Rebekah was done with Cleveland, ready to move on. As much as she loved her school and her suburban neighborhood, her plan was to go to a big city college and make that city her home. Then, as a sophomore, she took a three-week immersion course on community development and urban planning at Hawken School’s urban extension campus, The Sally & Bob Gries Center for Experiential and Service Learning, located in University Circle, the park-like hub of cultural, educational, religious, and medical institutions in Cleveland, encircled by struggling city neighborhoods.
The course, designed to orient students to the harsh realities of many of Cleveland’s neighborhoods and find solutions, started with an urban trek and an overnight stay in a church that serves low-income, distressed, and homeless people. During the following weeks, Rebekah and her classmates explored how and why University Circle has become the fastest growing district in Cleveland, learning on-site from real estate development, foundation, urban planning, and government professionals. Through community workshops, they were introduced to area residents seeking to improve their neighborhoods that have been wracked by decades of poverty, racial segregation, underfunded schools, disinvestment, decaying infrastructure, discriminatory housing practices, and government neglect and corruption. A final project required the students to redesign a built space or empty space in ways that would generate greater physical and social connectivity between a neighborhood and the institutions and opportunities of University Circle.

By the end of the course, the city Rebekah had planned to leave behind had become compelling — a place of vibrant people, dynamic change, and professional opportunities. She now understands that her participation in solving the city’s challenges makes a difference. In short, one three-week immersion course changed her post-college plans. Rebekah still wants to go away to college, but now she also wants to return to Cleveland.

FINDING ONE’S PEDAGOGICAL ROOTS

Six years ago, Rebekah’s transformative experience would not likely have happened at Hawken School. With an early 1900s-style, 45-minute period schedule, physical detachment from its core city, and a curriculum that had drifted from its progressive education past, the school was limited in its ability to offer students real-world experience. Yet, in 2007, Hawken recommitted to its pedagogical roots and initiated a process of deep integration of experiential education.

Such significant change was a risky move given the school’s flat enrollment and revenue in 2005, set against the backdrop of a sluggish local economy and declining regional population. But indicators show the risk was wise, in spite of the economic crisis in the intervening years. Today the school is thriving. Hawken’s story demonstrates that schools can successfully accomplish significant transformation in a short period of time, even and perhaps especially during tough times. It also illustrates that experiential learning and rigorous academics are not only compatible, but mutually reinforcing. And when given sufficient time and meaningful preparation, experiential learning can be life changing for students — and their teachers — and serve to fulfill a school’s public purpose in significant ways.

Even the most traditional independent schools have a starting point for expanding or integrating experiential education. Indeed, if you listen closely, most positive school narratives, as told by students and alumni, are about “learning by doing.” Perhaps it’s a longstanding service program, a teacher who regularly takes students on expeditions, or a middle school robotics club. A look at most schools uncovers such nuggets of experiential learning, whether they reside in the past or thrive in the present. Schools can draw upon them to inspire and model change. In our case, experiential learning was core to our past, but latent in our present. So the school needed to act.

Hawken was founded in 1915 as an alternative to existing traditional private education options for boys in Cleveland. James A. Hawken, a progressive New York educator, founded the school in a small house on the edge of University Circle in Cleveland. In those early years, Hawken and his band of innovative teachers taught children through hands-on experience, focusing on character and using the school’s surroundings to enhance classroom learning. Throughout most of its first 80 years, the school remained progressive, with child-centered pedagogy and innovative experiential learning opportunities such as service, animal husbandry, and outdoor leadership. Slowly, however, the school drifted away from this core. By 2005, the board of trustees recognized the need for dramatic change, and hired a new head of school to turn things around.

Key to Hawken’s ability to make a comprehensive shift toward a model of integrated experiential education was its past; indeed, experiential education is threaded in the school’s DNA. An inquiry into the best of the school’s past yielded an appreciation for the immediate relevance of James Hawken’s philosophy and practices. As such, the founder’s original intent formed the core of a new mission statement for Hawken, a far-reaching document that continues to guide its transformation.¹

Concurrent to a realignment with the school’s pedagogical roots was a commitment to its geographic birthplace as a way to engage students in real-world learning in its own community. The purchase of a
A turn-of-the-century mansion in Cleveland — 600 yards from the school's original location and only one block from the epicenter of one of the most densely developed “arts, eds, and meds” districts in the country — served as a lever for deeper change. With an urban extension campus underway, momentum grew around designing innovative curriculum, addressing the use of time (that lock-step, 20th-century, upper school schedule had to go), emphasizing 21st-century skills, adopting educational technologies, and engaging in partnerships and place-based learning.

**INTENTIONAL USE OF TIME**

Transforming a school's approach, culture, and mindset toward experiential education requires examining the use of time, often leading to the redesign of the academic schedule. In 2005, Hawken's upper school schedule of 45-minute class periods was essentially the same as a public school schedule in the first decade of the 20th century. The middle school already used a flexible, modified block schedule supported by faculty and administrators committed to team-teaching and both project- and place-based learning. Similarly, the lower school, as is the case for many independent school elementary divisions, used time more openly, as determined by classroom teachers. The Hawkens lower and middle schools were well positioned to use the new urban campus and deepen their “learning by doing,” but the upper school schedule needed a radical overhaul.

