



VCU Relevant, Experiential and Applied Learning

Motion: Academic Regulation for experiential learning, or “REAL”, graduation requirement at the undergraduate level for implementation beginning fall 2021

Referred to the Real Council Curriculum Subcommittee

Date referred: April 24, 2020

Motion

The REAL Council Curriculum Subcommittee supports the recommendation from the REAL Requirement Design Team to develop a new academic regulation for an experiential learning or “REAL” graduation requirement at the undergraduate level requiring all first-year and transfer undergraduate students who matriculate fall semester 2021 and thereafter to successfully complete at least one VCU “REAL” experiential learning activity. It is recommended that the requirement be satisfied by completing one of the following:

- a 300-level or above course that has received a REAL attribute of Level 2, 3 or 4, or
- an approved co-curricular experience that has received a REAL attribute of Level 3 or 4.

Further, it is recommended that each school, college or unit be encouraged to determine the pathway through which a student may fulfill the REAL requirement within its academic context, without increasing the hours required for graduation beyond the approved limit as stated in the VCU Bulletin.

Given the diverse contexts of students and of the disciplines, it is recommended that alternative pathways to fulfillment of the requirement be available through the co-curriculum, including pathways through the Office of Undergraduate Research, Office of Service-Learning, Global Education Office, Career Services and the Division of Student Affairs.

It is recommended that a student in a program of study that requires experiential course work be able to fulfill the REAL experiential learning requirement concurrently, as long as the course work meets the above criteria.

In addition, it is recommended that having once satisfied the REAL experiential learning requirement, the student will not have to fulfill it again, including cases of a returning student who is completing a baccalaureate degree or pursuing an additional baccalaureate degree, a student who is enrolled in multiple programs and a student who may change majors.

Courses and co-curricular activities that satisfy the REAL requirement should be searchable in the VCU Schedule of Classes and through the VCU Student Opportunity Center, which should be accessible through a student-facing VCU REAL website, real.vcu.edu.

Rationale (please see the [full proposal](#) for the proposed operational processes and enhanced discussion)

The purpose of the REAL experiential learning requirement is to ensure that experiential learning remains a distinguishing part of the curriculum for all VCU undergraduates. The requirement fulfills President Rao's vision to provide a real-world, transformative experience as part of every undergraduate student's VCU experience, and aligns with the university's founding mission. Adoption of the requirement demonstrates VCU's commitment to educational best practices for providing access to quality experiential learning at all levels. The recommended academic regulation supports:

- the continued maturation of experiential learning as a signature of a VCU education by encouraging multi-tiered opportunities for student engagement,
- democratized and equitable student access to opportunities, with a special focus on equalizing access for historically underserved student populations, addressing engagement gaps during the sophomore and junior years, and engaging transfer students, and
- student preparation for their senior capstone experiences and for their transition to the world of work.

Departments will soon be revisiting their programs of study in anticipation of the new general education program which is targeted to launch in fall of 2021, making this an optimal time for codifying the REAL requirement (for undergraduates students) as a part of our institutional practice. Not only does it make good sense to take advantage of this opportunity to map the disciplinary pathways through which students might fulfill the REAL requirement, it provides an important opportunity for departments to consider disciplinary pathways they would wish to build in the future.

Through the diligence and good-faith work of faculty and departments, experiential learning is a distinguishing feature of a VCU undergraduate educational experience. Since 2008, VCU has institutionalized experiential learning as bookends to the VCU undergraduate experience, with first-year students receiving exposure and exploratory activities through the University College's Focused Inquiry (FI) courses, and students in their final semesters benefiting from the curricular requirement that all majors include a culminating capstone experience as part of their plans of study.

More recently, over the last 18 months, departments, programs and units have actively worked to classify courses according to a common set of operational definitions, criteria and processes. In consequence, we have identified multiple pathways by which students might fulfill the requirement. Thus, the new academic regulation maintains VCU's high standards of excellence while also acknowledging the different contexts of academic units as well as of our diverse student populations.

Finally, adoption of the REAL requirement is an important step toward ensuring equitable access to transformative experiences by incentivizing student participation and ensuring these activities are incorporated into students' plans of study. The requirement improves equity by ensuring underserved student populations have access to these opportunities at the same rate as their peers.

Summary

In sum, the REAL Council Curriculum Subcommittee recommends development of the “Academic Regulation: Experiential learning, or “REAL”, graduation requirement at the undergraduate level” for the following reasons:

- It fulfills President Rao's vision that all students will have a transformative, real-world experience as part of their VCU education.
- It recognizes and builds upon the deep and rich history of experiential learning at VCU.
- It represents a realistic, practical step forward, expanding and enhancing the university's culture of experiential learning without disrupting programs or curricula.
- It provides flexibility for students through the co-curriculum.
- It advances a set of clearly defined criteria and expectations for what experiential learning means at VCU.
- It encourages student participation in experiential learning earlier in their academic careers, and better prepares students for their culminating capstone activities, leading to improved student success.