



# Experiential Learning

## Beyond the Podium Podcast

### Alexandra

Welcome to the Beyond the Podium podcast series at the University of Florida. My name is Alexandra Bailey and I'm the co-host of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. And today, our other co-host is Matt August, our producer.

### Matt

That's right. We're throwing a curveball at you today. My name is Matt August, and I'm the digital media coordinator for the Office of Faculty Development and Teaching Excellence. I'm normally the editing guru who works behind the scene, so it's actually a scary step to jump in the spotlight a bit, but I'm happy to be on this episode. Thank you, Alex, for letting me join you.

### Alexandra

It is our pleasure. We're happy to have you. So our guest today is Dr. Rich Conley, and he's here to tell us about his experiential learning course.

### Dr. Rich Conley

Well, I did my undergraduate work at the University of California Irvine. I grew up out west. And from there, I worked in the private sector for four, five, six years wondering what I wanted to do with my life and decided that banking and human resources was not it.

### Alexandra

Sometimes it's not the experiences we have that mark us most, but those we miss out on. Those missed opportunities sometimes serve as the drive that propels us in any given direction.

Matt

Oh, yeah. I know that's the case for me. The things I never got to do, they still live on my bucket list.

Alexandra

And when you finally have a chance to have that experience, you want to share it with others.

Rich

One of the things that I'd always regretted as an undergrad was that I had an opportunity to go study abroad in France, and I couldn't afford it. I was putting myself through school at the time, and so I always regretted not being able to do that. So when I started looking for masters programs, I decided to go to Canada, to Montreal.

Matt

Wait. Did he just say Montreal?

Alexandra

Yes, he did.

Matt

Just so the audience knows, Alex is from Montreal and French is her native language, so she gets really excited when meeting other French speakers.

## Interview Dialogue:

Alexandra

That's where I'm from.

Rich

Are you really?

Alexandra and Rich

[SPEAKING FRENCH]

## Interview Dialogue Ends

**Matt**

I will be honest. I was a little envious listening to the two of them speak French. Ironically, I tried learning French on my own last year but I could not understand a word of what they were saying.

**Alexandra**

It's OK, Matt. I can probably teach you one day, but you would have to promise to be a really good student.

**Matt**

Well, something tells me you'll have to be a fantastic teacher.

And while we're on the topic of fantastic teachers, Rich Conley's experiential learning class is an exceptional example of what being a great teacher looks like. Dr. Conley's course takes students out into the world to authentically experience the material.

## Dr. Rich Conley

This course that I did for spring break 2017 was a Native American politics. And I have done at least four or five study abroad programs in France. I developed one with a colleague back in 2008 for a summer in Dublin and Belfast when we went and studied some of the conflict between the two different communities there. And so I had that experience leading those trips, and it came in very handy in putting this one together.

## Alexandra

So Rich started planning this course and selected the area of Arizona where he'd spent much of his childhood.

## Dr. Rich Conley

Over the last five or six years, I got to know my native neighbors a little bit more out in Arizona. And when I was putting together the 16-week course, I thought, wouldn't it be a neat idea if we could get out of the classroom and go and actually talk to some people.

## Matt

You know, Rich also mentioned something interesting about his students that I really wouldn't have considered.

## Dr. Rich Conley

What I've learned in my time you have is a lot of students of Florida have not traveled that much. They may have gone abroad, but many have not gone past west of the Mississippi River. So it's a whole other frontier, a whole other universe for them. And I thought this could be a really neat thing to do. It's doable within a week over spring break, and it wouldn't be as expensive obviously as doing something that requires going abroad. So that was the genesis for it for me it was-- and selfishly, it gives me an opportunity to go back to part of the world that I do miss and I grew up in.

## Alexandra

For this to really work over a week-long period, Rich carefully chose his locations.

