

Applied Learning Status Report
June 29, 2005
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Method

During January and February, all academic department chairs completed a brief semi-structured interview in which they identified the members of their departments involved in applied learning efforts. Faculty identified by their chairs in that process were contacted to complete a second, more detailed semi-structured interview. Those planning to leave Western were excluded from the sample, as were chairs and the applied learning director. In total, 64 faculty were contacted and 53 completed the interview process between April and June, yielding a response rate of nearly 83%.

Some faculty completed multiple interviews if they were involved in multiple forms of applied learning. For the four types of curricular applied learning recognized at Western, the following number of interviews were completed: (1) 28 out of 37 attempted for independent research/project; (2) 25 out of 28 attempted for internship/practica; (3) 8 out of 8 attempted for study away; and (4) 7 out of 10 attempted for service learning. Thus, the response rate across types of applied learning ranged from 70-100%.

The interview tool itself had 17 questions on the following topics:

- ◆ Four questions on *Placement Quality*
- ◆ Two questions on *Application*
- ◆ Four questions on *Reflection*
- ◆ One question on *Diversity*
- ◆ Three questions on *Community Voice*
- ◆ Three questions on additional quality criteria, duration of the applied learning experience, and grading practices

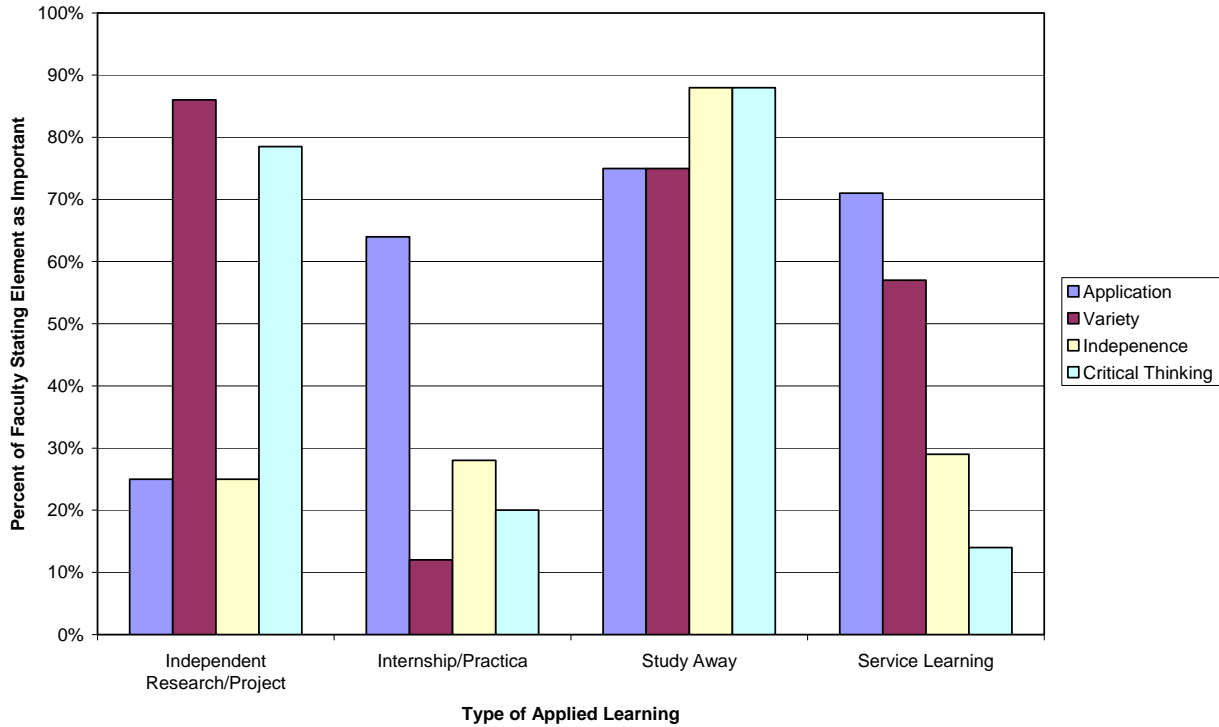
The first five sets of questions on *Placement Quality*, *Application*, *Reflection*, *Diversity*, and *Community Voice* were derived from the existing literature on applied learning quality evaluation practices. The purpose of those, along with the final three questions, were to assess Western's faculty on the elements of applied learning that they believe are essential to high quality student experiences. Faculty responses were recorded by the interviewer and subsequently analyzed. Analysis focused on identifying common themes that emerged across types of applied learning, as well as noting variability across types of applied learning. These themes will then be used to generate items to be part of our institutional assessment plan for applied learning.

