Rethinking Assessment: Community-Engaged Experiential Learning and Complex Environments in Business from a Student Perspective

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the academic landscape profoundly, prompting a shift toward new learning environments and evolving pedagogy, including a notable increase in experiential community-engaged learning (CEL) projects within business curricula. Despite these innovations, traditional assessment practices often neglect the development of critical skills, focusing instead on outdated knowledge certification. This study examines the integration of student voice in assessment practices, particularly within CEL projects. It aims to explore student perceptions of the opportunities provided by CEL, offering insights into specific elements that should be assessed to measure student success, accomplishment, and growth. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through end-of-term reflections, focus groups, and interviews with 52 undergraduate business students engaged in CEL projects. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes that can impact the design, selection, implementation, and interpretation of assessment methods: Adaptation, Balancing Teamwork with Individual Accountability, and Creativity and Innovative Problem-Solving. Students emphasized the importance of flexibility and proactive problem-solving in dynamic project environments. They also valued effective collaboration and personal accountability, preferring individual assessments within team projects. Creativity and innovative solutions were highlighted as essential competencies, suggesting the need for assessment tools that recognize these skills. The research indicates that incorporating student voice in the assessment process enhances engagement and relevance, aligning evaluations with students' actual experiences while fostering essential life skills. The study recommends the development of assessment rubrics that measure these competencies along with longitudinal studies to examine the impact of revised assessment processes on student experience and satisfaction over time.

Keywords: experiential learning; community-engaged learning; assessment; student voice; holistic competency

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have enduring effects on the academic environment. Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021, p. 133) posit that the pandemic has "created the largest disruption of education systems in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries." When it began, schools and universities were forced to switch to online teaching or some version thereof. This seems to have spurred a series of innovations in the higher education sector as institutions around the world embraced technology and greater flexibility while offering a combination of virtual, hybrid, and physical classrooms. Singh et al. (2021, p. 164) argue that "Public health disasters such as COVID-19 can encourage innovation and create out-of-the box thinking in educational settings."

Concurrently, more than ever before, students are embracing meaningful experiences and calling into question the return on investment of a college education in the current environment. New America's 2022 Annual Survey on Higher Education points to a decline in the percentage of Americans who have positive feelings about the impact and capacity of colleges and universities to "lead America in a positive direction", highlighting a 14% decrease since 2020. The heightened expectations of students coupled with the imperative for smaller colleges to remain competitive in the ever-changing higher education landscape have led to the use of creative methods to address evolving student needs, specifically in terms of their preparedness for post-college lives. These changes are involving increasing integration of experiential community-engaged learning (CEL) projects into the business curriculum.

This shift, while catalyzing various pedagogical innovations, has inadvertently exposed significant gaps in traditional assessment practices. Despite the apparent progress in various aspects of educational practice, current methods of evaluating student performance often fall short in relation to addressing the holistic development of critical skills, such as creativity, problem-solving, and teamwork; and these skills are indispensable in the modern professional landscape. The gap between the expectations that students will develop comprehensive skills and the reality of outdated assessment methods is stark. Traditional assessments predominantly focus on rote knowledge and static content, rather than fostering dynamic and applicable skills essential for real-world success. Current practices also often neglect the nuances of student experiences in complex, community-engaged projects. These discrepancies underscore the urgent need to rethink assessment frameworks to better align with the evolving educational landscape and the professional competencies required in today's job market.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the increasing demand for educational practices that not only impart knowledge but also cultivate practical, transferable skills. As students and employers alike call for more relevant and impactful learning experiences, higher education institutions face mounting pressure to evolve. The decline in public confidence in the value of college education further emphasizes the need for reforms that enhance the quality and relevance of educational practices. By incorporating student perspectives into the assessment process, this research aims to create more meaningful and effective

evaluations that reflect the complexities of real-world applications and foster essential life skills.

