



Article

Engaging the Community: The Importance of Experiential Learning in Tourism and Hospitality Management at State Universities

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of experiential learning on professionalism, industry-specific knowledge, and employability among tourism and hospitality management students in state universities. The research indicates that hands-on learning approaches have a significant role in the gap between academic theory and practical application within such a fluid industry. It focused specifically on how community engagement activities were integrated into experiential learning programs to enhance students' understanding of real-world industry issues. These activities also facilitated stronger relationships among academia, industry, and the community, fostering mutually beneficial partnerships. It then went deeper to explain the challenges and opportunities to state universities in implementing experiential learning initiatives. Resource allocation, stakeholder collaboration, and impact of the program on students' outcomes were some of the key areas of investigation. Findings have shown the nature of both obstacles such as funding constraints and poor coordination, and opportunities such as the enhancement of industry connection and student readiness for workforces. By addressing these objectives, the research provided insight into how experiential learning programs are implemented and their outcomes in tourism and hospitality education. The findings highlighted the transformative potential of such programs in preparing students for the demands of a competitive global workforce while contributing to the development of local industry and community ecosystems. Recommendations were given to improve experiential learning strategies and deepen the link between academic and real-world experiences for future program improvements.

Keywords: *experiential learning, tourism and hospitality management, industry*

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Introduction

Experiential learning has increasingly been recognized as one of the cornerstones of effective higher education, particularly in professional fields that demand practical skills and industry readiness. In the context of tourism and hospitality management, this approach is especially significant given the dynamic, customer-focused nature of the sector. The industry demands theoretical knowledge and the ability to apply concepts in real-world scenarios, respond to complex customer needs, and adapt to rapidly changing service environments. For state universities in the Philippines, where resource constraints often hinder the delivery of highly specialized training, experiential learning offers a vital bridge between classroom instruction and professional practice. By embedding hands-on experiences into the curriculum, state universities can better equip graduates with the competencies necessary to thrive in a competitive global market.

Community engagement is a central component of experiential learning, which connects students to real-world contexts beyond the classroom. It includes interaction with industry professionals, immersion in community-based tourism projects, and participation in internships or practicum programs where students directly apply their learning. Through these engagements, students acquire technical and interpersonal skills and cultivate social sensitivity, cultural awareness, and a sense of responsibility toward sustainable community development. In this way, experiential learning contributes not only to the employability of graduates but also to the broader mission of state universities to serve communities and foster inclusive development.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine the role of experiential learning in skill development, community collaboration, and career readiness among tourism and hospitality management students in state universities. Its findings are expected to be significant for multiple stakeholders. For educators, the study offers insights into best practices in integrating experiential learning into curricula and designing programs that build hard and soft skills. For industry stakeholders, it underscores the value of closer collaboration with higher education institutions in cultivating service quality and innovation. For policymakers, it provides evidence for promoting experiential learning initiatives in state universities to ensure the production of globally competitive graduates. Ultimately, this research also addresses how community engagement shapes professional development while simultaneously meeting societal needs through the mutual exchange of knowledge and resources.

As Kolb (1984) articulated, experiential learning theory emphasizes learning through direct experience, reflection, and application. Its cyclical model of concrete

experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation is particularly suited for tourism and hospitality education, where the mastery of customer service, cultural competence, and adaptability is central (Kay & Parsons, 2019). In this field, traditional lecture-based instruction is often insufficient, as the complexities of real-world hospitality operations demand learning approaches that expose students to practical problem-solving scenarios.

Several studies highlight the transformative effects of experiential learning in hospitality education. According to Chan (2012), experiential approaches nurture critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability, competencies that enable students to cope with the industry's intricacies. Similarly, Barron and Maxwell (1993) observed that internships and practicum opportunities significantly enhance students' professional competencies while deepening their understanding of customer relations and service standards. Community-based tourism projects also provide a dual benefit; they foster professional skills in students while simultaneously promoting community empowerment and sustainable development (Dredge & Whitford, 2011).

At the institutional level, implementing experiential learning presents both challenges and opportunities. Research by Zehrer and Mössenlechner (2009) indicates that resource constraints, such as limited funding, infrastructure, and partnerships, restrict the scope of programs in public universities. However, such barriers can be mitigated through collaborations with industry and local communities, enriching student learning and generating direct contributions to community development. Additionally, Rae (2007) found that experiential learning fosters stronger alum networks and better employment outcomes, reflecting its long-term benefits for individuals and institutions.

