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The Experience Lab: Student-run Media Platforms From Day One at Scale

Adam Wagler, *University of Nebraska – Lincoln;* Jill Martin, *University of Nebraska – Lincoln;* and Keri Mesropov, *TRG Arts, Colorado Springs, Colorado*

ABSTRACT

What does this experiential learning mean for journalism and mass communications programs as media evolves? This study assesses the first year of a new program, called The Experience Lab, where students in a college of journalism and mass communications begin working on real world challenges from day one. Student media is produced working with faculty, professional mentors, and student leads to build their academic skills while exploring professional interests in one of the college's media outlets. This study found participating students reflecting on the *structure and guidance, collaboration with experiences, skills of the profession*, and the *development of soft skills* during the year. The Experience Lab offers a comprehensive approach to experiential learning for JMC programs to consider how we prepare journalism and mass communications students to become leaders in the everchanging media industry.

Experiential learning is a growing trend in higher education requiring relevant skills and active learning (El-Azar, 2022). This is not a new concept of journalism and mass communications. For years, programs have offered hands-on experiences to students with close ties to the profession (Folkerts, 2014). What does this mean now with more disruption in the industry due to digital innovations, technology, misinformation, and evolving business models? The bottom line is that media is evolving. It is easy to shrug off by saying "We already do experiential learning." However, there is an opportunity to provide leadership in this area while building innovative experiences and curriculum for students. This study describes the student experience when incorporating a new experiential learning program, The Experience Lab, into a journalism and mass communications curriculum.

Job placement and career readiness have always been a goal for earning a college degree. The increase of automation across all industries demands new types of problem-solving skills. Furthermore, media professionals and producers must account for the digital gap widening as media platforms and technology evolve. The OECD (2016) found in the United States, only 5% of the population has "high computer skills." In many cases, those creating digital experiences and utilities are among the 5% who have these computer skills. As a result, higher education is putting more emphasis and energy on experiential learning across all majors. This goes beyond the skills and hands-on work with clients and real stories. Student learning and motivation are enhanced when challenging themselves to learn new things (Kitsanta et al., 2004; Shell et al., 2010; Sweller, 2006). This re-

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quires students to develop confidence and self-regulation to create professionalism and tackle challenges as they emerge. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory create paths to access rich work experiences, but the value lies not only in hands-on experiences but in the process of feeling, watching, thinking, and doing in a structured environment. The objective is to help students make connections between their majors and careers after graduation.

More research is needed as the lines between curriculum and co-curricular activities continue to blur, which compel educators to recognize all learning does not occur inside the confines of a classroom (Roberts, 2018). As a teaching approach, an active learning setting requires students to engage that is counter to many traditional approaches common in higher education. This becomes even more important coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The question educators and administrators must ask is what the value of in-person class time is and how to make the most out of the time meeting in the same place at the same time in a physical location.

Student media is not a new concept but is traditionally in addition to the curriculum or a capstone experience for upperclassmen. ACEJMC Accrediting Standards require that "instruction, whether on-site or online, is demanding and current, and is responsive to professional expectations of digital, technological and multimedia competencies" (ACEJMC, 2022, p. 46). As a result, many journalism and mass communications programs have students working on real-world projects including depth reports, news platforms, radio programming, TV production, and client work (Borgognoni & Wicks, 2021; Folkerts, 2014; Reed, 2018; Smith, Payne, Hettinga, & Norman, 2021).

This study assesses a new program where students in a college of journalism and mass communications begin working on real-world challenges from day one. How can working on these projects in collaboration with faculty, industry professionals, and peers help them develop a passion for a career in media? The structure allows students to have an internship-like experience from the beginning to help them explore and identify their interests in media. Also, having first-year students involved on campus helps to develop a sense of belonging. That sense of belonging may directly impact retention, GPA, and graduation rates (Murdock-Perriera, Boucher, Carter, & Murphy, 2019).

