

Alumni Engagement Through Applied Creativity: A Case Study

By Brian LaDuca and Adrienne Ausdenmoore

This chapter is a reflective case study that demonstrates the practice of an experiential learning partnership between University alumni and undergraduate students studying the applied creative skills that the most in-demand careers are seeking. Eyer (2009) explains how “experiential education blurs the line between theory and practice” (para. 19); this case study provides a working framework for students to practice creative skills in an alumni program that could lure graduates, regardless of era, to connect across disciplinary silos and engage directly with students from design to evolution to positive return on partnership. I am Brian LaDuca, Executive Director of the Institute of Applied Creativity for Transformation (IACT) and administrative faculty at the University of Dayton (UD). Together with my colleague and co-author of this chapter, Adrienne Ausdenmoore, we are driven to prepare students across any discipline of study for today’s ever-changing workforce.

Introduction to IACT

The Institute of Applied Creativity for Transformation (IACT) is an academic institute at the University of Dayton that trains students in the creative competencies of critical thinking, complex problem solving and cross-disciplinary collaboration — while applying those same skills to the students’ diverse disciplines of study. As the founding leadership team of the Institute, we piloted our applied creativity curriculum in 2014, a process that included nearly 60 faculty, staff and Dayton community partners in its development.

In 2016, the World Economic Forum indicated that the three skills that would be in the highest demand by 2020 were complex problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity. These skills not only teach students how to confront problems in an ever complex world but more importantly, help students understand how to think, which is imperative to all types of experiential learning opportunities (Kolb, 1984). Yet the skills identified globally as most important to creative problem solving are currently playing a minimal role in most curricula (Adobe, 2018). Through an adaptive framework that centers on building these creative competencies, we developed a transcribed academic certificate in applied creativity, the first of its kind in higher education. The certificate is open to undergraduate students of all majors, and graduated its first class of students in May of 2018. As of May 2020, 35 students have successfully completed the certificate, with an additional 67 currently enrolled.

The Institute's applied creativity pedagogy, while uniquely designed within the University of Dayton, has its roots in principles of design thinking — a methodology that originated at Stanford University's d.school. Design thinking is an approach to innovation that stems from an empathetic “people first” mindset and early prototyping/testing as the keys to learning and product development (Brown, 2008). The iterative process employed by the students at IACT approaches creative problem-solving through a cycle of active experimentation and reflective observation, as described in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle.

Students training with IACT continue to study in their disciplinary field while developing their own personal DRIVE: a map for vocational discernment of one's own meaning that can actionize a student's Passion, Purpose and Possibility. Baxter Magolda's (2001, 2009) research shows that self-authorship benefits all learners because they are able to manage the dynamic complexities of their academic knowledge and their experiential engagement. The mentoring and

advising model developed at IACT embraces the recursive and iterative dialog between student and educators around skills, talents, passions and visions. The DRIVE engages students by navigating their relational knowledge, human engagement and critical reflection of self, based off of the University of Dayton's holistic educational philosophy and Singleton's (2015) Head, Heart and Hands Model for Transformational Learning. The DRIVE is vocationally-centered with a long-term relational process that guides one's focus away from 'what' you are going to do with your life but rather on the sense of being, or 'who' you are working towards.

The integrated curriculum of the IACT certificate emphasizes the whole of a student's experience, rather than simply the context of their chosen major or a specific course subject. As a result, even simple class exercises provide the potential for immediate and meaningful application. This "framing" brings the real world into the classroom while simultaneously engaging students in critical reflection about the experiences that they are partaking in (Roberts, 2016, p. 92-94). Still, students who self-select into the IACT program are diverse. Students seeking a sense of belonging, students who identify as "go-getters," and students who are looking for that career advantage are all part of the program. For many of them the focus is on the creative skills, and for others it's the ability to be vulnerable with intention; in all cases the student-centered approach to their lived and learned experiences is key.

The 13-credit hour certificate culminates in a two-part experiential learning cornerstone, known as ACT III: Vocational Innovation and ACT IV: Innovative Transformation. The course focuses on the practice of key competencies and development of creative solutions that apply students' DRIVES to societal issues and challenges. The students come from a wide variety of majors and learn to work effectively with peers from other disciplines to develop a shared learning experience. This transdisciplinary approach "dissolves the boundaries between the

conventional disciplines and organizes teaching and learning around the construction of meaning in the context of real-world problems or themes” (International Bureau of Education).

