

Program on Experience Based Learning in the Social Sciences (PEBLSS) Strategic Plan

The Program on Experience Based Learning in the Social Sciences is a program within the Institute of Quantitative Social Sciences (IQSS) at Harvard University. The goal of PEBLSS is to provide a modern support infrastructure to Harvard programs and faculty that create experiential (or “active”) learning opportunities for Harvard students. Many of these opportunities already exist at Harvard, such as those housed in the Bok Center’s Activity Based Learning program, but they could be greatly improved by backend support. PEBLSS will supply solutions to shared obstacles in experiential learning and reduce common costs of using and evaluating this type of teaching tool. The primary missions of PEBLSS are to 1) facilitate faculty development of experiential learning opportunities at Harvard, 2) measure and enhance student skill attainment in research assistance/collaborative opportunities and 3) develop and house a selective internship program for social science students in positions outside Harvard. PEBLSS is designed to enhance existing Harvard institutions by providing scalable services predicated on modern social science principles and create new opportunities for experiential learning where appropriate. We will provide a common infrastructure and service base that speaks to the shared needs of an experience based curriculum.

PEBLSS will be launched in 2012 by Prof. Dustin Tingley, Assistant Professor of Government, under the auspices of the IQSS. PEBLSS will serve as a resource for faculty who wish to include experiential learning in their classrooms and enhance student experience in research and internships within the social sciences. To this end, PEBLSS will provide data-based support for existing experiential learning programs and evaluate teaching strategies and skill attainment in RA positions. Our focus on data will take numerous forms, including the creation of easily searchable databases that categorize and evaluate existing experiential learning efforts and a dataset that will allow panel analysis of student skill acquisition and success. We will bring together scholars across disciplines and various areas of expertise to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and training, as well as help establish best practices for data collection and analysis. In the medium/long-term, we also plan to bring a coordinated internship program to Harvard for undergraduates in the social sciences. This will be unique in providing a platform to identify and attract opportunities in corporate, government, and academic institutions that leverage the social science training we give our students. It will also assist in placing students in appropriate positions.

Our focus will start with the social sciences. However, except for its internship program, PEBLSS is committed to the application of social science methodology rather than substance. After establishing a foundation in the social sciences we hope to expand our support to the humanities and sciences. From inception we will start a dialogue with experience learning experts in the humanities and sciences.

The purpose of this strategic plan is to discuss how we might develop and implement this innovative and novel program. Below, we outline PEBLSS’s primary goals and principal activities for its first couple of years.

The Importance and Future of Experiential Learning

Experience based learning has become increasingly popular in recent years. Instead of treating the classroom as a vessel for transmission of information from an enlightened teacher to a passive, hopefully

receptive student, experiential learning stresses a more active role for students in and outside the classroom. Harvard's Bok Center has collected a number of in-class examples dedicated to the approach,¹ and PEBLSS is further committed to the proposition that skill based research assistance and internship programs belong to the same pedagogic vision.

Strategic Goals

The future goals of PEBLSS can be classified into four broad areas that we expand below: 1) Providing a searchable database to assist in faculty development, faculty training, and dissemination of technologies to enhance experiential learning opportunities for students; 2) Establishing ties with existing institutions (such as RA programs and the Bok Center) and enhancing their goals; 3) Housing, developing, and promoting technology based experiential learning tools; 4) Fostering student research and encouraging student involvement in social sciences. This instructional support, program evaluation, and research support has the potential to enhance teaching, student research and student opportunities in the social sciences. In light of the number of associated Harvard institutions, this program will also help improve the efficiency of programs committed to experiential learning in the social sciences.

1) Create a searchable database to assist in faculty development, faculty training, and dissemination of learning technologies and techniques to enhance experiential learning opportunities for students

Harvard currently has a number of courses and initiatives that practice and foster experiential learning opportunities. The Bok Center has collected and supported a number of them. PEBLSS will take this sample of classes in which experiential learning opportunities and codify the purpose of the lessons and the techniques deployed, with a goal to establish general themes, highlight and support efforts to evaluate effectiveness, and create an easy and searchable interface to explore these resources.

