

# The Power of ‘High Impact’ Learning

By **KARIN FISCHER**

**W**HEN Martin J. Hershock came to the University of Michigan at Dearborn as an undergraduate four decades ago, he was a first-generation student, with a limited sense of how to navigate college.

But his time at the commuter college was a positive one, offering opportunities like internships and undergraduate research that got him excited about learning and showed how his studies tied to real-world issues. Hershock went on to earn a doctorate in American history and eventually returned to Dearborn as a faculty member. Nine years ago, he became dean of the university’s College of Arts, Sciences, and Letters.

**Having hands-on, experiential activities can deepen classroom learning and improve academic outcomes, like retention and graduation rates.**

Now Hershock and his colleagues have made the kind of experiences that were pivotal for him central to the undergraduate experience for all students in Dearborn’s arts and sciences college.

Educators have come to understand what Hershock saw firsthand: that having hands-on, experiential activities can deepen classroom learning and improve academic outcomes such as retention and

graduation rates. Those activities have gotten a name: high-impact practices.

In addition to internships, research, and study abroad, among the 11 recognized practices are capstone courses and projects, common intellectual experiences, and learning communities.

Research has demonstrated the efficacy of such practices. Students who engage in [service-based learning](#) are more likely to continue with their studies: Among Washington State University students who completed a service-learning project, first-year retention rates were nearly 10 percent higher than those of their peers. A [recent study](#) by the University System of Georgia found that students who studied abroad had better four-year graduation rates and higher grade-point averages than those who stayed on campus.

And experiences like internships can help students even after they earn their diplomas, improving the likelihood that graduates — especially those from low-income and underrepresented backgrounds — will land jobs. An analysis by the Burning Glass Institute, an independent nonprofit research center on the future of work and learning, found that Black and Hispanic computer-science graduates were significantly more likely to get a good job after graduation if they had completed an internship.

## EMBEDDING EQUITY

High-impact practices emphasize important skills like critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. But they also may help students succeed because they give them a sense of belonging and of connection to their professors, fellow students, and the broader community.

Many of these experiences, such as study abroad and undergraduate research, were previously thought of as optional or add-

Students from the U. of Michigan at Dearborn take part in a study-abroad activity in Cyprus. Study abroad is among the “high impact” academic practices thought to improve student success.

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ons, boutique programs for a select group. But given their powerful effects, there has been a greater push in recent years to ensure that all college students participate in at least one high-impact practice. The state of Utah even requires that public-college students complete high-impact practices to earn their bachelor’s degree.

“What’s different and what’s new is the focus on equity and inclusion in design,” says Tia Brown McNair, vice president for diversity, equity, and student success at

the American Association of Colleges and Universities.

There has also been greater emphasis on shaping and implementing these experiences. Experts agree that it’s not enough to simply offer such programming. Activities must be intentionally designed, including faculty feedback and opportunities for student reflection.

The AAC&U runs an annual institute on high-impact practices that helps campus teams develop and assess their own strategies for high-impact practices. McNair says there isn’t a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, colleges must focus on the needs of each group of students and what works best for them. “They have to be culturally responsive,” she says.

Even within institutions, the approach can differ. At Nebraska Wesleyan University, a private college, all students do a capstone project, assemble an e-portfolio, and complete an internship or study abroad. But exactly what those activities look like can differ from major to major, says Patrick Hayden-Roy, who was concluding his term as associate provost for integrative and experiential learning in 2022. “It’s not a static model.”

At Dearborn, such efforts have included an overhaul of the first-year seminar. The introductory courses have been restructured around major themes like people and technology, environmental and social justice, and storytelling. They are team-taught by faculty members in different disciplines and emphasize engaged scholarship, often with community-based projects, says Marie Waung, an associate dean of arts and sciences.

The seminars provide an introduction to the college classroom, give students an early chance to learn closely from a professor, and help them begin to make sense of their education by casting it in ways that have real-world resonance. “There are so many opportunities for students,” Wang says, “that especially for those who are first generation, it can overwhelm them.”

