

BUILDING AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CENTER

Rhonda Eaker // Metropolitan State University of Denver

I am not proud to say it, but I can reduce any pleasant social gathering to awkward silence. As the Director of the Applied Learning Center, all I have to do is mention my job title and conversation comes to a screeching halt. You see, nobody outside of academia has a clue what an Applied Learning Center is and most people don't even know how to ask what it means.

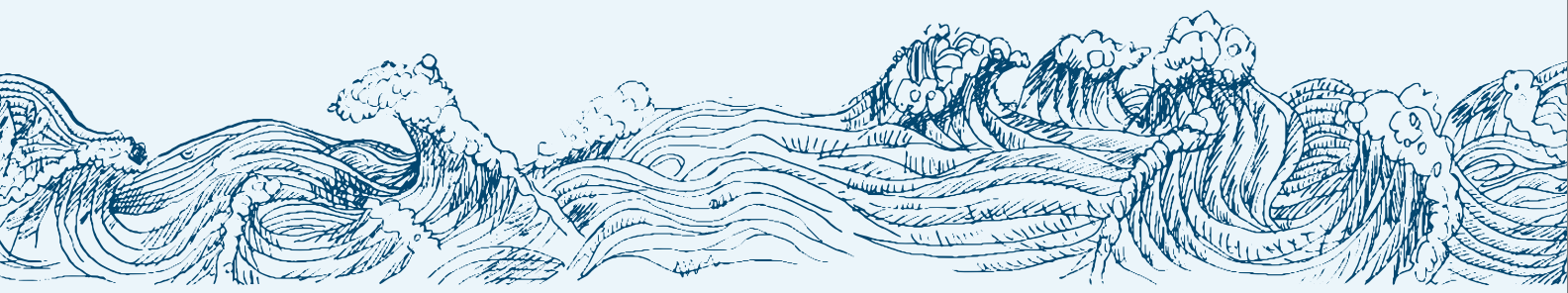
After a suitable number of head nods and “hmms”, someone will generally steer the conversation in another direction and the crowd will thankfully move on to another topic.

It was much easier when I could say that I worked at the Internship Center. Internship is a word people know and understand. People would share their own internship stories or talk about interns they have supervised. Conversation would continue and flow from there. Sometimes I even got new employers for our students from these conversations.

Five years ago our internship program was reimagined into a comprehensive experimental learning center and renamed the Applied Learning Center. This is the story of that change along with thoughts on what others might learn from our experience. Spoiler alert: the end of the story is that it was a widely successful change. So, despite the personal social discomfort, I wouldn't change a thing.

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver) was founded 50 years ago as an open enrollment, public undergraduate institution designed to serve metropolitan Denver. Early in the college history, the Internship Center was founded as a centralized unit to coordinate work-based learning experiences across campus. The center grew rapidly in size and number of students served for 15 years and then entered another 15-year period of relative stability. By 2010, however, that stability was beginning to feel like stagnation as the number of students



served gradually declined. Retirements and a layoff reduced the internship coordinator staff from six to four. The remaining staff started discussions of how to limit or reduce our services. We were a valued office, but a very small one with little clout. Sinking ship is not the right metaphor, but we were definitely a ship that wasn't going anywhere very fast!

