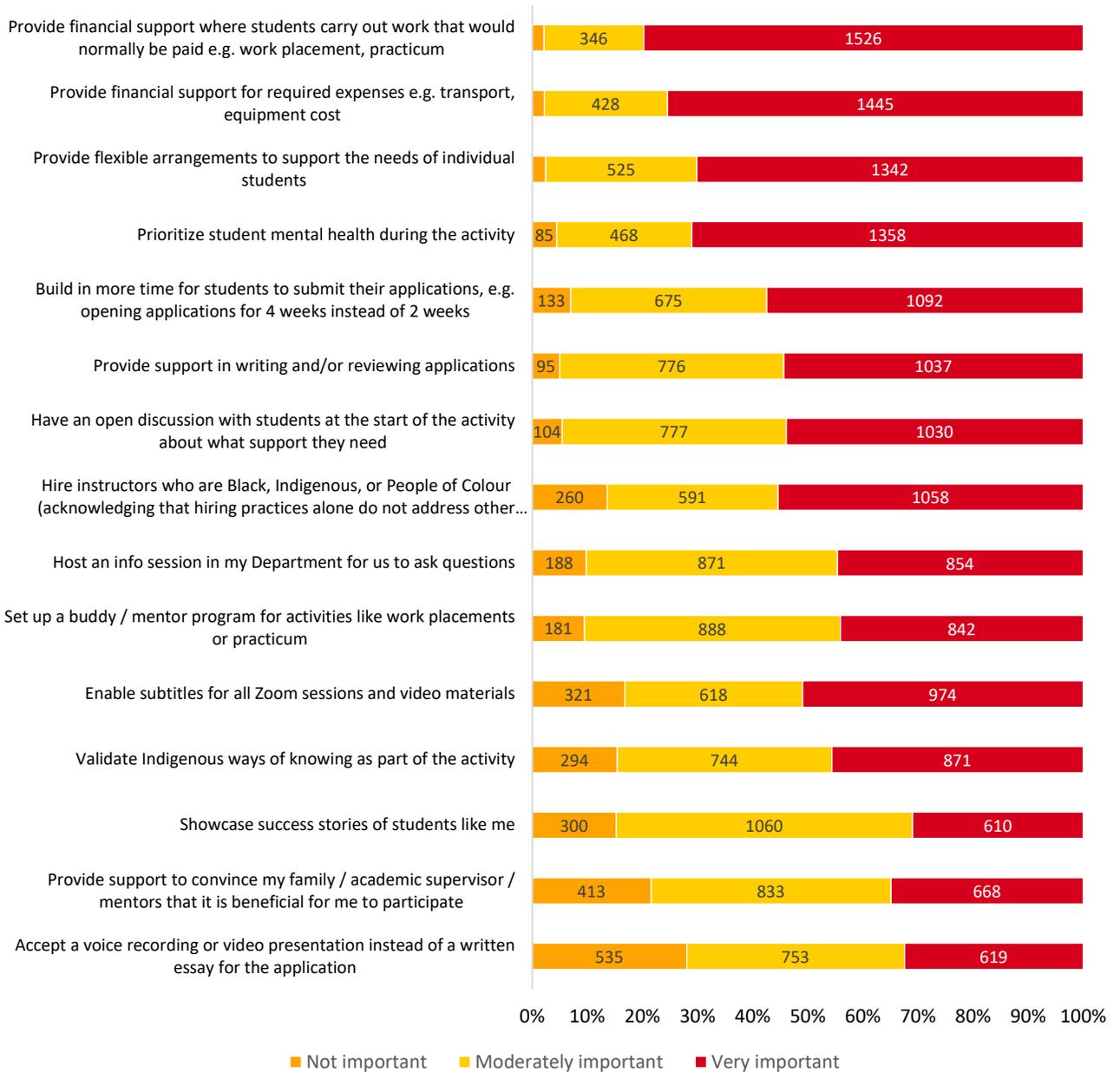
There are so many opportunities at UCalgary, some really great ones, but professors, who are the people students have the most immediate contact with (or first contact with) don't share nor know about these opportunities. I appreciate the few professors who allowed for in class presentations about group studies and exchanges, but I wish a professor had told me about co-ops, or that I could find my own internship. - *Survey Respondent*