The purpose of this study is to explore and assess a new, innovative student media program called the Experience Lab that provides a unique approach to incorporating experiential learning into a journalism and mass communications curriculum. The Experience Lab gives students a chance to gain hands-on experience from their first semester. They work with faculty, professional mentors from industry, and student leads to build their academic skill set while exploring their professional interests in one of the college's media outlets. Although this project focuses on a program at a college journalism and mass communications, it may also help other programs and faculty develop new ideas for experiential learning on their campuses.

The Experience Lab

The Experience Lab gives students a chance to gain hands-on experience from the first semester they enroll in a college of 1,200 journalism and mass communications majors at a large university located in the Midwest. The college launched the program in the 2021-2022 academic year as part of its strategic plan. Two faculty co-directors were appointed to lead the program. Working with faculty liaisons, professional mentors from the media industry, and student leads students build their academic skill set while exploring their professional interests in one of the college's media outlets. Students earn one credit and work 4-6 hours per week. They are required to successfully complete three, one-credit courses in the Experience Lab.

Day-to-day projects vary depending on the program. Professionals-in-residences (PIRs) from partner organizations throughout the region have donated the time of their staff to support and mentor students in the program. These industry professionals provide mentorship and guidance to students. Student leaders also serve as mentors to first-year and second-year students and manage day-to-day operations for the media outlets. The program includes 12 student leads who are paid hourly to oversee the students and help connect students with industry professionals. An additional four faculty serve as liaisons to the program and work directly with the student leads to ensure a quality experience for students and the professionals.

The media outlets include:

1. An Agency for Nonprofits – Students work for real-world clients who are interested in advertising and public relations services. The agency provides services for non-profit organizations and local community partners. Students

produce multimedia content including videos, graphics, integrated media communications, public relations, and social media campaigns. Professionals guide and mentor students in account management, art direction, brand management, public relations, strategy development and video production.

2. Statewide Wire News Service – Students work day-to-day to provide traditional and multimedia stories to more than 100 community news organizations in the state. Content includes legislative stories, features, hard news, photo galleries, sports features and more. Students deliver the content on a website and deliver it to news organizations through an email listserv. Professionals-in-residence provide direct story feedback, interviewing tips, photo editing advice, and general advice.
3. A Live Broadcast News Show – The show is student-produced and includes video stories covering campus, local and state news. During the first two semesters of the Experience Lab, students produced content throughout the week that aired as a 30-minute show each Friday. Students produce news content, entertainment features, graphics, standups, video stories, meteorology updates, and weekly roundups for on-air content. Behind the scenes, students are learning how to operate cameras, production equipment, audio, and more. Community professionals provide feedback on directing, news reporting, TV production, content creation, graphics, news writing, scripts, on-air delivery, voice coaching, and collaboration.
4. The Campus Radio Station – a student-led radio station that provides music, entertainment, news sports and local events. Students create variety shows, blogs, website content and creative work. Text-based and multimedia creation includes advertising, underwriting, community PSA outreach, entertainment, production, technical direction, blog, promotion, sweepers, and creative content. Professionals from the community provide feedback on music programming, blog posting, content production, technical direction, promotion writing, news content, vocal performance, interviewing, and sports announcing.
5. An Online Community Magazine for the State – a student-run webzine with content, including businesses and economic development. Students gain experience in data storytelling, infographics, feature, and profile stories about diversity in the state, SEO, video production, web development and social media campaigns. Professionals work with students on content marketing, community relations, data storytelling, public relations, and social media. One of the professionals is an employee from the state's economic development office.
6. State Sports Reporting – online student-led sports program where students produce stories, call games, create podcasts, and produce statewide sports content. Students produce graphics, photo stories, score updates, sports commentary, marketing and promotion, stories, and standalones. Professionals provide feedback on brand management, production, sports anchoring, promotion and reporting, technical directing, and sports photography and videography.
7. A Student-Run Agency – Students are guided by industry professionals to create work for paying clients. Student work includes research, strategic branding, videography, photography, social media strategy, print design, integrated media communications and public relations. Professionals provide feedback on account management, art direction, brand management, public relations, strategy development, and video production.