## Dr. Rich Conley

Well this last trip in 2017, we started the trip in Denver, and then we went to three reservations--one in Wyoming Wind River. Actually there's a movie right. It's a very, very good movie. And it's a unique reservation, because it's shared between two tribes. I don't think there's another example of that in the United States, the eastern Shoshone and the Northern Arapaho, who were traditionally enemies. But you have to go back to the 1860s and treaties to understand why that happened, but then we went to the Crow reservation, Little Big Horn in Montana on the side of the battlefield, and then on to Pine Ridge in South Dakota. That's the Oglala Lakota or Oglala Sioux.

## Alexandra

What's really significant about creating such an opportunity is to know and plan exactly what it is the students are supposed to learn and understand and experience through this.

## Matt

Exactly. Rich really invested in creating a learning opportunity. He made a traveling classroom.

## Dr. Rich Conley

Well, I think one of the things to note is that it's not just a sightseeing tour. Anyone can go and hop in a bus or car and drive around. What I endeavor to do is to take the students to political entities, for example, and historical sites to put those things in context. But we meet with members of the legislature or the executive in the tribal governments themselves. We meet with the federal level. The Bureau of Indian Affairs is the entity under the Department of Interior that liaise with the tribes. And so we met with several of the superintendents of the BIA. And it gives the students an opportunity to really connect with people on a level that you simply can't get this out of a textbook.

I had the students write a reflection paper a couple of months after the trip as part of their grade. And what did you learn from this? What was unique? And really that was the thing that came out. It was the people with whom we had these relationships.

## Alexandra

Despite the careful planning, the beauty of such an experiential learning opportunity is really the relationships that develop and surprise teachable moments that unfold magically.

## Dr. Rich Conley

On two of the reservations, I had made some friends. One was the lead ranger. He was a Crow Indian. He was the lead ranger at Little Big Horn. And for reasons I won't detail here, he ended up being our guide. He took us to a sacred place for the Crow, called Big Horn Canyon. And we stopped, and got out, and it was freezing cold. And he went out and he got a piece of sage, and he did a smudging ceremony. And he said a prayer to the four directions and native Crow, and then explained everything to us. And some of the myths about this is the seven sheep there Big Horn Canyon how they saved a boy, going in actually seeing all of this firsthand is just something that you don't quite get the same view when you're reading it from a book about economic development.

## Matt

Dr. Conley gave us such a great description of that experience and really what it must have been like to be there firsthand, but the story brings us back to the central theme of experiential learning, which is that no photo, video, or story can replace the value of what it must have been like to actually be there. Some things really just have to be lived, although this does mean some careful planning is required.

## Alexandra

Yeah, and I really think that Rich did a great job preparing his students.

## Dr. Rich Conley

And we had a pre-departure meeting where I told them that we're going to run into some very difficult issues, and we're going to have to be prepared for that. But they were very good listeners. They were polite. They were respectful. They asked good questions. And I didn't have any problems whatsoever keeping them really focused during the adventure.

## Alexandra

Now, part of that preparation is in setting up some ground rules.

## Dr. Rich Conley

One of the other things that I put in my own acknowledgment was that the students need to be respectful not only of federal and state laws, but also tribal ordinances. What's difficult is that on the one hand, you don't want to be too paternalistic, but you also-- you know, my ultimate goal and I know everyone else who does these programs or studies abroad, we want to make sure students are safe.

## Matt

Now, when I first listened to Rich talking about this trip, I figured it would be set up just like any study abroad trip. Right?

## Alexandra

No, actually it turns out to be quite a bit different, but Rich does a great job of explaining this.

## Rich

One thing that faculty should know is that putting together a domestic experiential course requires some things that are a little bit more complicated than, say, doing study abroad in the sense that we have the International Center for study abroad programs, and they handle the budget, finances, the bursar, et cetera. It doesn't work that way for doing this domestically. And so what I learned-- it took me about 15 months to set this up originally. What I learned is that we needed to work with Distance and Continuing Education, which in my case was great, because I was already doing some things for DCE and flexible learning, and so forth, and they were very gracious and willing to help. But you have to have a self-funding proposal done, and it has to go up through the chain of command, if you will, for approvals. And that takes time. And you have to really think through the course, so there's a lot of paperwork, there's a lot of administrative things.

