Community-Engaged Learning Coursework and Its Connection to the Experiential Learning Requirement at Saint Michael’s College: Definitions and Course Identification Process

I. WHAT MAKES A COURSE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING?

CEL courses seek to have faculty and students work with and for the community through purposeful service-learning experiences, community-based research, and advocacy efforts. CEL programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to benefit both the provider and the recipient of the activity as well as to seek a balanced approach to the service provided and learning sought. A community-engaged learning course accomplishes the following:

- Identifies a community need and articulates the connections between the community need, the course objectives, and the experiential project designed to address that need. There is an intentional plan for integrating the experiential activities with the course content.

- Develops a just relationship with the community which respects the skills, knowledge, experience, resources, and positions community members and key stakeholders bring to the table. This may be accomplished through either: (1) the development of a reciprocal, mutually-beneficial partnership between students and one or more community organizations working for the public good, wherein community partners are aware of course objectives and provide input for defining needs/goals as well as how objectives can be met through student research, projects, field placements, and engagement with the community, or (2) advocacy work for under-represented/disadvantaged stakeholders, in which action is grounded in and guided by critical research considering the causes and conditions of social inequities relevant to the identified stakeholders.

- Engages students in critical, reflective thinking about how the course objectives and themes relate to and inform the experiential component and vice versa.

- Evaluates student learning gained through the experiential, community-based component.

II. HOW CAN A MULTI-STAGE APPROACH HELP IN DESIGNING INTENTIONAL CEL EXPERIENCES AND ALIGNING COURSES WITH THE COLLEGE’S EXPERIENTIAL REQUIREMENT?

Identifying stages allows us to account for the degree to which a project or activity is integrated into the course curriculum as well as plan for the level of responsibility, competence, and commitment in effort and time expected of students. This, in turn, will assist faculty members in determining the amount and nature of support needed for students to be both challenged and successful. In addition, it helps to establish realistic expectations and facilitate discussions with community partners with the goal of developing positive relationships. No one stage is intended to suggest greater or lesser value than another; rather, all are viewed as necessary for building student capacity and offering progressively challenging and complex opportunities so that all participants are appropriately prepared to engage in intentional and purposeful CEL experiences.

Stage 1: Exposure to Community-Engaged Learning (preparing for and practicing the experiential learning requirement)
Stage 2: Deepening Commitment to Community-Engaged Learning (meeting the experiential learning requirement)
Stage 3: Mature Commitment to Community-Engaged Learning (extending the experiential learning requirement)
Faculty are asked to notify the CEL office of their intention to offer a CEL course in the semester prior to delivering it—or, if it is a new course—at the same time they are submitting the course for CEPC approval. This gives the faculty member who will be delivering the course an opportunity to determine whether or not the course is designed to meet or exceed the Experiential requirement since the identification tool guides faculty in selecting the stage which best aligns with their course plans.

III. WHEN DOES A CEL COURSE MEET THE “EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING” REQUIREMENT?

All community-engaged learning courses are experiential by design; however, the Experiential Learning requirement for the Liberal Studies Curriculum calls more specifically for experiences which demonstrate a high level of sustained student engagement and significant training and/or opportunities for students to critically reflect on their contributions in light of the overall objective of the activity. Courses in stage 2 and 3, therefore, should meet the guidelines for the Experiential requirement.

It is anticipated that certain courses may begin at one stage and end at a more advanced stage because the course itself may foster a developmental approach towards building student capacity. In order for a course to meet the experiential learning requirement, students must be involved in a consistently moderate to high level of engagement throughout the semester. See 3-stage matrix and project examples across the disciplines on the CEL website.

Ideally, departments which incorporate significant civic engagement components as part of the requirements of the major/minor will strategically plan which course(s) will offer experiences at each level and how each course will prepare students for progressively challenging experiences.

IV. CALCULATING CEL HOURS AND VALIDATING AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

*Total community-engaged learning hours include not only direct “contact” time with clients and community partners, but also “hands-on” work invested both in and outside of scheduled class meetings for completing a project for or with a community partner (see below categories and descriptions). Those courses most qualified to gain the experiential designation will demonstrate that service site/field hours and out-of-class work directly supporting the CEL project constitute the largest proportion of total service hours.

**SERVICE SITE/FIELD EXPERIENCE HOURS** (Includes orientation to the site; face time with individuals for client-based activities; interviews/consultations with organization representatives; gathering data or completing hands-on work at the service site; student presentations to community partners).

**IN-CLASS HOURS** (Includes time invested in direct preparation for and support of the CEL activity such as planning, information, reflection, and debrief sessions; skill-building activities; guest speakers).

**OUT-OF-CLASS HOURS NOT AT SERVICE SITE** (Includes carrying out the work which will contribute to the community project or which constitutes the “deliverables” desired by the community partner. This may take the form of group planning; data gathering, organization, or interpretation; creating print or web-based products; curriculum development; artistic contributions; and other forms of research. It may also include work on reflective assignments such as writing journal entries and culminating essays or preparing a presentation which connects theory and practice.)

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This document was completed January 2012 by the Community-Engaged Learning Advisory Committee and approved by the CEPC.