

Community partner perspectives on course-based experiential learning in Environmental Studies: A case study

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Abstract

The benefits of community-based experiential learning for university students have been well documented. Community partners hosting students benefit from such collaborations but also experience challenges. This case study explores the experience of community partners who have hosted students as part of two required courses for the Bachelor of Environmental Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island. An online questionnaire, including both open- and closed-ended questions, was distributed to representatives of community organizations in government, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, who had hosted students with the aim of understanding their motivation, the benefits and challenges of hosting students, and how such collaborations could be improved. Results indicated that overall, most community partners viewed the experience positively and benefited from the collaboration. Some challenges were highlighted particularly related to professionalism and preparation of students.

Résumé

L'apprentissage expérientiel dans un contexte communautaire offre des avantages bien documentés aux étudiant·es universitaires. Les partenaires communautaires qui accueillent des stagiaires bénéficient également de ce type de collaboration, mais vivent aussi des défis. Cette étude de cas s'intéresse à des organisations qui ont travaillé avec des étudiant·es de deux cours obligatoires du baccalauréat en études environnementales à l'Université de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard. Les différentes organisations (gouvernementales, à but lucratif et à but non lucratif) ont rempli un sondage en ligne comportant des questions fermées et ouvertes. L'objectif était de comprendre leur motivation à offrir des stages, les avantages et les inconvénients de la formule, ainsi que des pistes d'améliorations. Les résultats indiquent que la plupart des partenaires ont eu une expérience positive et ont tiré parti de la collaboration. Toutefois, on note un manque de professionnalisme ou de préparation chez certain·es stagiaires.

Keywords: experiential learning, hands-on learning, internship, environment, community

Introduction

Experiential learning approaches have become common in higher education globally. Such experiential learning can take different forms but is often referred to as *hands-on learning* or *learning by doing* which can be traced back to the educational reformer, John Dewey (1938). Similar to the educational theorists, Kolb and Fry (1975) who developed an integrated model of cyclical learning, Dewey was of the mind that people learn better when they are actually able to experience the subject matter and reflect on their learning. Engaging in a guided cycle of learning and reflection, grounded in practical experiences, enables students to apply the theory that they are learning in the classroom to situations in the community. This process can have myriad benefits including helping them to develop their skills as independent scholars and researchers, increasing their confidence, career development, and development of a sense of civic and social responsibility (Braskamp et al., 2006; Brown, 2023; Burch et al., 2019; Chapman et al., 1992; Chidwick et al., 2024; Gross Davis, 2009; A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Depending on the degree program, these experiential learning approaches are implemented through service-learning, paid or volunteer internships, co-curricular experiential learning, work-integrated learning, co-op placements, problem and project-based learning, community-based research, or clinical placements (Hollenbeck, 2024; Karasik, 2020; Kricsfalusy et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2023; Yates et al., 2015).

Higher educational institutions' increased focus on providing experiential learning opportunities for their students, has typically involved the engagement of local communities as the partners and places where such learning takes place. Beyond educating young people, the university's relationship with the community has traditionally been related to research and discovery which has had economic and other societal benefits (Booth et al., 2020; Buzzelli & Asafo-Adjei, 2023; Shah et al., 2023). The advent of experiential education approaches has reconfigured that relationship to one which emphasizes partnership, reciprocity, and co-creation or mutual exchange of knowledge (Bono, 2025; Booth et al., 2020; Hollenbeck, 2024; Owusu-Daaku, 2021; Shah et al., 2023). This emphasis on expansion of experiential learning coincides with a demand placed on universities to demonstrate their value to society and the communities where they are located (Booth et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2017; Karasik & Hafner, 2021; Quillinan et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2023).

This new relationship between universities and communities in the context of the expansion of experiential learning opportunities has both benefits and challenges. Some feel that the mission of the university may be compromised by an emphasis on helping students to develop 'marketable skills' (Buzzelli & Asafo-Adjei, 2023). These types of community-engaged learning situations may also place burdens on communities or sometimes exploit communities rather than engaging them as equal partners in mutual exchange of knowledge (Booth et al., 2020; Buzzelli & Asafo-Adjei, 2023; Chidwick et al., 2024; Karasik, 2020;

Owusu-Daaku, 2021; Poteet, 2023; Visser et al., 2025). In some situations, marginalized communities may miss out on opportunities to benefit from such university-community engagement (Quillinan et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2023). Lack of capacity to mentor students and having suitable placements can also be barriers to participation by potential partners in work-integrated learning situations (Jackson et al., 2017). Research with community partners has found that engaging with students has strengthened the work of their organizations by giving them access to human and other resources, and the fresh energy, creativity, and perspectives that students bring (Bono, 2025; Hollenbeck, 2024; Karasik, 2020). It can also have long-term positive impacts on the broader community (Bono, 2025; Booth et al., 2020; Karasik, 2020). Karasik and Hafner (2021) emphasize that successful and healthy community-university partnerships require good communication, an equal commitment from all parties, and compatible mutual interests.

