



National Association
of *Independent* Schools

ARTICLE

NAIS Global Ambassadors Advisory: Experiential Learning in Independent Schools: Strategic Approaches to Strengthen Postsecondary Readiness

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Executive Summary

In a time of rapid change, independent schools must intentionally design and integrate experiential education frameworks that prepare students for success beyond the K–12 environment. In preparation for what will become a new and more holistic paradigm for learning, this advisory provides school leaders with a strategic

compass grounded in the most current thinking in the field of experiential education in order to foster an “Experiential Learning Ecosystem” distinctive to each school community. It offers a shared working definition, guiding principles, models of practice, strategic design considerations, assessment frameworks, and phased implementation guidance. Independent schools that adopt a coherent, institution-wide experiential learning (EL) strategy will strengthen academic rigor, socio-emotional growth, career readiness, and global citizenship for all learners.

Why Experiential Learning Matters for Student Readiness

Independent schools increasingly seek to equip students not merely with knowledge but with the core competencies, habits of mind, and values that postsecondary institutions and employers demand. As higher education recognizes and promotes High-Impact Practices (HIPs), which serve as the core of experiential learning, independent schools must extend the continuum of learning into the pre-K-12 setting in order to advance readiness across academic, socio-emotional, and civic domains. As background, High-Impact Practices (HIPs) is a concept that was popularized by **George Kuh** (founding director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment) and the **Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)** in the early 2000s, emphasizing the need for educational experiences that foster active learning and personal development.

A Working Definition and Guiding Principles

As defined by the Independent Schools Experiential Education Network (ISEEN), experiential education is a pedagogical process by which educators engage the whole student through a cycle of direct experience, reflection, analysis, and experimentation. Experiential education prioritizes people, identities, and the environment, addressing justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and promoting authentic engagement within and among cultural communities. Experiential learning is the “how” of that process and is oriented more toward learners themselves than toward the pedagogical principles.

For NAIS member schools, experiential learning should sound familiar, as it encompasses project-based learning, internships and work-based learning, service learning, and adventure and travel-based learning. It includes a deliberate, structured cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application through which students engage meaningfully with authentic contexts, thereby developing disciplinary understanding, competencies that are transferable across settings, learner identity and mastery, and social and civic agency. Experiential learning promotes self-transcendent purpose.

Models and Modalities of Experiential Learning

To meet diverse student needs and institutional goals, independent schools must consider and enhance a broad menu of EL modalities, such as the following:

- Place-based and outdoor education
- Service learning and community engagement
- Internships and career-based learning
- Project-based and problem-based learning
- Global and intercultural experiences
- Student leadership and capstone projects

Strategic Design Considerations for Independent Schools

To move from isolated EL experiences toward a coherent, institution-wide approach of an “Experiential Learning Ecosystem,” independent school leaders should consider curriculum alignment, reframe and address structural barriers, promote equity and access, assess safety and logistics, develop partnerships across communities, enrich faculty professional development, and empower students as central stakeholders.

Assessment, Evidence, and Outcomes

Experiential learning is often described as a “black box”—we know it works, but defining and measuring the inner mechanisms proves problematic.

Suggested outcomes to track include mastery-based transcripts, measures of socio-emotional growth, learner competencies, and postsecondary readiness and success indicators.

It is recommended that decision-makers employ evidence from qualitative research methodologies. The Society for Experiential Education (SEE) provides research-based venues for program evaluation and scholarship, including the journal *Experiential Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (ELTHE).

Implementation Road Map (12–18 months)

- **Phase 1:** Convene stakeholders and define the school’s EL vision.
- **Phase 2:** Strengthen existing programs and launch pilot programs with faculty training.
- **Phase 3:** Implement pilots, collect data, and refine design.
- **Phase 4:** Conduct evaluation, report outcomes, and bring to scale successful models.

Policy Recommendations for NAIS Member Schools

1. Adopt a shared working definition of experiential education and learning based on ISEEN’s definition.
2. Promote SEE’s “Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities.”
3. Facilitate professional development through ISEEN and SEE.
4. Encourage inclusion of EL activities in transcripts and counseling materials.
5. Support research and evidence-sharing across NAIS member schools.

Conclusion

Experiential learning provides an established and research-informed pathway to cultivate adaptability, authenticity, and purpose in students. By adopting a strategic, schoolwide approach anchored by strong definitions, guiding principles, robust assessment, and sustainable partnerships, NAIS member schools can meaningfully enhance student readiness for higher education, career, and civic life.

Resources

- Independent Schools Experiential Education Network (ISEEN), "What Is Experiential Education?" 2025; online at <https://www.iseeninfo.com/what-is-experiential-education>
- Society for Experiential Education (SEE), "SEE Standards and Practice: Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities," 2025; online at <https://www.societyforee.org/standards-and-practice>
- David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Hoboken, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983)

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