Nebraska Wesleyan also works to get to students at the beginning of their studies, through first-year “exploratory” courses. It’s a matter of equity, says Hayden-Roy. “Often in the past, we’ve implemented a ‘build it and they will come’ approach,” he says. “And those who come forward are those who know to come.”

Salt Lake City Community College has all of its general-education courses incorporate e-portfolios — a digital collection of student work, such as papers, presentations, and artwork. The portfolios help students better understand and reflect on their work, says Kathy Tran-Peters, coordinator of the honors program and interdisciplinary studies. “It empowers them to take control of their education.”

But barriers exist that can prevent students from taking part in high-impact practices. They take faculty members’ time and commitment to design and execute. Activities like study abroad and internships can be out of reach for low-income students.

Many of Dearborn’s students are working their way through college and can’t afford to give up a regular salary for a short-term internship, Hershock says. So the university has raised money to pay for internship stipends. At Salt Lake City Community College, \$100,000 has been set aside to cover students’ costs in high-impact practices, such as to attend conferences and present research.

The hurdles are not always financial. A longstanding critique of education abroad is that it can be difficult for students to find the time to go overseas, particularly if they are in a highly structured major. Dearborn is starting a program that will allow students to go abroad and earn general-education credits.

At Piedmont University, a private institution in Georgia, faculty members voted in the fall of 2016 to make high-impact practices a centerpiece of the student experience.

Although students are not required to engage in a high-impact practice, most do,

says Julia Schmitz, an associate professor of biology who helped shape the plan as part of Piedmont’s reaccreditation. Freshmen and transfer students in the fall of 2020 who participated in at least one high-impact practice had a first-year retention rate of 79 percent. Retention rates for those who didn’t take part were 68 percent.

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One emphasis at Piedmont has been on undergraduate research. A number of professors have built research opportunities into lower-level courses, giving students a chance to work in teams or one on one with a faculty mentor. Each spring, the university holds a student-research symposium in which students apply and are selected to present their findings on projects as varied as a study of invertebrates in campus wetlands and the designing of computer games. At the most recent symposium, 10 percent of the more than 400 presenters were first-year students, Schmitz says.

GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

With global learning part of Piedmont’s mission statement, another priority is study abroad. Yet most of the college’s students are from within a 150-mile radius

Academic Practices That Pack a Punch

Educators have identified a group of educational activities that truly make a difference, improving students’ chances of academic success. Known as high-impact practices, they include:

- Capstone courses and projects
- Collaborative assignments and projects
- Common intellectual experiences
- E-portfolios
- First-year seminars and experiences
- Global learning and diversity
- Internships
- Learning communities
- Service- and community-based learning
- Undergraduate research
- Writing-intensive courses

Sources: American Association of Colleges and Universities, Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success

of campus, says Steve Nimmo, interim vice president for academic affairs, and many do not have a passport. “If we’re going to be in a global society,” he says, “we need to do this.”

Piedmont embeds international experiences into short-term, faculty-led courses, typically held just after the spring semester. Travel costs are included in course fees to help make international study more accessible to students, nearly all of whom are on financial aid. Students do preparatory work to give the trip context and write papers after their return.

“High-impact practices naturally form connections. It’s students with faculty. And it’s students with one another.”

Professors have stepped up to lead the courses, Nimmo says. Schmitz has taken students to France to visit the Curie and Pasteur Institutes, but she says day-to-day exposure to different cultures, such as to fast-food restaurants abroad, has been as meaningful for her students as the academics. So far, she has taught three study-abroad courses and was scheduled to lead two more trips — until they were canceled by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic was especially disruptive for high-impact practices that emphasize

in-person experiences. Study-abroad rates plummeted as countries around the world shut their borders. Internships and service-learning projects were put on hold. Even at institutions like California State University at Fullerton, which had made a major effort to increase access to [experiential learning](#), such activities “dwindled greatly,” says Dawn Macy, director of Fullerton’s Center for Internships and Community Engagement.