The program included 56 students in the fall 2021 semester and grew to 80 students in spring 2022. Thirteen professionals provided mentorship in the fall and 17 in the spring, the majority returning from the fall semester after providing positive feedback of the program's launch. Employers donated their employees time, to reduce the need to ask professionals to give personal time. The managerial responses to supporting the program and their employees' involvement was overwhelmingly positive. Some professionals declined to participate because of scheduling and time commitment challenges, but the majority agreed to participate and said they saw the value in giving back to the college and/or supporting students going into the industry.

In spring 2022, the faculty approved a requirement that all students complete at least three semesters of the program to graduate with a degree from the college. The program will intertwine with other programs in the college, including a communication

design program and the college's capstone courses.

Day-to-day work and mentoring vary across each program. All students, leads, faculty members, and professionals meet once a week for an hour and 45 minutes for a full gathering. The agenda often includes a brief 20-minute meeting at the beginning of the session for general announcements and reminders. The directors do check-ins during that time so each area can learn about what the other programs are doing. Students then transition into breakout areas where the student leads are responsible for overseeing the organization of each program. Those meetings are organized based on the size and needs of the programs. Programs with 15 or more students usually have a full meeting and then break out into smaller groups to meet with the professionals. Sometimes they rotate to ensure the PIRs have equal time with the students. At other times, they will have focused one-on-one time based on content needs, including video equipment training, content editing, communication, strategy, and audience needs.

Literature Review

Experiential Learning

The Experience Lab uses Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory as guiding principles. Experiential learning offers students activities that create paths to access rich work experiences. The value lies not only in hands-on experiences but in the process of feeling, watching, thinking, and doing in a structured environment. Repeating this cycle allows students to practice and gradually scaffold their learning experience to gradually introduce layers of complexity. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning (EL) cycle outlines the four stages: 1) concrete experience; 2) reflective observation; 3) abstract conceptualization; and 4) active experimentation.

The first stage, *concrete experience*, refers to the idea that it is not enough to watch others do something, but learning occurs when students have the opportunity to do it themselves. Throughout the Experience Lab students participate in multiple professional development experiences individually, in teams and with industry professionals. The second stage, *reflective observation*, is taking a step back to see the bigger picture of what they have experienced. As part of the Experience Lab discussion with faculty and professionals connect concepts to the industry trends and requirements. This happens informally in smaller discussions unique to specific platforms but there are larger deep dive talks from industry professionals. For example, PIRs made up a panel discussion around ethics and how they have approached different situations. Next is *abstract conceptualization*, where space is created to make sense of student's experiences while pulling in other research, theories, ideas, and information. Many times, this information is combined into a presentation, model, or writing. Along the way students in the Experience Lab work with student leads, faculty, and professionals-in-residence to discuss, critique, and iterate on projects. This space combines different perspectives and approaches as part of the student learning. Last is *active experimentation* that involves applying what has been learned by putting it into practice, which begins the cycle again. The Experience Lab provides students multiple platforms to products stories, content, and media for publication.

Svinick & Dixon (1987) modified Kolb's model with classroom activities around student involvement in various teaching methods. This adaptation sees student involvement ranging from a passive receiver of information to hands-on actors in the process. This approach begins to challenge traditional forms of teaching methods. The opportunity becomes creating a space with the flexibility of time, location, and resources where students could repeat steps multiple times as needed. The Experience Lab gives students time and experience with different media platforms that lead to the publication of content. Repetition of a hands-on experience extends learning by simulating different scenarios as needed, giving control to the student. Expanded time with projects in a lab increases recalls of information leading to direct experience. Experiential learning is not simply adding in hands-on experiences. While it may include apprenticeships, there must be structure to help students meet course expectations. Students come into the course with various backgrounds requiring experiential learning instruction to address those gaps with a consistent pedagogical framework to achieve learning outcomes (Radović, Hummel & Vermeulen, 2021). The Experience Lab provides that framework to address the various background of experiences students have starting in college.

