PORTFOLIO VERSUS SYLLABUS METHODS IN EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: The "portfolio" method of assessing past experience for the award of academic credit is being nationally promoted by the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL). The portfolio method has evolved since 1974 and is used in a number of colleges and universities. The project-syllabus method was developed by the author in 1969 to support experiential credit for students in sponsored experiences. Beginning about 1973, the project-syllabus method was also used to support credit for past experiences in some areas. These two methods are contrasted, comparisons made to traditional classroom methods, and strengths and weaknesses analyzed.

The awarding of academic credit for life experiences which occur outside the classroom is becoming common in higher education today. Previously, the question was "should credit be granted for such experiences since they occurred outside the rigorous scrutiny of traditional classroom methods?". Now the question is more—"what must the student present for evaluation to earn such credit and how should this evaluation by faculty occur?" It is the latter question which is considered here, especially as it relates to the portfolio method which has been developed by the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL) in contrast with the project-syllabus method developed by me and used at the University of South Florida.

Disclaimer: In several sections below quotations will be found which are not authenticated in the "Reference" listing at the end. These quotations are from a Handbook of a particular university which has been a major leader for CAEL in developing both the concept of the award of academic credit for past life experiences as well as the portfolio method.
of communicating such experiences for evaluation purposes. The omission of the reference to this handbook and university is intentional. This article is critical of the portfolio process, in general, not just the particular practices espoused by this one university. However, the university involved does represent the practices of many others so the specific quotations could have come from any of many other sources as well.

**CAEL AND OCT**

As noted earlier, CAEL is the acronym of the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning, formerly the Cooperative Assessment for Experiential Learning. OCT is the acronym for the University of South Florida's center for experiential education, the Off-Campus Term Program.

CAEL became an important factor in higher education in 1974 as a well-funded and well-managed grant project of the Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J. Then known as the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning Project, CAEL's mission during the two year grant period was to assess experiential education practices as they were at that time, while developing new and enlarging upon existing practices with special emphasis on methods for awarding academic credit for past life experiences. Ten colleges were originally identified as being the core team to assist in the assessment and development missions of CAEL. Development was further enhanced through specific mini-grants to other colleges and universities to try out new techniques, prepare people to teach these new methods, and otherwise perform experimental work in different areas. In 1976, CAEL became a richly endowed membership organization, going beyond the original grant goals and affiliations.

Since 1974, CAEL has been responsible for volumes of information being published in support of experiential education philosophically and in practice. It has brought together experts in experiential education from many leading colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad. A major thrust of all this effort has been the development of the portfolio method for assessing past life experiences of students for the award of academic credit. It is the portfolio method that is the concern of this article. While this method is criticized in the contrasts made between it and the project-syllabus method developed in 1969, it should be made clear that this criticism does not apply to CAEL, itself. There can be no question that the impact and viability of CAEL has