

How Important Is Experiential Learning to Your Public Policy Education?

It's very important - and it's a key component of our MPP, MPA and MCD graduate degrees

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by:

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You're seated in a lecture hall, staring at a whiteboard or scanning through a hefty textbook. Your instructor mentions some facts that he wants you to notate. "It'll be on the test," he adds. You look up at the clock on the wall and notice the time – you've only been there 20 minutes! And you feel like you haven't retained anything.

Have you ever thought, "How will a classroom prepare me for my career?" You're not alone. Albert Einstein once said, "I never teach my pupils – I only provide the conditions in which they can learn." For professionals-in-training, those ideal conditions typically consist of experiential opportunities in which they can apply the theories and practice the lessons taught within their courses.

What is experiential learning?

Simply put, [experiential learning](#) is when students learn by doing outside of the classroom and then reflect on and analyze their experience. It can be anything from internships to laboratory studies to special projects designed to allow students to practically apply their skills.

What are the benefits of experiential learning?

Experiential learning, when paired with a rigorous theoretical knowledge base, can help you get more value out of your degree program, expand your professional network, and better prepare you for employment in your chosen field. Here are some of the top benefits of experiential learning:

Practice applied skills

While traditional classroom learning is a foundational aspect of any higher education program, experiential learning opportunities can elevate and enrich educational experiences by allowing students to hone their skills before they enter the workplace. Instead of solely theoretical knowledge, graduates will [come away with practical experience and skills](#) and be ready for a position in their field. You can step into your post-grad role with more confidence and impress your employer with how quickly you adapt to your position.

Learn from working professionals

Classroom instructors are the foundation of any educational program because they are professional teachers, trained to effectively transfer information to students. Experiential learning opportunities build on this by adding current professionals in your field into the mix with internships, colloquiums, and more. While not trained professors, working experts will have the [most up-to-date information](#) and tips for students in rapidly evolving industries and job markets.

Build a network of professionals in your field

Building off the interactions with current professionals in your field, experiential learning may offer you the chance to network with big names in your area of study. We already know that [internships can often lead to full-time employment](#) when interns excel. Even if you participate in some other type of experiential learning, you'll still come into contact with other leading professionals in your field who may have an opening in the future.

Add experience to your resume

Most jobs seek candidates not only with degrees but with experience. Internships, capstone projects, and many other experiential learning opportunities can count toward experience on your resume, proving you have more than just a theoretical knowledge of your position, making you more employable. Instead of learning how to apply knowledge on the job, students with applied project experience will be [a step ahead of the game](#) – and therefore a step ahead of candidates who don't have the same experiential learning opportunity.

Make a difference before you earn your degree

Students hoping to enter the public service, human service, medical, or other fields that positively impact people and communities do so overwhelmingly because they want to help

people. With experiential learning, you don't have to wait until your degree is finished to start making a difference. Put your newfound knowledge to work in your community while still learning in the classroom as well.

Public policy graduate programs that feature experiential learning

If you are a service-minded individual and think all of the above benefits incorporate what you are looking for in a degree, the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire offers three master's degrees centered around experiential learning opportunities: the Master of Public Policy, Master in Public Administration, and Master in Community Development.

Master in Public Policy

The [MPP program at Carsey](#) enables students to become leaders in the policy and advocacy arenas. MPP students graduate with polished skills in policy analysis, strategic communication, and more, largely thanks to three experiential learning opportunities tailored to students' interests and career goals.

Washington D.C. Colloquium

During the January term, students [travel to D.C.](#) to meet with dozens of policy professionals on every imaginable career path. [Jordyn Kafka, '20G](#), says that the Colloquium was "the most valuable aspect of the program because I got to apply classroom skills to the real world of policymaking" as she interacted with policy experts.

Between our week-long colloquium in Washington, D.C., and guest speakers on campus during Fall and Spring semesters, the Carsey School's Master of Public Policy students have the opportunity to learn from a long list of policy practitioners with years of on-the-ground experience. The D.C. trip gives students front-row access to meetings with public policy institutions.

Internships

Each MPP student completes an internship with an organization they would like to work for where they apply classroom knowledge to real-world problems and network with industry experts. "I interned with the U.S. Department of State," describes [Tara Griffin, '19G](#). "This experience not only allowed me to stay with the State Department full-time after I graduated, but also gave me an opportunity to apply what I was learning in the classroom within real-life situations."

Applied Capstone Projects

All MPP students design an applied capstone project, providing another opportunity to hone their skills and delve deeply into an issue they are interested in addressing. Students can even use a paid position they are passionate about to fulfill the requirement, like [Adam Strong, '19G](#), did. Adam says he "looked for a job where I could do meaningful work while

gaining real-world experience that would fulfill my capstone and internship requirements to graduate.”

Master in Community Development

Carsey’s [online MCD program](#) empowers working professionals to advance their skills and careers in community engagement and leadership. Students design a multi-semester [applied capstone project](#) in their area of interest, meaning much of their time is spent in their communities, learning and growing their capabilities. “My long-term goal is to have a meaningful impact on housing conditions in southern New Hampshire,” explains [James Vayo, '19G](#). “The capstone project allows me to apply my knowledge to a problem I am passionate about and use new concepts and skills from the classroom to develop real-world solutions.”

Learn how the Master in Community Development degree program at the Carsey School of Public Policy prepares and shapes our students for successful careers as community organizers, fundraising and development leaders, government agency managers, policy advocates, program administrators, project managers, and more!

Master in Public Administration

Carsey’s [online MPA program](#), with options for both mid-career and new professionals, supports students in enhancing their leadership skills for the public and nonprofit sectors. Similar to the MCD, students complete an applied [capstone project](#) where they demonstrate the key knowledge and skills they learned in the classroom in their communities. “I was fortunate enough to be able to work with a colleague at the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services on my capstone to conduct a state-wide survey that would lead to the development of policies, programs, and funding needed to accomplish this initiative,” remembers [Kathy Naczas, '92G](#). “Many wonderful programs were advanced at that time, and I believe our survey data and analysis helped in achieving success for New Hampshire's seniors.”

Carsey School Academic Director Dan Bromberg sat down with Sarah Dorner '14G (Master of Public Administration program) in 2020 to discuss what it was like as a career professional returning to school.

Ready to learn more about the Carsey School's master degree programs and discover how experiential learning can take your education and career to the next level? [Contact a member of our Admissions team today!](#)

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