

# The Heart of Experiential Learning: Connecting Stakeholders in a Dynamic World

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## Introduction

The authors of this article are students at The University of Alabama (UA) pursuing various undergraduate and graduate degrees. The majority of our academic programs are in the Culverhouse College of Business or Manderson Graduate School of Business. In the spring of 2021, we each enrolled in a data visualization course taught by our faculty sponsor, Dr. Chapman Greer. Through the course, we developed technical and design skills to analyze, visualize, and communicate data effectively. We employed these skills in creating a database that drives a Tableau visualization of Experiential Learning Opportunities (ELOs) at UA.

## Project Overview

Our project client, Dr. Drew Pearl, is the director of community engagement research and publication at the Center for Community-Based Partnership (CCBP). The CCBP seeks to fulfill UA's mission of —“advanc[ing] the intellectual and social condition of the people of the state, the nation, and the world through the creation, translation, and dissemination of knowledge, with an emphasis on quality programs in the areas of teaching, research, and service”—through community engagement and experiential learning<sup>1</sup>. Prior to our project, there was not a centralized system for collecting these opportunities and programs on campus. We were tasked with creating a database to strengthen the CCBP's ability to fulfill its goal.

In a broad sense, our mandate from Dr. Pearl was to find and document “all of the cool things

on campus,” or, more specifically, to create a comprehensive and dynamic database of ELOs at UA. The original plan was to gather data from past programs at UA dating back 5 years. This data would then be used to create a dynamic dashboard displaying opportunities to different stakeholders. Each university stakeholder—university administration, faculty and staff, students, community partners, and the global UA community—would have a different view in the dashboard tailored to their respective needs and interests. Our vision is to use these views to better connect faculty, staff, students, and community partners in mutually beneficial partnerships, with features facilitating intercollege collaboration between faculty, encouraging student participation in projects, and conveying the importance of ELOs to all stakeholders. This project will have an impact on UA's ability to successfully complete, promote, and grow ELOs across Tuscaloosa, the State of Alabama, the nation, and the world.

## Phase 1

The first step of this project was defining what constitutes experiential learning at UA. We began by reviewing previously created displays of ELOs and community engagement projects within separate UA departments. We then benchmarked 93 colleges and universities to compare how they define and advertise ELOs. The selected colleges included all of the state flagships and land-grant universities (Figure 1). Ultimately, we defined experiential learning as a hands-on, mutually beneficial partnership between local communities

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<sup>1</sup> “Mission and Objectives.” The University of Alabama, <https://www.ua.edu/about/mission>

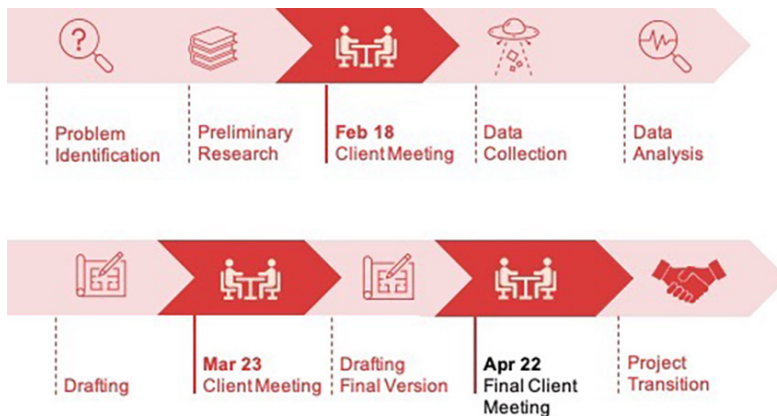
**Figure 1.** Universities with database-driven ELO websites



**Figure 2.** ELO framework



**Figure 3.** Project timeline



and the university. All ELOs include a learner, an educator, a real-world context, and reflection. Our benchmarking results aligned with this definition, as shown in Figure 2. “Active” refers to the learners’ roles in applying concepts learned in class or through an experience. “Organized” indicates an instructor-managed partnership between the student and community partner and instructor guidance in student fieldwork. “Community” represents the community partners working with universities to solve complex issues facing

the community. Subcategories of experiential learning include community-engaged learning, service-learning, practical application, and applied learning. Examples of specific ELOs include internships, co-ops, course projects, study abroad programs, and some extracurricular student organization-based activities.

