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## To This Day: College Graduates on the Lasting Significance of Relationality and Experiential Learning

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# To This Day: College Graduates on the Lasting Significance of Relationality and Experiential Learning

Ann Fullerton and Vicki L. Reitenauer

## Abstract

*In the past twenty years, much research has been conducted into the effects of community-based learning and service-learning on students, but studies into the long-term impacts that persist after graduation have been fewer in number. In this article, the authors share perspectives from Portland State University alumni on the lasting significance of their participation in a community-based learning course that has been operating continuously for more than two decades and the key features of significant learning experiences more generally.*

One of the first capstone courses to be designed and offered at Portland State University (PSU)—and the longest-running capstone at the university—is “Learning from and about Persons with Significant Disabilities,” referred to in this article as “Learning from Persons.” Since 1993, more than 3,500 students have completed “Learning from Persons.” In the course, students prepare for and then spend two weeks as student-counselors with individuals with significant disabilities in an outdoor camp program. Most students who choose this course have never before formed a relationship with a person whom they perceive to be so “differently-abled” than they are. In the final reflections they complete for the course, many students comment that the course was both one of the best and one of the most difficult things they had ever done, as they articulated the ways they accepted and met their responsibilities as student-counselors.

Through these final reflections, the instructors and staff involved in “Learning from Persons” hear every year about the powerful, even life-changing, experiences that capstone student-counselors have during their two weeks at camp. But do these changes constitute the sort of transformative learning that community-based practitioners know is possible through this pedagogy and teach toward in their courses? One purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the relative meaningfulness of the community-based learning experience that is the “Learning with Persons” capstone, both in and of itself and as one among many learning experiences students encounter during their undergraduate careers.

This article is based on a qualitative research study conducted with twenty PSU graduates who completed the “Learning through Persons” capstone. What follows is a description of both the community and the pedagogical contexts for the course, a brief overview of relevant literature, a description of the methods employed by the

researchers, a discussion of one set of findings and the implication of those findings, and some concluding thoughts on the “Learning from Persons” capstone and its power as a model of inclusive community-building.

## **The Community Context of “Learning from and about Persons with Significant Disabilities”**

The “Learning from and about Persons with Significant Disabilities” capstone is offered through a partnership between PSU and the Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp, Inc., of Oregon. The partnership was formed in 1972 as a practicum experience for special education teachers and in 1993 was expanded to support the capstone course by a special education professor (and lead author on this article) who herself enjoyed a longstanding relationship with Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp. As a thirteen-year-old, she began volunteering and working at the camp and today identifies this as a formative experience in which she developed confidence and the ability to work in teams with others, and which eventually led to her career path.

The lessons this now-seasoned professor brought with her from that lived experience from many years ago included the understanding that building reciprocal relationships with persons with significant disabilities is essential for respectful, authentic, and meaningful engagement to be possible across differences related to ability. This informed every aspect of the development of the original capstone proposal and continues to inform the design of the course today.

## **The Pedagogical Context for “Learning from Persons”**

As one of the many dozens of options that students have for their self-selected senior capstone course, “Learning from Persons” appeals to students for a variety of reasons. A small proportion of the students are preparing for careers in education, including special education. Some students have familial relationships with persons with disabilities or have worked or volunteered previously in settings with persons with disabilities. The majority, however, seem to choose the course because of the convenience of its scheduling—requiring a commitment of two weeks in residence at camp, with a weekend break in between, during the summer, when many students have greater flexibility in course scheduling—and because it seems like a fun and easy way to complete one’s capstone requirement. Although many students are initially attracted to the course because of convenient scheduling, all students engage in an application process through which they learn what the course requires of them, complete a self-assessment, and discuss the course with faculty or graduate assistants before they enroll so that they may make an informed choice to register for the course. On average, students from more than thirty different undergraduate majors enroll each year.

Given the intensely immersive nature of this capstone experience, students must be fully oriented and supported to plunge in and work through the challenges that await

them at camp. Additionally, students need repeated opportunities in a variety of settings and formats to reflect on what they are experiencing, to connect these experiences to past experience and already-held knowledge, and to transmute these experiences into new learning. Several components of this course converge to provide students with the opportunity to build relationships with persons who are differently abled, to explore the social constructs surrounding dis/ability in our society and the way those constructs create particular realities for persons with disabilities, and to reflect on the current and possible meanings of their developing awareness.