Educators observe that given the complexity of the environmental issues of today, approaches that incorporate opportunities for self-reflection, critical thinking, self-directed inquiry, learning by doing, engagement with real life problems and issues, and learning within communities better equip students in the environmental field for problem-solving and addressing the challenges following graduation (Marcinkowski, 2009; Orr, 2004; Stibbe, 2009). As a result, more efforts have been made to involve environmental students in learning that takes place in and often with organizations in the community. As part of an introductory Geographic Information Systems (GIS) course, students have learned technical and critical thinking skills, while gaining new understanding of social realities, through engaging with communities to address their priorities and concerns (Bono, 2025). In Florida, over several years students enrolled in planning-related courses were organized into teams and engaged with government staff at various levels and a private business in planning for remediation and redevelopment of superfund sites (Owusu-Daaku, 2021). Another example comes from an undergraduate geography field school course which collaborated with one rural community conducting research that was of importance to the various community partners involved, while providing a rich learning opportunity for the students (McPhee & Przedpelska, 2018). Students gained skills transferable to future careers or education such as independence, technological literacy, communication, and an understanding of other cultures. Similarly, the integration of service-learning into a short intensive field course in environment and sustainability, provided opportunities for students to learn practical and professional skills (Kricsfalussy et al., 2018). In British Columbia, an action learning course on carbon and energy management was co-developed through an innovative partnership between the University of Northern British Columbia and the local Chamber of Commerce to address the growing interest of local businesses and non-profits in taking action on climate change (Booth et al., 2020). This course successfully modeled the possibility of mobilizing knowledge not just for the students but also for the business community (Booth et al., 2020).

While these examples demonstrate the importance of experiential learning opportunities for students in the environmental field, it is also important to understand the reality of the implementation of such ventures from the perspective of host communities. The University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) has offered an interdisciplinary Bachelor of Environmental Studies (BES) degree since 2015 in which students integrate knowledge from courses across the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and business (University of Prince Edward Island, 2025). Experiential learning is incorporated into the Environmental Studies program in several ways, reflecting UPEI’s commitment to experiential learning (University of Prince Edward Island, 2018). Formally, opportunities for experiential learning are part of two required courses in the BES program which I have taught for over a decade (Table 1).

Environmental Studies Internship	Capstone Course
Third year	Fourth year
Fall semester	Winter semester
Volunteer	Volunteer
Individual	Groups of 3 – 4 students
Approximately 20 – 25 students	Approximately 20 – 25 students
Community partners • federal, provincial and municipal government. • non-governmental organizations • private businesses	Community partners • federal, provincial and municipal government. • non-governmental organizations • private businesses
Time commitment • 30 hours over the semester (approximately 2 hours/week)	Time commitment • 6 hours/week over the semester
• Activities identified by community partner	• Research projects identified by community partner

Table 1. Description of experiential learning courses

My previous study researched the perspectives of students who had taken the *Environmental Studies Internship* course and found that the volunteer internships enabled them to develop both personally and professionally (Brown, 2023). Having taught these courses for many years, I had anecdotal evidence that the community partners valued hosting the students. As a next step, this case study research aimed to formally evaluate the experience of the community partners who have hosted students for the volunteer internships and/or the capstone research projects. Using a quantitative questionnaire that also included some open-ended questions, community partners were asked about their overall perspective on these course-based experiential learning situations - their motivation for hosting students, the benefits and challenges for

their organizations, and how they could be better supported if hosting students in the future. Quantitative results are summarized below supplemented by direct quotes from the open-ended questions. Findings are discussed in the context of the literature related to experiential learning and reflects on how to improve the experiences of future community partners who host students.

Overview of Course-based learning in Environmental Studies at UPEI

As an integral part of *Environmental Studies Internship* individual students are engaged for 30 hours with a focus on hands-on learning in the environmental field. Over the years, students have engaged with their community partners in research and data analysis, field work in various ecosystems, event planning, or the creation and implementation of environmental educational programs for young children. The *Public Scholars on Environmental Issues* capstone course provides an opportunity for students to work in groups of three to four on research projects identified by the local community partner. Examples of projects, include evaluating the effectiveness of video surveys for determining nesting activity in Bank swallow colonies, surveying the local community for their perspectives about the value of trees in urban areas, developing a green roof design for the building of a local arts organization, and researching the sources and environmental fate of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), forever chemicals, on Prince Edward Island.

