

Project Impact Summary  
Experience | Success Initiative  
Athens State University

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The Experience | Success initiative represents Athens State University's institutional effort to strengthen student learning, engagement, and career readiness through the intentional integration of experiential learning across academic programs and co-curricular activities. Over multiple years of implementation, the initiative expanded access to experiential opportunities, strengthened assessment practices, and contributed to a culture in which applied learning is recognized as a central component of the Athens State educational experience.

This report summarizes the outcomes of the Experience | Success initiative and demonstrates the initiative's impact on student learning, instructional practices, and institutional development. Evidence presented here draws from multiple sources including student experiential learning surveys, faculty direct assessment rubrics, Experiential Learning Scholar Recognition applications, and faculty lived-experience reflections. Together, these sources provide a comprehensive and triangulated perspective on the initiative's effectiveness.

### **I. Initial Goals and Intended Outcomes**

The Experience | Success initiative was developed to strengthen applied learning and increase student engagement with authentic professional and community contexts. At Athens State University, experiential learning is defined as a process through which students develop knowledge, skills, and values by applying academic theory and disciplinary content to real-world experiences. To support institution-wide implementation, experiential learning activities were organized into five primary categories: hands-on learning, workplace learning, community-based learning, learning through research, and learning through expeditions. These categories provide a shared institutional language while allowing faculty the flexibility to design experiential activities appropriate to their disciplines and course objectives.

To guide implementation and evaluation, the Experience | Success initiative established five core outcomes. The first outcome focused on developing institutional infrastructure capable of supporting experiential learning opportunities and coordinating assessment processes. Initial infrastructure included the Office of Experiential Learning and Special Projects, which reported to the Provost and was supported by a Coordinator for Experiential Learning working alongside the QEP Director. Although the departure of the coordinator led to the eventual loss of a dedicated office space, the work of supporting faculty, coordinating assessment, and advancing experiential learning continued through the QEP director and key faculty along with leadership across the institution.

The second outcome sought to ensure that at least 90% of bachelor's degree programs provide students with access to experiential learning opportunities. While this benchmark focused primarily on undergraduate programs, experiential learning opportunities have extended beyond the undergraduate curriculum to include graduate coursework and extracurricular activities. Within the College of Education, all students pursuing certification complete field experiences and internships, which represent structured workplace learning opportunities. In the College of Business, experiential

learning is embedded in required coursework such as Project Management, where students participate in simulation-based activities designed to replicate workplace environments. Within the College of Arts and Sciences, experiential learning opportunities are offered across a wide range of programs, from English to Music Industry Studies, through courses that incorporate hands-on projects, research activities, or community engagement experiences. Although these programs do not rely on a single required course to fulfill experiential learning requirements, students are provided opportunities to participate in experiential activities within the curriculum.

The third outcome emphasized aligning experiential learning activities with course learning objectives and disciplinary outcomes. Rather than imposing a single standardized model, faculty and experiential learning facilitators were encouraged to design activities that reflect the eight principles of experiential education best practice. This approach allows faculty to tailor experiential learning activities to disciplinary expectations while ensuring that assignments remain intentionally connected to course objectives and student learning outcomes. Ongoing institutional discussions have also explored how experiential learning may align with or become integrated into institutional learning goals, which would further strengthen alignment between experiential activities and broader academic outcomes.

The fourth outcome focused on demonstrating student competency development through direct assessment. Faculty assess experiential learning activities using common rubrics built around seven competencies, including problem solving, communication, collaboration, professionalism, career understanding, reflection, and professional development. In addition to direct assessment through rubrics, the initiative incorporated several indirect assessment measures, including student experiential learning surveys and open-ended reflection prompts. These measures provide valuable insight into how students perceive their learning experiences and allow the institution to identify trends in skill development, engagement, and career preparation.

The fifth outcome centered on strengthening student engagement, identity development, and lifelong learning. Reflection plays a critical role in achieving this outcome by helping students analyze their experiences and connect them to personal and professional growth. Faculty frequently incorporate reflective assignments into experiential activities, and students seeking Experiential Learning Scholar recognition are required to submit reflective narratives describing the impact of their experiences. Through this reflective process, students develop the ability to evaluate their own performance, identify areas for growth, and adapt their approaches based on new learning. These practices support the development of lifelong learners who can continually learn from experience and apply their knowledge in evolving professional and personal contexts.