Results

Placement Quality. Analysis of Placement Quality responses revealed four common elements relevant to quality across types of applied learning. Below, the four elements are described and the percent of faculty who mentioned them across types of applied learning are graphed.

- ◆ Not surprisingly, the first element was application, representing responses indicating the context should offer opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in a real-world setting.
- ◆ The second element was variety, representing responses indicating the setting had to involve a variety of different activities, not repetitive tasks.
- ◆ The third element was independence, representing responses indicating the setting should provide opportunities for the student to work on his or her own, particularly having some ownership in the work done there.
- ◆ The final element was critical thinking, representing responses describing the importance of analytical thinking in the applied learning experience.

Common Elements of Placement Quality



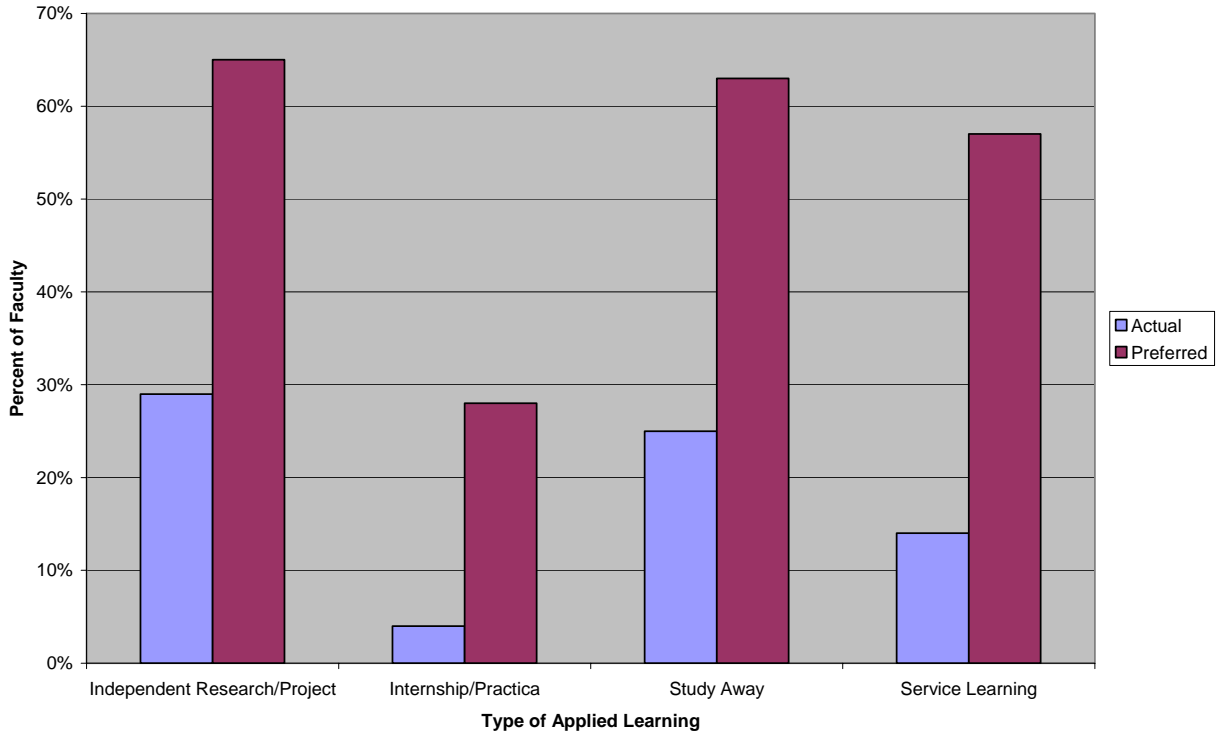
- ◆ Across forms of applied learning, 54% of interviews mentioned variety, 51% mentioned critical thinking, 50% mentioned application, and 44% mentioned independence. Other themes emerged, but not with the strength of these, and not consistently across the types of applied learning.
- ◆ Within types of applied learning, different patterns occurred:
 - For Independent Research/Project, application tended to mean use of the scientific method. Faculty agreed that clerical activity alone would be negative, although in the context of a variety of activities was acceptable, particularly if one of the activities involved analysis.
 - For Internship/Practica, faculty felt strongly that the opportunity to apply coursework was of utmost importance. In particular, several mentioned the important role of special projects that provide both the opportunity to take ownership as well as to practice analytical skills.
 - For Study Away, faculty agreed independence through immersion was important. However, given the brief duration of most trips and the high amounts of faculty contact (88% report near constant contact with students), few students probably have opportunity to meet this goal. This is a structural problem with the short-term nature of our study away opportunities.
 - For Service Learning, faculty mentioned application most frequently, but often in vague terms. Some even responded that no special skills were required for service-learning, suggesting a struggle to implement the distinction between service and service-learning.