Opportunities starts to get confusing with, what's the difference? What is available? Where is the information? If you go through the websites, different programs sometimes have their own social medias, but also separate sources of information, and it gets confusing. What works for my schedule? What is for me, what isn't? As soon as you have that confusion, it feels like none of it meant for you, because if it was, surely it would be much clearer. - *Focus Group Participant*

What Recommendations do Students Suggest for Equitable Access to EL?

As rich as the data were for understanding student perceptions of barriers to EL, it was also rich in the recommendations that students had for UCalgary to minimize some of these barriers. In the survey, respondents were asked to rank many potential ideas to increase access and inclusion and reduce barriers to EL at UCalgary. Respondents ranked each idea from "Not important" to "Very important". The top-rated idea was "Provide financial support where students carry out work that would normally be paid e.g., work placement, practicum," which 79.7% of respondents ranked as "Very important" (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. LIST OF POTENTIAL MEANS TO INCREASE ACCESS TO EL (N=1,915)



Some of these recommendations could be easily adopted while others might be longer-term goals for the institution. Quantitative and qualitative data from the survey data and rich description and commentary from the focus groups were coded and the following six themes were identified as the most frequent recommendations across all data sets:

- Follow Principles of Universal Design for Learning in EL Activity Development
- Increase Communication and Promotion of EL Activities
- Provide Financial Supports to Enable Participation
- Enhance Information and Resources About EL Activities
- Increase Number and Variety of EL Activities

- Diversify Faculty and Staff Representation and Engagement

Follow Principles of Universal Design for Learning in EL Activity Development

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) gives all students an equal chance to engage in learning opportunities. UDL provides flexibility in the ways that students access material as well as provides more inclusive and accessible options for assessment. A total of 1,169 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. The Project Team identified three subthemes. First, students wanted to see simplified application formats for EL activities. As one survey respondent said, “The application process is extremely long and as someone who has ADHD, lots of coursework, and limited time because of work, it would be helpful if the number of things I have to submit wasn't so in-depth.” There is a need to create more concise application formats with clear instructions in plain language. Ideally, these formats would allow students to showcase the value they can bring to the EL activity via diverse formats, including written, audio, or video submissions, that allow them to showcase diverse skills, experiences, and personal traits. As one survey respondent suggested, “More flexibility in the application format, as some are good at easy writing and others may be better with verbal communication; this would truly show the student's creativity and standpoint for the activity.” Regardless of the application format, students expressed a strong desire for supportive feedback, clarification, and encouragement. Students also expressed a preference for fewer competitive applications, and desired to get to know the EL instructor or team conversationally to see if there was “a connection” instead.

Second, students desired eligibility criteria that consider a holistic picture of the student. Such criteria would move away from strict GPA thresholds and rigid experience requirements to considering how the student would benefit from the experience, and how they would apply their initiative, passion, and life experience to the EL activity. Students were also keen to see safeguards for a transparent selection process that is not influenced by bias, implicit or otherwise. In addition, students recommend that EL activities accept non-academic references, or a reduction of the need for reference letters overall. As one survey respondent suggested, “Make passion and indication of hard work the main selection criteria. Not everyone has the opportunity to ‘perfect’ their resume, especially immigrants who are newly recruited to the Canadian system.”