Problem solving skills and the ability to work on a team have been identified as key resume attributes for employers (NACE, 2020). The introduction of an Alumni Influencer program, launched in fall of 2019, provides alumni and other interested champions of our work an opportunity to “give back” as a mentor by contributing to the growth and sustainability of the student experience and the entire academic institute (Wenger, 1998). The program engages alumni to guide a student team towards successful completion of their transdisciplinary cornerstone projects during the final year in the certificate program. Through this one year commitment, the influencers connect their own background, current work, and lived experience with the students’ DRIVES.

The process for the inaugural Alumni Influencer program was an ongoing experience that saw many iterations in its first year. As executive director, I have observed that even in its early stages, the Alumni Influencer program has provided our students a tremendous value-add in gaining real-world insights and experiences that connect to their own vocation and self-authorship while connecting with an alumnus on a deeper level. As emerging research continues to detail the importance of creative skill acquisition and application within the workforce, it is as important that students in our program also have a deep understanding of themselves. This act of vulnerability is a key component for developing a true trust for idea development, and the attempts to teach this early in the program has proven positively evident in our upperclassmen when they enter our Alumni Influencer program.

Laying the Groundwork for Alumni Engagement

In the Fall of 2018, shortly after IACT's first nine undergraduates completed the certificate, many units across the University began to grow curious about the impact and outcomes of such a novel and new academic institute. One specific area that was especially focused on the IACT was University Advancement, which includes Alumni Relations. The interdisciplinarity of our institute provided a much larger landscape for alumni interest and involvement, and a mutual interest between IACT and Advancement to engage UD alumni of any generation was a very strong catalyst for further investigation.

Traditionally, Advancement/Alumni Relations will begin relationship building with the intention to procure donations in the form of gifts and scholarships. Instead, our Alumni Influencer program stemmed from alumni who were interested in the learning, the innovative approach to teaching, and the student growth and application. They were excited about the cross-disciplinary structure of engineers working with education majors, and philosophy majors working with exercise science majors. For me, I did not want to build new relationships simply to fund another program. What I wanted was an alumni family that could give actual credence to the developing creative mindset of students from across all majors of the University. Money would be nice. A sustainable and evolving relationship would be preferred, for it models the importance of a transformative, people-to-people relationship that focuses on the applied creative competencies of resilience, empathy and initiative versus the more common transactional people-to-product relationship that tends to dominate most innovation and entrepreneurial programs.

A supportive colleague in Advancement took the initiative to begin an introductory process for alumni who shared in the IACT mindset and design-thinking inspired approaches to complex problem solving. She began to communicate with alumni within the entrepreneurial, education, creativity and design sectors — focusing specifically on those “outside the box” thinkers and creators who would have thrived in IACT if it had existed during their time as undergraduate students. This approach might seem vast, expansive and ambiguous — and it was. Still, we began to find those alumni who thrived in such creative and ambiguous spaces and who understood the purpose and intended impact on the next generation of UD alumni. One such alumnus, an aspirational human whose life at that point had taken him across the business sectors into health, was the type of creative thinker that we hope the next generation of students will become. Our initial conversation provided the scaffolding for what is known today as the IACT Alumni Influencer program. By the end of that summer, we had six Influencers ready to pilot the first program.

Connecting Students with Alumni

A formalized “Roundtable” experience was scheduled for November of 2019, where the six Influencers came from across the country to the UD campus to meet with the 14 IACT certificate students during their regularly scheduled ACT III course. The students sat in a circle, interspersed with our Influencers and the IACT staff. It was an informally designed affair situated in the IACT’s own Creator Space, a flexible space for quick and dirty iterative practices of creative innovation, with walls covered in glass boards for sketching and note taking and a color scheme more akin to a children’s museum than a college classroom.