Reflection. Patterns in faculty reflection practices are detailed in the table below. Faculty mainly use at least two forms of reflection, except in Service Learning which involves predominantly a single form. In instances in which faculty reported using only single forms of reflection, discussion was the form most frequently mentioned.

	Number of Forms of Reflection Used			Frequency of Reflection		
	3 or more	2	1	Throughout	Weekly	4 times or less
Independent Research/Project	50%	21%	29%	86%	--	14%
Internship/Practica	--	60%	40%	56%	16%	24%
Study Away	72%	63%	25%	100%	--	--
Service-Learning	--	43%	57%	86%	--	14%

- ◆ In addition to the forms and the frequency of reflection, faculty were asked to describe the focus of their reflection activities. In particular, they were asked about the levels of Analysis and Sharing in their reflective practice. The results were striking and consistent across types of applied learning. Nearly all faculty report underutilizing analysis in their reflective practice, and conversely, overutilizing sharing.

Actual and Preferred Level of Analysis in Reflection



- ◆ Finally, faculty were asked how they respond to student reflections. Most reported using a single form of response, typically oral. If non-oral responses were given, they were typically written comments on a final project. Very few faculty provide both oral and written feedback to student reflections.

Application. Faculty were asked to describe the courses to which their applied learning activity connects.

- ◆ Most faculty identified specific courses, some identified a specific sequence of them. A smaller number described applied learning as “related to everything” or not relevant to coursework at all.
- ◆ When asked to describe how these connections are communicated to students, in general most provide some written documentation of these connections in syllabi or assignments. A smaller percentage only make such connections through discussion, and a smaller, but still noticeable group makes no explicit connection as they see the connections as self-evident.

	Course Connections				Communicating Connections		
	Specific Courses	Sequence of Courses	Relates to Everything	Doesn't Relate	Written	Oral	Self-Evident
Independent Research/Project	79%	--	10.5%	10.5%	25%	64%	11%
Internship/Practica	64%	20%	16%	--	52%	16%	32%
Study Away	100%	--	--	--	--	88%	12%
Service-Learning	100%	--	--	--	71%	29%	--

Diversity. Faculty were asked if diversity was important to the quality of applied learning experience, and to specify what types of diversity mattered.

- ◆ For Independent Research/Project, 46% of faculty said diversity was important. For Internship/Practica, 68% indicated diversity's importance. Study Away had the highest percentage, with 88%, followed by Service-Learning with 86%.
- ◆ When asked what types of diversity were important, no strong themes emerged across types or within types of applied learning. Many mentioned socio-economic status, race, gender, and culture.

Community Voice. Faculty were asked about the relationship of their applied learning activity to community need. As a follow-up probe, faculty were asked to what extent the relationship between the learning activity and community need was reciprocal.

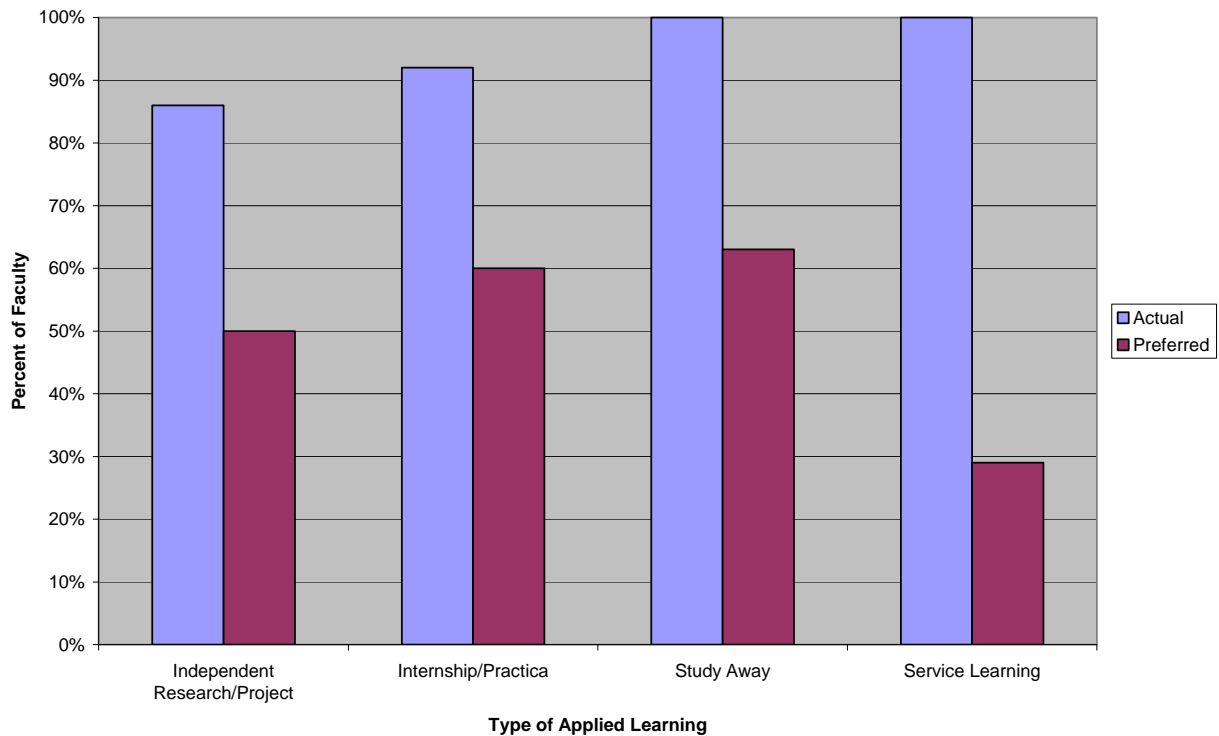
	Linkage to Community Need			Reciprocal Nature of Link			
	Yes, Linked	No, Not Linked	It Depends	Fully Reciprocal	Student Gets Most	Community Gets Most	It Depends
Independent Research/Project	64%	28%	8%	70%	20%	5%	5%
Internship/Practica	72%	20%	8%	60%	8%	16%	16%
Study Away	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Service-Learning	100%	--	--	86%	--	--	14%