One month before the on-site phase of the course, students attend a full-day orientation in which the faculty and community partner provide an overview of expectations for the students as camp counselors, the learning goals for the course, and the fundamentals of effective camp counseling. Students then read about the experiences and perspectives of persons with disabilities through first-hand accounts, coupled with scholarly material that employs a critical disability lens. Students complete online modules to ensure that they have reviewed and that they understand important information about their role as counselors. Their final preparation before they come to the camp is to write a pre-camp reflection paper, in which they contrast their own lived experiences with those recounted in a young person's first-hand account of living with disability, recall and describe how students with significant disabilities were treated in their middle and high schools, and share their current career aspirations and their connection to this capstone course.

At the start of their scheduled course section, students arrive at Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp for two days of on-site training that includes practicing counseling skills, team building to create a community of counselors ready to help each other, and engaging in simulation activities that give insight into what people with physical, sensory, and neurological challenges often experience. Each capstone student is then assigned to serve as the counselor for one or two camper-participants.

After the training, the camper-participants arrive with their families or caregivers, and the capstone students have an opportunity to ask questions and gain more information before the caregivers leave. Students are organized into groups of eight student-counselors. A masters-level, experienced teacher, working as a counselor-supervisor, along with an assistant, continuously coaches and supports the eight-person groups of student-counselors individually and collectively throughout their two weeks at camp. Additionally, the on-site faculty member also meets with student-counselors, rotating between the groups and checking in periodically with each individual student-counselor. In addition, all of the camp program staff (many of whom began their involvement at Mt. Hood Kiwanis Camp as PSU capstone students), who lead the various outdoor activities, are also responsible for teaching and coaching the capstone student-counselors.

No matter how extensive their preparation has been, many students worry that they will not know what to do or how to communicate and connect with their assigned camper(s). The aforementioned coaching and support, along with modeling from

supervisors, helps students confront their fears, move through them, and quickly establish a comfortable person-to-person relationship with the camper-participants.

As students gain confidence and form relationships with camper-participants, a second wave of learning occurs, in which students observe and reflect on the many individual ways that people with significant disabilities overcome personal challenges to live, play, and interact with others. Such experiential learning can be a powerful tool for increasing students' ability to navigate across difference, but only if students have repeated opportunities to reflect on what they are learning and connect that knowledge to larger contexts. At night, after the camper-participants have gone to bed, supervisors meet with their student team to discuss approaches to challenges they are experiencing and reflect on what they are learning about persons with disabilities. Student-counselors have an opportunity to practice understanding, respecting and valuing the role of diverse realities through this practice.

After sharing and reflecting on these experiences, discussions then move to broader topics such as the issues faced by families supporting a child with disabilities; the problems within the foster care and community service systems; the disability rights movement world-wide; barriers in education, employment, and housing; and the right to self-determination. Supervisors guide student-counselors in making connections between what they are learning each day alongside their camper-participants and these broader political and social issues.

At the end of the student-counselor's first week of camp, the student completes a self-assessment, a feedback tool that was collaboratively designed by faculty and camp staff, then meet with their counselor-supervisor to review their ratings and receive the supervisor's feedback. The student and supervisor collaboratively define goals for improvement and enhanced achievement for the student-counselor for the second week. At the end of the second week, the supervisor completes an evaluation and holds a final conference with the student.

After students return home from camp they write a post-camp reflection paper. They begin by re-reading their pre-reflection and consider how their views have changed after the two-week counseling experience. They also reflect on what they have learned about themselves and about groups that society views as different, and they identify what they are taking from this experience and how they might use their learnings post-camp. The student's final reflection paper, combined with the evaluation completed by the supervisor, is used to determine the student's final grade in the course.

After completing the course, many students want and need to continue processing the experience and do so in several ways. The counselor-supervisors and the students they supervised get together informally for a reunion in late summer or fall. The entire camp community (staff, counselors, camper-participants, and their families) is invited to participate in a fundraiser in September. Students also connect with faculty back on campus.