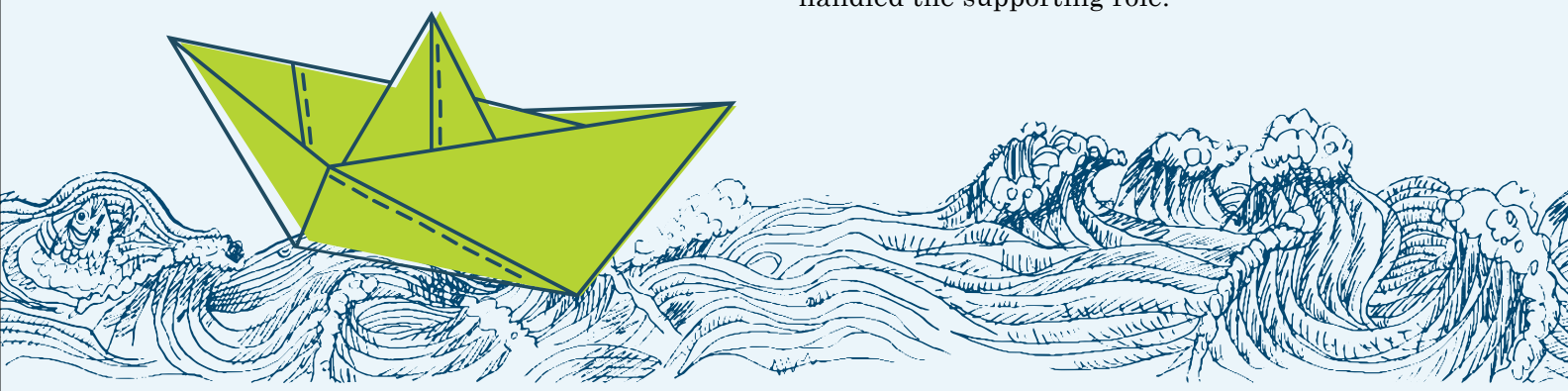
But, the tide was changing. New ideas related to experiential learning were growing on campus. There was interest in involving our students in undergraduate research projects and our president was heavily invested in creating an institution that was more community focused. Task forces were formed and community engagement, service learning and undergraduate research emerged as programs that MSU Denver wanted to develop.

As a public institution struggling to adjust to declining state support, the issue was how to develop new programs with limited money. A visionary Associate Vice President and Provost began to see a way forward. What about using the existing infrastructure of the Internship Center as a structural home for these new programs?

WHAT DO WE HAVE IN COMMON?

The proposals to create service learning, undergraduate research and community engagement initiatives on campus emerged shortly after the American Association of Colleges and Universities published its work on High Impact Educational Practices (Kuh, 2008). Our campus leadership had recently ordered and read the AAC&U publication so this work was fresh in their minds. Undergraduate Research, Service Learning and Internships were all on the list of "high impact practices". These programs also represent experiential or hand's-on learning. The high impact nature of the programs along with the experiential component provided the conceptual basis for combining them. A neighboring institution had an Experiential Learning Center that combined similar programs so we knew there was some precedent for the idea.

Nevertheless, the fact is that the idea to combine internships, service learning, community engagement and undergraduate research was a marriage of convenience. It was a practical and low cost way to start new programs. It was not the result of research into best practices or the outcome of a carefully crafted strategic planning process. Faculty on reassigned time ran the new initiatives and the Internship Center staff and existing budget handled the supporting role.



Still, there was some logic in the decision and the connections between these new programs became instantly clear. Internships, service learning and community engagement all work with a lot of the same community partners. Research projects often grow out of research internships and vice versa. Tracking service learning placements turns out to be a lot like tracking an internship placement. Many of the resources used by internship supervisors are useful for service learning faculty and research faculty mentors. Campus events and activities focusing on student work outside of the classroom easily fit together into common events.

Students also move seamlessly between the programs. My favorite early success story is of a student in a service learning class project who was selected for an internship as a result of his work on that project. The internship later turned into a paid job. The experience gained in that job eventually landed him in a professional graduate program.

In academic time, the transition was very quick. Just a year after the idea was first proposed we concluded that “Internship Center” was no longer an appropriate name. The Applied Learning Center (ALC) was born.