- ◆ Respondents interpreted "community" broadly. Some considered the academic field the community, others Western, and still others their geographical community.
- ◆ Study Away respondents struggled to answer this and in general felt it was not applicable to the nature of their applied learning work.
- ◆ Most faculty felt the relationship between applied learning activity for students and community need was reciprocal, although in some cases it was unbalanced.

Other Questions. Faculty were asked about other quality indicators, about the duration of their applied learning experiences and their grading practices and preferences.

- ◆ For Independent Research/Project, dissemination was mentioned by 70% of the interviewees as important to quality. For Independent Research/Project and Internship/Practica 28% and 36% mentioned student evaluations as important. Also, 32% of Internship/Practica faculty mentioned site supervisor evaluations as important quality indicators.
- ◆ Most applied learning activity is at least one semester long, and many span multiple semesters. Only Study Away lasts less than a semester in most cases.
- ◆ Faculty were asked if they assigned grades or used P/F designations. They were also asked which they preferred. The data for those responses are summarized in the graph below.
- ◆ Again, a striking pattern emerged across types of applied learning. More faculty are assigning grades than prefer to—many would prefer to move to a P/F system for applied learning. However, other departments who prefer grades indicated grading was essential to their certification/accreditation processes.

Actually Grades Applied Learning vs. Prefers to Grade



Opportunities for Faculty Development

- ◆ Study Away faculty have goals (i.e., immersion, independence) that are hard to fully realize with a short-term format for study away. Once the new Study Away Director is in place, developing a semester away format in addition to our accessible short-term trips should be helpful.
- ◆ Service-Learning is in its infancy at Western, as reflected by both the smaller number of faculty engaged in it as well as their struggle to implement the applications and evaluations of it. Twenty-nine percent of service-learning respondents indicated no special skills are necessary for service-learning, which begs the question of what is applied. An equal percentage indicated they grade these projects on participation rather than quality of service rendered. Faculty would benefit from opportunities to work with experts on designing and assessing service-learning activities.
- ◆ Across types of applied learning,
 - Faculty would like to implement more analytical reflection practices. Bringing an expert on this, such as Dr. Janet Eyler, to campus would be a useful faculty development exercise.
 - Students would benefit from a greater percentage of faculty providing explicit written documentation of the connections the *faculty* perceive to be present in applied learning. Presently, there is an over-reliance on connections communicated via discussion, or not at all.
 - A large percentage of faculty see connections to community need. However, developing these community partners so that both student learning and community benefit are maximized requires continual effort from both Western's and their community partners. Bringing an expert to campus on the development of this kind of partnership, such as Kevin Kesckes, Director of Community-University Partnerships at Portland State University, would also be useful.
 - Most faculty feel diversity is beneficial to applied learning quality, although Independent Research/Project faculty are split on the matter. Some faculty may have been reticent to say that diversity was unimportant to independent research/project quality, which may have contributed to this split. For faculty who feel more certain about diversity's relationship to quality, perhaps working with CME staff and with co-curricular programming to focus on the many forms diversity can take will be a useful effort for students and faculty, alike.