A PSU undergraduate is employed as a social media manager for the “Learning with Persons” capstone, and the course Facebook page and blog provide a place to connect throughout the year. Some students, camper-participants, and their families report that they stay in touch for many years. Students also often report they made lasting friends with their fellow student-counselors.

## **Literature Review**

Numerous studies have confirmed the positive impacts of community-based learning on participants. Bamber and Hankin (2011), for example, use transformative learning theory to investigate impacts of service-learning. Through a meta-analysis of eleven studies, Warren finds that service-learning also “increased multicultural awareness and enhanced social responsibility” (2012, 59) in participants. Pelco, Ball, and Lockeman (2014) offer a complex picture of the beneficial aspects of service-learning for a majority of students alongside the differential impacts experienced by students from varying demographics and the resulting differences in perspectives on their experiences.

Although there are numerous qualitative explorations of the impact of community-based learning courses during the experience or immediately afterwards, few qualitative studies have examined if and how course-embedded community-based learning experiences continue to influence graduates’ perspectives or actions. Kerrigan (2004) interviewed twenty graduates three years after participating in a variety of required capstone community-based learning courses in their senior year. In this study, some graduates described how the course had enhanced their communication and leadership skills, appreciation of diversity, and ability to operate effectively in new communities. Others gave examples of tangible professional skills that had contributed to their career development. Still others described a continuing sense of social responsibility and sustained volunteerism after graduation.

Kiely (2005) found that, one to eight years after college graduates had participated in an international service-learning course, each participant experienced one or more forms of perspective transformation (e.g., moral, intellectual, spiritual). Similarly, but at the K-12 level, Laursen, Thiry, and Liston (2012) reported that graduates who had been engaged in a science education outreach program one to eight years earlier reported positive outcomes in personal development, management skills, teaching, communication, and career-related skills. Newman and Hernandez (2011) studied the long-term effects on alumni mentors for a long-running service-learning course focused on personal and vocational development opportunities for urban youth, finding that the service-learning experience “appears to have long-term positive effects on young adults’ attitudes, intentions, and behaviors involving their learning experience, career selection, career preparation, skill development, and community service involvement” (2011, 44).

Finally, in determining the methods we would use for data collection and analysis (explored in greater depth below), we chose to use the critical incident technique described by Bycio and Allen (2004) and critical event analysis described by Bowie,

Pope, and Lough (2008). These approaches allowed us to mine interviewees' responses to questions about their most significant learning experiences through probing for rich descriptions of those experiences and then analyzing their responses for themes and patterns.

## **Methods**

In this article, we contribute to the rich literature on community-based learning through a study of the long-term impact of "Learning through Persons," as catalyzed by responses to questions regarding graduates' most significant learning experiences in college. Use of the critical incident technique allowed us to extract insights about the relative importance of this community-based learning experience within the numerous other learning experiences graduates had had in college.

The interview method used in this study was a modification of the critical incident technique described by Bycio and Allen (2004) and critical event analysis described by Bowie, Pope, and Lough (2008). During the interviews, participants were first asked to describe their three most significant learning experiences in college. Then, for each experience, they were asked what was meaningful about that experience for them, and in what ways that experience has impacted their life after college. By asking this question first, before any reference was made to "Learning from Persons," the researchers were able to explore how salient service-learning was among all the learning experiences that occur in college. If a respondent listed "Learning from Persons" among their top three significant learning experiences in college, the interviewer furthered the discussion of the impacts of this course with a number of additional questions about its long-term significance. In the cases in which interviewees did not list this course originally, the interviewer asked respondents directly about the "Learning from Persons" course and the meaning it held for them, both at the time they took the course and in the intervening years.

Potential interviewees were initially located through the PSU alumni database. At the time of the study, more than three thousand alumni composed this group of graduates who had completed "Learning from Persons," with about 60 percent of those being possible participants because a) current contact information was available, and b) they had given permission to be contacted by the university. Stratified random sampling was used to identify sixty potential participants from three time periods (2-5 years after they had completed the course, 6-10 years, and 11-16 years). Potential participants from each time period were randomly selected, called, and asked if they would be interested in participating in a forty-five-minute phone interview about their college experience. If a potential participant could not be reached or if that person declined, the next randomly-selected graduate was called. At the time of the interviews, four participants (19 percent) had completed "Learning from Persons" 11-16 years prior, eight (38 percent) had completed the course 6-10 years prior, and the remaining nine (43 percent) had completed "Learning from Persons" 2-5 years prior. The twenty interviewees had completed eighteen different majors during college,

including business, biology, art, and graphic design, to name a few. A thank-you in the form of a twenty dollar gift card was issued to each participant after the interview.