The primary purpose of this research is to explore effective methods for assessing student competency within the framework of experiential CEL projects in the business curriculum. Specifically, what elements of CEL projects, as perceived by students, should be assessed in order to measure their success, accomplishment, and growth effectively? With a central focus on the student perspective, this study aims to identify assessment criteria that better capture the multifaceted nature of CEL experiences and identify the critical skills and competencies that students develop through CEL projects, foster greater student engagement and ownership of the learning process by involving them in the design and implementation of assessment methods, and ultimately enhance the quality and relevance of educational outcomes by aligning assessments with the real-world skills and experiences that students value.

The anticipated outcomes of this research include guidance for the future development of robust assessment rubrics that reflect the complexities of CEL projects and the holistic competencies they cultivate. By integrating student voices, the study expects to enhance the validity and authenticity of assessments, thereby improving student engagement and satisfaction. Furthermore, the findings aim to provide actionable insights for educators and administrators, guiding the implementation of more effective and inclusive assessment practices that better prepare students for their professional lives. This research endeavors to contribute to a paradigm shift in higher education, promoting a more student-centered approach to learning and assessment that aligns with contemporary educational and professional demands.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Student Voice and Assessment in Higher Education
The concept of the student voice has been prevalent in educational literature since the 1970s and has been gaining in popularity in recent years, particularly within the realm of higher education. This research builds on Bovill et al.'s (2016) illustration of co-creation coupled with Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) conception of pedagogical partnerships.

According to Bovill et al. (2016, p. 196), co-creation exists when "staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches." Co-creation in this context refers to a collaborative process characterized by students and educators working together as partners in the design, delivery, and evaluation of learning experiences and curricula. This co-creation involves a shift away from traditional, hierarchical models of education towards more inclusive and participatory approaches. Instead of educators solely dictating the content and structure of courses, co-creation acknowledges the valuable contributions that students can make to their own learning experiences.

During the co-creation process, students are seen as active agents in their own education, bringing their perspectives, ideas, and expertise to the table. Educators, in turn, facilitate and support this process by creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration, encouraging student voice and autonomy, and valuing diverse perspectives.

Cook-Sather et al. (2014) propose the concept of pedagogical partnership as a "collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation or analysis." In this model, students are not viewed solely as recipients of knowledge but as active partners in the teaching and learning process.

Research findings by Wharton et al. (2014, p. 81) confirm that "students placed considerable emphasis on assessment" and highlighted the importance of incorporating student voice into this element of education while reiterating that it is "incumbent upon those charged with delivering the learning experience to question current practice and instigate fundamental change if merited." Facilitating a process whereby students have meaningful input into educational practices including the assessment process has been linked to increased confidence among students, better connections to course material, and a more robust sense of preparedness for career-related skills necessary for life after college. There continues to be growing recognition of the importance of integrating student voices into assessment processes to enhance their engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes.

The recent literature continues to highlight the importance of student voice. For instance, findings presented by Oruç (2024) suggest that when students are actively involved in the curriculum design process, they are more likely to take ownership of their learning and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter they are studying. Feuerborn et al. (2024) further emphasize that student engagement and input are crucial for the successful application of strategies which enhance student learning and well-being, ultimately contributing to a more positive and inclusive school environment. Additionally, Skerritt, et al. (2024) underscore the importance of adapting student voice practices to fit the unique cultural and institutional landscapes of different educational settings, demonstrating that effective integration of student perspectives can enhance classroom engagement and educational outcomes.

These contemporary studies reinforce the need for ongoing research and innovation in the integration of student voice into assessment practices. By valuing and incorporating student perspectives, educators can develop assessment practices that are not only more relevant and meaningful but also more effective in preparing students for the complexities of the modern world.

Yet, even though there is evidence of progress in this area and a renewed focus on it, Sun et al. (2023, p. 1009), in their sweeping review of student voice in

assessment trends over the last decade, demonstrate that a considerable number of students in higher education still lack a clear understanding of the role they can play in the assessment process, relying on teachers to define and establish assessment measures; they also posit that "student voice research can improve students' experiences, change teachers' practices and inform university support concerning assessment and feedback."