I contact potential community partners, prior to the start of the semester to explain the Environmental Studies program and the nature of the course, and organizations that agree to host students suggest activities for the voluntary internships or the research projects. When I first started teaching these courses 16 years ago, I emailed and made telephone calls to local government departments with a focus on the environmental area and environmental organizations that I was aware of on the island. I am also an active member of the local environmental community and so, over time, I became aware of other organizations to reach out to. Over the years, a network has been developed which facilitates the search for community partners each semester. In recent years, to broaden the network, I engaged with the new Experiential Education office at UPEI which has enabled me to find some new community partners, particularly those in the private sector.

At the beginning of the semester, students are provided with information about each of the potential opportunities and they are asked to indicate their preferred placements. However, I ultimately make the final decision, balancing the needs of the community partner and that of the students. Prior to beginning their 30-hour volunteer internship, I focus one class on professional ethics and engage students in discussion of various scenarios. Ultimately, students develop a code of ethics for the course. Both courses require that a placement agreement, developed in collaboration with the UPEI Experiential Education office, be signed

by all parties involved, which ensures that the students, community partners, and I understand and agree to our respective roles and responsibilities and the plans for the collaboration. The placement templates are provided in an Appendix. Some organizations have specific requirements or additional forms to be completed by volunteers, and students are required to fulfill those requirements prior to beginning the internship. For example, if a student is placed with an organization that does educational programming with children, they are required to have a current police record check. While it varies depending on the placement, on average, community partners are expected to commit to providing guidance to students for two hours each week over the 13-week semester.

Over the course of the semester, I regularly check in with community partners by email so that if concerns arise with the students, corrective action can be taken. For the *Environmental Studies Internship* course, community partners are asked to complete an evaluation form after the 30 hours have been completed to assess the students on their personal and professional qualities. This information is shared verbally with each student and ultimately forms part of a student's grade in the course. Over the last few years, in the *Public Scholars on Environmental Issues* course, I have asked each community partner to complete a feedback form at the end of the semester. The form asks them to comment on their interactions with students and provide insight about how I could better prepare students for future collaborations. This information is used to improve the collaborations going forward.

Methods

Following obtaining UPEI research ethics approval, an online questionnaire was sent via email, to contacts of 36 organizations that have hosted students for the *Environmental Studies Internship* course (2011-2024) and/or the *Public Scholars on Environmental Issues* course (2017 – 2025). In a few cases an organization no longer existed so no attempt was made to contact them. (See Appendix for a copy of the questionnaire). I have taught both courses and so had the email addresses for each of these organizations. In total, 51 people from the 36 organizations were contacted as some organizations, particularly government, had students engaged with multiple offices or sections over the years. Of those 51 contacted, three email addresses were no longer valid or the person had left the organization. Therefore, the eligible number of participants for the research was 48.

The email sent to community partners explained the context and aim of the research and included a link to the online questionnaire, consisting of 20 open and closed-ended questions, available on the Microsoft forms platform. Response options for Questions 10 to 16 were structured as a Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (McIver & Carmines, 1981). Stata 18 Data Analysis and Statistical software was used to calculate frequencies and percentages for each of the answers (Stata Corp, 2023). Due to the small sample

size, no statistical tests regarding differences between sub-groups in the data were done. Answers to the four open-ended questions (Questions 17 - 20) were analysed qualitatively (Patton, 2002) and coded according to main themes of benefits, challenges, and suggestions for better preparation for students or instructor support. Each respondent was assigned a number from 1 – 27, and these numbers are used for reference when including responses from Questions 17 to 20. However, quotations are not provided from all participants. As an incentive, participants were given the opportunity to enter a draw for a gift card to a bookstore. The questionnaire data was not linked to the names of those who chose to participate in the draw.

Results

Twenty-seven of the 48 eligible respondents completed the questionnaire indicating a response rate of 56.3 %. Of the respondents, most represented NGOs (N= 15; 55.5 %), with NGOs focused primarily on environmental protection, conservation or restoration (N= 12; 44.4 %) being most numerous (Table 2). Most respondents were either the Head/Coordinator of their organization/department or the Program Director/Manager (N= 22; 81.5 %). Twenty-one respondents (77.8 %) said that they had hosted students for the *Environmental Studies Internship* course with 12 (57.2 %) stating that they had hosted multiple times (Table 3). The majority of respondents (N= 17; 81.0 %) had served as the mentor or supervisor for the students. Most respondents (N= 15; 55.6 %) said that their organization had not hosted a group of students for the capstone course (Table 3). Of those who did host a group of students, five (41.7 %) had hosted only once with three (25.0 %) hosting multiple time. All respondents said that they had been the mentor or supervisor for the group of students.