Third, students recommend flexible, supportive, accessible, participatory, intercultural, and inclusive design of EL activities. As one survey respondent suggested, “EL should not just validate Indigenous ways of knowing, but actively seek out these ways of knowing and recognize they are not anecdotal or supplementary. Pay Indigenous people for their work.” Broadly, these characteristics focus on communicating existing resources and engaging in conversations on how to access support. Each of these recommended characteristics for EL activity design are defined as follows:

- **Flexible:** Flexible schedules and deadlines to accommodate classes, commutes, work, family, and other responsibilities.
- **Supportive:** Course instructors and supervisors with a strong ethic of care towards student well-being and mental health. This would be demonstrated through student-centered teaching practices, and empathetic support.
- **Accessible:** Clear statements on the importance of accessibility and steps taken to prioritize this. Students recognize the leadership role instructors have in normalizing and supporting accommodations. Equally, they also acknowledge the need for instructors to have more accessibility resources.
- **Participatory:** Students can build relationships with other participants, fostering peer networks and networking with instructors, staff, community, and/or industry.
- **Intercultural:** Inviting diverse participants and Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) representation in course instructors, integrating intercultural education as part of the EL activity, and applying an EDIA lens when designing EL activity.
- **Inclusive:** Safe spaces for students to access support without fear, discrimination, or intimidation. This includes supports regarding power dynamics and trauma.

Increasing Communication and Promotion of EL Activities

A total of 468 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Students consistently expressed the need for improved promotion of EL activities. Critically, 146 excerpts coded were of students sharing that they had not seen or heard of many of the EL activities included in UCalgary's EL Framework. Some students in the survey called for easy-to-access resources available as early as 1st year,

I would like to see easy-to-access resources that go over what all these EL activities are, and how to go about doing them. As a 1st year, I didn't even know "experiential learning activities" were a thing, until this survey. I'm guessing that's in part due to our introduction at the beginning of the year being non-existent, because of COVID. It felt like jumping right into classwork with no introduction of our degrees – that was the 2021 Fall introduction. If you didn't get the opportunity to go to anything at the University, such as Open House days, you were basically left in the dark on things like this"

Most students expressed confusion or lack of knowledge about how to find EL activities, and how to evaluate which would be applicable to them. Some students wanted information about EL activities to be easily found in a centralized location, and to be tailored to their areas of interest and year of study, including posting them on D2L or even professors taking the time to speak about them. Ideally, this information would clearly communicate the benefits, limitations, and learning outcomes of the EL activity to better inform their decision to participate (or not). Others wanted to see EL activities communicated and promoted via multiple channels at once, e.g., information sessions, faculty or staff champions, class announcements or discussions, and D2L. Some students also suggested a D2L shell dedicated to EL exclusively, or a D2L shell on EL tailored to their faculty or department with announcements, deadlines, and other communications posted online.

Provide Financial Supports to Enable Participation

A total of 122 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Students recommended more funded or paid opportunities, and greater availability of financial aid, bursaries, and scholarships. One survey respondent suggested, "Financial support is so critical for an effective learning environment. Student loans do not always cut it, and scholarships tend to be so specific that they can be difficult to qualify for. This left me to work two jobs, one being night shifts, to pay my bills and go to school." Students also shared their frustration with being ineligible for many forms of financial support, particularly as international and part-time students. One survey respondent had this to suggest:

More funding, or lesser fees, for field schools would be great to allow all students of all demographics to engage in such important educational processes. I am a low-income student; my family who will never be in a financial place where they can help with funding. EL opportunities need to be affordable; not for just the rich and well-off. This especially applies to Arts programs where you need the in-school experience to be employable after graduation.

Enhanced Information and Resources About EL Activities

A total of 383 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Above all, students expressed that clear and abundant information would allow them to make informed decisions. In specific, students wanted information on:

- Expectations of participants, including ways in which participants are required to engage, e.g., public speaking
- Asynchronous or synchronous, in-person or remote, etc.
- Required time commitment, including estimated workload, and specific schedule of mandatory activities
- Applicable fees and associated costs, including required equipment or safety gear
- Operational details such as location, size of team, financial supports, etc.
- Level of competitiveness, such as ratio of applicants to successful candidates.
- Physical demands required
- Rubric for how students will be assessed

