Forward:
I did not know it at the time, but one of my last acts in what would be 10 years of serving as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences was to ask Sarah, a recently graduated history major, to prepare for me a short essay on the history of the College from the perspective of its commitment to require experiential education for students graduating in the class of 2000 or later. Almost 8 years later the University would follow suit making a similar graduate requirement for the University. The College's commitment seemed to have helped its profile as this period was one of rapid growth in the College's freshman applicant pool going from 5,000 to 17,000 applications in 10 years. Below is Sarah's work, which now that I have stepped out of the Dean's Office, I present as an interesting case study of a College of Arts and Sciences that committed to experiential education in all of its forms. Thank you Sarah for letting us post your work on our blog (www.otherlobe.com). – Jim Stellar 3/09

Experiential Education in Northeastern University's College of Arts and Sciences

Sarah Robey '08

In 1909 Northeastern University began its first co-op program. At the time, the eleven-year-old university developed co-op (short for cooperative education), in part, as a way to pay for one's education while learning a trade. Co-op catered to commuter students interested in industrial fields such as automotives and engineering. As the university developed over the next century through phases of both expansion and contraction, co-op remained an integral part of the university's curriculum. By 2000, Northeastern University was home to nearly 20,000 students in a huge variety of disciplines. Though the university had blossomed into a large, highly competitive national university, it continued its cooperative history by instituting an experiential education requirement for all graduates.

Liberal Arts in the Early Years

Founded in 1898, Northeastern University experienced a huge amount of growth during its first few decades. When the College of Liberal Arts was added to the university in 1935, its courses served as a supplement to the established trade based courses of studies. In the years following World War II, universities across the country experienced a huge upsurge in attendance numbers and programs of study, Northeastern being no exception. However, despite widespread expansion in the colleges and departments across campus, the College of Liberal Arts continued to mainly provide the core liberal arts curriculum to students in other colleges, rather than cultivate many graduates in the humanities.

This dichotomy can be based largely on Northeastern's history as an industry-oriented urban commuter school. Students who came to Northeastern were looking for a hands-on education in a practiced trade, whether in engineering, economics, or law. In addition, the co-op opportunities also appealed to those looking for workplace experience, or those who might otherwise be unable to afford a university education. Thus, because the early years of Northeastern were somewhat untraditional when compared to other large institutions, the College of Liberal Arts would have to find its place within the university at a later date.

Growth and Challenges

By the 1980s, Northeastern University was a strikingly different place than it was 50 years prior. The social upheaval of the 1960s naturally led to increased emphasis on the study of the

humanities, and as such, Northeastern's College of Liberal Arts grew in both enrollment and variety of programs. Enrollment in the College almost quadrupled between 1959 and 1970.[1] President Kenneth Ryder, a History professor by training, recognized the importance of a strong liberal arts program and pushed for further expansion of humanities programs beyond a curriculum that simply supported other colleges. In addition, the College of Liberal Arts diversified with the creation of new interdisciplinary programs such as Women's Studies, Linguistics, and Urban Studies. With the creation of new departments, the College of Arts and Sciences (so renamed in 1979) began to find its footing as an autonomous college.

As more and more students found their home in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), its programs continued to develop. By 1989, enrollment in the CAS had reached 4,278 students, making it the largest college on campus, as well as the largest CAS student body in its history.[2] However, with unprecedented growth came new pressures. The rising cost of tuition made it impossible to pay for a university education with co-op salaries. Further, courses of study within the CAS did not always lend themselves to obvious co-op positions, which negatively impacted student interest in co-op. For those who wished to participate in co-op, students and advisors alike had to be creative and flexible about finding substantial employment.

Smaller but Better

The slight downturn in college age population occurring in the late 1980s and the national economic recession that struck in the early 1990s brought changes with unexpected consequences. Freshman enrollment plummeted, triggering massive budget cuts throughout the university. However, the university-wide downsizing allowed admissions to become more competitive, each year increasing the mean test scores of university freshmen, a trend that continues through the present. This unexpected shift into "smaller but better" also paved the way for reform that could address the pressures placed on the co-op programs within the CAS. Under the leadership of new President John Curry, who began his term in 1989, the university seized its opportunity to adjust its goals to meet the needs of a changing academic atmosphere.

By the mid-1990s a number of committees were charged with the task of reassessing the university's basic plan. Among the topics stressed in the College of Arts and Sciences was a desire to be more in tune with the university's basic co-op mission as well as to encourage students to be connected with the world outside of campus, both in study and in practice. Rather than only employ traditional academic study, Northeastern wished to continue to create a more well-rounded student, one who could explore the value in connecting the classroom to the global community. In this way, the university could provide its graduates with the experience of involvement, an invaluable life skill that fosters maturity and adaptability. Soon, the term "experiential education" was coined within the College of Arts and Sciences to describe the initiative to encourage students to participate in an involved college career. While co-op remained the traditional way of accomplishing this, the College leadership was also aware that a more innovative approach was necessary to engage all students, even those who were not participating in traditional co-op.