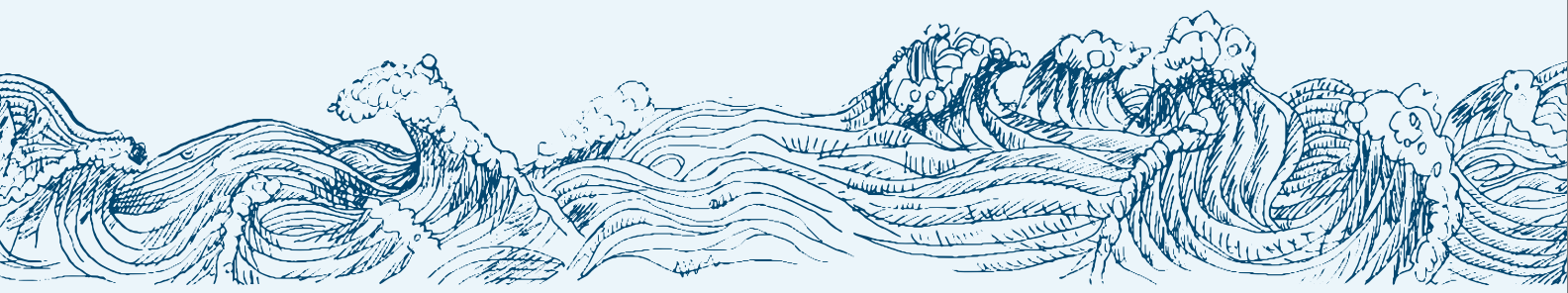
WHERE WE ARE NOW

The Applied Learning Center was successful in initiating the new programs at MSU Denver in a quick and cost effective way. But it ended

up being more than simply an expedient way to start some new programs. The ALC initiated a new level of growth and visibility for experiential learning at MSU Denver.

Although we started with only the original internship staff, the success of our new initiatives brought enough visibility to the program that new positions were quickly created. Senior leaders became champions for various initiatives and found ways to make sure that we had the staff needed to continue those initiatives. Currently, the ALC has doubled the original staffing levels.

With increased staffing, the need for space became critical. Although the Internship Center space was not ideal, it served the needs of a smaller staff but there was no space for new staff. After a couple of years of spreading new people around across campus our plight became dire and we were offered a new, custom designed space for the ALC. We designed a welcoming lobby with workstations for front desk staff. We have a full sized classroom with Smart Board for orientations, trainings and meetings and an intimate conference room for smaller gatherings. These spaces have been used in a variety of ways by the various programs. Community engagement and service learning have used the space to host community-focused planning groups such as Campus Compact or the Engaged Faculty Institute. The rooms have been used for lunch and learns and workshops that target both



students and faculty for all of our programs. Internship employers have used them for information sessions.

To meet internal needs coordinators for all of the programs have private offices to meet with students and faculty. The Civic Engagement Program office has an extra workstation for Alternative Break Leaders. We even designed a workspace and storage in the kitchen specifically for prepping for events, conferences and open houses.

We have more name recognition and visibility on campus that we have ever had. The Internship Center had strong relationships with a number of departments on campus, but in most cases we worked with a single faculty member in each department. Faculty in the department who didn't supervise interns typically didn't know much, if anything, about what we did. However, with multiple programs we have engaged far more of the faculty. Faculty who never supervised interns may be mentors to research students or they may teach service learning classes. The ALC has found strong faculty support among a much broader range of faculty than we had in the past.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, we are serving larger numbers of new students. As our visibility on campus has grown, more and more students seem to be finding us. We are also reaching them in new ways. Although most students who walk in our door still come to us because they want an internship, we are using our orientation to introduce them to other ways

of gaining experience. We now have students who are heavily engaged with our office in ways other than internships.

