

**Applied Learning Alumni Survey**  
**May 14, 2008**  
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Western's institutional signature program, applied learning, has been assumed to have a positive impact on student outcomes post-graduation. To move beyond assumptions, this spring an alumni survey was conducted to assess the impact of applied learning experiences on perceptions of preparedness and post-graduation career progression.

*Sample*

Alumni since 1999 were surveyed, and only two departments were selected. Biology (BIO) and Engineering Technology (ETC) alumni were selected for two reasons: (1) though applied learning is frequently offered in these departments, they do not *require* applied learning for graduation, allowing a comparison of alumni who did versus didn't participate in curricular applied learning, and (2) they provided representation from each of the two colleges (LAS and PS, respectively).

Alumni contact information was procured through the Alumni Office on campus, and based on that information, 334 surveys were mailed in mid-March, with 76% of the sample being from BIO and 24% from ETC. The response rate to the survey was 18.26%, with 77% of the respondents coming from BIO and 23% from ETC, making it reasonably comparable to the survey mailing.

*Instrument*

The survey itself was a 13-item questionnaire format, with a 14<sup>th</sup> item allowing free response. Respondents indicated their graduation year, whether or not they had completed an applied learning (AL) experience (which we defined in the cover letter and on the instrument), and if so, what type of AL experience. Respondents also provided information about their initial job search duration, starting and current salary, promotion experience, graduate school pursuit and completion, and psychological perceptions of preparedness, satisfaction with degree program, and confidence upon graduation.

*Results*

Fifty-seven percent of respondents indicated they had a curricular AL experience while at Western. The vast majority of these experiences were internships (37%) or independent research (34%) or a combination of those two (17%). No service-learning was reported, and only 11% of those indicating an AL experience participated in Study Away.

*Job Search and Salary Outcomes.* Of the respondents indicating an AL experience, 42% indicated that the experience led directly to a job offer. However, AL experiences in this sample did not significantly impact job placement within the first six months: 77% of alumni with AL experience landed their first position in less than six months, and 73% of alumni without AL experience were placed in the same amount of time. Additionally, no advantage for an AL experience was detected in terms of starting salaries, either. The mean starting salary for AL respondents was significantly ( $p < .05$ ) lower than that for non-AL respondents. Fifty-seven percent of respondents with an AL experience indicated a starting salary below \$30,000 on their first job, and this was the modal response for alumni with AL experience. Only 28% of non-AL respondents indicated a starting salary in that range. The modal response for non-AL respondents was a starting salary between \$30,000-\$39,999. This pattern persisted for current salary, with AL respondents indicating an average current salary of \$37,984 and non-AL respondents indicating a mean current salary of \$43,587, although the difference was not statistically significant.

Examining only the independent research and internship respondents and disaggregating them from each other reveals that internship participants are significantly more likely to see their AL experience result directly in a job offer than their independent research counterparts. While 69% of internship participants' AL experiences yielded an offer, only 22% of independent research experiences culminated with such a result. Consequently, the internship participants also show a distinct advantage in terms of the duration of their initial job search—92% of them were placed in under 6 months, while 73% of independent research participants had located positions within that amount of time. No difference, however, was observed between internship and independent research participants in terms of the size of their starting salaries. Fifty percent of each group started below \$30,000. This pattern of no discernable difference persisted with current salaries, as well. The independent research respondents were markedly more likely to have reported a promotion—80% as compared to only 58% of the internship respondents.

*Promotion and Perceptions.* Although placement and salary responses showed no benefit to AL experience, promotion and perception responses did. Respondents with AL experience were somewhat more likely to report having received a promotion. Eighty percent of AL respondents indicated they'd received a promotion, while only 62% of non-AL respondents had. Alumni who had an AL experience at Western reported modestly higher perceptions of their preparedness, satisfaction with degree program, and confidence in their initial job search.