The interviewer conducted twenty phone interviews with participants. Interviews were audio-taped, and each was transcribed for analysis. The researchers then analyzed the data contained in the transcriptions according to the processes described by Creswell (1994). Two readers read each interview and identified the dominant themes, coded the data according to these themes, compared their results, and reached consensus regarding the coding. A third reader confirmed these themes through an independent analysis of the data.

## **Findings**

Of the twenty interviewees, twelve mentioned “Learning from Persons” explicitly as one of their most significant learning experiences in college. In other words, 60 percent of interviewees cited this community-based learning course—which constituted six credits of their minimum of 180 required for graduation—as a most significant learning experience they had had as an undergraduate. Of the eight other interviewees who did not mention “Learning from Persons” as one of their three most significant learning experiences, six of these graduates made it clear that it had been a significant experience in response to the interviewer’s questions about their capstone course. For example, one said, “It was the most important experience of my life,” and four described it as a “fantastic” or “incredible” experience that had impacted their life since graduation. In all, 90 percent of interviewees identified that a community-based learning course—their capstone course, specifically—had been a most significant experience in their college education.

Analysis of the data, both with regard to students’ most significant general learning experiences and the lasting impact of their involvement in “Learning from Persons,” led to insights about what graduates report years later as the most salient and impactful aspects of their college years. Students consistently pointed to two major themes as features of their most significant learning experiences, which cross-cut throughout their commentary:

- Relationality, which included the following:
  - ◆ A high degree of interaction with others perceived to be different from themselves, particularly in the community-based setting
  - ◆ A high degree of interaction with a teacher (broadly defined) who modeled ways of thinking and working through problems and provided opportunities for continual contact and feedback
  - ◆ A high degree of interaction with peers, including through group and team work
- Community-based, experiential, hands-on learning experiences

### **Relationality**

Of the fifty-seven total learning experiences that graduates reported as significant (three experiences for each of seventeen interviews, and two experiences for each of three interviews), 92 percent involved explicitly relational elements, experienced in a

variety of ways. That is, students repeatedly described encounters with teachers, fellow students, student affairs resource staff, guest speakers, and community partners as the most significant elements of their undergraduate education. When a respondent mentioned something that was not overtly relational in nature (and, of these responses, the location of PSU, in the midst of downtown Portland, Oregon, was the most frequently cited factor), the probes that followed the initial questions—namely, “What was important about that experience for you?” and “In what ways, if any, has that impacted you after college?”—typically led to responses that involved the importance of human relationship and connection. In response to these probes, students often mentioned having had the opportunity to connect outside classes with persons working in their chosen field or being able to attend lectures, readings, and other events that furthered what they were learning in the classroom.

One graduate explained that her most valuable learning experiences were ones where people related to one another:

I like to connect with people. I like to connect with my teachers. I don't...like big lectures and stuff, you know, where there's no personal interaction. I find that hard. So [in college] I really appreciate[d] when there [was] discussion and some type of personal [connection], or personal accessibility.

This student stated that the high degree of relationality in some of her courses, combined with her involvement in student organizations, “opened the door” for post-graduation involvement on projects in small groups and the taking on of leadership responsibilities. This student concluded by saying that she found it extremely valuable to have engaged in this sort of integrative learning, as it helped her relate to different people.

*Interaction across difference.* Nearly half (45 percent) of the graduates explicitly mentioned the fact of the diversity represented by their instructors and their peers as being central to their most significant learning experiences, which intersects with their more general descriptions of faculty and peer interactions expanded on below. Even more fundamental in graduates' responses was a recognition of the significance of learning from persons formerly thought of as “others” within community-based learning environments.