In addition, students desired advising and mentorship, ideally in-person and personalized. Topics could include how different EL activities maximize their degree, how to apply for EL activities, and how to apply for financial resources. Focus group participants specifically emphasized the importance of networking with peers, course instructors, industry, and community. Seeing peers that they know and/or mentors they respect doing EL encourages them to believe EL might be meaningful for them, too. However, for many students, this is easier said than done. While students acknowledge that these networks are advantageous in securing preferential EL, they recognize that gaining these relationships can be difficult, particularly in first year, and for students from visible minorities. One focus group participant suggested that it could be as informal as grabbing a coffee with someone to learn about the EL opportunity so that it is 'approachable' and 'humanized.' As they suggested, "I want to chat about what's out there, rather than having to do research for a specific thing, when I haven't even figured out what specific things I want to do." Other focus group participants suggested that some students are aware of these informal networks while others are not, and this inhibits some groups of students from accessing EL opportunities:

I have heard that some of my classmates are doing research assistantships, but I'm really not sure how they got them. Most of them have done undergraduate degrees here at UCalgary, so I think it's because of these informal networks that are continuously being built. I think that's the main problem, and the pandemic isn't helping either. Most of my classmates that have research assistantships are from UCalgary, but my other peers at the department – international students, as I am, are in the same position. We have TA-ships but not research assistantships.

Increase Number and Variety of EL Activities

A total of 185 excerpts from survey and focus group data were coded to this theme. Students stated that embedding EL in their courses would incentivize participation. This would also mitigate concerns about distracting from academic goals, while gaining valuable experience. As one survey respondent suggested, "EL should become part of curriculum and pedagogy, not something you have to fight for in an application process." Some students also shared that such EL activities increased their understanding and confidence in pursuing additional elective EL opportunities, such as study abroad, studentships, and internships. In recognition of the competitive nature of some EL opportunities, students suggested greater availability of EL activities in general, particularly for high interest and coveted forms of EL such as co-operative education, research, internships, and practicums. Ideally, more EL activities would mean more EL distributed across (or open to) all faculties. Lastly, students recommended making more EL activities available in first year, particularly those with community and industry partners. One survey respondent was astute in recognizing this could benefit First Nations communities as well as students, "More industry and government collaboration, especially with First Nations governments to understand their needs and to implement these needs into research and study." Additionally, students were aware when programs offered no hands-on learning and suggested the university support their search for relevant hands-on experience to enhance their degree. As another survey respondent succinctly pointed out:

More EL opportunities for all of the different majors that the University offers. Each degree should be able to offer an EL opportunity that corresponds to the major students are in. My current major does not have any hands-on experience, volunteering or paid, available. I should be able to find work or volunteering in my field with the support of the University while I am still a student, so that I have valuable experience when I graduate.

Diverse Faculty and Staff Representation and Engagement

In the focus groups, the Project Team noted students' recommendations for diverse and equitable representation of faculty and staff at UCalgary and specifically for diverse and equitable representation within EL activities. Representation is particularly important for students who are visible minorities, and as one focus group participant suggested they can more easily communicate and connect with faculty and staff with shared lived experiences:

It can be difficult, in departments and faculties that are white dominated, for students of colour, for international students, and for students who don't really speak English well, to build those

connections with professors. Those connections are very important, to move on in academia in any sense. I'm of African descent; during my undergraduate degree, I only had one professor who was black. I only had one woman of color. Most of the classes I took were taught by white faculty. So, it's very hard sometimes to build connections with these professors, not just because of race, but just because of that cultural barrier – the same understanding oftentimes isn't present, and there's often a lot of biases against international students

That same focus group participant also said that students from a visible minority demographic have a harder time making connections to professors than white students because of the lack of representation at the instructor level and labeled this as a sort of racism:

There's racism that comes into play. I've just seen a lot more white students who have been able to make these connections with these professors much faster and get employment opportunities much faster. Whereas for students like me, who never see themselves represented on the teaching stage, it's a little bit different. But when I do find professors like that – that was how I got my first opportunity to be a research assistant, because I connected with someone. She understood my background, I understood hers, and then we both could do a research project together on a topic that we both understood. I value seeing myself represented and having the ability to connect with people that are like-minded, that speak my language, come from the same background as I do, but that doesn't happen a lot in this institution.”