After determining the scope of our research, the class broke into nine teams—one for each of the undergraduate colleges at UA—with the goal of completing the project as specified by the timeline

(Figure 3). Our preliminary research included an exploration of UA's course catalog and other UA websites to identify contacts that had additional ELO information. We created lists of faculty and staff currently working with community partners. In the data collection stage, we interviewed faculty and staff to learn more about their work with ELOs.

As our teams conducted interviews, we were consistently moved by how excited each faculty or staff member was to share their experience. We realized these personal testimonies were a vital part of encouraging experiential learning on campus. Initially, our data collection “spoke to the head,” approaching experiential learning in terms of hard numbers and quantifiable outcomes. The powerful personal testimonies led us to refine the project mission to focus on “the heart” by telling the stories we were collecting. We decided to display personal testimonies in our final deliverables to all stakeholders. A mockup of Dr. Horan's story is displayed in Figure 4.

At this stage, we also expanded our benchmarking to further analyze how the 93 colleges and universities displayed their experiential learning outcomes. Of the 93 schools,

only six offered a dynamic display by which users could explore individual opportunities (the goal of our project). However, these pages were difficult to filter, heavily focused on raw data, and not visually engaging. In order to speak to the heart of our mission, we reimagined what our dashboard should look like. We envisioned a dashboard housed within a website, with a tailored view for each stakeholder. These pages would allow stakeholders not only to browse through ELOs, but also to filter based on interests, find ways to get involved, hear testimonies of their peers, and submit ELOs to be included in the database. In preparation for our third client meeting, we created the wireframe and mockup displayed in Figures 5 and 6. These figures explained the proposed website flow.

## Phase 2

As we gathered information, we discovered there were more ELOs on campus than could be collected in a single semester, making our original project goal unattainable. As a class, we reevaluated our goals and expanded the project transition phase to include handing off our deliverables to future teams.

**Figure 4.** Faculty feature prototype

# DR. HOLLY HORAN

Medical Anthropologist

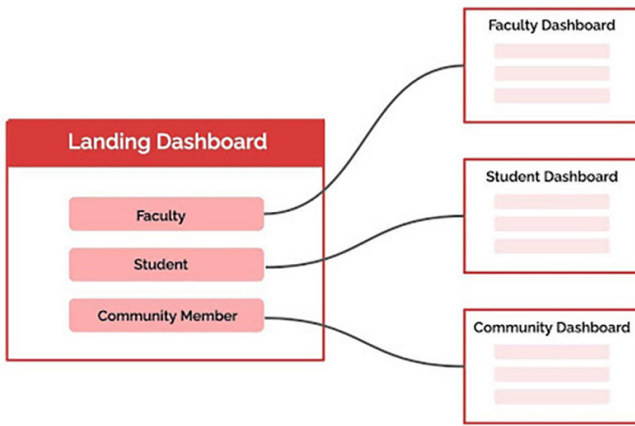


## TAUGHT NUTRITIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY

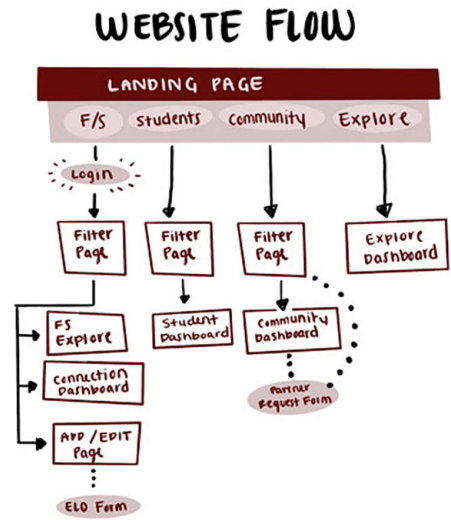
Fall 2020

Dr. Holly Horan taught Nutritional Anthropology in which her students worked with West Alabama Food Bank to prepare meals and begin the works of a food pharmacy. They also worked with Schoolyard Roots which provides gardening programs for elementary schools. Despite the class ending, all of her students have continued on the projects they started to address food insecurity in the state of Alabama.