One graduate who described herself as older than the majority of other students in college noted that interacting with these younger classmates was important for her post-graduation interactions in the workplace. Another graduate said that one of her most significant learning experiences stemmed from the diversity within the group of professors she encountered throughout her studies, who came from many parts of the world and offered her fresh perspectives on issues that she had never examined before. This graduate spoke directly to how this engagement across difference had fostered in her an open-mindedness that she has continued to operate from post-graduation.

Another graduate, who identified herself as a conservative, identified “tolerance” as a most important lesson she took from her interactions with persons from across the political spectrum:

Being a conservative and being among a lot of liberal students and teachers... it was a really hard thing sometimes to just keep your mouth shut and absorb and listen and appreciate....It really taught me a lot about how...everybody’s allowed to have their own opinion, everybody’s ideals are different, and you just have to kind of try and see the good in everything, because typically there is something good in all those things....It was really a good thing for me to have gone to a liberal arts college because I got exposed to a lot more, and I think I have a lot more tolerance now because of it....I’m not so close-minded [sic] now. That’s probably the one thing I will tell my kids, is that I don’t care what they do when they go to college, they can go there for whatever they want, I just want them to learn to live with everybody who’s out there, to appreciate everybody who’s out there, and to really listen to people, no matter [if] what they think they’re saying is crazy, or not, you don’t have to...agree with it, but just appreciate it.

With regard to “Learning from Persons” in particular, the way that the capstone was grounded in encounter across difference provided the foundation for students’ significant learning in the course. Without exception, interviewees talked about the nature of the “live encounter” (Palmer 1998, 37) and the way it called forth a kind of reciprocity that they were often startled to experience. Indeed, many students spoke to a central paradox in their roles as student-counselors with persons with significant disabilities: that, at the start of the experience, they had had to set themselves and their fears aside simply to do the work of caring for another who was clearly in need of such care, and, in the end, they realized that they had likely gained more from the experience than those they had ostensibly been serving. Respondents spoke to that tension throughout the interviews when they reflected that they had to push through their concerns in order to be effective and fully in service to their campers—to recognize that this experience was “not all about me,” as many of them stated explicitly—and that doing so allowed them to realize how they were ultimately changed by the experience and that, in fact (and ironically so), it was all about them.

One particularly powerful example of this kind of recognition, this “ah-ha” moment born of that paradox, was expressed by this participant:

I [counseled] a thirty-year-old autistic woman who was completely dependent on me [for personal care]...and it was extremely humbling. Had to do everything....When I first started, [I] couldn’t believe I was having to do this with my time....Well, by the end of the week, I actually, for the first time since I was probably five years old, wet the bed at camp, because of all the trauma and stress that had happened to me for the four days before that happened. It was like I was so humbled that I got taken back to where they were, and I actually told my thirty-year-old camper what had happened, and

she gave me the biggest hug and said, “It’s okay, I wet the bed too.”...I was so mortified that it happened to me, I didn’t know who to tell, or what to do. But she just totally embraced me and said, “It’s okay.”...That’s why I say it was the most amazing experience of my life. It just totally took me, 360 [sic] to an adult. It was just amazing, overnight....I was so scared when it happened, but looking back, thank God that happened to me....I have to say that was probably the ultimate moment, the one thing that I got out of my entire college career that I will never forget....I would have paid a hundred thousand dollars just to have that experience happen to me, because it has meant so much on how I parent, on how I deal with my husband and my marriage, on how I deal with individuals at the church, at the clothes drive, my neighbors....Sometimes everybody needs to be taken care of. No matter how capable they are. No matter how stubborn, how strong-willed. Sometimes everybody needs to be told that it’s okay, no matter what....Even if it’s [an] embarrassing thing, or the most awful thing...they just need to be told it’s okay...and sometimes that’s all it takes.

*Interaction with faculty.* In recounting their most significant learning experiences, graduates also referred explicitly and often to the power of the modeling provided by their instructors and the value of the high degree of interaction with faculty in those significant learning experiences. One graduate now employed as a social worker indicated that one of the most significant learning experiences happened for her in a class in which she “was [regarded as] a person to the teacher, instead of just another student in the class.” Another graduate talked about the importance of his business classes that were taught by instructors with expertise developed through experience in the workforce and the seasoned business leaders they welcomed into the course as guest speakers, and how he draws on the lessons he learned from those instructors and speakers to this day.