Focus Group Participant

SUMMARY & NEXT STEPS

Students want to participate in EL. Like participants in the 2020 NSSE survey, the Equitable Pathways Project participants expressed a desire to participate in experiential learning but found there are challenges to accessing those opportunities and feeling welcomed once they were engaged. This research project explored and unpacked these challenges and provided recommendations for minimizing them. Since launching the Equitable Pathways to EL Project, the OEL has engaged students, as well as student service and academic units in conversations around student participation in EL activities at UCalgary. Capturing feedback from a broad cross-section of UCalgary students and sharing that feedback with those involved in delivering EL is an important step toward our campus targets for EL at UCalgary. The Office of Experiential Learning continues to engage teams at UCalgary in how to action recommendations generated by students through this work.

The Office of Experiential Learning will continue to engage members of the university community and other invested audiences with the student feedback and recommendations compiled through this project. To date, this work has been shared at various conferences, such as the Society for Experiential Education (SEE), the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), the Canadian Association College and University Student Services (CACUSS) and Cooperative Education Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL).

Several other initiatives are underway to enhance inclusion, accessibility and belonging in Experiential Learning. These activities present opportunities to continue to respond to student feedback.

Work-Integrated Learning for Neurodiverse Students Initiative – In 2022, UCalgary partnered with The Sinneave Family Foundation to launch a 4-year project to support neurodivergent students in accessing and thriving in WIL. This initiative is focused on engaging students with lived experience with neurodiversity and leveraging principles of Universal Design for Learning to transform WIL programs and explore new forms of WIL that support students' thriving. The initiative also involves campus and industry partner training related to neurodiversity in the workplace, supporting neurodivergent students and Universal Design for Learning.

Develop and offer short-duration, lower intensity EL programs that allow students to sample EL activities, build confidence, and explore interests. These programs are new in 2021 and 2022 and are open to students across disciplines. University 304, piloted in Fall 2022, targets second and third year students and prepares students to connect their academic studies to a paid or unpaid placement, project or job-shadowing experience. Explore Micro-placements, launched in 2021, provides students with short 30-40-hour placements with an industry or community partner. This program helps students find and sample career-relevant placements in a short-duration program that can be completed alongside other commitments. Finally, the non-credit Ready for Research badge targets first and second year students and helps students see themselves as researchers, build confidence in developing research projects, and find undergraduate research opportunities.

Shift toward Inclusive Excellence. In 2022, the Vice-Provost of Teaching and Learning and the Academic Lead for the College of Discovery, Creativity & Innovation presented a proposal to change the GPA requirement for the Program for Undergraduate Research Experience (PURE) from 3.2 to good academic standing. This recommendation was discussed with the Teaching and Learning Committee of the General Faculties' Council and implemented for the 2023 award cycle. This change signals to students that they belong in undergraduate research and responds to student recommendations for enhancing equity, diversity and inclusion in the PURE program.

Finally, this focus on enhancing students' access to and sense of belonging in Experiential Learning aligns with recommendations through consultation on the [2022 Experiential Learning Community Report](#) – a progress report at the midway point of UCalgary's EL Plan. In addition, for the three broad priorities in the plan, leaders identified six recommended areas of focus for 2022-25. Several of these recommendations align with the themes discussed in this research project including:

- enhancing accessibility and inclusion in EL,
- connecting the EL Plan to ii'taa'poh'to'p, expanding student opportunities (especially early in degree),
- and enhancing messaging about EL for students.

In partnership with other areas, our team is looking to spark conversations and explore specific activities to enhance participation and belonging in EL. For further information about this work, or to explore opportunities to action recommendations contained herein, we invite you to contact us through experientiallearning@ucalgary.ca.

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