In summary, student voice in assessment is a vital aspect of fostering student-centered learning environments in higher education. When effectively integrated, we argue that student voice in the area of assessment can yield numerous benefits for both students and institutions. These include increased student engagement, motivation, and ownership of learning, as students perceive assessments to be more relevant, meaningful, and aligned with their learning goals.

Additionally, involving students in assessment design and decision-making can enhance the validity and authenticity of assessments, as they provide valuable insights into their learning experiences and preferences. Moreover, fostering a culture of transparency and open communication around assessment promotes trust and mutual respect between students and educators, and this supports a positive learning environment (Cook-Sather, 2020). Continued research and dialogue are essential in order to further explore best practices for effectively integrating student voice into assessment in higher education. In particular, this research considers this issue in the context of complex experiential learning environments, specifically CEL.

2.2 Experiential Community-Engaged Learning and Assessment

By definition, this research adopts the supposition proposed by Chan (2023, p. 1) that experiential learning is a "descriptive term to refer to a broad range of activities that center on the intentioned process of learning." In the context of this definition, "experience [is constituted] as a form of knowledge" (Usher, 1993, p. 169). Experiential learning can take various forms depending on the discipline and learning objectives. For example, in science courses, it might involve conducting experiments in a laboratory, while in business courses, it might involve working on consulting projects for real companies. The overarching goal is to enhance students' understanding, retention, and application of knowledge by actively engaging them in meaningful experiences.

This study focuses specifically on community-engaged learning (CEL), one type of experiential learning initiative, in a higher education business studies setting. CEL is a strategy used to enhance student proficiency. It involves fostering mutually advantageous partnerships between educational institutions and community groups (Johnston, 2020). Holbrook and Chen (2017) highlight the intricate nature of these types of projects and posit that they enable students to be better prepared for real life situations that occur in practice. Nicols (2017, p. 318) argues that higher education institutions recognize the need for CEL opportunities (and other related pedagogical methods) in order to foster "more 'hands-on' training and experience for college students."

Experiential learning and specific initiatives such as CEL have a long history in the literature; however, in spite of its longevity, there is also uncertainty around it as well as unexplored constructs. In higher education, there is a growing emphasis on experiential learning; however, the evaluation of these projects tends to be limited, ambiguous, and subject to debate (Sotiriadou, 2020). Assessment plays a pivotal role in educational policies and students' learning approaches. Yet, there is less clarity about the most effective processes for evaluating these types of less conventional learning experiences. Although assessments predominantly evaluate students' proficiency in terms of academic knowledge in fundamental subjects, there's a noticeable dearth of assessments and research dedicated to holistic competency.

Industry has an appetite for students with holistic competencies. Chan and Luk (2021, p. 467) define holistic competency as being "composed of generic skills (e.g. communication skills, problem-solving skills), positive values and attitudes (e.g. resilience, self-confidence, appreciation) which are essential for the development of the 'whole person'" and also quote the literature on holistic competency by referring to how it is considered to include "'transferable skills', 'twenty first century skills', 'soft skills', 'employability skills', 'generic competencies' and 'generic attributes.'"

As argued by McKie (2019), many universities still depend on exams and essays for grading, but with the increasing importance of the fourth industrial revolution, employability, and student satisfaction, experts are increasingly advocating for assessments that better mirror real-world tasks. Research by Mayer et al. (2019, p. 144) illustrates that students "became more confident and optimistic in their ability to problem solve or achieve a task, outcome, or learning objective" which in turn "connects well to the many real-life 'problems' that students encounter." Given that the literature has affirmed the efficacy of experiential learning in fostering student development, particularly in cultivating holistic competencies essential for success in the modern, technology-driven global society of the 21st century (Chan, 2023), the assessment process should better reflect these types of skills intended to prepare students for professional life after college.