To ensure quality change around the use of time in the upper school, a working group was charged with designing a schedule that was dramatically different from the traditional one in use. In 2010, following three years of research and committee work, Hawken launched an upper school schedule that includes varying blocks of time throughout the year allowing for language and cultural immersion, in-depth core course study, and greater team-teaching and interdisciplinary offerings. The new schedule features a four-part “Rotation-Intensive-Rotation-Intensive” framework, balancing two semesters (August–November and January–April) of rotating blocks (60, 70, and 85 minutes long) with two three-week “mini-mesters” (in December and May) called Intensives, each offering a single course worth a semester's credit. As with curriculum, Hawken's schedule is no longer completely static. Three years out, the upper school is considering tweaks to the Rotation schedule. Also, the lower school is examining how it uses time to best impact learning.

**EARLY ADOPTERS**

Just as most schools have some form of experiential learning to expand upon, they all have inventive teachers willing to lead the change and provide momentum for new initiatives. As Hawken's building in University Circle was being renovated, teachers from the lower, middle, and upper school divisions jumped at the charge to innovate, inspiring others to follow.

A veteran upper school English teacher, for example, integrated his experience serving homeless people with his knowledge of literature, resulting in a senior elective titled *Homelessness*. The course includes daily internships with homeless service agencies, coupled with inquiry and creative nonfiction writing. Once the new urban campus and schedule were ready, constraints of time and location melted away and the course took full shape. Students now engage in agency projects — such as creating visual essays for marketing purposes, setting up social media capabilities, and creating personal profiles of homeless people through in-depth interviews — that are mutually beneficial. The successes (and mistakes) of this course, and a few other courses piloted by early adopters, generated valuable lessons about Hawken's use of time, curriculum design, community partnerships, logistics, and policies that, in turn, eased the transition for other teachers.

**EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT HAWKEN**

Core Curriculum: K-12 courses and units that use experiential and community-based learning as a foundation.

Community Service: Volunteer action organized by and for different groups of students (class, grade-level, division, team, club, etc.).

Service Learning: Courses or units across the curriculum that integrate community service to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

Classroom Cleveland: A K-12 curriculum that engages students in academic study and meaningful urban revitalization through community partnerships.

Global Connections: Engendering global citizenship through international student exchanges, travel experiences, and studies.

STEMM Pathways: Guided research in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, and Medicine through lab- and field-based internships.

Circle Arts: Visual and performing arts experiences with fine arts and community arts organizations, and professional artists.

Entrepreneurial Studies: Courses and programs that empower students through the development of an entrepreneurial mindset.

Outdoor Leadership: Three-season, 9-12 program and associated courses focused on problem solving, leadership, and sustainable survival skills culminating in multiday wilderness expeditions.
PATH TO GREATER EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Is your school looking to add more experiential learning opportunities to its curriculum? If so, consider the following:

- **Put the question to the board of trustees.** If, like Hawken School, experiential education is a part of your school’s original intent, it should be easy to get the ball rolling. If not, you may need to bring in experts on experiential learning who can help make the case that it should be central to any 21st-century school.

- **Take a year to discuss possible changes** with the faculty, parents, and students. Not only will this help gauge interest, but it will also help underscore structural impediments to change.

- **Consider how experiential education connects** with core school values and how it can revitalize learning. Review the school’s mission statement in light of these conversations.

- **Find a “lever”** (new building, reinvigorated program, new schedule) that aligns with your school’s mission and resonates with key constituencies to help move change along. An urban learning center or an on-campus working farm can shift perspectives and be major game changers. But smaller initiatives can impact a school as well. Build on what your school already has and integration will follow.

- **Invest in administrative leadership** to navigate a new direction, nurture change, and avoid premature teacher burnout. Some schools have directors of curriculum design, community partnerships, innovative programming, or service learning.

- **Identify “early adopters”** and help them build momentum by celebrating existing experiential learning and supporting new ideas. At the same time, invest in relevant professional development for teachers willing to try new approaches.

- **Reconsider the use of time.** The common 20th-century schedule (designed for the Industrial Age) is antithetical to experiential learning. There are plenty of models out there to consider, but what matters most is that the school settles on a new, flexible schedule that works for the faculty.

- **Incorporate extended immersion experiences** into the school year. Even one week allows teachers the opportunity to try on ideas and approaches that will in turn influence how and what they teach during the rest of the year.

- **Visit other schools that have committed to experiential education,** whether fully or partially. Seeing firsthand how a variety of schools approach “learning by doing” will spark new ideas, offer solutions to challenges, and provide your school with a community of like-minded educators from which to draw.

- **Find partners** — institutions, nonprofits, professionals, other schools — and get to know the area surrounding your school. Every community, whether it is suburban, urban, or rural, has places and people that will enliven and deepen student learning.

- **Look at ways to integrate experiential learning** into the curriculum, across disciplines, grade levels, and divisions. For schools with extensive sports programs, consider ways of creating greater flexibility for afternoon programs.

