Risk Management in Experiential Learning

From the Office of the Vice-Principal Finance and Administration

For many people, thinking about risk management is like deciding if they would take a shortcut down a dark alley at night. They are concerned about what might be lurking within and could cause harm, thus forcing a decision to either take a risk by using the shortcut or avoid it altogether by pursuing a longer route. Fortunately, risk management does not have to be alarming or burdensome. When practiced correctly, it can be an efficient and effective process within experiential learning opportunities.

Risk is defined as the potential for positive or negative outcomes. The definition is broad and therefore serves to bolster existing opportunities by increasing resiliency and reducing uncertainty. As educational experiences move beyond the traditional classroom environment, students are exposed to a wide variety of hazards, and universities are subject to increased scrutiny regarding their own legal liability. This fact only heightens the need for a tried and tested risk management process within.
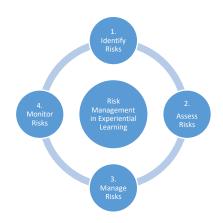
The desired outcome of risk management in experiential learning is to provide opportunities that are safe, robust, and satisfying for all parties involved. Ultimately, this effort encompasses a diverse group of stakeholders including students, faculty, staff, community partners and others.

The Risk Management Cycle

To promote a safe environment within an experiential learning opportunity, stakeholders are empowered to address a number of risk-related questions:

- What can go wrong?
- How likely is it to occur?
- What are the consequences if it does occur?
- How can the hazard's likelihood of occurrence and severity of impact be eliminated or reduced?

Fortunately, these questions can be consolidated into a four-phase framework: identifying risk, assessing risk, managing risk, and monitoring risk. These four phases comprise the risk management cycle in experiential learning.

1. Identify Risks – What can go wrong?

It is important to note that different experiential learning activities will require different answers to this question. To simplify the process, consider the following categories:

- *Transportation* – are students required to travel? Is the method of transportation provided by the university, community partner, or personal travel?
- *Location* – will students work or travel in locations considered high-crime or high-risk? Does the physical location present additional risks? (i.e. dangerous worksite).
- *Project Activities* – will students use power equipment or dangerous tools/chemicals? If so, who is responsible for providing an orientation, safety training and personal protective equipment to students?
- Are there intellectual property questions? Who will have the ownership of the work output, if applicable? (i.e. research publications?)
- *Special Populations* – will students interact with high-risk or marginalized populations? (e.g. minors, elderly, homeless, prisoners, persons with mental or physical impairments etc.)
- *Community Partners* – is this a new partner to the university? If not new, what has been the experience with this partner? Are there any external factors to consider such as the partner's reputation or industry standards?
- *External Factors* – consideration for any other unique or pan organizational risks to be considered (e.g. pandemic conditions)

While the above represents an example of factors to consider, it is impossible to devise a "one size fits all" strategy that can address vastly different experiences simultaneously and comprehensively. Therefore, each experiential learning activity must be reviewed independently to identify unique risks.

2. Assess Risks – How likely is it to occur? What are the consequences if it does occur?

The next step takes identified risks and ranks them based on their perceived likelihood of occurrence and severity of impact resulting in a list of prioritized risks. Defining risk priorities enables faculty, staff and students to make informed decisions about how to effectively address those risks.

In the context of experiential learning, the assessment process can require an approach that is more qualitative and subjective than quantitative and objective. For example, it may be possible that no student has ever been injured in a fieldwork course that requires outdoor foot travel/hiking. However, it is reasonable to predict a slip and fall during the activity is possible or even probable. The assumption might not be scientifically measurable but is something that should be considered in this phase.

One commonly used tool to assist the risk prioritization process is a risk map. Risk maps are helpful because they visually illustrate where an identified risk falls along an established risk continuum. The completed risk map classifies hazards into high, medium or lower risk categories.

Likelihood * Impact	Insignificant	Minor	Moderate	Major	Catastrophic
Almost					
Likely					
Possible					
Unlikely					
None or					

Some risks may not be placed onto a risk map as they are related to certain policies and procedures that may impact whether a student can participate in the experiential learning. The [Off-Campus Activity Safety Policy (OCASP)](#) applies to all members of the Queen's community involved in university-sanctioned activities that take place off campus. Experiential learning activities are sanctioned by the university so they fall under the purview of the Policy. The Policy establishes a framework for planning, risk-assessment, preparation and support of all off-campus activities and it defines the responsibilities of those involved in these activities.

3. **Manage Risks – How can the hazard's likelihood of occurrence and severity of impact be eliminated or reduced?**

Managing risks will help students enjoy a rich, rewarding experience while providing the university greater protections against liability. This is where practical, actionable strategies can be implemented to promote safety and resilience. Managing risks can be done in concert with community partners and risk management options consist of the following strategies.

- **Treat** – the process of selecting and implementing measures to modify the risk, making an unwanted event less likely, or softening the effects if it does occur. Examples include pre-program or on-site orientation/training and an overview of the learning site (location, scope of work, safety procedures, transportation, background checks etc). Another risk treatment is redesign of a risky activity. For example, can risky fieldwork be conducted in a less hazardous location? Contract/Agreements with community partners can also provide legalese protection to the university through the appropriate language and clauses (i.e. indemnity, roles and responsibilities, insurance).
- **Transfer** – a strategy where the burden of bearing a loss is shifted from one party to another. This can be accomplished by purchasing insurance which protects the university if a covered lawsuit is brought. Insurance related information and queries can be directed to the university [insurance office](#). Another example is liability waivers which serve to inform participants of the nature of an activity, the inherent risks with the activity and the potential consequences if those risks materialize.
- **Terminate** – if all other risk management treatments have been exhausted and the burden of institutional liability is too great, complete termination of the activity may be necessary. For example, if sudden political unrest or an armed conflict springs up, it may be prudent to cancel all travel to the affected area.
- **Tolerate** – it is impossible to eliminate all risks that may accompany an experiential learning program. Upon implementation of risk management strategies, we must consider the need to tolerate residual risk that remains in the learning opportunity. It may be necessary to accept a certain threshold of risk to complete the program.

4. **Monitor Risks**

The last component of the risk management cycle is to continually gauge the effectiveness of the risk controls and adjust them as needed. It is important to obtain feedback from students and faculty throughout learning opportunities to evaluate how risk management controls are

working. These individuals have unique perspectives that may validate the mitigation strategies or reveal unexpected hazards.

It is impossible to guarantee that any experience will be free from interruptions, uncertainty, or harm. This is true of traditional classroom settings as well as experiential learning contexts. Therefore, as we identify avenues for students to engage with real-world problems and meet needs in the larger community, we endeavor to incorporate risk management best practices into experiential learning by proactively identifying, assessing, managing, and monitoring the risks present in these opportunities.