

A Mixed-Methods Examination of the Barriers to Kinesiology Students' Engagement in Work

Integrated Learning

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## Abstract

The call for the provision of work integrated learning (WIL) for all students (BHER, 2016), aligns with the broader focus within Canadian higher education for advanced access and accessibility (Jones, 2014). Access to WIL, however, remains unevenly distributed with specific barriers previously reported for international students (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017), Indigenous students (Gair, Miles, Savage, & Zuchowski, 2015), and students from a background of low socio-economic status (Dunn, Schier, Hiller, & Harding, 2016). Strategies for advancing inclusion have emphasized the importance of understanding population-specific barriers to engagement (Wall et al., 2017). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate undergraduate Kinesiology students' perspectives of the barriers to engaging in an optional unpaid WIL opportunity. A mixed-methods convergent parallel design was used for this study, and 110 surveys and 17 semi-structured interviews were completed with students. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a combination of inductive and deductive coding techniques. Findings are presented across the themes of perceived value, logistical barriers, workplace barriers, and self-efficacy and self-determination. Interestingly, of the students not enrolled in WIL, 77% report that they would value the increased knowledge and skills they would gain from completing a placement, 72% report logistical barriers such as timing, finances, transport and support, 77% are concerned about discrimination or harassment in the workplace, and 81% report that being evaluated in the interview process keeps them from applying. Directions for future research directions are suggested.

## A mixed-methods examination of the barriers to Kinesiology students' engagement in work integrated learning

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a pedagogical practice whereby students come to learn from the integration of experiences in educational and workplace settings (Billett, 2009).

Recognizing the benefits of this pedagogical approach, there has been increased national and international attention to students' experiences of WIL (BHER, 2016; Patrick et al., 2008; Wilson, 2012).

The call for the provision of WIL for all students (BHER, 2016) aligns with the broader focus within Canadian higher education for advanced access and accessibility (Jones, 2014), however, access to WIL is still unevenly distributed and not all students choose to partake (ACEN, 2010). Researchers consistently report the underrepresentation of various student groups in WIL, including international students (Tran & Soejatminah, 2017; Wall, Tran, & Soejatminah, 2017); first generation, racialized and Indigenous students (Gair et al., 2015); students with low GPAs (Dunn, Schier, Hiller, & Harding, 2016); students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students with a disability (Cooper et al., 2010).

Looking beyond population-specific barriers, a number of individual barriers can keep students from engaging in learning outside the traditional classroom setting, including student awareness and perceptions, preparedness, financial challenges, time commitment and equity and access challenges (HEQCO, 2018). As well, institutional barriers previously identified include a lack of administrative support and connections to workplaces (Jackson et al., 2017; Lawlis, Anson, & Greenfield, 2014), employers' inconsistent understandings of WIL (Jackson et al., 2017; Martin & Leberman, 2005; Patrick et al. 2008), and students' highly structured timetables (Lawlis, Anson, & Greenfield, 2014). For students who choose to participate in WIL, challenges

can arise in their relationships with their mentors when they encounter discrepancies between student and mentor expectations (Brooks & Youngson, 2016).

To date, most research in this area has reported barriers to quality engagement and learning but few studies have examined factors that prevent students from enrolling in WIL to begin with. Researchers have emphasized the importance of understanding population-specific barriers to WIL (Wall et al., 2017), as the first step in identifying facilitators for WIL access, participation and inclusion. To date, no research exists specifically on the barriers to engagement in WIL within the academic discipline of kinesiology and physical education. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate undergraduate Kinesiology students' perspectives of the barriers to engaging in an optional unpaid WIL opportunity.

#### KPE Placement Program

The kinesiology placement program includes student participation in 120 hours of hands-on practice where students are paired one-to-one with a mentor to observe and assist as appropriate in the day-to-day activities of the workplace. The experience is spread over the academic year (September – March) as a part of an academic course, and student placements can occur in a range of settings including education, health care, sport and recreation, health promotion, and research and innovation.

#### Methods

A convergent parallel design was used in the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This approach is consistent with Zegwaard and Hoskyn's (2015) assertion that more research in the area of WIL is moving towards a mixed methods approach in order to combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research, and to attempt to understand the complexity of educational issues (Zegwaard & Hoskyn, 2015). To allow for a unique set of results, quantitative

data attained from an online anonymous survey (Phase 1) and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were collected concurrently. Both methods were analyzed independently and then analyzed together for an overall interpretation of the collected data. Themes and relationships were identified upon total data collection, analysis and interpretation.

#### Phase 1: Student Survey

*Participants.* Survey participants included 110 kinesiology students, including both students who have (n = 67) and have not (n = 43) completed a WIL experience. Student participants who have completed a WIL experience included individuals who self-identified as a person with disability (n = 5; 7.5%), racialized (n = 24; 35.8%) and first generation Canadian (n = 29; 43.3%). None of the participants who completed a WIL experience self-identified as an Indigenous person. Among the students who have not completed a WIL experience, individuals from a variety of groups were represented including individuals who self-identified as a person with disability (n = 2; 4.7%), racialized (n = 13; 30.2%), first generation Canadian (n = 17; 39.5%) and indigenous (n = 1; 2.3%).

*Procedures.* An online questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study. Survey questions on barriers to WIL were grounded in the transtheoretical model of behaviour change, with specific themes identified based on barriers to WIL reported in previous literature. Students were recruited through the contact lists of the Faculty. All registered students in years three, four or five of their degree were sent an email inviting them to complete a 10-minute online survey. The survey was provided to both those who have and have not completed a placement.

*Data analysis.* Survey data were analyzed descriptively and using Pearson's correlation analysis.

#### Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

*Participants:* Semi-structured interviews were completed with 17 students who have either completed or not completed a placement. Some students completed the online survey in addition to participating in the interviews. Efforts were made to recruit students with diverse demographic backgrounds (i.e., gender, ethnicity, registration with accessibility services). Among the interviewees, 14 participants identified as female and 2 identified as male (1 did not disclose). While the majority of participants identified as straight (n = 13), one individual identified as gay (n = 1) and one individual identified as bisexual (n = 1) (2 did not disclose). Participants self-identified as a person with an invisible disability (n = 2). Over half of the participants identified as racialized (n = 9) and one individual self-identified as indigenous belonging to the Metis community. Seven participants identified as being first generation Canadian.

*Procedures:* Students were asked to discuss their perceived barriers to completing a WIL course and the course application process. A copy of the letter of information and informed consent was read and signed by the participant before each interview began. Interviews ranged in length from 30 – 60 minutes and each began with the general question, “Are you aware of the opportunity to complete a placement?” and “Are there any reasons why you may not want to complete a placement?” Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used and any identifiable information was removed during the process of transcription.

*Data Analysis:* The interview data were analyzed thematically using a combination of inductive and deductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Results

In examining the perceived barriers to WIL faced by kinesiology students', collective findings gleaned through both survey and interview data are presented across the main themes of

perceived value, logistical barriers, workplace barriers, and self-efficacy and self-determination.

This paper presents highlights of the qualitative comments and descriptive survey findings. Each theme is presented in turn.

### Perceived Value

Of the student participants not enrolled in a WIL course, 77% report that they would value the increased knowledge gained from completing a WIL course and 74% believe that not completing a WIL course is detrimental to their educational experience. At the same time, when asked how WIL courses ranked compared to other degree courses, a range of perceptions of WIL courses were revealed. Some students prioritized other academic courses, as reflected in the following comment, “I definitely don’t think it [work integrated learning] is as important as anatomy or biomechanics or something like that [...] You need to have anatomy to understand what you are going to do in the placement” (Participant 12). On the other hand, another student explained, “I think placements are equally as important, if not more important [than other academic courses] because you can be great at school and awful in a work environment” (Participant 13).

### Logistical Barriers

Among the themes that emerged from the collected data, logistical barriers were among the most common for students. Seventy-two percent of non-WIL students reported that the time required for the work experience was challenging. Balancing work hours with class hours was reported by students as a barrier to participation. Students also spoke about the barrier of ‘hidden hours’, such as time for transportation or workplace related events (e.g., staff socials, conferences) that increase the amount of allotted time for the course.

Other logistical barriers reported include financial barriers (42%), transportation constraints (65%), and barriers associated with accessibility needs (63%). Students stated that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds may face greater barriers in accessing WIL courses. Specifically, the cost of transportation to different WIL locations affects students' decisions when applying for certain placement sites. Furthermore, individuals with accessibility needs have pointed out additional logistical barriers associated with participation in WIL. "Because I am on the autism spectrum, I don't necessarily do well with new people. Especially in an interview setting" (Participant 13).

### Workplace Barriers

Student perceptions of workplaces affect whether the student chooses to enrol in a WIL course. Seventy-seven percent of students not enrolled in WIL courses report that they are not interested in taking a WIL course because they are concerned about discrimination or harassment in the workplace. One student made the following comment about submitting their resume as a part of the application process:

You always hear for resumes that you might want to change your name to make it sound a little bit more "white", for example. I haven't heard that for placements specifically, but just in general with the stigma that is going on... or maybe change your address because people will start to stereotype you based off the area that you live in. (Participant 10)

International students also identified barriers in securing a placement at specific sites. One student stated,

For people who are international, Skype [interviews] and call [interviews] will have a lesser chance of getting selected [...] To tell you the truth, if I knew, I would have stayed

maybe 2 weeks more. I would have shown up in person and asked if it were possible to accelerate the process for me. (Participant 1)

### Self-Efficacy and Self-Determination

The final theme identified through data analysis were barriers related to students' perceived competency and efficacy in the workplace. Among the survey respondents, 81% of students not enrolled in a WIL course agree that being evaluated in the interview process keeps them from applying for a potential WIL course. Moreover, 86% of non-WIL students report interest in the course, however, do not feel prepared for the tasks they will be given. Finally, 79% of non-WIL students report feelings of concern regarding how WIL course grades will affect their GPA. Among the interviews, one participant reported using a sense of empowerment to motivate them to enroll in a WIL course, "It's empowering students to take ownership over your own education" (Participant 4).

### Discussion

This study supports much of the literature to-date. Participants reported that work integrated learning opportunities are valuable to their education, but logistical barriers and workplace barriers impose constraints on their engagement. Individuals who self-identify as being "racialized students" fear being discriminated against in the workplace and was a deterrent from WIL participation. In addition, students enrolled in accessibility services find the enrollment process challenging, potentially leading to decreased participation.

This mixed methods research highlights the need to consider specific contextual and intersectional barriers experienced by underrepresented populations in order to support equitable access to WIL for all. Though the study supports prior knowledge in the field, more research is required on the unique barriers to WIL faced by marginalized students and students with

accessibility needs. Furthermore, future research is required on population-specific factors that facilitate students' engagement and success in WIL.

### Conclusion

In summary, this research employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design to investigate undergraduate Kinesiology students' perspectives of the barriers to engaging in an optional unpaid WIL opportunity. Perceived value, logistical barriers, workplace barriers, and self-efficacy and self-determination were barriers identified by kinesiology students as deterring their participation in WIL. While this is the first research specifically on Kinesiology students' perspectives of WIL, the findings are well supported by previous research. A number of questions are posed for future study.

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