	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Government (federal, provincial, municipal)	7	25.9
Non-governmental organization focused primarily on environmental protection, conservation or restoration	12	44.4
Non-governmental organization focused primarily on education with children or adolescents	1	3.7
Non-governmental organization focused primarily on research and/or advocacy	2	7.4
Business/private sector	1	3.7
Other	4	14.8
Total responding to question	27	100.0

Table 2. Respondents by organization type

	Internship course		Capstone course	
	Number of respondents	% of respondents	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Once	6	28.6	5	41.7
2 – 3 times	1	4.8	2	16.7
4 – 5 times	5	23.8	1	8.3
More than 5 times	6	28.6	0	0.0
Not sure	3	14.3	4	33.3
Total responding to question	21	100.0	12	100.0

Table 3. Frequency of hosting a student for the internship or capstone course

Participants were asked why their organization had hosted Environmental Studies students and to choose all responses that applied from a list of five possible reasons. Respondents could also choose “other” as an option and were asked to explain their response. The main motivation for organizations was an interest in contributing to youth education and development ($N = 25$; 92.6 %). Similarly, the second most common response was that hosting students provided them with an opportunity to share experience and knowledge ($N = 20$; 74.1 %). The majority of organizations were interested in developing a relationship with the university ($N = 17$; 63.0 %). Roughly half of organizations said that hosting students helped fulfill unmet needs in their organizations ($N = 14$; 51.9 %) and was a way to attract future employees ($N = 13$; 48.1 %) (Table 4).

Theme	Description of Theme	Survey Question Number
Motivation to host students	• Interest in contributing to youth education/development • Opportunity to share experience/knowledge • Develop relationship with UPEI for future projects • Fill unmet needs of organization • Attracting future employees	9
Benefits	• Fill unmet needs of organization • Contribute to youth development • Build relationship with UPEI • Attracting future employees • Creativity/gain a fresh perspective	17
Challenges	• Limits of student preparation/knowledge • Matching student skills to organizational need • Lack of professionalism/reliability • Finding tasks that can be completed within the semester time frame • Limited number of staff to supervise students	18

Table 4. Summary of themes in survey results.

In responding to an open-ended question asking them to list the top two or three benefits to their organizations from hosting students, some of the 27 responses echoed the common motivations for hosting students. For example, Participant 13 listed: “tasks that our team can’t get done; fostering future environmentalists and creating a network where they can come back, ask questions, get help is very important to us. We want people to get excited about conservation.” Similarly, Participant 24 indicated, “An opportunity for us to share our areas of interest with young people considering their plans for the future; an opportunity to learn from students what’s important to them in the current context; support with special projects that we would otherwise not have been able to take on.” Participant 20 offered, “Having additional support to work on projects, research or initiatives we may otherwise not be able to; building relations with the students and UPEI, contributing to their education.” Participant 5 stated, “Having extra people to assist with events; creating connections with students who will be entering this field of work and may apply for jobs with our organization or organizations we work with.”

Another benefit theme highlighted by respondents concerned the fresh perspectives that hosting students brought to their organizations. Participant 15 commented, “Fresh perspectives and ideas. Interns sometimes introduce new approaches or creative ideas that enhance our programming, particularly in climate and environmental education. . . .” Participant 17 said, “Getting an outside perspective on the work we do and policies and procedures we employ, i.e. a fresh perspective. . . .” Participant 3 explained that “This student project has initiated the vision that’s been on the mind of our organization’s leadership for decades, so that was the number one benefit. Having a starting point to work from to develop our plans further is another massive benefit. Finally, engaging students in a space that they’ve never been in before is part of our overall goal of diversifying our audience.”

In answering questions structured as a Likert scale, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students were respectful in their interactions with the organizations. Almost all respondents ($N = 26$; 96.3%) felt that overall, their organization had a good experience hosting Environmental Studies students (agree or strongly agree). A large majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that communication with the course instructor had been clear ($N = 26$; 96.3%). Similarly, 96.2% ($N = 25$) agreed or strongly agreed that the support that the course instructor provided to their organization had been adequate. Twenty-two respondents (81.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that students were well prepared to engage in the tasks that they were being asked to do. Similarly, 21 (77.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that students had sufficient knowledge to engage in the tasks that the organization was asking of them. Eighty-eight percent ($N = 22$) agreed or strongly agreed that students followed through on research projects or assigned tasks.