3. Methodology
This research uses a qualitative approach. Creswell and Poth (2016, p. 40) articulate that qualitative research is appropriate when attempting to uncover a "complex, detailed understanding of the issue" illustrated by individuals while "allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature." It also empowers them to share their stories, listen to their voices, and reduce the hierarchical power dynamics that often exist between researchers and study participants. Qualitative research facilitates capturing the nuanced ways in which students adapt, collaborate, and innovate within CEL projects and allows for an in-depth exploration of students' experiences and perspectives.

3.1 Participants
Purposive sampling is employed in this research. This is a sampling technique that doesn't seek to achieve representativeness or statistical generalizability. This

non-probabilistic technique was chosen in order to allow individuals who could provide rich and meaningful data relevant to the specific aims of the research to be selected strategically (Adeoye, 2023).

Fifty-two undergraduate business students from the Business & Economics Department at Salve Regina University were selected based on their involvement in experiential CEL projects. These participants were chosen as "proficient and well-informed with a phenomenon of interest," and they possessed "knowledge and experience"; the researchers paid attention to "the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner" in the selection process (Etikan et al., 2016, p. 2).

- Several courses in the Business & Economics Department at Salve Regina University have an integrated CEL component. The scope of this research covers a three-year period encompassing 12 semesters and multiple unique CEL projects. Student teams work consistently throughout the semester with their community partner, providing updates at certain milestones throughout. The project culminates with a presentation with their community partner and often other interested parties including community members, executives, the media, governmental agencies, politicians, the administration, faculty, and staff. For this research, the 52 participants were selected from the following CEL projects used as the foundation for investigating what specific elements of CEL projects, as perceived by students, should be assessed in order to measure their success, accomplishment, and growth effectively:

- An entrepreneurship class partnered with an innovation-inspired coworking center to plan a three-school collegiate entrepreneurial summit featuring networking, workshops, flash talks, and a keynote   speaker.

- Multiple classes partnered with a local trade organization. A marketing strategies class crafted a renewed marketing strategy which detailed industry-specific information and trends, target market details, a marketing campaign including social and traditional channels, key performance indicators, as well as creatives for the campaign. An economics class looked at the industry's economic recovery from the COVID pandemic.

- Multiple classes partnered with a local commission charged with overseeing the maintenance, operations, and activities of a historic landmark. Economics classes worked to develop a grant proposal for an engineering study and conducted economic impact studies; a marketing strategies class created a thorough marketing plan for the launch of a new mobile donation app.

- Multiple classes partnered with a local hospital to project the total economic impact to the area along with jobs created by staff payroll and vendor payments; an analysis of the cost implications and economic effects of transitioning from an inpatient-centric to an outpatient-centric patient care model evaluating both healthcare quality metrics and financial considerations.

Participants were approached through formal invitations including an explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and the importance of their contributions. Ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent was obtained while emphasizing confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time.

3.2 Data Collection and Instruments
Data were collected in three primary formats: end-of-term reflections, focus groups, and in-depth interviews:

1. End-of-term reflections: At the conclusion of each term, student participants were asked to provide detailed reflections of their experiences in a short essay format. These reflections focused on their personal experiences during the CEL project, the skills they developed, the opportunities they encountered, and the challenges they faced.

2. Focus groups: Focus groups comprised six to eight participants and allowed for the flow of diverse student perspectives relating to CEL projects to be expressed (Akyıldız, 2021).

3. In-depth interviews: One-on-one interviews were conducted to delve deeper into individual experiences with and insights on CEL projects.

Characterized by a less structured approach, the focus groups and in-depth interviews were guided by a selection of broad open-ended questions designed to explore the essential skills and competencies students develop through CEL projects, to investigate how these projects and student involvement in assessment can enhance engagement and ownership of the learning process from the student perspective, and ultimately to improve the quality and relevance of educational outcomes by aligning assessments with the real-world skills and experiences that students value. This structure allowed the conversation to flow naturally based on the participants' responses. The focus groups and interviews were highly flexible and adaptive, with the facilitator/interviewer following the participants' lead to explore topics in great detail; the primary goal was to gain a deep, comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, feelings, and perspectives (Taherdoost, 2022).