**Figure 5.** Website wireframe



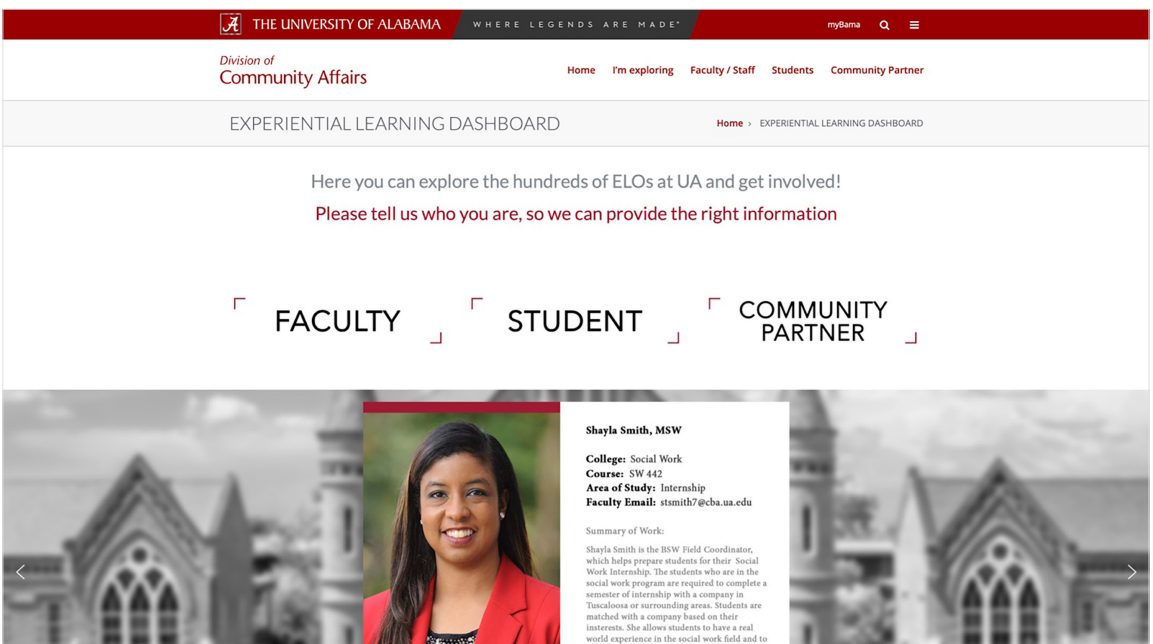
**Figure 6.** Website flow



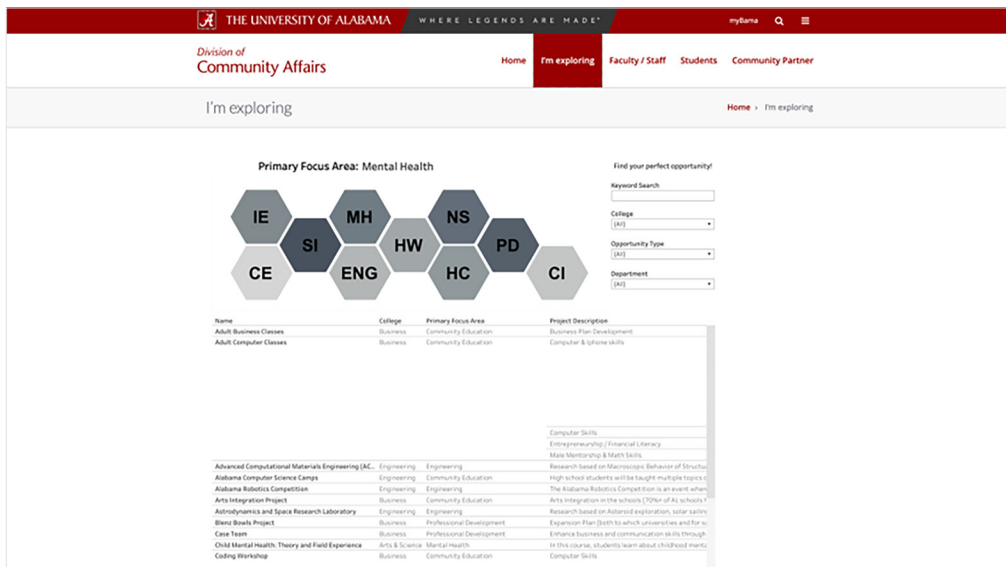
We reorganized into seven new teams—Presentation, Database, Dashboard, Transition, Interviews and Stories, Publication, and Final Report—each tasked with completing a key component of our project wrap-up and final deliverables. The work performed by these teams culminated in a website prototype that incorporated our mockups. The prototype consists of fully functioning features for faculty and staff views and the foundations for the views of other stakeholders. Figures 7 and 8 contain select views from the website prototype.