In listing the top two to three challenges for their organization in hosting students many of the things listed by the 26 respondents were related to the

Likert scale questions 12 – 14. Concerning student preparation and having knowledge to engage in the tasks, Participant 4 listed “Students did not seem prepared for the project and did not do enough background research. This meant check in meetings were often spent going over basic information such as how to research (search engines, keywords, etc.) and how to write a paper (formatting, keeping professional tone, staying on track, etc.) . . .” Participant 15 reported, “ . . . Matching student skills to organizational needs. Students may come in with strong academic knowledge but limited experience in youth engagement, curriculum development, or translating complex environmental topics into hand-on, age-appropriate activities. . . .”

A few respondents commented on the reliability of students in following through on the projects and assigned tasks. Participant 5 noted, “Some students we have hosted have been unreliable (i.e. did not show up to events, unresponsive to emails, etc.). Participant 1 stated, “Deadlines were often not met with the students even after making things very clear, but we were flexible.” Elaborating on some areas of concern, Participant 4 explained, “.... The students did not communicate well. There were times the students joined video calls from loud, public areas. There was also a time the students forgot to cancel a meeting and did not show. I had to contact them to find out it was cancelled. Students did not share their work. Although I asked for updates very early on, the students did not share any of their work until late in the semester. By then I realized they were not going in the right direction, but it was too late to steer them back completely.” Critically, three respondents said that they had had no challenges with students in the open-ended question.

Respondents were asked what the course instructor could do to better support the organization while hosting students. Of the 24 people who answered the question, 12 said that everything worked well and they had no suggestions for improvement. One theme that emerged from the responses was the importance of making sure that both students and community partners clearly understand the expectations for the collaboration at the beginning of the semester. One respondent stated, “Maybe making it more clear to students what the expectations are for the project, deliverables etc” (Participant 1). Another said “give examples of what is and is not expected of the community partner. For example, how much of the research process should the community partner be involved in and at what point should the students be on their own?” (Participant 4). One suggested that an intake interview with students and a bio of the mentors that students can review would be helpful in advance of choosing who to work with (Participant 9). Another theme concerned the professionalism of students. One respondent commented, “Perhaps more accountability for students who do not follow through with assigned tasks during their internships” (Participant 15). Some community partners would prefer that student internships be structured so that they were able to volunteer in eight-hour blocks, following the staff hours.

The last question asked the respondents to suggest ways that the course instructor could better prepare students for their volunteer internships or group

research projects. Of the 25 who answered the question, nine had no suggestions as they felt that students were well prepared for their placements. Similar to previous responses, the theme of professionalism emerged in the answers to this question. Participant 15 stated, “Set expectations around professionalism and collaboration and encourage students to approach the placement as a professional learning experience, with punctuality, clear communication, and initiative.” Another commented, “All of the training on showing up on time, being prepared, with physical appearance taken into consideration etc. This is very important at this stage of their life and will serve them well. There is nothing worse than taking on student that shows up in sweatpants. PUT THEIR PHONES AWAY” (Participant 25). Having a good work ethic was a related theme with Participant 5 emphasizing the need for students to follow through on their commitments and communicate with the host organization in a timely manner. Another said, “Prepare them to show up with a good work ethic for the hours that they are supposed to be there. Some tasks aren’t fun and can be tedious or labour-intensive, but they are necessary to the job” (Participant 11).

Some internship placements required students to be engaged in outdoor field work with the local organizations sometimes in inclement weather. Several respondents mentioned the importance of the professor advising students on how to dress properly for field work and the need for them to be physically capable of doing the work required. One said, “Ensure that the student is prepared for hard physical work. Dress appropriately” (Participant 7). Another respondent wrote, “Being ready for the weather (talking about outdoor gear and where to find it second hand or cheap)” (Participant 23). Participant 19 suggested, “Let them know that this is physical work and to be fit and strong is necessary.”

Another suggestion related to research and writing skills. This is of particular importance for the capstone research projects but could also be relevant to other situations depending on a volunteer internship placement. A few respondents suggested that some students required more preparation in basic research and writing skills. For example, Participant 21 suggested that some students may require more guidance on projects so that they are approaching them with the appropriate depth. One stated that the professor should “Ensure that students know how to conduct a research project, including writing a paper” (Participant 4). Participant 1 commented that “more training on professional writing, research techniques, etc. prior” was needed.

Other challenges noted by community organizations concerned being able to find tasks that can be done in the time available during the semester. Participant 21 indicated, “Finding tasks that can be completed by students within the allowed time frame that are not too challenging, not critical, and able to be completed without breaking confidentiality.” Similarly, Participant 15 indicated, “Limited timeframe for meaningful contribution. With only 30 hours, it can be difficult for students to gain deep understanding of our programs and make a substantial contribution. Onboarding, orientation, and training take time, which leave fewer hours for productive work.”

