

How Experiential Learning in College Could Launch Your Career

Hands-on activities like internships, studying abroad, assisting with faculty research, and other experiential learning options give students invaluable opportunities to apply their knowledge to authentic, real-world situations. Employers think so, too. According to [PayScale.com](https://www.payscale.com), 69 percent of employers feel that hands-on or job specific training is an important or critical soft skill they want to see in potential employees (other top five soft skills include: work ethic, teamwork, oral communication, and problem solving).



What is experiential learning?

You can think of experiential learning as learning by doing, but that's just half of it. Experiential learning is also applying what you already know (such as concepts and theories) to unfamiliar and variable situations. In some ways it's like the difference between learning Spanish vocabulary words in a classroom and trying to order local cuisine off a menu in Barcelona. Interacting with real Spanish speakers, who may talk faster and pepper their conversation with slang and idioms, is a more authentic experience than learning Spanish solely in an American classroom.

Here are the top 3 career benefits to seeking out [experiential learning activities](#) on your college campus:

Discover What You Love

Experiential learning is a great way to find out what you like and what you don't. You love your biology and chemistry classes, but do you really want to go to medical school? An externship program shadowing a doctor for the day may convince you to sign up for the [MCAT](#). Are your sensibilities better suited for an institutional software company or a scrappy environmental startup? Summer internships in both the corporate and nonprofit worlds can give you a better idea of what fits you best. These types of activities are also chances to discover new interests and to develop talents and strengths, even in areas beyond your major—and more crucially, beyond your comfort zone.

Take a Risk

The [Association of Experiential Education](#) explains that since hands-on learning experiences require students to “take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results,” students may also “experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty.” Just like in the real-world, you can’t totally predict what the outcome of an experience will be—but no matter what you’ll learn from it.

Learn How to Talk about Your Skills

The final component of an experiential learning experience is reflection. What specifically did you learn through the experience? How could you apply what you’ve learned to other settings? Landing a great job after college means articulating your strengths and demonstrating their value to a potential employer. For example, upon reflection it will become clear that your work-study gig as a peer tutor in the Writing Center has strengthened your ability to break down complex material for others to understand (an experience you can reference when an employer is looking for someone with impeccable [communication skills](#)). Similarly, your role on the Solar Car Team finessed your technical skills as well as the ability to problem-solve as part of a team.

Check out our book [Colleges That Create Futures](#) for more experiential learning opportunities on 50 college campuses.