The questions used in this research were tested in a pilot focus group and pilot interviews with a small, representative sample of the target population. This helped to identify any issues with question clarity, relevance, or order. In addition, using a combination of written reflections, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews as data collection instruments ensured that the findings were

triangulated since multiple data sources were employed to cross-verify and validate them. Written reflections provided individual, reflective insights from students at the end of each term, capturing their personal experiences and thoughts on the CEL projects. Focus group discussions allowed for dynamic interaction and collective reflection among participants, fostering a rich exchange of ideas and perspectives. In-depth interviews offered a deeper dive into individual experiences, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of each student's unique viewpoint. This multifaceted approach not only strengthened the reliability and validity of the research findings but also provided a holistic view of the students' experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of the CEL projects. Through triangulation, the study was able to capture the complexity of student engagement and the development of critical skills more accurately, ensuring that the conclusions drawn were robust and reflective of the diverse student population involved in the research.

Managing data from 52 participants requires a systematic approach. Transcription was used to convert spoken dialogue into written text (verbatim), ensuring a uniform and structured format for further analysis. Data were then stored in a secure database to which only authorized researchers had access to ensure confidentiality and integrity. Regular backups and secure storage protocols were employed to prevent data loss.

3.3 Data Analysis
This research uses rigorous thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which aims to identify and analyze patterns of meaning or themes that emerge from the data following an inductive approach, without utilizing predefined categories. This approach is the catalyst for gaining deeper comprehension of the phenomena under investigation by delving into the first-hand experiences of individuals directly involved, acknowledging the invaluable insights derived from participants' distinctive perspectives, which are intricately tied to their personal experiences and worldview (Billups, 2019).

Yin (2015) and Castleberry and Nolan (2018) describe a five-step structured plan for analyzing data via thematic analysis: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. The data compiled from end-of-term reflections, focus groups and in-depth interviews underwent transcription in order to convert it into written text. This transcription process ensured a uniform and structured format for further analysis. Following transcription, the data were disassembled into meaningful subgroups using an inductive coding scheme. This allowed for the emergence of themes until saturation was reached, indicating no new themes were emerging from additional data (Morse, 1995). The reassembly phase involved contextualizing the codes in order to map the overarching themes. Throughout these steps, concurrent analysis was maintained. Finally, in the interpreting stage, codes and themes were examined holistically to identify patterns across the data, drawing from a diverse array of opinions, worldviews, and commentary gathered from the various sources (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

By employing these strategies and procedures, the study ensured a comprehensive, ethical, and systematic approach to data collection and analysis, providing robust insights into student experiences in CEL projects.

4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount in the study. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (Eeckhout et al., 2023). Data confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning unique identifiers to participants and securely storing all data. Additionally, ethical approval was sought from the institutional review board (IRB) before commencing the study.

5. Results

From the students' perspectives, three central themes emerge as critical catalysts that should influence the design, selection, implementation, and interpretation of assessment methods: Adaptation, Balancing Teamwork with Individual Accountability, and Creativity and Innovative Problem-Solving. The following sections provide a summary of the collective student insights derived from data analysis, supplemented with select verbatim quotes from the end-of-term reflections, focus groups, and in-depth interviews to vividly illustrate these perceptions.

5.1 Adaptation

A key finding of our research highlights the critical importance of adaptability amongst students in achieving successful outcomes. Frequently, students mentioned the need to be flexible and proactive when dealing with their community partner as well as other team members. Students cited challenges they encountered throughout the entirety of their CEL project, widely referencing the importance of adaptation. Research by Mattajang (2023, p. 2367) supports the importance of developing soft skills, including adaptability, positing that "organizations value individuals who have strong soft skills because they are able to contribute to a team, lead, and adapt to environmental changes." This skill is essential for navigating the fast-paced and often unpredictable nature of modern business landscapes. Adaptability not only enhances individual performance but also contributes to overall team success in dynamic environments. In practical terms, students described how their ability to pivot and respond to evolving project requirements was crucial. This underscores that adaptability is not just a desirable trait but a critical catalyst for achieving successful outcomes in collaborative, real-world projects.