Throughout the interviews, when describing the significance of their growth connected to “Learning from Persons,” students recognized and identified the camper-participants with whom they worked as the direct sources of their learning—and, in effect, their teachers. One graduate talked about learning a fundamental lesson about communication from the nonverbal young woman that she had counseled. Toward the end of the week, her cabin group was practicing a skit for the final campfire, and the young woman’s reaction surprised her:

[She became] really, really, really resistant....I was getting really frustrated, because I thought...what is the deal?....why wouldn’t [she] get involved?.... She had a word book with picture-y things, and she showed me the picture of “sad,” and it finally clicked to me that the reason she was so resistant was because she had been to camp before and realized that when you started practicing for these little skits, that meant the end of the week was coming.

This graduate said that she had learned not to make an assumption about what a person is trying to communicate, but to draw closer to the person and their communication

style so as to be open to what is being shared—and she learned that lesson directly from her relationship with her camper-participant. She went on to explain how she regularly applies this lesson in the present: “Give people credit, back up from the situation, and don’t assume the absolute worse...making sure you’ve understood what they’ve communicated.”

*Interaction with peers.* Graduates recognized and included their interactions with their undergraduate colleagues as being significant sources of their learning. A number of interviewees reported that working cross-functionally within student teams throughout their time at PSU and learning the skills and capacities for functional group interactions were essential parts of their memorable learning experiences. One graduate, an accountant, noted that “learning to get along with and work with people you don’t want to” was a key feature of her learning from her peers.

Another graduate, a business student, described the value of working closely with peers in this way:

Learning to work with others in team-based projects...was really challenging for me, and I learned a lot about personal boundaries and other people’s boundaries, and it has helped me in the workplace immensely, although I hated it at the time....I have found that there’s typically always a way, because there’s a middle ground you can meet [on], and I really learned that patience from my college experience, because, you know, you had to get those grades in college, and you really learned how to encourage people versus make people mad. And try and bring out the positive and not necessarily point out the negative....These experiences...really did help me to get through those real-life situations.

Another graduate who had majored in business described two important outcomes of engaging in teams in college: gaining skills in working cross-functionally with different sorts of people and learning how to take individual responsibility for her contribution within a team. This graduate spoke about how she learned to deal with difficulties that arise, personally or professionally, when working with others, and the importance of “being honest, not only with myself, but with the whole group if it’s something I can’t handle or something I need help with.” This interviewee then shared, “I don’t think about [this on] a day-to-day basis, but now that we’re talking about it, it really is kind of a big part of what I do,” suggesting that this learning has been so well integrated as to have become invisibly operational in her professional working style.

## **Experiential Learning**

Interviewees repeatedly mentioned the importance of experiential engagement as cornerstones of their most significant learning opportunities. In fact, under initial questioning about their most significant learning experiences, 55 percent of interviewees explicitly named “hands-on” learning as a critical aspect of these most memorable sources of learning. Internships, practica, field-based science activities, and

study abroad experiences were all cited here, with one graduate, for example, noting that her internship in a business setting helped her determine what work she both wanted to pursue and, equally importantly, didn't want to pursue in the future, while also allowing her to strengthen her resume and build references for later job-seeking.

Graduates repeatedly described post-graduation outcomes resulting from experiential learning in college. For example, one said that his internship "gave me a lot of skills that I actually apply to what I do today." Another graduate recalled that as a sophomore he was the lead electrician in a theater production, supervising twenty other students. He reported that "the leadership aspect [of this role] was really important, [because] I'm actually in a supervisor position now, and it really helped me with my organization and scheduling."

A former biology major, who is now a teacher, described the importance of courses which involved outdoor trips, including one to the Oregon coast to look at fossils and giant rock beds, to the development of his pedagogical approaches today:

It's...one thing to be in a classroom and talking about it and reading about it, but actually getting out and seeing it...made all the difference....Physically getting your hands dirty....I mean it was so cool....PSU had a big influence on the things I studied and who I am now....I'm actually now a teacher, and I love to take my students out as much as I can get them out....I like to take 'em out and get 'em dirty.