## **II. Implementation Adjustments and Institutional Learning**

Since 2021, the Experience | Success initiative has provided sustained leadership in the development, implementation, and assessment of experiential learning at Athens State University. This work has strengthened institutional understanding of experiential learning, expanded faculty capacity, enhanced assessment practices, and aligned experiential learning with institutional priorities and accreditation expectations. Through campus-wide collaboration and strategic resource management, experiential learning has been established as a shared institutional practice across academic and co-curricular contexts.

Faculty engagement and professional development have been central to implementation. The initiative supported the creation of the Athens State Faculty Fellowship Program in experiential learning, the “Share and Plan” Experiential Learning Series, and participation in national and regional professional development opportunities such as the Experiential Learning Leadership Institute, the Society for Experiential Education Annual Conference, and the Experiential Education Academy. These efforts expanded institutional expertise in experiential pedagogy while increasing faculty participation in experiential learning initiatives.

Assessment and continuous improvement have also been key priorities. Systems were developed to track faculty participation in experiential activities and administer an institutional experiential learning student survey across courses and co-curricular experiences, enabling longitudinal analysis of student outcomes. Assessment practices evolved over time through improved survey instruments, refined rubric language, and more systematic data analysis.

The initiative also introduced the Experiential Learning Scholar Recognition program, through which students submit reflective narratives describing the impact of experiential learning on their academic and professional development. These submissions both recognize student achievement and provide qualitative evidence of learning outcomes. Additional structures supporting innovation include the Experiential Learning Task Force and internal grants launched in Fall 2024 to support faculty-led experiential learning activities.

Experiential learning opportunities expanded through both curricular and co-curricular activities, including global expedition experiences in partnership with the Bahamas Agriculture and Marine Science Institute and faculty-led field experiences in the Smoky Mountains and Dauphin Island Sea Lab. The initiative also strengthened institutional visibility through recruitment events, marketing efforts, digital badges, and experiential learning recognition at graduation. Leadership participation in national experiential education networks and professional organizations further increased Athens State’s visibility in the field. Together, these efforts have embedded experiential learning as a sustained component of the Athens State educational experience and strengthened the institution’s capacity to support high-impact learning opportunities for students.

### **III. Impact on Student Learning and Student Success**

The impact of the Experience | Success initiative is demonstrated through multiple forms of evidence collected over several academic years. These sources include student survey responses, faculty direct assessment results, narrative evidence from student reflections, and faculty lived-experience accounts describing how experiential learning influenced classroom practice.

Together, these data provide a triangulated view of experiential learning outcomes. Student surveys illustrate how students perceive learning gains, faculty rubrics document observed performance across competencies, and narrative evidence provides deeper insight into the meaning students and faculty attribute to experiential learning experiences.

#### **A. Student Survey Evidence**

Student experiential learning surveys collected between Fall 2021 and Fall 2025 provide substantial indirect evidence of student learning and engagement across

experiential learning modalities. Across thirteen academic terms, the dataset includes 2,371 student responses representing multiple colleges, disciplines, and experiential learning formats. The survey was designed to align with institutional experiential learning outcomes and includes measures of integrative learning, pre- and post-self-assessments of skill development, and open-ended reflection prompts. Collectively, the data provide a longitudinal view of student perceptions of learning, growth, and engagement.

Overall performance against the initiative’s indirect outcome targets is strong. Integrative learning indicators derived from AAC&U VALUE rubric constructs consistently exceed the institutional benchmark of 80% of students reporting High Milestone/Capstone levels of achievement. Across the dataset, connection to experience shows a mean score of 3.50 with 85.2% of responses at Levels 3 or 4; connection to discipline is the highest-performing indicator with a mean of 3.59 and 89.7% at Levels 3 or 4; transfer of learning shows a mean of 3.45 with 86.7% meeting benchmark expectations; and reflection/self-assessment, while slightly lower, still exceeds the benchmark with a mean of 3.37 and 81.6% of responses at Levels 3 or 4. These results demonstrate that students consistently connect experiential learning activities to course content and disciplinary frameworks, while also identifying reflection as an area for continued instructional emphasis.

Participation patterns, as seen in Figure 1, reveal both strengths and opportunities within the experiential learning ecosystem. Hands-on learning represents the largest share of responses, reflecting the institution’s emphasis on applied instructional activities such as labs, simulations, and project-based assignments. Combination experiences that integrate multiple experiential components form the second-largest category, suggesting increasing sophistication in course design. Research-based and workplace learning experiences occur less frequently but often demonstrate slightly stronger integrative learning outcomes on average. Expeditions and community-based learning appear least frequently, indicating potential growth areas for expanding experiential opportunities.