A video camera was placed in the room to assure an archive of the dialog at the Roundtable would be captured for never before had we led such a public forum on vulnerability and the application of it through creative skills. The students were prompted to provide a story that connected their meaning-making practices within the DRIVE and their academic process and aspirations. The practice of storytelling was not new to any of the students in the room for each, by this time, had spent between nine to twelve hours of individual discernment with me. The action of storytelling with a larger group of colleagues and strangers was new. Yet each student reached deep into their passions, purposes and possibilities and shared for five to ten minutes on what drives them to be who they are. For example, one student shared that her DRIVE was to

impact long term health outcomes for patients experiencing chronic pain through preventative care. As a student in the Pre-Medicine Program at UD, I was surrounded by incredibly driven and focused students whose goal was to get into medical school, physician's assistant school, pharmacy school, etc. While I admired the work ethic of my peers, I felt disconnected from them in that I knew my passion for engaging in healthcare went beyond simply becoming a physician or physician's assistant... I took health policy courses, social work courses, health communication courses, anything to help to understand the unique challenges that patients and healthcare providers face today. I enjoyed all of these courses, and learned a lot from them, but none of them gave me the space to imagine, dream, create, or innovate a future.

The authenticity in the room was felt by the Influencers who worked to ask follow up questions that were not aimed as critiques of the story but more open-ended inquiries that pushed the students to seek a bit more tangible connection to the Influencers own work experience.

Three hours of engagement between current students and alumni brought out deep levels of motivation, discipline and ambiguity. The emotions were very high due to the tremendous amount of respect given by each and every human in the Creator Space that late November afternoon. More importantly, connections between students and alumni were unearthed. This was the start of the transformative, person-to-person relationship I sought to develop between alumni and our academic program. Money, investment, or scholarships were never addressed but rather obstacles, dreams and aspirations were partnered in ways that a traditional student/alumni relationship may not find time to develop.

The outcome of this Roundtable was to create small cohorts of students whose stories found authentic connection with alumni Influencers in attendance. The process was quite organic and lacked pretension. I simply asked each Influencer if there was a single student who they felt most connected to from the Roundtable. This provided all Influencers an opportunity to review their hopes for specific student pairings and trios that they, as experienced professionals in various fields, could leverage to make possible innovative change in their own work and fields. Each Influencer was ultimately matched with a group of two or three diverse students.

One cohort example consisted of a senior pre-med major whose story revolved around women's reproductive rights, a senior finance major invested in blockchain technology for more inclusive economic exchange and a senior human resources major who, due to financial pressures, had to leave campus early and whose story was still in great transition. Their influencer was the previously mentioned alumnus who was in the innovative health industry out of Boston. The transactional outcome from this cohort was not supposed to be determined at this time but the transformative relationship was just starting. The new student cohorts would spend the remainder of the semester connecting their DRIVES and disciplinary work together with their

Influencer, in order to develop a clear collaborative project idea that would address real-world problems or themes. One student shared the following about the relationship with his Influencer:

Early on in our work together, it became apparent that I was seen as a part of their team and they valued my unique perspective. It takes humility to admit that you do not have all the answers and seek outside help. I was able to ideate, brainstorm, rough draft, prototype, and present my ideas pertinent to employing people overcoming traumatic life events... This challenge forced me to do a lot of internal reflection and come from a position of both understanding and empathy.

The Ambiguity of a New Process

Our first hiccup in this new program would begin to emerge at this point. As the fall semester neared an end, it was apparent that the next steps for Influencer engagement with the students were quite unclear. The students were both distracted with end of the semester demands and my unclear direction. Their communication back to their respective Influencers was minimal. The Influencers began asking questions around who should guide the relational process, the students or the Influencer. Some Influencers just jumped in and took the lead; others were less ambitious, afraid to interfere with overall program goals. My comfort with ambiguity translated as unclear, and because of that the act of developing a true understanding of the Influencers, their students, and the specific real world challenge they were to work on was not 100% successful by the time the students left for winter break.

At the start of 2020, it was imperative that the Influencer group had a balance of understanding and empowerment when working directly with their respective student teams. Due to the lack of what Kolb (1984) calls “abstract conceptualism” any final stage of understanding

the relationships between the student, the Influencer and how they were going to create a transferability for their own practices was going to be nearly impossible because of this unclear start. An IACT Influencer Starter Pack was created to bridge that gap in “abstract conceptualism” which provided the vocabulary, the mission, visions, pedagogy and creative exercises that the students would begin working on in the spring semester with the goal for the Starter Pack to aid in explaining those IACT specific models to help develop a shared understanding of what was a very emerging program (Kolb, 1984).