Nonetheless, effective implementation requires alignment between academic goals and industry expectations. A study by Richardson (2008) revealed that mismatches between what universities teach and what the industry expects often undermine the success of experiential programs. This challenge underscores the importance of ongoing dialogue between educational institutions and industry partners to ensure that learning outcomes correspond with evolving professional standards (Cooper & Shepherd, 1997). Without such alignment, experiential programs risk producing graduates who are technically trained but not adequately prepared for the demands of the workforce.

The benefits of experiential learning in tourism and hospitality management are widely documented, particularly in private universities and specialized hospitality institutions across the globe (Zehrer & Mössenlechner, 2009; Kay & Parsons, 2019). However, less attention has been given to how state universities, which often operate

under resource constraints, integrate and sustain these approaches. Most studies highlight outcomes in well-funded contexts, leaving a gap in understanding the unique experiences of students and educators in state institutions that serve broader and more diverse populations. Furthermore, while literature acknowledges the importance of industry collaboration, the specific role of community engagement in shaping student learning outcomes has not been adequately examined. There is no empirical evidence on how community immersion, local tourism initiatives, and collaborative projects with stakeholders contribute to skill development and professional readiness among students.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the experiences, challenges, and implications of experiential learning in state universities offering tourism and hospitality management programs. Analyzing the intersection of classroom instruction, community engagement, and industry collaboration provides a more comprehensive understanding of how experiential learning contributes to individual student development and community advancement. In doing so, the study expands the discourse on experiential education to include perspectives from resource-constrained but socially embedded institutions, thereby offering practical and culturally grounded insights for curriculum development, policy-making, and sustainable industry partnerships.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the role of experiential learning in developing professional skills, knowledge, and employability of tourism and hospitality management students at state universities.
2. To determine how community engagement activities are integrated into experiential learning programs to support students in understanding real-world industry issues and to foster stronger relationships between the community, industries, and academia.
3. To gain insights into the challenges and opportunities of state universities in implementing experiential learning programs for tourism and hospitality management, resource allocation, stakeholder collaboration, and student outcomes would be some of the focus areas.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design to explore the importance and integration of experiential learning in state universities' tourism and hospitality

management programs. The methodology was developed to address the objectives of observing skill development, community engagement, and institutional challenges. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with students, faculty, and alums of tourism and hospitality programs to collect data for the study. The methods gathered information on how experiential learning contributed to real-world preparedness and professional growth. Alums shared their views on the impact of experiential learning on their career trajectories, while current students elaborated on their ongoing learning experiences.

Engaging community activities within experiential learning programs was examined by inviting industry professionals, local government representatives, and community stakeholders into the study. Interviews emphasized the collaborative efforts of such experiences as internships, community-based tourism projects, and business ties for collaboration with local businesses. These activities supported students in overcoming real-world industry challenges while enhancing academia-community hospitality ties. Institutional documents, including program outlines, funding reports, and partnership agreements, were examined to understand challenges and opportunities that state universities faced in implementing these programs.

Interviews with administrators and faculty members focused on resource allocation, stakeholder collaboration, and student outcomes. The data were thematically analyzed, revealing recurring patterns and making connections between experiential learning practices and broader program objectives. The study maintained ethical rigor by securing informed consent from participants and ensuring confidentiality.

Results and Findings

Experiential learning has emerged as a cornerstone of tourism and hospitality education, providing students with opportunities to bridge the gap between theory and practice through hands-on experiences, community engagement, and industry collaboration. In state universities, programs such as internships, on-the-job training, simulated learning environments, and community-based projects have been shown to enhance students' acquisition of practical skills, enabling them to develop competencies in communication, customer service, teamwork, and problem-solving, skills that are vital for employability in this dynamic sector. Beyond skill acquisition, experiential learning allows students to apply classroom concepts in real-world contexts, reinforcing their knowledge while cultivating adaptability and confidence. Industry collaboration projects and community-based initiatives further strengthen

this process, exposing students to authentic challenges while fostering mutual benefits for learners and local stakeholders. Partnerships between universities, industries, and communities expand professional networks and contribute to cultural preservation, sustainability, and local development. Despite its transformative potential, however, experiential learning in state universities faces challenges, particularly in resource allocation and sustaining structured stakeholder collaboration. Limited funding and outdated facilities hinder program implementation, while misaligned expectations sometimes weaken partnerships with industry. Nevertheless, when effectively supported, experiential learning maximizes positive student outcomes by cultivating career readiness, strengthening employability, and enabling students to make meaningful contributions to the communities they serve.