Other interviewees also explicitly identified that certain experiential learning opportunities had been significant because of the connection to their professional pursuits. A graduate in speech and hearing sciences spoke to the value her discipline-specific courses had for her but stressed the importance of her experiential learning through the capstone, saying the following:

I think...actually getting to be out there in the trenches doing something rather than reading a book or studying for a test, just actually getting out there and doing stuff...really makes a big difference. [It was] a real-life experience that I was then able to apply when I started looking for work, that I had actually done something in that field, because then when I started applying for jobs as an assistant I had some experience.

A graduate serving as an officer in the military also named his capstone as a most significant experience because being a student-counselor at camp required him to demonstrate and expand his leadership skills: "Leadership was...quite a growth for me. It helped me because eventually I became an officer and a lot was expected [of me]."

In fact, of all of the types of experiential learning that students had encountered, the most frequently mentioned type identified by students as most significant was community-based learning. One business school graduate currently working in the high tech industry described community-based learning as central to two of his most

significant learning experiences in college. Through a sophomore-level general education inquiry class, this student volunteered at a local food bank, which, he said, opened his eyes to the personal benefits of volunteering. The student noted that, before this class, he “had given blood, and...[done] civic duty kinds of activities, voting and stuff, but this was the first time I actually got out and volunteered....Arguably it was forced upon me...[but] it actually exposed me to things I wouldn’t have been exposed to on my own.”

The power in the community-based component in this graduate’s inquiry class led directly to his choosing the “Learning from Persons” capstone. The latter learning experience, he said, “opens your eyes to different opportunities, different exposures, different ways of thinking, where a regular classroom environment wouldn’t have done so....I wouldn’t have tried to spend that time had it not been part of the curriculum.” Now, in his corporate position, he serves on his company’s team-building committee and regularly schedules group service outings for his colleagues to engage in collaboratively. “You are bagging potatoes elbows to elbows,” he reported. “It worked when I was a sophomore, it’ll work now that I’m in the professional field.... It’s really lived in me to become the person I am today.”

In fact, in response to questioning about the “Learning from Persons” capstone specifically, 90 percent of interviewees identified the experiential nature of the course as one reason for its significance. A particular way that interviewees talked about the significance of “Learning from Persons” was in relation to the “24/7” nature of the experience; the fact that they had entered an immersion that essentially forced them to push through their resistances in order to meet their responsibilities. A clear majority of the respondents identified that they had chosen the course because it had seemed like a fun and easy way to meet their general education requirement in a relatively short two weeks and then discovered, upon meeting their campers, the forces of resistance within themselves to being fully present and participatory. If they were to stay, however, they had to figure out how to move beyond their resistances to be useful to another, and the stories of their journeys described, over and over, this trajectory. Despite their making an informed choice to join “Learning from Persons” and the extensive preparation they had received prior to their camp experience, graduates recalled feeling fearful and uncomfortable when faced with the reality of providing care for their camper-participant. If they were to remain in the course, they had no choice but to engage, given the immersive nature of the experience—but they realized that they *did* have a choice about *how* they would engage. And they recognized, upon reflection, that this choice deeply impacted what they took with them from the experience.

One graduate talked about the arc of his experience in this way:

So the first day, and it’s amazing, right?....All of us senior capstone students were all in the lodge, we’re all being briefed, we’re all being kind of trained with our faculty advisors on how to handle the processes there, and the parents pull up and drop off their children. I got Tad, and he was...a little more of a

challenge, a little more disabled than a lot of the other kids there....He couldn't speak...[and] he couldn't walk, so it was a challenge in the beginning. And I thought, 'Oh, my gosh, I can't do this.' And so the first two days, I have to admit...I was going, 'I'm out of here.' This is too hard, you know. My guy can't tell me when he's hungry, he can't tell me when he needs to be changed....He can't even go swimming, right, and...it's just...really hard. But the third day through, no lie, the third day...after lunch, he had difficulty, so I had to kind of feed [him]...and all of a sudden Tad reached out and grabbed my hand. And I was like, he's in there! Totally in there! He's telling me he wants more...and then he started interacting with me, and...I was so, honestly, ignorant and naive, right, it was subtleties in his face, because he couldn't talk, but then the third day I started to understand him, and I started to connect with him, and...I was like, 'You know what, I like this guy!' You know, he knows I'm there, he knows I've got his back.