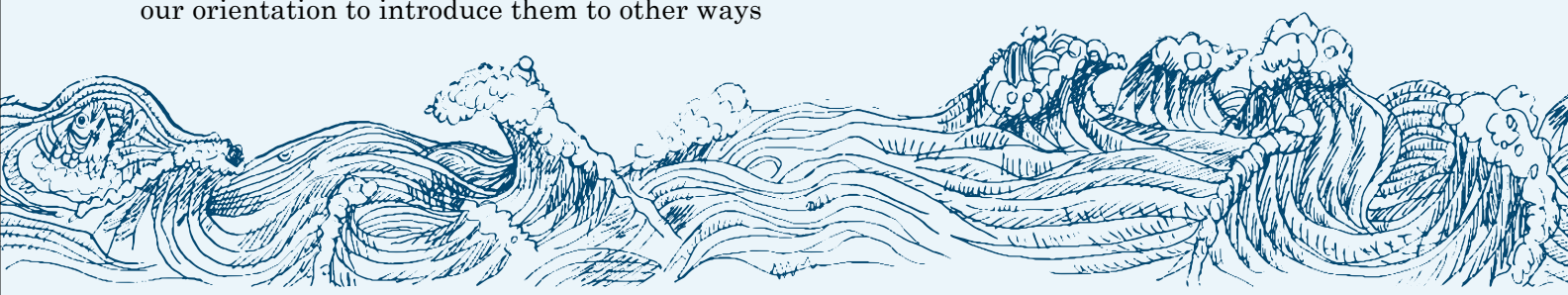
Now is the perfect time to look back and share with others what made it all work and what we have learned.

SMOOTH SAILING: WHAT WE DID RIGHT

Faculty Involvement

They key to the early success of the ALC was the use of Faculty Associates. We started with a Service Learning Faculty Associate and two Undergraduate Research Associates. These were full time faculty who were offered reassigned time to work on the new programs.

An initial reason for this structure was the fact that it cost the institution very little extra money, but the advantages to this arrangement ended up being far more valuable than just saving money. Having respected faculty as champions for the new programs gave instant credibility to the programs among other faculty. They had access to Faculty Senate, faculty meetings, chairs meetings and other venues that administrators don't usually have access to. We created advisory boards with heavy representation of faculty. These boards set the agenda and priorities for the new programs. The partnership between the faculty associates, advisory boards and ALC staff meant that the new programs and initiatives had the input and buy in needed to succeed.



Start with a Bang!

One of the first priorities for the Faculty Associates for Undergraduate Research was a desire to initiate a campus-wide Undergraduate Research Conference. There had been small departmental events that showcased student work, but a campus-wide conference would be a great way to build immediate value and visibility for the idea of undergraduate research at MSU Denver. The Faculty Associates spent most of their first year eliciting support for the conference and building interest. They didn't start small, but proceeded with plans to make it a full-fledged, professional-style event. It was a tremendous success and instantly became a signature event for the campus.

This early and very visible success had immediate benefits.

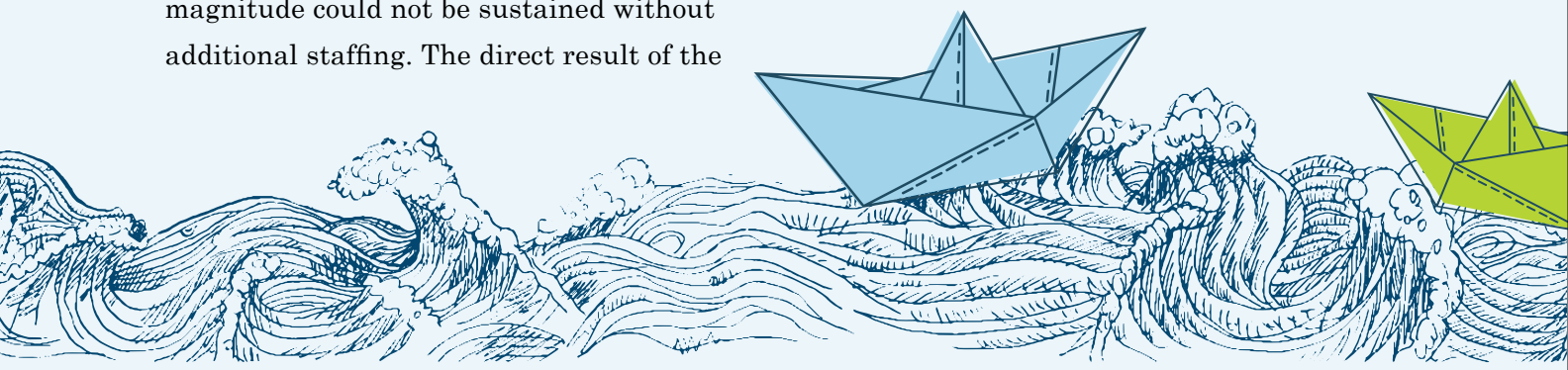
- It put the Undergraduate Research Program on the map. Faculty who may not have even known that MSU Denver had an internship program were involved in the conference. This spread awareness of the new ALC quickly.
- It gave us a reason to ask for new funding. The conference was expensive and if it was to happen again, it needed a budget.
- Perhaps most importantly, after putting in many long hours planning the first conference, the faculty associates joined with me in pointing out that a conference of this magnitude could not be sustained without additional staffing. The direct result of the