Specifically, in journalism and mass communications, a continued need exists to understand how experiential learning is integrated into higher education. Instructors have worked to integrate experiential learning by using simulations to practice real-world experiences across multiple disciplines. Often the

focus is on the production and execution of their craft that excludes the process and communication to achieve stated goals through collaboration (Ziek & Fink, 2019). Steel, et al., (2007) found journalism education that simulates real-world practice provides a valuable experience but posed the question "how (if at all) could scholars make the most of experiential learning and teaching of the practice of journalism in ways that relate to, and complement, the academic components of the degree?" (p. 323). As digital media evolves, new standards emerge, making it critical to learn best practices. Saks, Cruikshank, & Yanity (2019) found few students apply best practices when publishing original content on Twitter that included failing to tag accounts to reach audiences beyond student media to increase audience engagement and the use of hashtags to insert themselves into conversations. Online media, in contrast to "legacy media," is a great opportunity for students to publish their work externally. Specifically publishing in-house is more conducive to a semester structure (Reed, 2018). As a result, all of the platforms in the Experience Lab are digital first publications. Smith, Payne, Hettinga, & Norman (2021) emphasized four areas that should be embedded in student media that include: community, practice, identity, and meaning. This highlights student media as a social activity that provides space for experiential learning. Experiential learning and student media requires a team of faculty to support efforts ensuring student success.

Leadership & Self-Regulation

Mentoring offers significant benefits to leadership development and experiential learning. Students develop foundational skills through the connections they develop in the mentoring process. Beech and Brockbank (1999) found that "the nature of mentoring relationships changed radically as mentees began to define themselves as being more competent and knowledgeable in management" (p. 7). An effective mentor relationship can make a significant difference in enhancing development in early adulthood (Kram, 1985). By combining the leadership and mentorship role with real-world experiences and experiential learning, students have a better chance to connect with their work and the organization in a foundational way.

Self-regulated learning requires structure to develop leadership skills and learn how to begin making their own connections to careers in the industry. Students must be given time to think about topics and spend time developing their own goals to begin instilling self-regulated learning. Students gain confidence when they are invested in their goals and can tackle challenges on their own. Several studies have found student learning improves if students "employ self-regulated learning processes as they go about acquiring new skills" (Kitsanta et al., 2004, p. 270). Learning requires effort, but educators can take advantage of techniques to motivate students, make materials more approachable, and ultimately facilitate a self-regulation in the student so they can challenge themselves to learn new things (Shell et al., 2010; Sweller, 2006).

As media evolves and digital platforms fragment audiences it creates a future full of uncertainties. These complexities require students to not only be creative problem solvers, but also be skilled at adapting to a variety of contexts. Further complicating the issue are students who have an aversion to risk. Carlson (2015) writes that many students are not familiar or comfortable experiencing failure, which is a missing skill in a high-risk world. Blanda (2013) points out "the smartest workers will be able to leverage technology to their advantage and be able to recognize the big-picture ways to utilize it" (para. 13). Attempting to morph these aspects into a curriculum raises its own complexities but requires educators to prepare students for this reality. The connective nature or global media and continued disruption to the industry require students to understand digital media, analytics, social listening, mobile platforms, and emerging immersive media platforms. Students in advertising and communications have the power to tackle critical issues facing the world through real-world contexts and conditions (Kolotouchkina, Vallés, & Mosquera, 2021).