*Means and Standard Deviations for Perceptual Ratings*

	<b>Preparedness (<math>\sigma</math>)*</b>	<b>Satisfaction (<math>\sigma</math>)</b>	<b>Confidence (<math>\sigma</math>)</b>
<i>AL Experience</i>	3.87 (1.09)	3.97 (1.10)	3.77 (1.01)
<i>No AL Experience</i>	3.44 (.80)	3.85 (.82)	3.58 (.98)

\* $p < .10$

For those respondents that had an AL experience, over half (57.2%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the experience helped them in the interview or graduate school admissions process.

*Graduate School Admissions and Completion Data.* It is in terms of graduate school admissions and completion that a clear benefit to AL experience emerges. Thirty-seven percent of the total sample indicated they had pursued graduate studies, and of those individuals, 65% were AL respondents. Alternately, 44% of the AL respondents reported pursuing graduate studies, while only 31% of non-AL respondents had. Of the individuals who had pursued graduate school, 39% had already successfully completed their programs. Individuals who had successfully completed graduate school were predominantly AL respondents—78% of individuals completing graduate studies had an AL experience. Alternately, 46% of AL respondents who had pursued graduate school completed it at the time of this survey, in contrast to only 28% of non-AL respondents. AL respondents also showed a greater variety of degrees being completed: medical degrees, master's degrees, and Ph.D.'s. Non-AL respondents had only master's degrees represented in this sample.

Disaggregating the internship and independent research respondents from each other indicated that the two groups of respondents were equally likely to pursue graduate school (39% of internship respondents had compared to 42% of independent research). Independent research respondents in this sample were twice as likely to have completed graduate school and were more likely to have pursued a Ph.D. than internship respondents; however, the response rate on these questions for these participants was low enough that I would interpret these patterns with caution.

*Alumni Comments.* AL respondents were asked to characterize the benefits of applied learning. Twenty-five of the 35 AL respondents answered this open-ended query, generating a total of fifty-two comments (some respondents generated multiple comments). After reviewing all comments, each comment was coded as to the nature of its meaning. The modal response related to career development, including remarks such as being able to “rise above other applicants” in the interview process or how AL “helped me get my foot in the door.” Eleven of the 52 comments were in this vein. The next most frequently occurring comment was a generic nod to the importance of “experience” that AL provided (9 of 52 comments). Other comments addressed the importance of being able to apply skills to a real setting (8 comments), personal development (8 comments), the development of technical skill (6 comments), personal development (4 comments), the ability to reflect via written or oral forms (4 comments), the ability to view things from a broader perspective (4 comments), and independence (1 comment). One respondent indicated a negative view of his/her AL experience, describing it as “too broad” to be useful.

*Summary*

AL does seem to offer a benefit to students pursuing graduate studies in terms of starting and completing such programs, as well as increasing the variety of degrees considered for pursuit. Although the salary data suggests an AL disadvantage, this may well be explained by the larger number of AL respondents who are currently in graduate school or who pursued graduate school prior to starting their careers. Such pursuits likely yield lower initial salaries but later advantages not captured in this relatively young sample (59% graduated in 2004 or later).

AL-respondents report somewhat higher, though not greatly higher, mean ratings of perceptions of their own preparedness for their initial job search, satisfaction with their degree programs, and confidence in their initial job search than non-AL counterparts. Although the mean scores do not look vastly different, examination of the “top box” scores, a typical approach in marketing research, indicates a much stronger positive effect for AL. Thirty-two percent of AL respondents rated their preparedness using the top rating, while *none* of the non-AL respondents endorsed that rating. On satisfaction with degree program, 36.4% of AL respondents endorsed the top box rating, while not even half that amount (18%) of non-AL respondents did. Finally, with respect to confidence, 23% of AL respondents used the top box rating, while only 19%

of non-AL respondents did. AL experiences do appear to positively impact these sorts of psychological indicators, which bodes well for Western's relationship with alumni.

*Action Recommended*

The present survey provides a snapshot based on a modest sample from two departments from an alumni perspective of the benefits of AL. While the results are helpful in documenting the value alumni perceive in the AL programming, they do not speak directly to issues that would guide program development decisions. A next step as Western assesses the impact of AL is to develop a similar survey targeting the employers of Western alumni. This survey, rightly designed, may help Western "fine-tune" its programming to better support the needs of its community partners in terms of the types of AL experiences it supports and delivers.