first research conference was the addition of the ALC's first new staff position.

Visibility

The Undergraduate Research Conference started the ALC off with a bang during its very first year. But, the other programs had a slower start. Service Learning was still trying to get its footing and Civic Engagement wasn't conceptualized fully. During our second year, the ALC initiated its first strategic planning process. The overriding question: how do we take the infrastructure of the Internship Program and the newly generated excitement of the Undergraduate Research Program and use it to build momentum for this new entity called the Applied Learning Center? The answer was more integration of programs and more joint marketing. Specific goals included:

- Host an annual Open House for the ALC to introduce the campus to our office
- Create a series of awards that represent achievement in areas related to all of the ALC programs and host an Awards Banquet to celebrate those achievements
- Develop an ALC public relations campaign that includes joint brochures and a website for the ALC
- Develop a joint database in which all of the ALC activities can be tracked so that overlaps in community partnerships and faculty involvement can be easily identified



I had been describing the ALC as an “umbrella” infrastructure for separate and distinct programs that each operated independently. The key to our future together, however, needed to be built on a reputation as a single unit with the common purpose of introducing students to experiential learning and high impact educational practices.

With increased visibility came increased clout. The ALC is much more widely known on campus now that the Internship Program ever was. Rather than only having support from faculty who supervise internships, we have support from faculty who mentor researchers, and faculty who teach service learning classes. More visibility and awareness on campus means we are reaching more students.

It's All about Attitude

So here is the picture: An office that has experienced declining staff is being asked to take on new programs, including putting on a campus-wide conference, with no additional regular staff or budget. Student employees found themselves making nametags for the conference instead of sending resumes to employers. Conference schedules, rather than position descriptions, were being printed on the internship office printer. The already insufficient office space became a conference staging area. **Sounds like a scenario ripe for complaints and grumbling . . . right?**

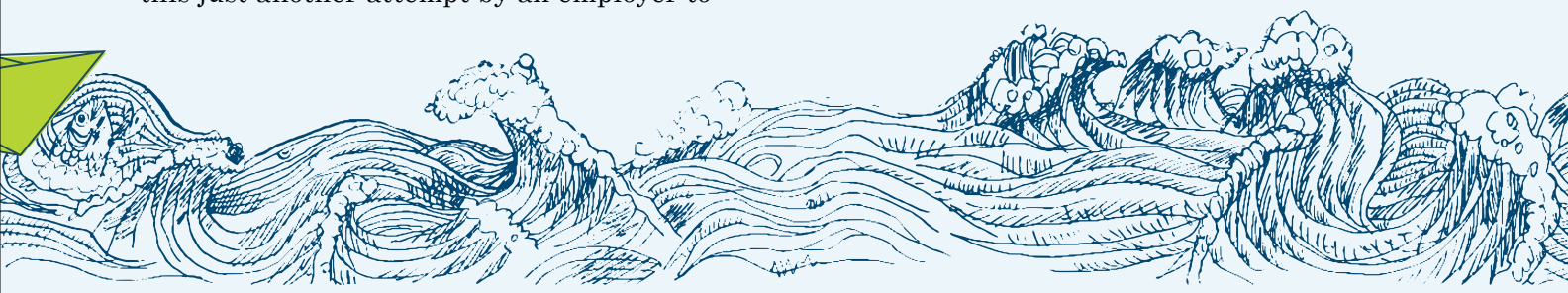
Don't get me wrong. There was concern. Is this just another attempt by an employer to