Active student engagement is key to their success in an experiential learning setting. However, student barriers exist regarding the sense of belonging in college that include societal stereotypes, numerical representation, and the uncertainty of the value of diversity and inclusion (Murdock-Perriera, Boucher, Carter, & Murphy, 2019). Understanding these contexts becomes vital for college students to ask if they belong at college. However, colleges can address these barriers by creating *places of belonging* that are social learning environments that have students actively involved on campus. Murdock-Perriera, Boucher, Carter, & Murphy (2019) point out a sense of belonging impacts "academic outcomes in-

cluding motivation, GPA, and retention" (p. 291). All this must be structured and intentional but is needed for student learning and growth. The connection with student mindsets and achievement goals can impact academic success (Yeager and Dweck, 2020). Overcoming a fixed mindset can impact academic performance by students understanding effortful practice and preparation using growth mindset interventions (Fink, Mattson, Cahill, Frey, & McDaniel, 2022). The Experience Lab requires students to be engaged to overcome challenges and solve real-world problems through a sense of persistence.

Method

Design. A survey was used to assess student learning and perceptions of the first year of the Experience Lab. The 23-item Google survey was developed and distributed via email to students enrolled in the Experience Lab at the end of the fall and spring semesters (2021-2022) that addressed the following research questions:

1. How was the experiential learning process during the first year of the Experience Lab valued by students?
2. What were student perceptions of the support provided during the Experience Lab from faculty, professionals-in-residence, and student leads?
3. What did students take away from their experience during the first year of the Experience Lab?

The survey was emailed to students enrolled in the Experience Lab. They were asked to complete the survey by the end of the semester.

Sample

Participants included students enrolled in the Experience Lab. A total of 136 students were enrolled in the Experience Lab. As a result, the sample (N = 95) responded to the survey for a 69.9% response rate. The course is a combination of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior journalism and mass communication majors. There is a representative sample of advertising and public relations, broadcasting, journalism, and sports media and communications majors participating in the Experience Lab.

Measures. The survey asked students about their experience over the first semester of the Experience Lab. Survey items began asking about excitement, projects and challenge of the Experience Lab using a 10-point scale. It also asked for feedback on student leadership, faculty and professional-in-residence using a six-point Likert scale. Finally, open-ended questions were included to collect ideas and feedback about specific experience students what to share.

Experience Lab. Participants were given a 5-item subscale. These items (M = 7.56, SD = 1.52, α = .825) were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*) and included questions such as "What is your level of satisfaction with the work/projects made available to you to participate in during this semester's Experience Lab?" and "How challenged were you by the work/projects you participated in as part of the Experience Lab?"

Faculty. Five items (M = 5.24, SD = 0.85, α = .905) were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) and included statements such as "Faculty were available when I had questions," and "Faculty demonstrated care and support for students."

Professionals-in-residence (PIRs). Six items (M = 4.90, SD = 1.25, α = .953) were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) and included statements such as "The PIRs helped boost my confidence," and "PIRs taught me something(s) that helped me professionally or personally."

Student Leaders. Seven items (M = 5.24, SD = 1.03, α = .961) were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) and included statements such as "My student leaders took command and showed leadership skills regularly," and "I felt appreciated by my student leaders for my work and contributions."

Open Ended. Questions were asked of students to provide their own perspective and ideas about the Experience Lab. These included questions such as "What are you most proud of accomplishing in the Experience Lab?" "What is one change you would like to see made to the Experience Lab program?" and "What advice would you give to next years' Experience Lab participants?"

Findings

An analysis of the survey results included a thematic analysis of the opened responses. Table 1 provides descriptive statics on the survey responses.