What I tried to do at the end of that experience was to put together a little guidelines memo, which is, I guess, about 25 pages with all of the forms, but really how to, a checklist, a timeline, of how to do these things. If folks are interested in that, I'm going to put that up on my web page and you can easily access it. So you really do have to think about these things well in advance.

## Alexandra

So when listening to Rich, I couldn't help but wonder if this would be possible as an embedded aspect of a regular course.

## Dr. Rich Conley

In terms of embedding something like this in a course for just a day or two days, I believe there's a course in geology, which Distance and Continuing Education has done. I don't know if it's a week long trip or just three days, but they are happy to help. And again, I was blessed to have folks over there who really guided me through all of the complexities, and really worked hard to make that happen along with shared services and liberal arts and sciences. They are such a key component because of the financial part of it. And I had a teaching assistant, had to get her paid, and me paid, and reconcile all of the bills. The budget was about \$14,000, and so you make sure that we had all of that done, the p-card issues. So it can certainly be done, but advance planning is very, very important. And there's a lot of things to think about that I simply was unaware of, because when I've done study abroad, UFIC handles it also.

## Alexandra

But you're willing to share— all of your hard, earned wisdom, right?

## Dr. Rich Conley

Absolutely

Well, I don't know if its wisdom or not, but certainly. And I think that's the goal. Why reinvent the wheel?

## Matt

It still blows me away that Rich essentially pioneered his own path to bring this course to life. What started as an idea was completed with careful planning and determination to try something not many people had.



## Dr. Rich Conley

When I started this process, I went back to my department chair said, hey, I was thinking, wouldn't it be neat to take the students out to some Native American reservations? He said, "yeah, great idea, but I don't know how you'd do it." So what do we do? And he said, "well go talk to the Dean Mary Watt over in CLAS." And so Dean Watt and I got together, and said, "this is a great idea, but I'm not sure how you do it. So here's your mission-- you go and figure it out, and report back to me when you do." So I said, great. So that's what my perspective has been. And trying to put together this guidelines, things to think about, and timelines, and once you get that course established like that, then it's much easier to focus instead on the logistics of the actual trip.

But it's important to make sure we do these things, especially with the budgetary aspects. We want to make sure we're transparent, that the bills are paid, and when you have speakers' fees, for example, there's a couple different ways to do that. And you can have a check cut in advance, or you can do it after, but you still have to account for all of these things, and that that's something else that we have to think about and give other units the time and space they need to be able to complete those to meet our deadlines.

## Alexandra

So for all those skeptics out there wondering if is this really possible, is it worth the effort, and most importantly, did the students actually gain anything valuable from this trip, listen to Dr. Conley explain.

## Dr. Rich Conley

We visited Mount Rushmore, for example. I gave us, I think, two and half hours there, three hours. When we got to Mount Rushmore, and it was actually snowing a little bit that day, I let them wander through the exhibits, snap pictures, and a lot of it was just impromptu. Two things happened that I recall there at Mount Rushmore. One was that one of my students came and found me and said, professor, there are no mentions of the Sioux people, the Lakota people at all. It's all about Gutzon Borglum and his mining out, their doing the carving of the faces. And she went up and asked the park ranger, why don't you guys have any history of the Sioux? And she was very polite, very respectful.

And the park ranger said, well, ma'am, I don't make policy, I just follow it. But there is a native who is allowed to come twice a year and set up a stand by the parking lot. That got a conversation going. And then we were out actually on the panorama outside with two or three students, and we ran into a lady who had a baby and had her mother there, and we found out they were from Alabama, a neighboring state. So we started talking and said, what are you guys doing here? My students, oh, our professor took us on this class. And so, why did Native American politics, why did you come here?

And so then that student who'd asked the question of the park ranger said, well, let me tell you all about it. And at the end of our little 20 minute talk there, the lady said, I had no idea. I've learned so much from you.

## Alexandra

When students turn around and become the teachers, you know you've created an experience that has truly marked them.

For information on building your own experiential activity or course, visit the links included in the description of this podcast. Also, use the [teach.ufl.edu](http://teach.ufl.edu) website to find more resources on teaching.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. We're so happy you joined us. And we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies, ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.