ask employees to do more work with no additional resources? Should we be worried that this change was just going to take our focus away from internship students? Those were possibilities, but the desire to be part of something bigger provided hope. Staff went along with it, perhaps grudgingly at first, but with an attitude that we would do our best. That attitude paid off. The relationships built with the faculty associates and the success of the early endeavors proved that it could work.

Support the University Strategic Plan

It is common advice to make sure that any office on campus can support the overall campus vision and mission. While internships alone can certainly fit into the strategic plan at MSU Denver, the expansion of our programs provides a stronger connection to the strategic plan. MSU Denver's strategic plan specifically mentions our desire to create “civic-minded” graduates. Although I could argue that internships support that goal, our Civic Engagement Program and Service Learning Program both have clearer and more direct relationship to that particular goal. Internships and Undergraduate Research, on the other hand, more directly support the goal of creating graduates who are “ready to meet career and/or graduate school expectations”.

The yearly annual report for the ALC has provides a forum for making a case for our contribution to the University mission. The



ALC has also been active in creating learning outcomes for our programs and attempting (sometimes successfully and sometimes not!) to measure those outcomes. An annual report rich with data and assessment information has been a useful document for making the case for the value of the ALC to the university.

CHOPPY WATERS: LESSONS LEARNED

Looking back, there is little doubt that building a full-fledged experiential learning center out of a declining internship program was a good move. In retrospect, the adjustment went surprisingly well. Still, there were lessons learned.

Lesson: it is worth extra time and effort to develop a clear vision of each position

As new positions were added to the staff, sometimes we didn't have a clear vision of what the new person would actually be doing. The positions evolved and changed considerably after hires were made. Some of the early new hires didn't stay as long as we would have hoped, in part due to a disconnect between the person hired and the position as it evolved. New positions in a new office can be nebulous at first. Still making an extra effort to find the right fit and build a strong staff are well worth the time.

Lesson: Physical location matters

Once new staff members were hired, we had to find a place for them. At one point we had staff spread out in three different locations

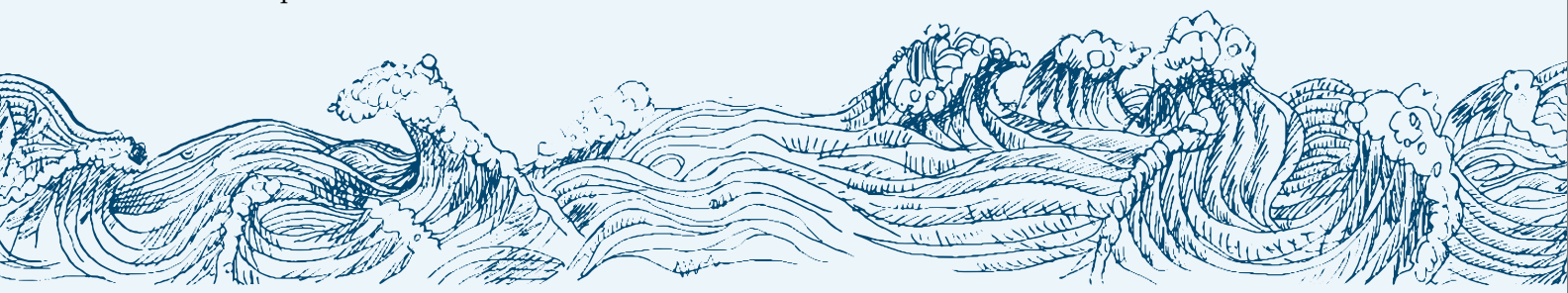
across campus. This led to a lack of early group cohesion, which considerably slowed the process of integrating the various programs and activities. We were finally offered new space large enough for all of us. Once we moved in together, the difference was immediate. We began thinking and working as a single unit rather than disparate programs that just happen to report to the same director.