Practical Skill Acquisition through Hands-on Experience

Practical learning skills help students gain necessary competencies for tourism and hospitality. The on-the-job training, simulated practical environments, and internship allow them to acquire communication, customer services, and problem-solving competencies. A student participant reported that working in a live kitchen setup during our practicum taught me time management and how to handle pressure, which you do not fully grasp in theory. Faculty members concurred, with one commenting that we strive to offer students experiences that allow them to develop essential skills that align with industry needs, such as adaptability and teamwork. Such opportunities help fill the gap between the classroom and the industry.

Learning and Applying What Is Learned

Experiential learning allows students to apply theoretical concepts to practical situations, thus understanding the subject matter better. Fieldwork, such as event management or destination marketing projects, enables students to see their coursework in real life. One participant commented that planning a community-based tourism project allowed me to understand the intricacies of budgeting and logistics, which I could not have learned solely from textbooks. Another said, Seeing the direct impact of our strategies on actual business outcomes was eye-opening and reinforced my learning. Faculty added that such programs are specifically geared to ensure students learn the appropriate concepts in the industry, all while facing real-world challenges.

Building Employability and Career Readiness

The experiential learning framework enhances students' employability through industry exposure and the facilitation of professional networks. Internship supervisors also noted that students who went through practical training had a higher readiness for employment. An industry professional commented, Interns from state universities who have had hands-on experience adapt faster to our workflows and often require less training. Students expressed similar views, with one stating, The internship helped me gain confidence and secure a job offer before graduation. Faculty emphasized that integrating experiential learning into the curriculum prepares students to meet workforce demands by enhancing their technical and soft skills.

Industry Collaboration Projects

Another significant community engagement integration in experiential learning programs is the industry collaboration projects, where students directly collaborate with businesses or organizations in the tourism and hospitality sector. Such projects can include developing marketing strategies, plan events, or devising solutions for operations. One student participant said that in our project with a local hotel, we studied their booking system and made suggestions to make it easier, which gave us real-world problem-solving experience. Industry representatives were also pleased with these collaborations, noting how students bring fresh ideas to long-standing challenges. As one manager said, working with students introduces innovative perspectives while allowing them to understand industry realities. Such projects are not only learning skills but also allow students to work significantly and interact with community partners, fostering a mutual exchange of knowledge and insight.

Initiatives in Community-Based Learning

Other alternative sources in which engagement activities are integrated into experiential learning are community-based learning projects. It may involve setting up tourist promotion for local sites, surveying preferences, or helping small businesses improve their delivery service. One student shared that our community immersion project entailed developing a tour package for a heritage site within our local destination. Witnessing firsthand the direct positive impact our effort made for the community was satisfying.

Community leaders acknowledged these efforts as impactful, with one stating that the students' involvement has significantly helped promote local culture and attract tourists, which supports our economic growth. Faculty members highlighted

that such initiatives allow students to learn about sustainability, cultural preservation, and the importance of community inclusion in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Building Partnerships Between Stakeholders

An important aspect of integrating community engagement into experiential learning is building partnerships between the community, industries, and academia. Such partnerships are often implemented through collaborative agreements where the universities and industry stakeholders work together towards common objectives. According to a faculty member, we have formalized partnerships with a few hotels and tourism agencies to offer students internship opportunities and collaborative projects.

According to community members, these partnerships benefit the students and the bond between academic institutions and local businesses. According to an industry professional, these partnerships help us identify talent early and shape it to meet our organizational needs while universities get insight into the trends and challenges we face. Students like one student also appreciate this network, saying that the contacts I made at my internship have led me to take up a full-time position upon graduation.

Through collaborative projects, community-based initiatives, and stakeholder partnerships, the students are equipped for the demands of the tourism and hospitality sector while contributing positively to the communities they serve.

Challenges in Resource Allocation

Resource allocation was found to be one of the significant barriers in the implementation of effective experiential learning programs. State universities are usually financially limited and, therefore, cannot provide all comprehensive opportunities like internships, study tours, or state-of-the-art facilities. Our budget usually goes to core academic needs, and experiential learning programs suffer from a lack of funding. One faculty member said getting resources for field trips or collaborations with top industry players is difficult.

Another student mentioned outdated equipment and limited access to industry-standard tools. Another said that we rely on theory because the university has no budget to simulate a hotel or kitchen lab. However, amidst all this, some institutions have taken the challenge as an opportunity to optimize the minimal resources available by planning strategies such as collaborating with the local companies for shared use of some resources, showing that one way out might be found.