The website showcases the value of this centralized system: Users can access, explore, and connect in one location, streamlining their experience and encouraging greater participation. Figure 9 illustrates our “value cycle” for faculty and staff. As faculty and staff members explore our dashboards and database, we envision them collaborating with potential partners to organize ELOs, expand the capabilities of existing programs, and provide new ones. These ELOs will make a greater impact in local communities and then be uploaded to the database and dashboard

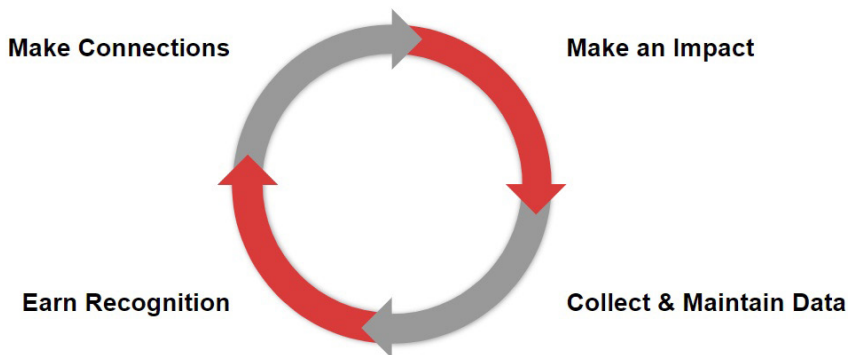
**Figure 7.** Website homepage prototype



**Figure 8.** Website search prototype



**Figure 9.** Proposed ELO "value cycle"



through the website, further increasing both awareness and collaboration.

At the semester's conclusion, we produced a final report that included our final deliverables and mockups. The report contained a project summary, methods, findings, recommendations, and conclusions. It discussed the final deliverables of the database and automation process, dashboard visuals and mockups, and stories from connections with faculty and staff. In addition, it included all documentation generated over the course of the semester, such as meeting minutes, surveys and results, and the final slide presentation.

As we completed this stage of the project, we created a transition document to facilitate project continuity. The goal of the transition phase is to move the project forward and to explain the technical foundation behind the deliverables. We envision the following next steps:

- continuing research to document more ELOs facilitated by UA
- completing the website mockups
- partnering with other UA departments such as Strategic Communications to create a fully functioning website. Since, by nature, ELOs are ever-changing, our database and tools need to be continuously updated and maintained.

During the 2021–22 academic school year, a cohort of faculty scholars and a new data visualization class (with Dr. Greer) will continue the project. The transition document will introduce new students to the project goals and current status and prepare them to build on the work that has already been completed.

### Key Takeaways

As we sought to represent ELOs offered at UA, we faced several hurdles, including ongoing



communication and coordination issues related to the project scope and challenges maintaining a consistent project definition. While many teams face communication problems, this class overcame barriers created by divisions between the various departments and colleges on campus. Each academic unit at UA defined experiential learning differently and collected and documented efforts independently. Our teams had to not only gather information about documented ELOs but also standardize the qualitative data to form a centralized database. Because each team was focused on its respective colleges, we found this task difficult to complete. Standardization became more manageable when we reorganized into teams focused on individual aspects of the final deliverables rather than on teams for separate colleges.

Due to various departments at UA operating under different definitions, we also found it challenging to maintain a consistent working definition of ELOs. While working with our initial definitions, we often encountered projects and opportunities that fit our technical definition of an ELO, but not the spirit of experiential learning. We also found some opportunities which met the spirit of experiential learning, but did not technically qualify as an ELO. We continued to refine and revisit our definition throughout the project. This led us to focus on “the heart” of experiential learning versus simply “the head” (or quantifiable statistics) of our project.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we learned that UA’s community involvement is much greater and more impactful than we’d initially imagined. The availability of community engagement opportunities is vast, ranging from computer science camps in underserved communities, to personalized public relations and advertising consulting through the Capstone Agency. These opportunities impact the community in many ways, from drastically improving high school students’ standardized test scores to helping small businesses achieve their goals. We discovered that UA faculty and staff members make a difference

across all disciplines and geographies. Their love for their students and communities drives their work beyond the classroom. ELOs bring UA together to advance “intellectual and social conditions” throughout the world.

We believe that all universities need a centralized location in which to house ELOs and bring students, faculty and staff, and community partners together. ELOs are a valuable avenue for pursuing a university’s mission and goals. However, without a university-wide method for collecting and sharing these opportunities across departments, stakeholders are limited in their ability to make significant and lasting change. We believe an updated and dynamic database will facilitate UA’s influence and impact across the globe.

## **About the Authors**

The authors of this article are undergraduate and graduate students who were enrolled in a data visualization course at The University of Alabama in Spring 2021, as well as the graduate assistants and instructor of the course.

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