Learning *technologies* have become one part of the experiential toolkit in the classroom. For instance, Economics and Government classrooms have begun using EconVision, an interactive web interface for running classroom experiments.² Currently, Harvard instructors often work independently in developing these experiential learning technologies in the classroom. PEBLSS would like to foster interdisciplinary communication among educators who use these technologies or who are interested in using them. This will enhance our ability to further develop the technologies. These various programs will also be evaluated to determine which experiential techniques are most effective increasing student knowledge, skill, and enthusiasm.

This goal can be broken down into a set of actionable steps.

A. Faculty and Graduate Student Development

- **Contact relevant educators and develop a database of existing experiential learning techniques** Working with the Bok Center, we will contact educators who have used experiential learning technologies and techniques in the classroom as well as those who have an interest in doing so. Central to this endeavor is the creation of a database in

¹ <http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k1985&pageid=icb.page29716>

² Dustin Tingley, director of PEBLSS, is Chief Scientific advisor to EconVision and holds a minor financial interest in the firm.

which we will store data on the techniques used by various educators. This will include information on the topic, technology, and methods for evaluation. We will work directly with the Bok Center in order to develop the appropriate database solution to this task.

- **Encourage development of new and existing experiential techniques** We will help recruit faculty and other educators to learn about existing experiential learning techniques. We hope to increase the number of faculty members who integrate experiential learning opportunities in their coursework.
- **Provide support for conferences and seminars** Working alongside other interested parties, we will help support conferences and seminars on experiential learning opportunities. For example, we will provide technical materials for training sessions that will inform participants about tools such as EConvision and Qualtrics (a research focused survey tool) and will provide tutorials on using our databases.
- **Provide Support Structure for Graduate Student Poster Sessions** Poster sessions are an efficient way to communicate ideas and give young students the experience of interfacing with a diverse set of intellectual consumers. The Government Department held their first this year and it was well received.³ PEBLSS will support the use of poster sessions for dissemination of graduate student research within and across departments. This includes providing templates and logistical support for interested departments.

B. Program Evaluation In 2005 and 2006 the Bok Center fielded several novel surveys of students enrolled in Activity Based Learning classes. We will setup a system of regular evaluation that will scale across classes and research assistant programs. We plan to evaluate these programs with the aid of undergraduate and graduate research assistants as well as students from the School of Education. After the first couple years of PEBLSS, we hope to have a system in place that will permit low cost evaluations and thus improve the various experiential learning techniques used by faculty under the auspices of PEBLSS. Key to this component is the creation of advanced panel designs assisted by randomized manipulations.

2) Establish ties with existing institutions and establish an advisory board

A. Support existing institutions at Harvard College There are a number of relevant institutions that provide students with research experience in the social sciences such as the Institute of Quantitative Social Sciences and the Harvard Decision Science Laboratory. These institutions offer research assistant positions to undergraduates within the social sciences. In addition, there are centers and organizations that present undergraduates with internship opportunities. The Bok center focuses on improving teaching at Harvard. We hope to establish ties with all of these organizations in order to evaluate programs across centers and organizations and create databases of information. These initiatives will take place during the inaugural year of PEBLSS.

- **Collaborate with Bok Center** The Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning works to advance the quality of undergraduate education at Harvard. They routinely videotape classes to provide feedback to educators and provide materials and host seminars to improve teaching strategies. We hope to enhance their activity based learning initiatives using the data based approach outlined in this document.

³ <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/govposters>

- **Collaborate with existing RA programs** The Harvard Decision Science Laboratory, BLISS, IQSS, and the Weatherhead Center, among other programs, offer research assistant positions for undergraduates. We will organize these positions into a database so that students can access all positions in the social sciences through a single database. We will also evaluate positions for the skill sets they offer to students. We hope our efforts will help orient research assistance on campus more towards undergraduate skill enhancement. We will also help RA programs establish longer term tracking programs to measure their influence on later life outcomes.