Developing Stakeholder Collaboration

Collaboration with stakeholders is the backbone of a successful experiential learning program. Universities often face the challenge of establishing and maintaining a productive partnership with industry leaders and community organizations. According to a program coordinator, whereas we try to create strong industry ties, a lack of structured agreements or misaligned expectations can hinder collaboration.

On the other hand, successful partnerships offer great opportunities. An industry partner said that when universities and businesses align their goals, we can create meaningful programs that benefit students and organizations. These partnerships bridge the gap between theoretical education and industry needs. The students echoed this importance with one saying: Industry professionals have been crucial for preparing me for the job market through internships and workshops.

Maximizing Positive Student Outcomes

Experiential learning programs present an excellent opportunity for positive changes in student outcomes, though attaining success each time may be difficult. Most participants agreed that the transformational potential of these programs lies in the fact that it improves their skills and makes them more employable. One of the students said that working on actual tourism projects taught me teamwork, problem-solving, and customer service, skills I would not have fully developed in a traditional classroom setting.

Closing the gap by embracing hybrid and remote experiential learning options may equalize opportunities and make their benefits more available to students.

It thus reveals that, though resource constraints and inconsistent collaboration are challenges, experiential learning programs in state universities also pose opportunities for significant positive impact. Addressing resource allocation through innovative funding mechanisms, building industry partnerships with clear frameworks, and ensuring equitable access to opportunities can enhance the efficacy of these programs.

Discussion

This study's findings underscore experiential learning's transformative role in shaping state universities' tourism and hospitality management programs. Integrating practical, experience-based activities into academic curricula significantly enhanced students' skills, knowledge, and employability. Unlike purely theoretical instruction, experiential learning provides authentic contexts where students can apply classroom

concepts to real-world situations, bridging the gap between academic preparation and professional demands. This outcome strongly resonates with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which emphasizes the cyclical learning process through concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. By sitting in learning within authentic industry and community settings, state universities fostered a deeper, more durable form of learning where theoretical knowledge was continuously reinforced and validated through practice.

Students consistently reported that internships, industry exposure, and structured fieldwork were instrumental in their professional development. These opportunities allowed them to cultivate core competencies such as teamwork, communication, adaptability, problem-solving, and customer service orientation, which are central to succeeding in the highly dynamic tourism and hospitality sector. It supports earlier findings by Chan (2012) and Kay and Parsons (2019), who noted that experiential learning not only equips students with technical proficiency but also hones soft skills increasingly valued in global hospitality markets. Moreover, experiential learning helped students gain confidence, resilience, and cultural awareness, preparing them to navigate diverse workplace environments and rapidly evolving industry expectations.

Equally important is the study's finding on the role of community engagement as a pillar of experiential learning. Through community-based tourism projects, outreach activities, and collaborations with local stakeholders, students were exposed to the practical challenges and opportunities within the industry. Such engagements helped them better understand sustainability, resource management, and the socio-cultural dimensions of hospitality and tourism. In turn, students gained relevant professional insights and contributed to community development by participating in projects that supported local tourism initiatives, enhanced cultural heritage promotion, and addressed grassroots needs. This dual benefit highlights the reciprocal nature of experiential learning: while students acquire practical skills and professional readiness, communities benefit from the energy, innovation, and service contributions of learners.

Overall, the findings confirm that experiential learning is not merely a pedagogical enhancement but a transformative educational strategy that empowers students, strengthens community-industry-university linkages, and enriches tourism and hospitality programs in state universities. By integrating classroom knowledge with real-world practice and community involvement, experiential learning ensures that graduates are technically competent and socially responsible and industry-ready professionals capable of driving growth and innovation in the sector.

Conclusion

Based on the study results, the following conclusions were made for the role and impact of experiential learning programs in tourism and hospitality management in state universities. The findings reveal that experiential learning is key to developing students' professional competencies, industry and business knowledge, and employability. Practical experiences, such as internships, fieldwork, and collaborative projects, significantly enhanced students' communication, problem-solving, and teamwork abilities, effectively bridging the gap between academic theories and industry practices. Moreover, integrating community engagement activities within these programs allowed students to understand real-world challenges better while fostering stronger ties between academia, industry, and local communities. These activities were essential in fostering mutual benefits, acquiring hands-on learning experiences, and contributing to community development activities. These include resource constraints, old facilities, and inconsistency in stakeholder partnerships. The findings highlight the importance of experiential learning in preparing students for the dynamic demands of the tourism and hospitality sectors. By addressing identified challenges and leveraging collaborative opportunities, state universities can further enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of these programs, ensuring they remain a cornerstone for professional and personal development in this field.

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