Challenges were also related to the limited number of staff in many organizations in PEI which affected their ability to develop tasks and mentor the students. Participant 24 wrote, “Our own staffing – we don’t have many employees, and we all have many demands on our time, so there were times when we may have let a student down by not being totally present, or by providing contradictory advice/feedback.” Similarly, Participant 3 commented, “Our biggest challenge was from our end, in that we run an organization with a very small staff so finding the time to disseminate knowledge and meet with the students properly was the most difficult part. Students could have benefited from a bit more direction on our end, but we’re ecstatic with the results.” Another stated, “Having sufficient capacity to take away from other duties to devote to students; having accessible activities for students to do that do not take a large amount of training” (Participant 17). Participant 25 highlighted that “There needs to be a champion that can organize a project and easily manage a student. Ideally there is a physical space where they can work in the office. In our case, we didn’t have a desk, so the student was working in a small, shared lounge.”

Discussion and Conclusions

This research confirms the anecdotal evidence previously received from community partners that, overall, these organizations have a very positive view of their collaboration with these two environmental experiential learning courses. It is a credit to the Environmental Studies students who have completed these courses that all community partners found them to be respectful in their interactions with their organizations. The emphasis that I placed on continuous communication with community partners before, during and after the semester, including the requirement of signed placement agreements, may have contributed to their positive view of these collaborations. The need for good communication in community-based learning collaborations was emphasized in several studies (Chidwick et al., 2024; Karasik, 2020; Karasik & Hafner, 2021). Positive experiences are the reason why community organizations have continued to host students multiple times over the years. While respondents saw these collaborations as having mutual benefits for both students and their own organizations, there were some challenges, and they suggested some areas for improvement, particularly related to student professionalism and preparation for placements.

Motivations of Community Partners

Most organizations were motivated to host students as a way to contribute to the education of young people and help them to grow and develop their environmental skillset. Since most community partners are working within the environmental field, these collaborations provided an opportunity to pass along that knowledge and expertise and inspire future environmental leaders. Similar

community partner motivations were found in studies from fields other than the environmental field (Chidwick et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2017; Karasik, 2020; Karasik & Hafner, 2021). As in these cited studies, community partners were also motivated by their own needs, as hosting students enabled them to accomplish work that would not otherwise have been done. This is not surprising in the context of this research since PEI is Canada's smallest province with a population of about 182,000 (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2025). Most organizations, including government departments, have a small number of staff with limited time and capacity to carry out all the work they might like to do.

Networking is a common way for people to find employment, and so unsurprisingly community partners viewed the collaboration with the two courses as a way to assess students for future employment opportunities. In fact, my earlier research (Brown, 2023) found that many students were able to find summer or permanent employment with the organization that had hosted them for the course-based 30 hour volunteer internship. With only one university on PEI, it is to be expected that community organizations might want to look for opportunities to benefit from academic collaborations. Apart from the island context, the proximity of a university to a community helps to facilitate these sorts of collaborations that have the potential to be beneficial for both parties (Booth et al., 2020; Buzzelli & Asafo-Adjei, 2023). Undoubtedly these community partner motivations to seek a relationship with UPEI, along with being in an island context, enabled me to find the internship opportunities and community research projects for students.

Benefits of Hosting Students

Benefits identified by the community partners were similar to that found in other studies and contexts (Bono, 2025; Chidwick et al., 2024; Hollenbeck, 2024; Karasik, 2020; Karasik & Hafner, 2021). As mentioned previously, one benefit to small organizations is having more people to help implement various projects or programs which is of particular concern in many fields. Hosting students also enabled some projects to go ahead that otherwise might never have been achieved. As cited by one organization, hosting a group of students helped them to begin to implement a vision that their leadership had had for years but were unable to find the time to focus on. The enthusiasm, creativity and fresh perspectives that students can bring to a community organization can be very energizing and beneficial. As highlighted by one NGO, students brought new ideas and approaches to their educational programming for children related to climate and environment.

Challenges and Ways Forward

While most organizations had a positive experience hosting students from these two courses, some challenges align with those in other studies (Jackson

et al., 2017; Karasik, 2020; Karasik & Hafner, 2021). Some community partners highlighted the unreliability and lack of professionalism of some students, which is perhaps not unexpected for some students at the undergraduate level. For the most part, community partners recognize that part of their role is in helping undergraduate students develop those professional skills and over the years they have been very understanding when students do not always measure up to their expectations. While a discussion of professional ethics forms part of the students' preparation for their 30-hour volunteer internship, results of this research suggest this focus should be expanded and emphasized in both courses. As explained previously, the evaluations that community partners complete for the *Environmental Studies Internship* course are very helpful in providing feedback to students and pointing out areas where they can improve in the future.