B. Develop Advisory Board Tingley will need a group of senior advisers. Possible candidates include Gary King (Director, IQSS), Mark Eddington (Director, HDSL), John Girash (Bok Center), and Christopher Winship (Professor, Sociology).

3) House, develop, train and promote *technology*-based experiential learning tools

A. Compile List of Current Technologies In the first year of PEBLSS, we will compile a list of existing technologies on campus for experiential learning, such as EconVision and Qualtrics. We will also focus on disseminating these technologies by facilitating training sessions and working with organizations like iCommons to increase awareness about these programs. These sessions will target students, especially thesis writers and graduate students, as well as instructors.

B. Facilitate Development and Use of New Technologies In the second and third years of PEBLSS, we will focus on expanding the technologies available to students and instructors in the social sciences by facilitating the development and use of new technologies. This involves employing programmers either from courses such as CS50 or elsewhere to develop specialized programming for particular curricular needs and raising funds to support this endeavor. We will also focus on working with administrators on incorporating emerging technologies into the standard set of tools they support.

4) Foster student research and encourage student involvement in social sciences research

A. Create categorization and evaluation system for research assistantships in the social sciences After we have connected with the various institutions/organizations with undergraduate RA programs in the social sciences, such as Weatherhead, IQSS, HDSL, IOP, Kennedy School, and various FAS Departments, we will develop a system for categorizing their opportunities. We will develop a system of tracking learning experiences of undergraduates in various RA positions. This will involve having faculty ex ante identify skill categories and then distributing surveys to RAs at the beginning and end of the year, and publishing the results of these surveys so undergraduates can have a more complete picture of various research assistance opportunities. We look to the example of the University of Colorado at Denver's Experiential Learning Center, which has their interns fill out goals for skill acquisition. Upon evaluation of these surveys, we will develop curricula for faculty on how to incorporate skill development into RA tasks more effectively.

B. Develop poster presentation programs for graduate students in the social sciences Poster sessions are an efficient way to communicate ideas and give young students the experience of interfacing with a diverse set of intellectual consumers. PEBLSS will support the use of poster

sessions for dissemination of graduate student research within and across departments. This includes providing templates and logistical support for interested departments.

C. Supplement the BLISS undergraduate research program After the first year of PEBLSS, we hope to work even more closely with BLISS to help enhance their undergraduate research program. First, we would like to encourage broader research opportunities by reaching out to faculty who are less likely to be reached by BLISS. We will also provide data-based support which will allow for the assessment of undergraduate skill development and evaluation of learning opportunities.

D. Catalog and develop social science internship opportunities A long-term goal of PEBLSS is to catalog internship opportunities where companies, non-profits, research institutions, etc. can recruit undergraduate interns who have particular social science skill sets. PEBLSS would serve as a liaison between organization and students seeking social science oriented internships. This would be done by establishing linkages with organizations that could benefit from the program and facilitating the application and screening process for selecting interested undergraduates.

E. Support collaborative research between undergraduates and graduate students/faculty members While there are many opportunities for research assistantships and individual undergraduate research, there are fewer opportunities for collaborative research between undergraduates and graduate students/faculty members. Collaborative research would serve as an intermediary step between RAs and individual research endeavors and would hopefully improve the quality of work of undergraduate scholars in the social sciences. We hope to arrange, structure, and publicize these opportunities.

Summary

PEBLSS will provide scalable solutions to enhance experiential learning at Harvard. These solutions address *common* obstacles that individual faculty and institutions at Harvard currently face in implementing effective, successful experiential learning activities for students. PEBLSS will use the social science tools it hopes to promote in order to collect and analyze relevant data, becoming a repository of best practices for this important but under-utilized educational technology. Establishing a common framework based on social scientific tools will be both cost effective and net enhancing of existing programs.