> "*One of the biggest challenges with this project was navigating through the constant updates and changes in thought by our community partner. We were required to give frequent updates to the partner who in turn gave us feedback and direction on next steps. I often found myself frustrated after leaving these sessions because based on the feedback, it seemed that our group had to constantly rework parts of the project that we thought we had already finished. Sometimes the partner would even take us in an entirely new direction. It was stressful for sure. I personally think at least a part of our grade should reflect our ability to deal with the changes.*"

> *"A big struggle overall was the need for our team to adjust our thinking and even go off the course we thought we were on. I felt that our community partner changed his mind multiple times throughout the course of the project. Just when we thought we were on a good path, we had to rework or readjust our strategies."*

Even with the multitude of comments that expressed the difficult nature of working with an outside partner and not having a clear direction from the outset, most students attributed these difficulties to a better learning experience overall. Students also provided insight into the steps they took to navigate the fluid nature of the CEL projects effectively, citing the importance of remaining flexible and proactive. This required them to communicate regularly with team members, stay organized, remain open to new ideas, and be willing to adapt their plans and approaches as needed. Additionally, they highlighted how they could seek guidance from outside mentors or instructors and actively participate in problem-solving discussions to navigate changes effectively.

> *"My group thought that our original assumptions were spot-on. Although it was difficult when we had to pivot to adjust to our client's needs, I do think we ended up with a better project in the end."*

> *"This project absolutely took me out of my comfort zone. It was tough for me to communicate with business professionals and forced me to look at the project from a more practical approach instead of a strict 'academic-type' assignment. I have a great sense of accomplishment knowing that what I'm working on may actually be utilized in a real-world setting."*

> *"Often, we had to find answers to questions that were really difficult. One way we did this was to communicate with other business professionals with more experience in the area we were studying. I really forgot that we were working on a class project because we got so involved with the process and with the people we communicated with from industry. We had to change our direction many times, but it was so well worth it in the end."*

5.2 Balancing Teamwork with Individual Accountability

Another significant theme emerging from data analysis is the importance of teamwork, along with insights into how assessments might address this crucial competency. Students greatly value the lessons learned from teamwork, which boost their confidence for future situations. However, they also strongly believe that individual proficiency and contributions to team projects should be assessed separately. This perspective highlights the need for assessments that recognize individual effort within a collaborative setting, ensuring that the contribution of each student is evaluated fairly and rewarded.

> *"I think experiential projects should be graded on participation and how well we all contribute meaningfully and work together. I think there would be no way to really have an exam or quizzes and I think it wouldn't be applicable to this kind of class. The value in this class is that it is an unstructured way of learning giving us real life experience working on a*

> *project as a team. Any other sort of grading techniques would get in the way of that.*"

Teamwork has been cited throughout the literature as one of the key "soft skills" employers are looking for from recent graduates heading into the workforce (Tripathy, 2020; Asefer and Abidin, 2021). There is a distinct appetite within industry for candidates who possess interpersonal abilities that facilitate effective collaboration with others. Specifically, they value individuals who can work harmoniously within a team, communicate effectively, listen attentively to the perspectives of others, contribute ideas constructively, and resolve conflicts amicably. These skills are essential for fostering a positive work environment, promoting productivity, and achieving common goals within a professional setting. In a globalized environment where job task automation plays an increasingly significant role, soft skills are even more important as they involve tasks that remain beyond the capability of machine replication. Deloitte (2019, p. 2) asserts that human skills "will be the job currency of the future."