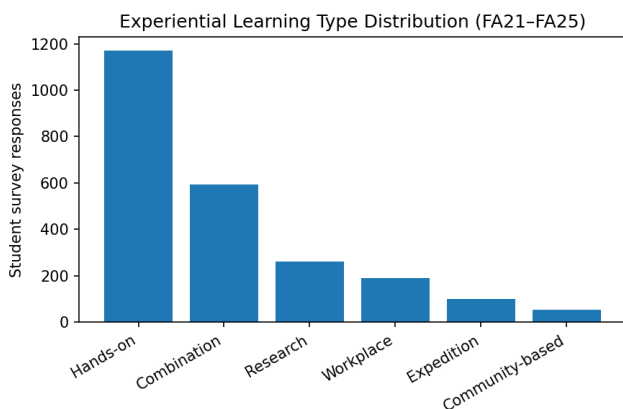


Figure 1 summarizes the distribution of experiential learning types selected by students.

Pre- and post-self-assessment results provide strong evidence of student growth associated with experiential learning participation. Across all competencies measured on a five-point scale, students report positive gains ranging from approximately +0.61 to +0.97.

The largest increases occur in the ability to apply theory to practice (+0.97) and generate original ideas (+0.96), indicating that experiential learning effectively supports the translation of academic knowledge into authentic contexts. Significant gains are also evident in career readiness outcomes such as advancing within a career (+0.82), obtaining a position in a career field (+0.81), and performing effectively in professional environments (+0.74). Additional improvements in problem solving, time management, independent learning, leadership, ethical understanding, and appreciation of diverse perspectives suggest that experiential learning contributes to broad student development beyond disciplinary learning alone.

Qualitative responses reinforce these findings. Analysis of 882 open-ended comments shows that students most frequently associate experiential learning with skill development (61.6% of comments), real-world or career relevance (33.9%), and application of academic knowledge (29.4%). These themes confirm the quantitative evidence that experiential learning strengthens practical competencies and professional readiness. Mentions of collaboration, confidence, and perspective-taking appear less frequently but remain meaningful indicators of broader developmental outcomes.

Taken together, the survey findings demonstrate that experiential learning is producing measurable improvements in student learning, engagement, and readiness for professional practice. Students consistently report strong connections between experiential activities and academic learning, meaningful gains in applied knowledge and creativity, and increased confidence navigating professional contexts. At the same time, the data highlight opportunities for continued refinement, particularly in strengthening reflective practice and expanding access to underrepresented experiential learning formats such as research, community engagement, and expedition-based experiences.

## **B. Faculty Direct Assessment Evidence**

Faculty direct assessment complements student self-reported and narrative evidence by documenting observed student performance using common experiential learning rubrics. Between 2021 and 2025, faculty submitted 46 rubric datasets assessing student performance across seven competencies: problem solving and inquiry, communication, collaboration, professionalism, career understandings, reflection, and professional development. Faculty reported student counts across four performance levels and marked outcomes as not applicable when the competency was not relevant to the assignment design. This approach allows evaluation of both student achievement and broader implementation patterns across courses and disciplines.

Across rubric submissions, student performance consistently clusters within the “At Standard” and “Exceeds Standard” categories, while unacceptable ratings are rare. Strong results appear in competencies associated with applied learning and professional practice, particularly communication, collaboration, and professionalism. Reflection outcomes are strongest in courses that include structured reflective assignments supported by prompts or rubric guidance, highlighting the importance of intentional design and scaffolding in experiential learning activities.

Faculty scoring patterns also provide insight into implementation practices. The not applicable designation appears most frequently in competencies dependent on assignment structure, particularly collaboration and professional development. Individually completed activities often assess competencies such as problem solving or communication while

collaboration is marked not applicable. When group work is intentionally embedded, collaboration is assessed and students overwhelmingly perform at or above standard. Similarly, professionalism and career understandings are most often evaluated in activities that mirror workplace contexts, including practicums, capstone projects, career seminars, mock interviews, portfolios, and client-facing assignments.

Competency-level analysis further illustrates performance patterns. Problem solving and inquiry demonstrate strong attainment, with 84.9% of 1,004 ratings at Levels 3 or 4. Reflection shows a similar pattern, with 84.9% of 496 ratings at levels three or four when reflective elements are incorporated into assignment design. Communication shows particularly strong outcomes, with 91.4% of 467 ratings at levels three or four. Professionalism also demonstrates strong results, with 87.9% of 239 ratings meeting or exceeding expectations. Career understandings shows greater variability, with 60.4% of 439 ratings at levels three or four, indicating an opportunity for improvement. Professional development, though assessed less frequently, shows strong performance with 83.6% of ratings at levels three or four. Collaboration, assessed in fewer contexts, demonstrates the highest concentration of high-level performance, with 97% of students rated at levels three or four when collaborative work is incorporated.