Though the College of Arts and Sciences did not wish to abandon co-op, the committee discussions became focused on co-op alternatives. If the CAS was to encourage, and eventually require, students to participate in experiential education, it must present flexible options. One option that seemed particularly suited to provide students with an outside-world perspective was the opportunity to study abroad. Dean Robert Lowndes made crucial headway for this program during his tenure, expanding both the International Affairs Program and study abroad. Not only did International

[1] Frederick, Antoinette. *Northeastern University, coming of age: the Ryder years 1975-1989* (Boston: Northeastern University, 1995): 95.

[2] Frederick: 105.

Affairs witness unprecedented growth in the early 1990s, but it also played a large role in expanding study abroad options, as it was the first department or program to require its students to travel internationally. By the academic year 2004-2005, students from CAS would made up 71% of the total number of students who studied abroad.[3]

In addition to co-op and study abroad, undergraduate research and service learning were discussed as additional alternatives. For students interested in pursuing a career in academia, undergraduate research could serve as an excellent forerunner to doctoral research, and it could also cultivate many of the same career skills as a traditional co-op. Likewise, service learning develops career strengths while encouraging community dialogue and awareness.

The Class of 2000

As the various experiential education programs developed through the 1990s, student participation increased. Increased student participation proved the need for more resources in each of the experiential education departments, and subsequently, more money and staffing were dedicated to the programs. With increased interest throughout the College of Arts and Sciences, and with a newly expanded variety of programs designed to fit the needs of each student, the College administration decided to implement an experiential learning requirement for all graduates, beginning with the class of 2000.

The Center for Experiential Education and Advising (CEA) played a critical role in bridging the gap between students and possible learning opportunities. It also allowed advisors to collaborate with each other in a way that could best provide students with planning resources. The centralized office could address another potential issue: making sure that each experiential program was standardized in objective and purpose while still being able to cater toward the individual learning track of each student and their course of study. Each experiential education option was to be authentic, substantial, and meaningful to the student's college career.

To better accomplish this, each student was now required to take a "capstone" course during his or her senior year of study. The purpose of capstone was to require students to integrate their previous academic courses with their experiences outside of the university. Capstone courses forced students to think critically about their overall university experience, and to make connections between what he or she has learned in the classroom with why it matters in the "real world." Capstone courses were also to be taught by department faculty and were unique to each major. Thus, by enlisting the cooperation of each individual department, the CEA bridged the gap to another crucial community on campus: the academic faculty.

CAS and the University

Since emerging from the cutbacks of the early 1990s, the College of Arts and Sciences has experienced unprecedented growth. From 1992 to 2007, the number of applicants to the CAS increased by an impressive 12,614, while its annual freshman enrollment has more than doubled.[4] The College's ability to meet the experiential needs of its students has given it visibility within the university, and to prospective students. CAS has truly proved to be an ideal testing ground for unconventional experiential education. Its relatively recent expansion and the breadth of disciplines within the CAS gave the College the ability to adapt and expand in an innovative, modern way. Other colleges have responded to the example: for the class entering in Fall 2008, the University adopted an experiential education requirement in its core curriculum for all students, not just those in CAS.

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[3] From "Study Abroad Figures," courtesy of the Northeastern University Office of International Study Programs.

[4] Statistics taken Northeastern University Factbooks, 1992-2007, courtesy of the Northeastern University Office of Institutional Research.

The variety of programs has continued to thrive in recent years, as new alternatives have made their way into the College's repertoire. Students now have more international options available such as expanded overseas co-op opportunities, and Northeastern's Dialogue of Civilization Program, which takes groups of students on faculty-led international learning trips. In fact, since it began in 2003, Dialogue of Civilization now accounts for almost one third of students who travel abroad.[5] Service learning and undergraduate research have also continued to grow over the past decade, and more recently, community-based research has integrated the two programs to create yet another outlet for student involvement.

Regardless of the type of experiential education in which a student participates, the knowledge that he or she develops is transformational. Students who reach beyond the traditional academic track acquire maturity, versatility, and critical understanding that cannot be taught in a classroom. These skills, like the applied trades taught to those who graduated from Northeastern over a century ago, are the tools of the modern workplace. Yet there is something as equally important, albeit intangible, that happens when students are given the opportunity to invest in their own education. Students graduate with an expanded concept of their abilities, and a more developed sense of what it means to be part of an ever-changing global community, one in which they have already become active participants.

[5] "Study Abroad Figures."

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