

May 12, 2023

American Association of Colleges of Nursing
655 K Street, NW, Suite 750
Washington, DC 20001

Dear AACN Member Committee:

Experiential learning provides valuable opportunities for students to apply knowledge and skills to solve real-world challenges and industry issues. Oftentimes, experiential learning opportunities in higher education settings are offered through formalized internships, study abroad programs, or simulation-based learning experiences (Gavillet, 2018). While these types of learning opportunities have proven beneficial, numerous barriers hinder students from accessing them fully. Financial constraints, program design limitations, scalability issues, capacity controls, and logistical challenges pose significant obstacles to students (Hora et al., 2021). A 2021 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) brief revealed that 42% of students cannot accept in-person internship opportunities outside their commutable area. This limited accessibility makes existing internship opportunities competitive and inaccessible for many students. Despite these barriers, the demand for experiential learning remains high among students, as it offers advantages such as resume building, networking opportunities, and skill development for enhanced work readiness (Ezarik, 2022).

In response to this need, Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) has developed HEaRT Solutions Lab (HSL) as part of the Higher Education and Real-World Training (HEaRT) online experiential learning model. This innovative strategy aims to connect undergraduate students in nursing and health professions with industry employers. HSL is a free experiential learning opportunity available to any program-eligible student. HSL brings together students in small interdisciplinary teams, enabling them to collaboratively tackle healthcare industry dilemmas. Through interactive lab work, students apply the knowledge they gained from their coursework in nursing or health professions to develop solutions for healthcare challenges. Within the lab, students engage in a range of activities that cultivate essential skills related to creativity, technology utilization, team dynamics, project management, goal setting, and professional communication.

Execution & Sustainability

A pilot of the HEaRT Solutions Lab model began in the Spring of 2021 with an enrollment of 66 learners. The pilot included students from Nursing, Public Health, Healthcare Administration, Health Information Management, and Public Health and Health Sciences programs. HSL has since expanded to include learners from Human Service programs which further fosters the rich interdisciplinary problem-solving that occurs during the HSL project work. HSL is offered four times per year to align with undergraduate student terms. The students work together on their lab project, assisting one another to achieve problem resolution. The HSL learning environment promotes teamwork and directed problem-solving to achieve optimal deliverable outcomes. The project work is organized in four-week blocks, providing focused and manageable learning periods, aligning seamlessly with other aspects of the student's academic commitments. The

faculty model for lab facilitation employs a 1:100 faculty-student ratio. This ratio is supported by relatively autonomous student teamwork and allows the faculty facilitator to serve as a guide and support rather than direct supervisor, empowering students to take ownership of their project work.

To date, HSL has now served 304 student learners and 80 project teams. Additionally, it has expanded to include 10 employer partners and has hosted 26 unique project labs. The program's growth is underscored by its expansion, now encompassing employer partners from regional, national, and international industries. This collaboration with esteemed employers not only provides invaluable real-world insights but also enhances the program's sustainability by establishing lasting relationships within the healthcare industry. The student experience within HSL has consistently garnered positive evaluations, with average student satisfaction and willingness to recommend rating exceeding 8 on a scale of 0-10. Additionally, HSL has a team completion rate of almost 60%. This is a significant percentage considering the experience is optional, and the learners participate in HSL, along with their traditional coursework. The remarkable student response, coupled with strong interest from employer partners, and the program's ease of replication, has driven plans for further expansion. HSL will soon be operational across all six undergraduate terms, ensuring more students can benefit from this immersive experiential learning model.

Catalyst for change

The HSL model aligns with the educational mission of Southern New Hampshire University to transform the lives of learners by offering the best support in higher education. The model helps connect students and industry employers, creating educational partnerships that offer creative project work that benefits both students and employers. Additionally, the model provides an innovative and affordable pathway for students to help achieve their educational and professional goals. The HSL model is an optional no-cost experiential learning opportunity, open to all program-eligible learners, with the choice of obtaining credit through a Learning Experience Assessment (LEA) process. The model includes the ability to acquire a series of digital badges and a pathway for the LEA process. The LEA process awards 3-course credits based on competency achievement and results in cost savings of \$1800 per student.

Replication and Dissemination

The HSL model can be modified to include other program students from various disciplines and any employer partners who desire to connect with students to explore industry-driven project work. The model is especially valuable for programs where experiential opportunities are sparse, difficult to access, or underutilized. Since its inception, it has been expanded to support Health Information Management students in completing program-specific internship requirements. It has also been included as a structured component of the RN-BSN curriculum redesign of the service-learning course. HSL's existing project labs have explored a variety of topics and contextual issues facing healthcare employers today. Current labs have provided the opportunity for interdisciplinary healthcare program student collaboration to address problems such as strategies to mitigate social isolation among the elderly in long-term care settings, development

of social media tools to facilitate access to mental health resources, educational campaigns to promote hygiene in healthcare facilities, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policy development, etc. The interdisciplinary collaboration by healthcare students has resulted in comprehensive deliverables presented to healthcare employers who find great value in the students' work. One employer partner recently provided feedback on the program stating,

“We love that SNHU offers their students an opportunity to work on real-world problems through the HEaRT program. The input from the students gives us a fresh perspective that we can incorporate into the implementation of our projects.”

The success of the HSL model demonstrates the potential for replication and dissemination in other nursing and healthcare programs. The model has been presented nationally and internationally to provide evidence of its applicability to meet health education needs. Institutions can adapt the model to meet their specific needs and goals, providing students with valuable experiential learning opportunities that promote collaborative problem-solving and innovation.

Faculty Teams

HSL involves the collaboration of faculty teams to support and facilitate employer and student connections in the experiential environment. The HEaRT team consists of representatives from nursing, health professions programs, and career services. This collaborative interdisciplinary team provides strong leadership to the HEaRT program offerings creating opportunities to foster student knowledge application and team building. Faculty representatives meet with employers when considering the employer project labs, identifying various facets of the healthcare challenge that would benefit from a collaborative student approach. The diverse faculty program representation leads to the creation of a rich experiential learning environment and an improved understanding of the perspectives, strengths, and limitations that may be reflected across disciplines. Additionally, career service representatives foster student-employer networking connections and provide resume support and guidance to learners.

Advancement of professional nursing education

HSL provides a valuable opportunity to advance professional nursing education to encourage students to engage in interdisciplinary problem-solving while applying their academic knowledge to address complex issues facing the healthcare profession. Students within HSL are challenged to apply research skills, engage in professional communication, demonstrate scholarly writing, synthesize information, and use technology while creating innovative and collaborative solutions. One recent HSL student remarked at the end of the lab experience:

“It is an awesome lifetime professional experience that is needed for all students.”

Creating learning environments that cultivate a systematic approach, mirroring the complexities of today's healthcare landscape while also fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and problem-solving, is of the utmost importance in advancing today's healthcare system.



Respectfully,

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References

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