Some concerning examples were cited of students not having the research and writing skills to contribute to completing the research project for the organization. This is a little surprising, given that students are in the third or fourth years of their degree program when taking these courses. While these comments may reflect the particular challenges of a few students who would benefit from some extra help to develop those skills, it does demonstrate the need to review the BES program requirements to make sure that students are developing research and writing skills through prior courses. For those students engaged in outdoor field activities, it is important that they be reminded of the reality of the requirements for working outside when they choose a particular placement.

Another challenge identified by respondents concerned having the capacity to identify suitable projects and mentor students throughout the 13-week semester. These challenges were found to be a key reason that organizations did not host work-integrated learning students (Jackson et al., 2017). Karasik (2020) identified similar challenges in such collaborations especially concerning matches between the needs of the community partner and the students, as well as the time required for orientation, training and supervising their placements. While the placement agreements are helpful in ensuring an understanding of the responsibilities of students, community partners, and the professor, they do not address everything. Therefore, it is important to be very clear when contacting community organizations about the expectations for their role and the time commitment involved in hosting students.

Frontloading discussions about the needs of the community organization and the nature of the students they will be hosting will help to avoid potential mismatches. It may also be helpful to facilitate a connection between potential new community partners and those who have hosted previously, so that a potential new community partner could learn from the experience of previous host organizations. It is essential to have ongoing communication to address any questions or concerns. For both courses, students are provided with information at the beginning of the semester about what they might be doing in a volunteer placement or a capstone research project to help them prioritize

their choices. Links to the website of each community partner are also provided so that students can familiarize themselves with the scope of an organization's work when deciding about preferred placements. Even with more information, sometimes it may be difficult for students to fully understand what a placement will entail before starting it.

Limitations of the Research

This research represents a small case study of two environmental experiential learning courses which may limit its applicability. However, its focus on the perspectives of community organizations engaged in collaboration with these two courses, in some cases for over a decade, provides some understanding as to how such university-community collaborations work over the long term. Another limitation concerns the potential bias that is introduced by the fact that I have taught both these courses for over a decade and also conducted the research. Even though there was no link between the answers on the questionnaire and the name or contact information of respondents, some may have been reluctant to criticize me or the approach to these courses. Another source of bias concerns the fact that while over half of the organizations who hosted students participated in the research, these may represent those who had positive experiences in hosting students. It is possible that those who chose not to participate had fewer positive experiences.

Key Takeaways

Despite these limitations, this case study provides some insight that is applicable to such community based experiential learning courses, particularly in smaller communities that are in proximity to a university. The very nature of this 'town-gown' proximity often simplifies the channels of communication, making it easier to make connections with local organizations and find placements for students. However, it is extremely important that a professor of such courses clearly communicates, beginning when community organizations are initially contacted through providing sufficient information about the course, the nature of the students and the expectations for the collaboration. There should be established timelines for checking in with a community partner during the semester but also ensuring the freedom to contact the professor or departmental office at any time, if concerns arise. Placement agreements that outline the responsibilities of the instructor, the students and the community partners can be helpful to ensure that all understand the nature of the collaboration. A standard feedback form about the collaboration should also be provided to community partners at the end of the semester so improvements can be made for future collaborations.

An increased desire for students to have experiential learning opportunities, particularly in small communities with universities, can place a burden on

local organizations that may become overwhelmed with requests from various departments to provide placements for students. To overcome this challenge, it might be helpful for universities to have a central office which helps to facilitate and coordinate the interaction of various professors and courses with community partners. This office could standardize procedures and protocols about how such collaborations should work and evaluate the collaboration at the end of each semester. Having a third party evaluate the partnership is especially important in small communities where social interactions are common as it will create some distance between the community partner and the professor. Such an office can also provide some capacity-building to help those professors who wish to engage community partners to provide experiential learning placements for students. Given the expanded emphasis of universities on experiential learning, it is incumbent upon them to conduct research about how such community collaborations are working across departments so that benefits can be highlighted and challenges addressed.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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Appendix A

Environmental Studies Internship Placement Agreement Form

Professor name: _____ Phone: _____

Email: _____

Student name: _____ Phone: _____

Email: _____

Community Volunteer Placement: _____

Supervisor name: _____ Phone: _____

Email: _____

Brief description of project(s) to be completed during this placement: _____

Instructor

The instructor will be responsible for:

- Providing the student with training before placement around professional conduct
- Ensuring that students are matched with placements that are appropriate to their training, skills, and abilities.
- Supporting the student throughout the placement via meetings/feedback on weekly reflections
- Supporting the supervisor in addressing any issues that arise with the student during the placement
- Designing, collecting, and assessing assignments concurrent to the placement to structure student reflection and learning
- Granting academic credit to the student upon successful completion of course and placement work