Longitudinal analysis provides additional context. Average rubric scores range from 2.97 in Fall 2023 to 3.71 in Spring 2025, suggesting increasing alignment between experiential learning implementation and assessment practices over time. Improved performance in later terms may also reflect faculty participation in experiential professional development opportunities. Disciplinary analysis shows variation across subject areas; Biology demonstrates the highest average score (3.90), while the Adult Degree Program shows a lower average (2.86), indicating areas for further review of assignment design or assessment practices.

Overall, faculty direct assessment results indicate strong attainment of experiential learning competencies across the institution. Most students perform at or above expected standards when outcomes are intentionally assessed and aligned with assignment design. At the same time, variation in assessment coverage across competencies and disciplines highlights opportunities to strengthen career understanding outcomes, expand assessment of underrepresented competencies, and promote cross-disciplinary sharing of effective experiential learning practices.

### **C. Student Narrative Evidence**

Experiential Learning Scholar Recognition submissions provide qualitative evidence of the impact of the Experience | Success initiative. The program was developed in alignment with experiential education best practices by recognizing student achievement through reflective practice. Students gain access to the application after completing the experiential learning survey, and submissions are reviewed by a faculty task force to determine whether students demonstrate reflective evidence of learning, impact, and personal growth. Students whose applications meet these criteria receive experiential learning cords to wear at graduation.

This analysis includes 159 student submissions collected between September 15, 2023, and December 5, 2025, representing a wide range of experiential learning activities across academic and co-curricular contexts. All personally identifiable information was

removed in accordance with FERPA requirements, and results are reported only in aggregate.

Across submissions, students frequently describe experiential learning as transformative because it allows them to apply classroom knowledge in authentic contexts. Narratives consistently highlight the development of transferable skills, increased professional confidence, and clearer understanding of career expectations. Students often describe experiential learning as a bridge between academic coursework and professional practice, emphasizing gains in communication, teamwork, problem solving, planning, and readiness for professional environments. These themes align closely with the initiative's intended outcomes and reinforce findings from survey and rubric-based assessments.

Submissions are concentrated in the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Business, which together account for more than two-thirds of the dataset, while the College of Education contributes narratives focused on tutoring, practicum, and field-based teaching experiences. Submissions from Adult Degree Program students and the Bonner Leader Program are reported separately to reflect their distinct experiential structures. Activity types include simulations, capstone or client-based projects, tutoring or clinical experiences, community engagement activities, research projects, career readiness initiatives, portfolio-based learning, and professional communication assignments.

Submission patterns tend to cluster around academic cycles and recognition deadlines rather than occurring evenly throughout the year, suggesting that faculty encouragement and program awareness influence participation. Overall, the Scholar Recognition dataset provides a valuable student-authored perspective on experiential learning at Athens State University. These narratives reinforce quantitative assessment findings by highlighting applied learning, professional skill development, and career readiness while also offering insight into where experiential learning opportunities are most visible across the institution.

#### **IV. Faculty Lived Experiences**

While quantitative assessment measures provide important evidence of student learning outcomes, they do not fully capture the instructional decisions, professional judgment, and reflective practices that shape experiential learning in authentic classroom contexts. To complement student survey data and faculty rubric assessments, this report incorporates faculty lived-experience narratives collected through a reflective survey and supported by participation in an experiential learning fellows program. These perspectives provide important insight into how experiential learning is conceptualized, implemented, and refined across a range of instructional settings.

Faculty consistently described experiential learning not as a single teaching strategy but as an instructional philosophy focused on moving students beyond passive content consumption toward active engagement, application, and discovery. Many instructors reported incorporating experiential learning practices even before the formal launch of the Experience | Success initiative, though the initiative helped formalize and expand those practices by providing shared language, institutional visibility, and structural support. As a result, experiential learning became recognized not merely as an individual instructional choice but as a valued component of institutional teaching practice.

Across disciplines, faculty implemented experiential learning through a wide variety of approaches tailored to specific courses and student populations. These

approaches included research projects culminating in public presentations, tutoring and field-based teaching experiences, oral history and community-based projects, industry simulations, technology-enhanced communication exercises, virtual laboratory environments, and hands-on technical activities. Across these varied methods, faculty emphasized a common objective: creating authentic learning environments in which students interact with real-world processes, audiences, and expectations.