The Experience Lab responses found students began the semester energized (M = 8.36, SD = 1.55) but decreased by the end of the semester (M = 7.30, SD = 2.15). This comparison showed more consistent

Table 1: Survey Results (N = 95)

	M	SD	Range	α (No. of items)
Experience Lab	7.56	1.52	1-10	. 825 (5)
Faculty	5.24	0.85	1-6	.905 (5)
PIRs	4.90	1.25	1-6	.953 (6)
Student Leads	5.24	1.03	1-6	.961 (7)

excitement at the start but when asked at the end of the semester responses varied much more. When asked about the level of satisfaction with the work and projects student responses also varied (*M* = 7.27, *SD* = 2.13). However, when asked if they were challenged by the work the reaction was a little more consistent (*M* = 7.18, *SD* = 1.84). As a result, students did generally report that they thought their time during the first year of the Experience Lab was worth it (*M* = 7.75, *SD* = 2.18). Every item increased from the fall to spring semester. However, the item about the Experience Lab being worth students' time had the largest difference between semesters, fall (*M*= 6.97, *SD* = 2.43) and spring (*M*= 8.26, *SD* = 1.85).

Feedback on the different leadership positions for the Experience Lab was generally positive. Faculty were good listeners (*M* = 5.44, *SD* = 1.0), supported students (*M* = 5.57, *SD* = 0.81), and were available when students had questions (*M* = 5.26, *SD* = 0.94). They were being able to adjust to the needs of the program (*M* = 5.24, *SD* = 0.98) but continued work is needed around organization (*M* = 4.66, *SD* = 1.23).

The Professionals-in-residence have room to improve as the Experience Lab evolves. Students clearly saw them as experts in their respective fields (*M* = 5.36, *SD* = 1.35) and PIRs taught them something during the semester (*M* = 5.18, *SD* = 1.34). The PIRs also helped students improve their confidence (*M* = 5.03, *SD* = 1.39) and students understood how to utilize their expertise (*M* = 4.96, *SD* = 1.31). However, continued work is needed to increase the ease of access to PIRs (*M* = 4.78, *SD* = 1.49) and encourage students to reach out for their guidance (*M* = 4.55, *SD* = 1.43).

Student leaders provided a much-needed layer of support that was positive for students participating in the Experience Lab. Students leaders were available when needed (*M* = 5.26, *SD* = 1.18). They also listened to ideas (*M* = 5.36, *SD* = 1.12), demonstrated empathy towards students (*M* = 5.37, *SD* = 1.09), and provided students with feedback (*M* = 5.33, *SD* = 1.15). Students felt appreciated by their student leads for their work (*M* = 5.26, *SD* = 1.15) and showed their leadership skills regularly (*M* = 5.21, *SD* = 1.11). However, student leaders will continue to improve on their organization (*M* = 4.92, *SD* = 1.23).

Open-ended Analysis

Emergent themes from the open-ended questions revealed *structure and guidance*, *collaboration with experiences*, *skills of the profession*, and the *development of soft skills*. Students reflected that there is a need to provide more organization to provide a better structure for their experiences. They saw the value of the Experience Lab through the professional mentorship and skills they learned in the course. However, they benefited from developing a set of soft skills while working with clients and planning their projects together.

Structure and Guidance. Students expressed concern about the organization and accountability, "most of my stress during my time in the Experience Lab has come from disorganization." As a result, this impacted motivation and a lack of understanding of what was required of them. One student expressed the need for "more clear-cut expectations…I felt no punishment for not showing up; my drive throughout the semester went out the wayside." There was also confusion about projects and expectations while working with clients. Another student said, "I felt overwhelmed and felt way in over my head. I was aware we would be challenged, but on many occasions, I felt like I was walking blind into the work I was doing." Additional definitions of work to be done would help "in terms of staying on track to meet deliverable deadlines." One student did acknowledge that "A bit more push for people to get their work done, flexible but direct deadlines" would be helpful. Many of the students acknowledged this being the first year when saying they "had slightly anticipated that it wouldn't be perfect because it was the first year testing it" and "it is understandable since it was the first year."