> "*The [CEL] class is a very different class than most because it incorporates much more teamwork and people skills than just individual raw talent and efforts. We are working ultimately as one cohesive team which is preparing us for our future jobs. Sometimes you need to be pushed to say your opinion out loud, and this class is motivating me to get out of my comfort zone and clearly voice my opinions with my team members.*"

Many students reported that while working in teams, they encountered varying levels of commitment and contribution from their peers, and that this could lead to disparities in the overall team performance. They argued that individual assessment within team projects would ensure that each student's efforts and skills are fairly recognized and rewarded. This sentiment was echoed by several others who believed that individual evaluations would not only promote fairness but also encourage all team members to contribute more actively. Furthermore, incorporating individual assessments can allow for detailed feedback on a student's specific strengths and areas for improvement, which is essential for personal and professional growth.

> "*I understand the importance of teamwork, especially in the 'real world.' Many guest speakers and professors have stressed how you may be placed in a team in a job setting with an individual that you don't see eye-to-eye with. The hardest part is trying to manage the team while producing a successful outcome at the same time. With that being said, I still think that in a college environment, each student should be graded separately. How will the student that doesn't pull their weight learn from the experience if they aren't penalized somehow? On the other hand, how will a student be rewarded for acting in a professional and effective way with a difficult teammate? I am all for individual grades in these types of projects.*"

5.3 Creativity and Innovative Problem-Solving
Present in the data was a consistent reference to thinking "outside of the box" and finding unique ways to approach challenging situations. Proficiency in the areas

of creativity and innovative problem-solving skills have become essential in order for graduates to excel in the 21st-century work environment (Musa et al., 2012). The complex nature of modern business challenges demands holistic and inventive solutions that go beyond traditional methods. Additionally, as automation and artificial intelligence continue to transform the workplace, human roles are shifting towards tasks that require creative thinking and problem-solving capabilities. Ali (2023, p. 55) argues, "As machines take over repetitive tasks, humans are increasingly engaged in higher-level activities that require creativity, problem solving, and social intelligence."

Creativity and innovative problem solving were often utilized when students were tasked with suggesting different approaches to existing solutions; they expressed a wish for these competencies to be measured through assessment:

> "*Coming up with a campaign theme was one of the hardest things I've ever done. My group spent two full weeks going back and forth on different ideas and testing them with the target market. If only there was some way to grade our effort on this process.*"

> "*During our project, we had to work with different stakeholders in the organization. It seemed like each person had a different view and opinion on what the outcome of our project should be. They gave varying advice and guidance. This really took a lot of creative thinking and planning from our team to come up with a solution that would satisfy all parties involved.*"

Certain students were completing these projects during the COVID-19 pandemic which completely disrupted the educational environment, seemingly forcing teams to devise innovative solutions to things previously taken for granted.

> "*COVID was certainly a shock, especially seeing it happened while I was in the middle of my college experience. I particularly recall working on a project for a local organization where we were responsible for creating a marketing plan. It was that weird time that had some of us in the classroom and some of us virtual. It rotated that way throughout the semester. Working on this project was extremely challenging and required a lot of creativity in the way that we did things. We had to reinvent how we met as a team. We had to figure out how to conduct marketing research without access to things we previously took for granted – like having a focus group or interview in person. Figuring out how to navigate these challenges seemed almost insurmountable, but we came through it successfully. We figured it out and came up with solutions and 'work-arounds' for the crazy environment we found ourselves in the middle of.*"

6. Discussion

This research highlights the critical role of adaptability, teamwork with individual accountability, and creativity in CEL projects from a student perspective, advocating for the integration of student voice in assessment processes. These findings align with and extend current educational theories, emphasizing the need for more dynamic and inclusive assessment methods (Ahmadi). Incorporating student voice in CEL project assessment acknowledges students as

active participants in their learning journey, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. It promotes a student-centered approach to assessment, which offers students opportunities to express their perspectives, preferences, and concerns regarding assessment methods, criteria, and feedback mechanisms. This approach aligns with the principles of inclusivity, equity, and diversity in education, as it recognizes and values the diverse experiences, backgrounds, and learning styles of students.