Faculty reported that experiential learning significantly reshaped classroom dynamics by encouraging dialogue, collaboration, experimentation, and reflection. Students frequently demonstrated increased engagement, confidence, and persistence as they worked through authentic problems and produced tangible outcomes such as presentations, research projects, or technical artifacts. At the same time, instructors acknowledged challenges associated with experiential learning, including increased planning demands, coordination with external partners, and the need for scaffolding to support students who may initially struggle with open-ended tasks. Faculty consistently emphasized that these challenges are part of the learning process and that, with appropriate guidance, students develop resilience, critical thinking, and a growth-oriented mindset.

Reflection emerged as a central component of experiential learning, helping students translate experience into meaningful learning. Faculty reported that reflective assignments, presentations, and narrative analyses allowed students to articulate what they learned and how their experiences shaped their professional development. Participation in the experiential learning fellows program further strengthened these practices by encouraging collaboration among faculty and supporting continuous improvement in experiential course design. Taken together, faculty narratives provide compelling qualitative evidence that experiential learning deepens student learning, strengthens professional competencies, and contributes to a culture of engagement, reflection, and continuous improvement across the institution.

## **V. Institutionalization and National Engagement**

Over time, experiential learning has become increasingly institutionalized within Athens State University. Experiential activities are now embedded across academic programs and supported through faculty engagement, student participation, and institutional assessment systems.

The initiative also contributed to national engagement with experiential education. Faculty and leadership associated with the Experience | Success initiative have participated in national experiential education networks, professional development programs, and conference presentations highlighting Athens State's approach to experiential learning.

These activities contributed to broader recognition of the institution's work in experiential learning while also providing opportunities for faculty development and collaboration with peer institutions.

## **VI. Institutional Reflection, Continuous Improvement, and Sustainability**

Athens State University's approach to continuous improvement in experiential learning is guided by evidence from multiple sources, including student pre-post surveys, faculty rubric assessments, Experiential Learning Scholar Recognition applications, and qualitative student narratives. Together, these data show strong outcomes in applied learning, skill development, and career readiness while also identifying areas for further

refinement. Analysis of these data highlights that experiential learning is most effective when activities are intentionally aligned with course objectives and supported by structured reflection. While students consistently demonstrate strong performance in competencies such as problem solving, communication, professionalism, and collaboration, reflection is less consistently embedded across courses. Courses that require structured reflective artifacts supported by clear prompts and rubric criteria demonstrate stronger integrative learning outcomes, suggesting the value of establishing shared expectations for reflective practice.

Additional opportunities for improvement involve strengthening program-level tracking of experiential learning and refining assessment practices. Although course-level evidence of learning gains is strong, clearer definitions and consistent documentation practices are needed to better measure how widely experiential learning is embedded across programs. Student and faculty feedback also emphasize the importance of clear expectations, meaningful feedback, and well-scaffolded assignments, particularly for complex experiential activities such as simulations and project-based work. Finally, improvements to survey design, such as separating pre- and post-assessments, may strengthen measurement accuracy. Moving forward, continued data-informed refinement, expanded program-level analysis, and sustainable infrastructure for coordination and assessment will support the long-term institutionalization of experiential learning at Athens State University.

## **Conclusion**

This report documents the design, implementation, and impact of the Experience | Success initiative using multiple sources of evidence, including student surveys, faculty direct assessment, qualitative narratives, and participation patterns across colleges and experiential learning formats. Together, these findings demonstrate that experiential learning is a meaningful and effective component of the Athens State University student experience, particularly in supporting applied learning, professional skill development, and career readiness. Across assessment methods, students consistently demonstrate gains in applying theory to practice, generating original ideas, solving problems, communicating professionally, and engaging in authentic or simulated professional environments. Faculty rubric data confirms these outcomes, while student narratives and faculty reflections highlight increased confidence, motivation, and the value of experiential environments that support experimentation, reflection, and authentic practice.

At the same time, the findings underscore that experiential learning is an evolving institutional practice that benefits from ongoing refinement. Continued attention to reflection and self-assessment, improved program-level tracking, and stronger alignment between learning objectives, experiential activities, and assessment practices will further strengthen outcomes. Building on the progress of the Experience | Success initiative, Athens State University is well positioned to institutionalize experiential learning as a defining element of its academic identity. Re-establishing an Experiential Learning and Special Projects Office, supported by coordinated leadership and college-level engagement, would provide sustainable infrastructure to support faculty participation, strengthen assessment practices, and ensure students continue to have opportunities to apply theory in authentic contexts and develop the skills necessary for lifelong learning and career success.