Student

The student will be responsible for:

- Applying information about professional conduct and standards, provided by the instructor, throughout the placement
- Following workplace policies and procedures as outlined by the supervisor
- Completing the work assigned in both the academic and placement components of the course
- Communicating with the instructor and supervisor should any issues arise which would hinder successful completion of the placement
- Documenting the volunteer hours completed through the placement

Community/Work Placement Supervisor

The community/work placement supervisor will be responsible for:

- Providing an orientation for the student upon arrival at the placement
- Providing any training and/or equipment required to perform the assigned work
- Respecting the student's rights as a volunteer
- Establishing clear and consistent expectations, in cooperation with the student
- Alerting the instructor should any issues arise which would hinder the successful completion of the placement
- Offering the student feedback throughout the placement
- Providing to the Professor an evaluation of the student's personal and professional qualities as observed during the volunteer internship

Instructor signature: _____ Date: _____

Student signature: _____ Date: _____

Supervisor signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Research Project Agreement UPEI Bachelor of Environmental Studies Public Scholars on Environmental Issues

Background

A key part of the Bachelor of Environmental Studies degree is to provide students with experiential learning opportunities to develop, integrate and apply their theoretical knowledge of environmental studies in various fields. The capstone course for the program, Public Scholars on Environmental Issues, provides a forum for students to interact and learn from local, national and international experts in various fields of environmental studies. In order to develop their own expertise as public scholars, students will be involved in practical experiences or research projects with private, public or non-governmental organizations that are engaged with environmental issues. Lectures, readings and in-class discussions among students will assist students in developing an interdisciplinary and integrated approach to analysing their experiences.

Teams of 3 students will engage in a research project identified by a community partner that is of benefit to the organization. Students are expected to address the objectives of the research project in collaboration with the community partner, do an oral presentation of their results for the community partner and also write up their results in the form of a report. There is no expectation of payment to the students.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Research project relies on the engagement of a learning triad: student, project supervisor, and the course instructor.

Students

Bachelor of Environmental Studies students offer organizations a theoretical foundation and interdisciplinary understanding of the environmental field and applied research methodologies. A team of BES students will contribute their knowledge and skills to filling a need in the organization by completing the research project as defined by the organization's project supervisor. Students are expected to:

- Be prompt and professional in their conduct and communication with the sponsor organization, course instructor, and all other members of the general public or clientele encountered during the course of the research
- Meet all course and project deadlines and project deliverables
- Seek feedback and further clarification from the project supervisor and/or course instructor when needed
- Engage in a reflective learning cycle through in-class discussions and assignments

Project Supervisor

- The project supervisor is employed by the host organization and is responsible for overseeing the research project for the team of students collaborating with the organization. The supervisor is expected to:
- Define the student project and provide the student with any relevant resources

- Communicate project milestones, deadlines, and deliverables
- Make introductions to anyone relevant to completion of the project
- Compensate the student for any direct expenses associated with the research project (e.g. travel)
- Provide constructive feedback to the student and/or course instructor as needed

Course Instructor

The course instructor is employed by UPEI as a Professor of Environmental Studies. The instructor acts as a liaison between project supervisor(s) and the team of students to ensure that research project meet course objectives and students meet the organization's expectations.

The course instructor is expected to:

- Coordinate the timely completion of the Project Agreement, ensuring all parties understand project expectations and the responsibilities of each role
- Design and implement a curriculum based on best practices in experiential learning to support students in the successful completion of their research project
- Maintain clear and open communication with project supervisor and students, addressing any issues as they arise
- Evaluate student learning through course assignments
- Student and supervisor are invited to contact the course instructor at any time to discuss project goals, structure, or process.

Course instructor:

Email:

Phone:

Project Overview

Project supervisors and students are asked to complete the relevant sections below. The course instructor will collate supervisor and student input and share the final Project Agreement with both parties prior to the start of the work-study placement.

Sponsor Organization:			
Supervisor Name:		Lead Student Name:	
Email:		Email:	
Phone number:		Phone Number:	
Section 1 (to be completed by Project Supervisor)			
Brief Project Description:			

Expected deliverables (research proposal, presentation, report: .
Expected timeline (project milestone deadlines etc.):
<i>Additional comments:</i>
Section 2 (to be completed by student)
<i>Learning goals: (Why did you select this project? What do you hope to gain from the experience?)</i>
<i>Additional comments:</i>

Sign below to indicate your agreement with the details of this project as outlined above:

Student Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Student Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Project Supervisor Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Course Instructor Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____