Collaboration with More Experiences. Students saw the importance of networking and gaining as much experience as possible during the semester. "Getting to meet professionals-in-residence, getting an idea of where others are in their work." One student even landed a job opportunity, "I have also benefited from meeting with the professionals that come into the Experience Lab. I was even able to be hired to a part time job after talking to one of the professionals." However, many wanted more collaboration. One

student said, "more interaction between all parts of the Experience Lab." Another highlighted the need for more team members to balance the workload, "few more people in our group just to even out the work." There was also some confusion about the connection between real-world experiences and project work. A student mentioned they would like to "be able to choose and to do real-life agency work rather than work on just videos." However, students did want to learn more about the PIRs and tour local media companies and clients to actually see real-world settings. Students said they wished they "could go out and tour more places related to our specific program" and "visit clients in their office space."

Skills of the Profession. Many students commented on how valuable it was to learn the skills of the profession. A student pointed out that they benefited from "working with the PIRs, building my skill set and making connections." One said, they "got to learn new equipment, how to use the equipment and new applications." Another said, "I learned to use Premiere Pro and how to communicate professionally." Techniques were also mentioned, when one said, "learning to write a story was good; doing multiple interviews was a good challenge for me." Students appreciated working with the PIRs to learn skills. "I got to sharpen my reporting skills with the tutelage of my team leaders and PIRs. The PIRs had taught me some valuable things about reporting." Productivity was pointed out as something students might have a concern about. A student mentioned, "I haven't really gotten much out there, so it is hard to say what I've learned." The connection between learning outcomes with publication is something to consider moving forward. However, these experiences helped me experience careers, "learning from PIRs that handle the production of shows gave me a real-world perspective of what I would be doing in the future."

"Be a Sponge," Develop Soft Skills. The contacts students made with the PIRs were important, but they benefited from the "connections within different majors in the J-school and developing time management skills." This does not mean it will be easy, "the Experience Lab will challenge you and make you step outside of your comfort zone." Another student mentioned, "You run out of time quick. Don't worry about perfection. Just keep producing content, and perfection will come with time." Through these experiences students made connections in the development of soft skills in communication and leadership skills that emerged. One student talked about developing confidence by "learning how to take the reins with communication. As an introvert who would much rather be told what to do, it was a weird feeling being the first one to speak in meetings and assigning tasks." Even as the program develops more structure, it has helped one student "discover that leadership experience within my field can be extremely valuable, so I'm gaining so much experience as a leader that I hope will pay off later in life in my own job-seeking." This growth mindset is evident when one student discusses how they "have grown in leadership skills by offering critiques, asking for help and faking it till I make it on certain things." One student summed it up by saying, "take advantage of everything you can learn from this program. Be a sponge."

Discussion

This study revealed emergent themes from participating students including *structure and guidance, collaboration with experiences, skills of the profession*, and the *development of soft skills*. The first year was a challenge but overall, students found it to be worth the effort to participate in the launch of the Experience Lab. Students reflected that there is a need for additional *structure and guidance* to provide better organization overall. The experiential nature of the course has started to build more connections between the students and industry so continued *collaboration with experiences* will strengthen those bonds. They saw the value of the Experience Lab through professional mentorship during the semester to develop the *skills of the profession*. Additionally, students benefited from the *development of soft skills* while working with clients and planning their projects together.

With any new project there is lots of excitement and the experiences were relevant the students. That excitement waned over the course of the semester as the work ramped up but did highlight the need for additional planning and structure to scaffold the student experiences. Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) provides a framework to incorporate the cycle, so students are not just working but reflecting and continually experimenting with their craft and their peers. As one student put it, "perfection will come with time."

There are limitations to the current study in that additional responses are needed to develop a clearer picture of student experiences. Additionally, a qualitative approach should be introduced to ask propping

questions to begin to answer the why and how surrounding those participating in the Experience Lab. All perspectives from students, faculty, PIRs, student leads and clients could provide additional insight. Last, this study represents the first year of students so has the potential to benefit from longitudinal research as the Experience Lab scales up with additional students.

The authors of this study are engaged with the Experience Lab. One author is directly involved with the Experience Lab as a co-leader. The other author is an administrator of the college who has worked on the logistics but is not directly involved in the day-to-day efforts with the Experience Lab. Both are faculty in the college that has launched the Experience Lab. The last contributor to the project helped distribute and collect the survey results while serving as a PIR with the Experience Lab.