- **Figure out what “experiential learning” means** to your school. Depending on location and interests of faculty, it can range widely from hands-on classroom work, to working on a school garden or farm, to involvement in the local community or city, to environmental studies, to global travel, to outdoor leadership training. Often, schools develop a range of options and opportunities.

With three-week immersion blocks in place, Hawken teachers also started connecting curriculum to international experiences. Linking language, science, humanities, or any area of study directly to places where students can apply skills, test knowledge, and stretch their personal growth is central to experiential education. Examples of new global applications of experiential learning in the Hawken Intensives include language and cultural immersion in Chile and environmental science in the Bahamas at the Island School. In Chile, while speaking only Spanish, students attend classes at a local school, experience a home stay, explore their host city, and travel to the coast on public transportation. At the Island School, biology, human ecology, and sustainable energy topics come alive. Students then re-examine them in the context of northeast Ohio during the spring Rotation semester.

By 2005, the Hawken middle school was well on its way to adopting experiential learning into its curriculum. Most notably, an eighth-grade urban Outward Bound expedition in New York City served to link the humanities curriculum with the grade-level essential question: “How can I make a difference in the global community?” Locally, the purchase of the urban center inspired a seventh-grade teacher to pursue an idea plucked from a Cleveland newspaper article, describing the need for a sponsor of the American Garden, one of more than 26 cultural gardens strung along Rockefeller Park near University Circle. The garden, established in 1933 by schoolchildren and abandoned after Cleveland’s 1966 race riots, is now vital to Hawken’s seventh-grade curriculum. Student-directed projects include grant writing, digital tree mapping, garden cleanup, community outreach, historical research, and applied engineering. Central to the program are partnerships with the neighborhood public elementary school, a community development corporation, and the Cleveland Cultural Garden Federation.

Building on this experiential practice, the middle school then estab-
lished its own one-week “intensive” immediately following winter break. Mixed grade-level interdisciplinary courses, designed and taught by pairs of teachers, take students deep into topics often through exploration of city neighborhoods and institutions, area parks and farms, and other natural areas. These types of short, often ungraded learning experiences allow students and teachers unhindered engagement with their surroundings, each other, and real-world topics.

While the early years of lower schools often align with the principles of experiential learning at some level, philosophy and practice tend to deviate to the traditional as the grade levels progress. The fourth-grade team addressed this phenomenon by reworking a longtime favorite science unit on prehistory and archaeology into an interdisciplinary immersion program designed and taught in collaboration with educators at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Only one block from the museum, Hawken’s Gries Center is now home base for the weeklong course that includes an on-site archaeology dig simulation, artifact mapping, and prehistory tool use. This approach inspired a later redesign of an ancient Egypt unit that takes the fourth grade back to the Gries Center for a week each spring.

As with all teaching at Hawken School, regardless of the grade level, experiential education is approached with intentionality, connected to learning objectives, and designed to foster character. Teachers learn from extended immersion opportunities, whether in the chemistry lab or in a village in the Himalayas. This, in turn, transforms how and what they teach and how they assess learning during more conventional class time.

**MAINTAINING MOMENTUM**

Six years into Hawken’s transformation, experiential learning has once again become integrated into the school’s culture and pedagogy. It takes place on the school’s suburban and rural campuses, in the city of Cleveland, within surrounding natural areas, and around the world. It includes all students at all grade levels, not just those choosing an elective or those at the top of their class. Hawken’s immediate future will be

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the rise of experiential education

about refining schedules, honing logistics and policies, deepening practice, and learning from others. Meaningful integration of experiential learning into the curriculum will continue to evolve, with a focus on PS–12 curriculum and skills continuum design. Integration also includes moving the school’s partnerships, whether local or global, towards codesign and coconstruction. Students will become greater agents of their own learning and personal journeys.

All of this requires inventive and spirited teachers who seek collaboration and opportunities for crossfertilization, both within the school and beyond. To that end, continued investments in professional development will be essential, including summer grants for individual and team work, as well as participation in formal and informal learning opportunities. Sharing experiences and lessons learned with other educators, internally and externally, and generating new knowledge and insights in that exchange process, is a natural outgrowth of these efforts.

Every school, of course, has its unique story and history to consider when weighing transformational changes. But what Hawken found is that recommitting to a school’s core principles, and figuring out what this means for schooling in the 21st century can lead quickly to significant and exciting changes. In fact, these may be necessary changes in order for schools to thrive in this century of great flux.

In two years, Hawken will celebrate its 100th anniversary. In most ways, the school looks very different than it did when James Hawken was a pioneering educator in a little house in Cleveland. But in other ways, it’s closer to matching his vision. As the school celebrates its centennial, Rebekah will be starting college, no doubt reflecting on her high school experiences and considering a return to Cleveland where she knows firsthand that she can make a difference. As she put it, “Instead of being here on campus and just speculating about how things work, we were actually talking to people. We have a chance to do things that a lot of people (not just students) don’t have a chance to do... In 10 years, when I’m ready to make a career move, this is going to be a really great place."

Sara Mierke is the director of The Sally & Bob Gries Center for Experiential and Service Learning, Hawken School (Ohio).

Notes