How has the project fostered collaboration and interdisciplinarity?

Danielle Reilly was hired on contract in February 2013 to work as the Experiential Learning Coordinator in the SCCE office. One of her first duties was to identify best practices in regards to EE on campus and beyond. As such she has developed a working relationship with the EE office in Social Sciences. In particular, Danielle has been liaising with SocSci staff about changes to MTCU’s WEPA program (insurance for students on unpaid work placements) and implications to non-mandatory EE courses. This information is being shared across campus through the Career Centre Manager’s Meetings and was discussed at a recent PD event, in which career centre staff from 4 faculties (Science, Business, Engineering and Social Sciences) participated.

Danielle has also helped facilitate a FedDev Graduate Internship grant, in collaboration with our partners in the Faculty of Engineering. Danielle has helped screen recent graduates for GEI eligibility and advised them on effective job search strategies. Drawing on this experience, she is making recommendations to Science about the viability of a formalized internship program for in-program students wanting to gain work experience during their degree. (Note: formalized science internships are offered in the current UG calendar, however the lack of a viable framework has resulted in almost no advertising or uptake of these opportunities). We hope to begin marketing this internship program in 2014.

Finally, Danielle has offered a series of workshops to undergraduates in programs across our faculty, to raise awareness of course based EE opportunities. She has advised students how to effectively secure academically relevant experience, both on campus and off, which is allowing more students to take advantage of these courses.

Have other projects been initiated as a result of this project?

Danielle identified that reflective practice should be enhanced within our current EE course offerings. She built a tool to foster student reflection which has been incorporated into the courseware for 2C00 (Skills for Success in Science Careers). She has recently completed training on the Learning Portfolio and will be encouraging students to use this as a tool for self-reflection and career planning. She is also hosting a forum later this month, with student leaders and past EE participants to gather feedback on current course offerings.

How has the project exposed students to new or emerging research?

By increasing the awareness of EE offerings, particularly research practicum courses, more students will get to volunteer in research labs for course credit. Most importantly, the nature of the volunteer work is being vetted so that students are assisting with academically relevant projects and not simply doing routine housekeeping or more basic tasks.

How has the project offered students an experience beyond traditional borders?

We have been very impressed with how students are planning their experiential courses – particularly those taking place off of campus. Students are thinking about potential career paths and are engaging with community partners / supervisors in specific sectors of interest. For example, a current Sci 3EP3 student is volunteering in a naturopathic clinic, to learn more about the role of a naturopath but also what type of entrepreneurial skills someone needs to build a health care related business. Another
student recently took advantage of an opportunity to volunteer in an elite sports performance clinic located at the University of Louisville and received 6 units of elective credit through Sci 3EX6.

How has the project challenged the confines of existing programming and advanced new paradigms of research or education?
Individual programs and departments in Science are being encouraged to expand their EE offerings. However, a continued challenge has been resources to vet these properly. By having a centralized support position in the SCCE office, we have been able to provide key services, like customized learning contracts, for departments wishing to add new courses.

Students in particular seem to be enjoying the flexibility that these programs offer. In particular, experiential education allows students to customize their academic experience within a “standard” program. However, we have found that it is critical to have an application process that is rigorous and consistent. Without a well thought out learning contract, these experiences can result in relatively minor academic achievement. The learning contract sets out clear roles, responsibilities and outcomes for both the student and the supervisor to work towards. It allows the faculty to do our due diligence to ensure that students are working in a safe environment and the experience is truly academically relevant, and not simply “busy work” (e.g. filing, answering phones, washing glass ware). It also allows us to check that students are not “double dipping” by ensuring that the experience is not a repeat of something they have previously received course credit for (e.g. an extension of an independent study or thesis). Most importantly, it has forced us to rethink what constitutes an “academic product” and what can and should be part of course assessment. In this regard students often complete a combination of written work and an oral presentation, which is fostering self-confidence and communication skills.

How will the outcomes of the project be sustained or expanded?
We are currently investigating ways to financially sustain this position within the Faculty.

Conclusion
The funding from the FWI fund, which was matched by the Dean of Science, has been instrumental in allowing us to pilot this new position. We are encouraged by both the increased student uptake of these course offerings, as well as expanded program and department interest in offering students additional ways to complement their academic program of study with more personalized experiential education courses. As one student recently reflected:

“With more students receiving their degrees in the sciences, it is becoming harder and harder to graduate with distinction. This placement course, Science 3EX6, allowed me to reach beyond McMaster and make connections that I could not have imagined. Science 3EX6 was more than me just getting a placement credit; it was a way for me to open doors for my future academics and career.

I had a placement at the University of Louisville in Kentucky where I worked with and for their Sport Performance Staff. They are a very well respected Division 1 NCAA school with a strong and integrated athletic department. In my degree, it is hard to find specific Sport Science courses to take. For me to have the opportunity to travel to one of the best programs in our continent and receive course credit for it was an absolute blessing.

Science 3EX6 was the catalyst for me to receive education and experience in the specific field of study that I was passionate about. The stories and experiences I have gained I will never forget. This summer was paramount in my personal and professional development. I would highly recommend this course to anyone considering it.”

~Rob - Honours Kinesiology, Level 3