Recommendations moving forward include, leveraging the different tiers of leadership by working with stakeholders to balance workloads across platforms. Also, not all students were able to spend time with PIRs so finding ways to schedule the Experience Lab, so all students have equal access to all the resources. Last is the challenge of skill gaps between students from different backgrounds, comfort producing media, and level of motivation. The Experience Lab is a new program to the college requiring continued efforts to find ways to prepare students who need it and challenge advanced students. The range of student skills becomes an opportunity for leadership and mentorship built into the structure. As a result, this begins to engage students earlier in their academic career where it could impact rendition and graduation rates (Murdock-Perriera, Boucher, Carter, & Murphy, 2019). There is a range of experiences between platforms so continuing to make sure students do not see their majors as silos rather make connections between disciplines.

The Experience Lab shows promise by the excitement not only from the students but leadership, the campus, and the professional community. There is a lot of work to make sure the students are getting the most out of their time and effort. The Experience Lab model has the potential to become an opportunity for students and our industries. The level of collaboration, experimentation, and community engagement is inspiring. This study represents the beginning of this journey tackling future challenges and will guide those preparing journalism and mass communications students in becoming leaders directing the ever-changing media industry.

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Appendix: Survey Questions

Experience Lab - 1 (*low*) to 10 (*high*)

- How energized were you about the Experience Lab program at the start of it back in August?
- Do you feel participating in the Experience Lab has been worth your time investment?
- What is your level of satisfaction with the work/projects made available to you to participate in during this semester's Experience Lab?
- How challenged were you by the work/projects you participated in as part of the Experience Lab?
- How energized by the Experience Lab program are you now as the semester concludes?

Faculty - 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*)

Rate your Experience Lab faculty

- Faculty were available when I had questions.
- Faculty demonstrated care and support for students.
- Faculty were organized.
- Faculty were agile and adjusted to the needs of the Experience Lab program.
- Faculty were good listeners.

Professionals-in-residence (PIRs) - 1 to 6

Rate the Experience Lab Professionals-in-residence

- I sought out the help of a PIR frequently.
- PIRs taught me something(s) that helped me professionally or personally.
- I understood how to utilize the expertise of PIRs.
- It was easy to access a PIR when I needed advice.
- The PIRs helped boost my confidence.
- The PIRs were clearly experts in their field/on the topics they were advising me on.

Student Leaders - 1 to 6
Rate the student leader(s) of your department.

- My student leaders were available when I needed them.
- My student leaders demonstrated empathy towards me and our department.
- My student leaders took command and showed leadership skills regularly.
- My student leaders were organized.
- I felt appreciated by my student leaders for my work and contributions.
- My student leaders listened to my ideas.
- My student leaders provided me with feedback.

What is one change you'd like to see made to the Experience Lab program?

What are 2-3 things you benefited from the most this semester in the Experience Lab?

What are 2-3 things that were the biggest obstacles for you during this semester in the Experience Lab?

What are you most proud of accomplishing in the Experience Lab?

What advice would you give to next years' Experience Lab participants?

Anything else you'd like to provide feedback on or make us aware of?

Adam Wagler, Ph.D., is the Associate Dean for Academic Programs and an associate professor of advertising and public relations at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism and Mass Communications. He teaches design, development, and strategy courses using both interactive and traditional media.

Jill Martin is an assistant professor of practice in journalism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism and Mass Communications. She teaches reporting and editing, coordinates the Nebraska News Service and is co-director of the Experience Lab for the college.

Keri Mesropov is the Chief Talent Officer at TRG Arts in Colorado Springs, Colorado responsible for the scouting, recruitment, development, and retention of the firm's talent for all positions throughout the global company. She currently serves as a professional-in-residence in the Experience Lab at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism and Mass Communications.