Integrating student voice into assessment, however, poses several challenges. These include resistance from educators and institutions used to traditional assessment practices, concerns about the reliability and validity of student input, and logistical issues such as time constraints and resource limitations. Moreover, there may be disparities in the ability or willingness of students to articulate their views, particularly among marginalized or underrepresented groups. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort from educators and administrators to create supportive environments where students feel empowered to contribute meaningfully to assessment processes.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is also important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the generalizability of the results is limited due to the specific context of the research, which focuses solely on undergraduate business students at Salve Regina University. Consequently, the findings may not be applicable to students in different disciplines or educational settings. Second, the study employed purposive sampling, selecting participants who were involved in community-engaged learning (CEL) projects. Although this approach ensured rich and detailed data, it does not provide a representative sample of the broader student population, potentially introducing selection bias. Third, the data analysis techniques, primarily qualitative in nature, rely on thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes. While this method offers deep insights, it may also introduce subjectivity and bias, as interpretations can vary. Employing mixed-method approaches in future research could enhance the robustness of the findings by combining qualitative depth with quantitative rigor. These limitations suggest that further studies across diverse contexts and with more varied sampling and methodological strategies are necessary to validate and extend the current findings.

Despite the limitations, this research provides a foundation for future research aimed at reforming assessment practices to better prepare students for the complexities of the modern workforce. By addressing these implications, educators and institutions can foster a more engaging and effective educational environment that aligns academic assessments with real-world skills and competencies.

7. Conclusion
The study identified three central themes, based on the perspectives of participating students, that should impact the design, choice, execution, and interpretation of assessment methods in community-engaged learning (CEL) projects within the business curriculum. First, students emphasized the

importance of adaptation, highlighting the need for flexibility and proactive problem-solving when working with community partners and team members. They cited challenges such as navigating constant updates and changes in the direction of projects, which ultimately contributed to a better learning experience and the development of adaptive skills. Second, students valued effective collaboration and personal accountability within team projects. They advocated for individual assessments to ensure that each student's contributions and proficiency are fairly evaluated; further, this approach would promote a sense of ownership and responsibility. Third, students frequently referenced the need for creative thinking and innovative solutions in their projects, expressing a desire for assessment tools that recognize and measure these competencies, underscoring their importance in real-world settings.

The study's findings have significant theoretical implications for higher education, particularly in the context of experiential CEL projects and assessment. The results support the shift towards student-centered learning environments, where students are engaged contributors in their education (Chan & Yeung, 2020). By incorporating student voice in assessment processes, educators can create more relevant and meaningful learning experiences that align with students' goals and perspectives. Additionally, as mentioned above, the study underscores the importance of assessing holistic competencies such as adaptability, teamwork, and creativity. Traditional assessment methods focusing on memorization and static knowledge and seem insufficient for preparing students for the complexities of the modern workforce. Furthermore, the findings reinforce the concepts of pedagogical partnerships and co-creation, where students and educators collaboratively design and evaluate learning experiences. This approach promotes inclusivity and participatory education models that value diverse student contributions.

The practical implications of the study are equally profound, offering actionable insights for educators and institutions. Future research should inform and develop assessment rubrics that explicitly measure competencies like adaptability, teamwork, and creative problem-solving. These rubrics should be integrated into CEL projects to allow for comprehensive evaluation of student performance. Additionally, institutions should actively involve students in the design of assessments and decision-making processes. This kind of inclusion can enhance the validity and authenticity of assessments, making them more reflective of real-world tasks and challenges. To implement these changes effectively, educators may require additional training in order to support the development and utilization of new assessment methods. Institutions should provide resources and support to facilitate this transition. Future research should include longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of revised assessment processes on student experience and satisfaction. Continuous feedback and iterative improvements will ensure that assessment practices remain relevant and effective. By addressing these implications, educators and institutions can foster a more dynamic and engaging educational environment that prepares students for the demands of the modern world, aligning academic assessments with real-world skills and competencies.

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