Lesson: Have something to offer

One of the first initiatives of the Service Learning Program was to try to find out what kind of service learning was already happening on campus. But, attempts to gather information were met with resistance. Faculty had no reason to tell us about their service learning activities and some were a little distrustful about our motives for asking. So, we stopped asking. Instead, we hired someone who had the expertise to help faculty develop and revise Service Learning curriculum. We now have expertise and assistance to offer faculty rather than just asking them for information. Once we have a relationship with faculty we find that often they are happy that someone is interested in what they are doing and are far more willing to share information about their service learning activities.

Lesson: Simplify the message

Just like my dinner party companions, students and faculty aren't always sure what an experiential (or applied) learning center might do. Despite the success and visibility of our various



endeavors, many people on campus will still revert to calling us the Internship Center when introducing us to their students or to new faculty because “internship” is a concept almost everyone understands. Even as staff of the ALC we have struggled to define what we do.



The MSU Denver Career Services office provided a breakthrough. They designed a simple graphic

with three words: **Explore, Experience and Execute**. They tell students that their office helps students “Explore” their career goals and “Execute” their career plans, but that for “Experience” the students should check out the ALC. This simple graphic and explanation put our office in terms that students easily understand. We are the “place to get experience” to enhance your education and career preparation.

UNCHARTED WATERS

On a regular basis, we find more and more ways to integrate the various initiatives of the ALC. Our most recent change was to replace our longstanding “internship orientation” with a more generic orientation. The premise of the new orientation is that we are going to introduce students to a variety of ways that they can enhance their resumes with career related experiences and not limit ourselves to just talking about internships. Drawing on our creative juices, the ALC staff developed our own graphic (figure 1) showing the “ivory tower”

and the “real world” with a great chasm in between. During the orientation, we proceed to “fill in” the chasm with boulders representing various types of experience.

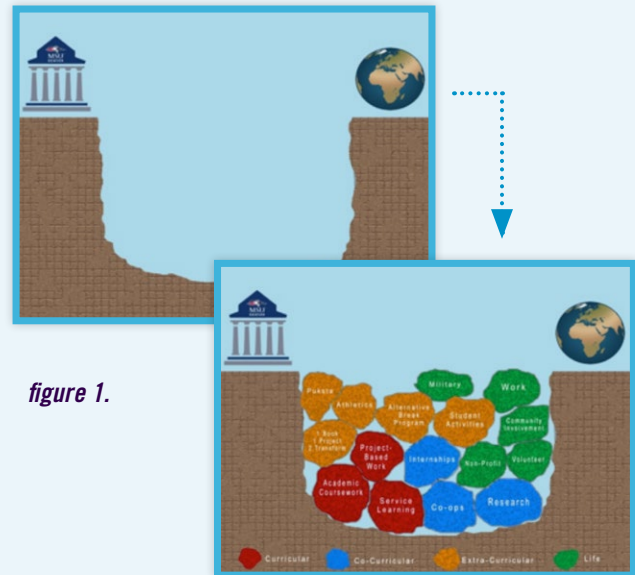


figure 1.

Corny, but it makes the point. Students come to the Applied Learning Center and we provide a variety of resources for them to gain experience, apply their learning and enhance their career preparation.

I am sure that we will continue to find new ways to take advantage of the synergies between our various experiential activities as the years go by. No longer limited to internships or co-ops we have so much more potential for new programing in the Applied Learning Center at MSU Denver.

Reference:

Kuh, G.D. (2008). High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter, *American Association of Colleges & Universities*