The weekly work between the Influencers and their respective student teams would cover the following over the course of the spring semester:

- **Challenge Statement:** Working from the Roundtable and the collaboration between students' DRIVES and their Influencer's experience, a “How Will We” statement was created to understand the initial plan and outcome.
- **DRIVE Collision:** Each student team identified the intersections between each other's DRIVE statements and how those intersections provide a shared vocational goal among the students.
- **First Lens Solution:** Students developed an initial idea for deliverable that should seek to solve the challenge, give disciplinary direction and satisfy the Influencer's overall goal.
- **Necessities:** Students were asked to develop a simple story wherein their discipline and DRIVE were put into a realistic position to satisfy both the challenge and the first lens

solution. Common unknowns and tensions that were shared between the student teams were then recognized as necessary to the continued research and development.

- **DRIVE Actions:** Students revisited their own vocational mapping to determine how their Purpose+Passion, Passion+Possibility and Possibility+Purpose could be leveraged to help address the necessities.
- **Leverage Points:** The student's common DRIVE actions and their addressing of the necessities were then transformed into very specific themes and concepts that would become the tangible frameworks for the next iteration of the Challenge Solution.
- **Field Tests:** Working specifically with their Influencer's network of contacts and potential recipients of the final deliverable, students would build on-the-ground experiences to test the leverage points identified to assure these are the key needs being addressed within the challenge and solution.

The weekly experiential collaboration between the Influencers and the students found a great rhythm between January through early March. Concepts, ideas and even field tests were being scheduled in order to leave a solid month to assess the field test results with Influencers and finish designing and building the needed solution. On Thursday March 12th, the University of Dayton declared a pause on face-to-face teaching due to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. Immediately, we were faced with moving to a virtual format and developing a plan for doing so successfully. Cohort groups had already scheduled field tests that now had to be canceled. One group was exploring ways to cater to different student learning styles, and had planned to interview and prototype tests for grade school educators in Indianapolis. Another team conducting a large scale survey around college accessibility had planned to follow up in person;

this now had to move to a virtual format that no one was prepared for. More importantly, the one-on-one weekly meetings between the cohorts and I were now going to be fully virtual — but when to reschedule and how much time would be left in the semester to do so was left without answer.

The Pivot to Online

Eleven days after the University's COVID-19 announcement and a scheduled spring break, communication with the certificate students resumed. While much interaction with the Influencers had already been in a virtual format, we understood that navigating this new normal of online coursework was a load the students were not expecting. The goal was to balance both the deflating sense of student morale with a creative, innovative and transferable method for certificate completion.

I communicated with all Influencers to lay out a prospective plan for next steps that specifically asked how we could assure that their wants, needs and visions were still supported. We set up a series of Zoom calls to assure communication and support was both clean and inspired for all invested in the program. This would give the students as well as the Influencers, who too were going through transitions of their own due to the pandemic, the time to get other needed priorities in order before returning to the creative and innovative work they had developed earlier in the year.

From the moment the pandemic disrupted the program, we were prepared for the student teams and their Influencers to create, design, and deliver on the work in whatever new state they

still found passion and purpose in. The active experimentation during these final weeks of work took on a much broader sense of transferability. The one-on-one weekly meetings with me pivoted to weekly Zoom calls for each Influencer and their students. I began joining the calls to observe and get a sense of commitment while also seeing how much, if any, of the work done during class pre-COVID was still valuable and relevant. To my surprise, the work found continued momentum and even more importantly, purpose and value for the students and their Influencers. As one student shared,

I have learned that we cannot continue to keep approaching the same challenges from the same perspective, but maybe from a different angle. We need to change the way we even approach the problems, and that is what my group challenged me to consider. Our team relationship with our influencer was honestly stronger and more influential than I anticipated it to be.

The purposeful learning that was occurring at this point has always been the intent of the IACT, but we understood that getting the collaborative work between students and their Influencer completed was going to be top priority during the pandemic. Yet, as we pleasantly discovered, the usefulness and relevance of the learning was less about the product deliverable for the Influencer but the strengthening of relationship, practicing incorporating diverse perspectives and the exhibiting of flexibility became the learning most useful to students' life (Kolb, 1984). The Influencers also highlighted the importance of students practicing skills and developing professional experience:

[Bringing together] the diversity of thoughts and opinions, interests and passions ... is much more realistic to what happens out in the professional world than you get in a traditional higher education academic setting.