Colleges scrambled to shift some of these opportunities online. Nebraska Wesleyan, for example, offered “virtual global engagement” programs, connecting individual classes with partner institutions overseas, often around group projects. One course, on African cinema, beamed in Rwandan actors and directors who had created the films the students were studying.

Nationally, about 80 percent of internships were performed remotely or in a hybrid form in the summer of 2021, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers. But far fewer students did an internship than before the pandemic.

Despite the challenges of Covid, the positive effects of high-impact practices continue to be felt, and may have reinforced a sense of community for those who have engaged in them.

**‘I DIDN’T FEEL SO ISOLATED’**

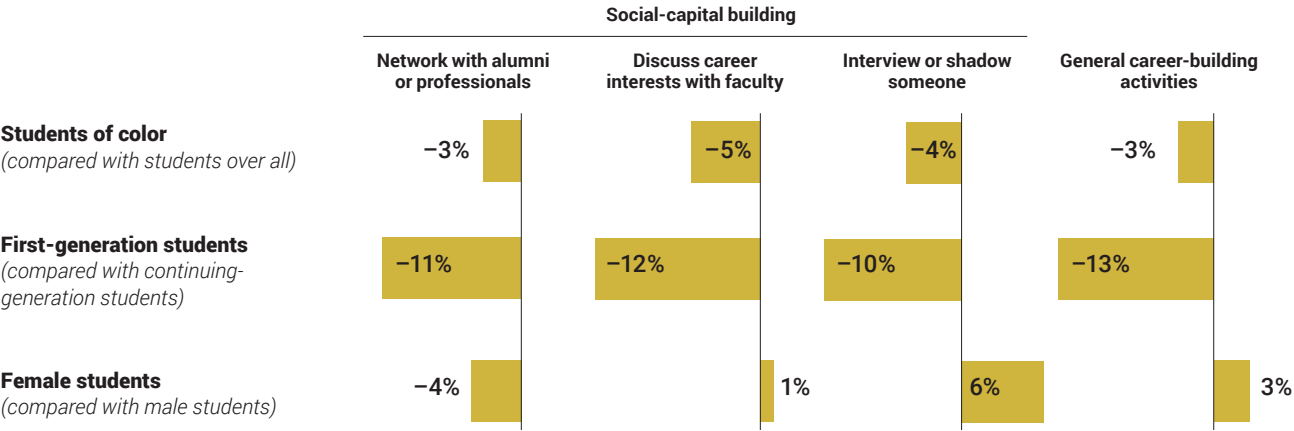
Before graduating from Dearborn in the spring of 2022, Zenon Sommers took part in several high-impact practices, including undergraduate research, community-based learning, and learning communities, where he was both a participant and a peer mentor and instructor.

When courses went online because of Covid, “I was able to stay a lot more connected because I had already been working with so many different people,” he says. “I didn’t feel so isolated.”

“High-impact practices naturally form connections,” says Waung, the associate

**Equity Gaps in Career-Building Activities**

Compared with students who had at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree, first-generation students were less likely to participate in social-capital building activities. They were 13 percentage points less likely to participate in general career-building activities.



Note: Data from 2021 NSSE Career & Workforce Preparation Module. Responses represent seniors who reported “done or in progress” to certain activities.

Source: “Understanding Undergraduates’ Career Preparation Experiences,” December 2021, Strada Center for Education Consumer Insights

dean at Dearborn. “It’s students with faculty. And it’s students with one another.”

Sommers, a double major in psychology and behavioral and biological sciences, says he can see the effect of high-impact practices across his college experience. Early interactions with professors made him more comfortable seeking out help during office hours. Undergraduate research has opened him up to a possible academic career, starting with a year

teaching high-school English through the Fulbright Austria program. Community engagement helped his commuter-college experience feel much more personal and intimate.

When Sommers had the chance to transfer to Michigan’s Ann Arbor campus, he decided against it, figuring he wouldn’t have as many opportunities to work closely with his professors. “That’s something,” he says, “I didn’t want to lose.”