## Implications

In responding to questions asking them to identify their three most significant learning experiences in college and then probing for the details surrounding that significance, graduates overwhelmingly named relationality (in the form of relationship with others across difference, relationship with faculty and persons serving as teachers, and relationship with peers) and experiential learning as foundational to those experiences. While the preceding sections have discussed these elements separately, there was much overlap in the responses among these factors. Interviewees, for example, spoke of the learning they had gained in numerous and subtle ways through working with camper-participants, who, as co-participants in an immersive experiential setting, had actively taught them and who offered a living source of engagement across difference.

Given the high degree of response indicating the importance of relationality (92 percent of interviewees) and experiential environments (90 percent of interviewees) to most significant learnings, we argue that experiential opportunities within courses—from experiential activities and exercises embedded within more “traditional” courses to the full-on immersive environment of a residential service-learning course like “Learning from Persons”—provide a key to unlocking significant learning for students. Indeed, while a clear majority of interviewees named the capstone as one of their most significant learning experiences, many of them also named plenty of other experiential approaches, too, from place-based activities that took them out of the classroom for relatively brief periods of time to internships, practica, and other community-based learning opportunities.

It is perhaps more likely, as well, that course elements experienced as relational ones will be embedded in or will emerge from experiential learning settings. A team of business students developing a marketing plan for a real community partner, for example, will necessarily engage in multiple forms of relational learning. So will science students exiting the classroom for a place-based study of a local geological feature. Further, interviewees spoke to the power of even a relatively common

classroom-based occurrence—the presence of a guest speaker—as contributing to the significance of their learning, as the speaker offered something within the course that was seen and experienced by students as relationally-based and particularly memorable.

While clearly not all courses, and not even all community-based courses, can or should be structured like “Learning from Persons,” the data from this study suggest that it is not only such profoundly immersive courses that contribute to students’ experiences of significance, but also it is both large *and* small relational elements, and both fully enveloping *and* small-in-scope experiential opportunities, that persist as significant for graduates over time. Certainly most, if not all, instructors, course designers, and program administrators, including those that operate in online contexts, might consider how to further embed relational and experiential elements in their courses and programs, as these elements pay dividends for graduates long after they leave the institution.

## **Conclusion**

On thirty beautiful acres in the Mt. Hood National Forest, fifty staff, fifty-five university students, and fifty-five to sixty camper-participants come together every week and create a positive, accepting, fully inclusive community. While camp directors, staff, and faculty put a lot of work into creating the right structure and support so this can happen, there is camp director and staff turnover, a new cohort of university students every time, and a mix of new and returning camper-participants. Yet even though the players might be new, the same positive community recreates itself year after year.

Faculty, staff, and students come to camp thinking we are going to be the ones that are in service, the ones that will be doing the giving. But when the camper-participants arrive, the real faculty have shown up, and they teach us how openly and without judgment to welcome a new relationship, accept another person fully and without condition, have fun in any situation, and co-exist just exactly as we all are.

This community that is continually making and re-making itself does not have to be sustained beyond a week, and thus does not have to grapple with the tensions and inequities ongoing communities face in the “real world.” Why, then, would students report, both in their reflection papers and course evaluations and in the interviews conducted for this study, that “Kiwaniis Camp was *real*”? When students comment that camp was one of the first “real” communities they ever experienced, one in which everyone, including each of them, felt welcome to be who they are, and when graduates report that this experience, out of so many others, was among their most significant ones in college, we know that we are in the presence of the transformative possibility of education.

Not every learning setting can be as fully immersive and experiential as the one established by the “Learning through Persons” capstone. Yet the insights shared by graduates about their most significant learning experiences offer practitioners guides for the sorts of learning approaches and strategies that will resonate long after the end

of college. Graduates repeatedly told us that it was the learning experiences marked by relationality, involving meaningful interaction across difference, and offering opportunities for hands-on work that have continued to echo for them and inform their perspectives and actions to this day.

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