One of the benefits of a program like IACT is that it brings to the forefront that solving problems is not a straight line... These students will be set up with a skill set that is needed in the workplace: understanding themselves... [and] understanding how to solve problems holistically from a place of empathy.

Each student team and Influencer met at a minimum of five times over Zoom, where they continued to build tangible results around their earlier semester work. The canceled field tests were still designed but not necessarily executed face to face due to pandemic restrictions. Collaborative concepts went through a true iterative process and then developed. Design companies were brought into work closely on storyboards and one cohort even pitched their medical application to a set of medical venture capitalists in Boston to experience the action of sharing a medical/business technology concept and to get a sense of viability and feasibility. After this pitch, one student shared:

In reality, my team's final deliverable could never come to fruition without a massive shift in funding and ideologies in the U.S. healthcare system, but instead of encouraging us to maneuver within an already broken system, Addison (Influencer) encouraged us to be the change we want to see.

At the end of the semester, a virtual ceremony was held to debut the final deliverables for this graduating class. Here, each Influencer was able to introduce their students, their process and their deliverable. Each student team had to present their concepts and provide an appropriate

human-centered story around their work, reinforcing the program's emphasis on the people-to-people relationships and personal development within their process. One Influencer team shared the following:

Once we got involved with IACT and the Influencer Program, we truly became enmeshed in the fabric of the University of Dayton and its mission of Learn, Lead, Serve. We value the real-world experience the University offers to the students and the challenge to think outside of academia into the future, taking into consideration the real humans they'll be working with as they grow into professionals.

This two-hour event was a perfect punctuation of a very odd and challenging semester that saw students working experientially in a direct and hands-on fashion, only to pivot into a virtual experiential learning model that no one had ever experienced prior.

Lessons Learned and Moving Forward

This inaugural year of the program illustrated that there is great potential in how our certificate students can engage with alumni in meaningful ways that further their personal and professional development. We also discovered that largely, the process and practice of the creative competencies our Institute was built on — critical thinking, complex problem solving and collaboration with others — was the primary measure of impact, rather than the project deliverables themselves. That said, three of the projects continued to be developed with Influencers in our summer micro-internship program, where the skill building and networking continued with a different set of students.

We have learned that the ambiguity that we, as leaders of the Institute, thrive on, proved to be challenging for Influencers. This was compounded by overly complex vocabulary that participants struggled to keep up with. As we move into our second year of the Influencer program, we have spent considerable time honing in on the key concepts that shape our curriculum and a simpler, more accessible vocabulary. This, combined with more clearly defined outcomes, should provide new Influencers a more direct path into our process and hopefully fewer challenges in the future. Reflecting on the relationships that were built, one student shared

I continue to think about my work differently... I am starting to think about how corporations play a role for good in these societal challenges, which is new for me. This is why I reached out to our influencer after the program ended... They said they would always be willing to talk and impart whatever advice and wisdom they may have to me. I think our influencer sees the opportunities we have as students, how we think, and what we want to do with our lives, and they want to support that growth so that we can truly make a difference in the world.

For the Influencers, one identified benefit was that the program offered an opportunity for them to reconnect with their alma mater. Several cited a direct connection to the University and its students that they had not experienced previously:

IACT has given me an exciting opportunity to reconnect with the University of Dayton in ways I have previously not been able to... I found the energy, vision and purpose of the students to be really fulfilling and exciting to be around.

IACT has been such a great way to connect back to the University in a way that I haven't been able to do in previous years. [It] created an opportunity to engage myself in a program that I wish existed when I was a student.

Despite the challenging circumstances of the spring semester, the program also demonstrated the potential for alumni impact through virtual engagement. This discovery has led to an ongoing series of "Influencer Lunch Lounges" where we invite alumni and other Institute supporters to engage with our certificate students in a casual networking discussion via Zoom. This is one of several tactics that have helped shape a new alumni engagement strategy for our Institute. We still face the challenge of scalability and sustaining momentum with alumni participation, especially as our certificate student population grows. However, we feel confident that new strategies will build a larger pool of interested alumni that then funnels into deeper engagement and advocacy for our Institute. The response we received from Influencers regarding their relationship with the University mirrors the outcomes in other student-alumni mentorship programs, providing a path for strategic alumni engagement that leads to long-term support (Vieregger and Bryant, 2020). In sum, we feel that we have developed a framework for our Institute that advances the experiential learning impact on our students as well as providing meaningful engagement for alumni.

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