Chapter 3
Expanding the Terrain of Online Higher Education Through Active Blended Learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As institutions harness the growing mobility in the lives of students and recognize the expanding terrain of possibilities by incorporating innovative active blended learning approaches, it is imperative to reimagine education itself. Connectivity and active blended learning can open doors for focused interactions, fostering deeper understanding through synchronous and asynchronous learning. The level of attention given by programs to active blended learning can sometimes portend success – programs with strong strategies and methods find ways to flip classrooms, deploy practical skill-based experiences, and design rigorous engagement initiatives. How can more programs take advantage of active blended learning methodologies and approaches to engage communities of inquiry for collaborative learning across borders?

INTRODUCTION

What is possible within the geography of our minds when we remove the geography of borders to allow for active blended learning (ABL)? A thriving virtual agenda is creating immense opportunity for educators to innovate. As institutions harness the growing mobility in the lives of students and recognize the expanding terrain of possibilities by incorporating innovative ABL approaches, it is imperative to reimagine education itself. Connectivity and ABL can open doors for focused interactions, fostering deeper understanding through synchronous and asynchronous learning. The level of attention given by institutions to ABL can sometimes foreshadow success - programs with strong strategies and methods

find ways to flip classrooms and deploy practical skill-based experiences and rigorous engagement initiatives. How can more program administrators, faculty, and students take advantage of ABL methodologies and approaches to engage in virtual spaces to experience collaboration beyond their campus?

Online programs utilize innovative technologies and creative programming to design inclusive spaces for Academic Nomads, contemporary students who, due to personal, professional, or academic circumstances, lead a mobile lifestyle and participate in education through a variety of sources and flexible modalities throughout their academic career (Gargano & Throop, 2017). In addition, online programs mean military-affiliated students can complete their mission, graduate students can conduct research in the field or overseas, and executive students can travel the globe on business, all while completing their coursework, interacting with a thriving digital agenda, and earning a degree. Faculty can share lessons learned from ongoing projects, participate in professional development opportunities, and network at conferences while still engaging with students in the online classroom from wherever their work situates them at that moment in time. ABL programs allow Academic Nomads and faculty to participate in discussions, engage in problem-based and team-based learning, and collaborate with individuals in various time zones and on campus. Used effectively, this means that on a daily basis students are being exposed to different perspectives, worldviews, and realities, expanding their understanding of world affairs and illuminating multiple perspectives on a myriad of topics. The potential for learning is unprecedented.

The evolving landscape of higher education and the lived experiences of Academic Nomads demand innovation. The tools, technologies, and techniques afforded by ABL are increasingly being recognized for their ability to expand the terrain of academic possibilities farther than ever previously conceived. Thoughtful program design using ABL implements technology with a focus on human interactions throughout all modalities.

This chapter examines how one higher education program reimagines the possibilities at the intersection of higher education and online learning by grounding the program in ABL. An international relations program at a private mid-sized liberal arts university in the United States fosters a community of inquiry and recognizes student mobility through its innovative approach to learning. Reconceptualizing the classroom and reimagining technology, this chapter illuminates specific ABL strategies at the program level, presents concrete examples of engagement through ABL spaces, highlights the complexities of implementing ABL, and offers insights and strategies for sustainable ways ABL addresses shifts within the field of higher education. Embedding ABL throughout academic coursework and student programming is critical to the program. Opportunities to co-create knowledge, apply content to real-life situations, and collaborate are guiding pillars for the ABL curricular and co-curricular spaces infused throughout the program.

This chapter first provides context for the development of the program by briefly illuminating relevant trends in online higher education. The evolution of active learning and blended learning discourses that merged to create the ABL field are briefly outlined. Then a portrait of Academic Nomads, who reside at the intersection of online higher education and ABL, is presented. The complexities of establishing and administering an ABL program in higher education are explored through an examination of curricular and co-curricular aspects of the program. Recommendations and lessons learned are shared, before the chapter concludes with additional opportunities for research.

BACKGROUND

The intersection of ABL and online higher education narratives demonstrate the symbiotic yet decentralized nature of these discourses. From institutional perspectives to course design, ABL approaches are being adopted to reimagine student engagement. Institutions that are not able to demonstrate a commitment to innovative ABL are overlooked or viewed as irrelevant. Programs that do not incorporate and structure curricular and co-curricular opportunities for student engagement are characterized as disconnected. Faculty that are not able to design courses that require students to apply new skills, think critically, and expand their understanding of course content, are seen as antiquated. ABL is the "the new normal" (Norberg et al., 2011, p. 207).

Online Higher Education

Trends in online higher education, current events, and personal circumstances dictate that institutions and programs explore ways to engage students with academic content and create communities of inquiry. Yet, one of the most significant reasons for the exponential growth of online higher education is student demand.

Generation Z (the generation born between 1995 and 2015) is disrupting and shaping the discourse around learning and engagement in higher education in the United States. This generation of students expects flexibility, values connectivity, and demands rigor. Students in Generation Z are digital natives and technologically literate. "For Gen Z, learning is one continuous, multi-faceted, completely integrated experience – connecting social, academic and professional interests" (Barnes & Noble College, 2016, p. 6). The connected view that students hold of education mimics the grounding paradigm of ABL. Students learn by doing and expect the flexibility to customize an interactive learning experience that creates fluid boundaries and modalities in learning; increases their independence and strengthens their self-reliance; and connects learning across experiences. Students in higher education expect to connect, collaborate, and co-create in ABL spaces.

As evidenced by a survey conducted by the Babson Research Group, blended education enrollments at higher education institutions have grown at a faster pace in the past decade than ever before. The United States has 4,836 degree-granting institutions of higher education, enrolling approximately 20 million students, with 30% of students taking one course online and just over 14% taking all of their courses online (Seaman & Seaman, 2016). These statistics speak of a heightened preference among students for new and adaptive ways of learning. The same survey also found a low rate of uptake among U.S. higher education institutions, which presents the question: are institutions and programs accepting the challenge? "Almost half of distance education students are concentrated in just five percent of institutions, while the top 47 institutions (just 1.0% of the total) enroll 22.4% (1,421,703) of all distance students." (Seaman et al., 2018). What accounts for the discrepancy between supply and demand for blended learning?

The findings of the *Online Report Card* (Allen & Seaman, 2016) found a significant relationship between the reported level of acceptance among faculty members and the number of distance education students at that faculty's institution. "While the number of distance programs and courses online continue to grow, the perception of chief academic officers of the acceptance of this learning modality by faculty has not improved," with only 29% of Chief Academic Officers responding that their faculty see the legitimacy or value in online education (Seaman et al., 2018). In addition, faculty are more likely to approve the promotion of active blended learning when (a) the institution's reason for promoting blended

learning aligned with their own, (b) when the infrastructure for blended learning already existed, and (c) technical support was available (Porter & Graham, 2015). Attitudes that question the legitimacy, rigor, and student engagement of online learning prevail, creating major obstacles for innovative programs looking to recruit faculty.

Active Blended Learning

Online higher education assumes multimodal models and a wide array of technologies. Yet, technology alone does not define ABL.

ABL is a pedagogical approach that "involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 19). ABL is an emerging academic and pedagogical discourse that is not grounded in one discipline, but instead cuts across fields as administrators and practitioners re-envision how to harness fluid borders and interconnected opportunities for sense-making to craft student-centered learning. ABL offers an evolving model that challenges what has long been the norm in the way faculty are expected to teach and students are expected to learn. ABL is a pedagogical approach that is based on the idea that connected learning happens inside and outside of the classroom, online and in-person, through formal and informal educational experiences, and through the rigorous co-construction of knowledge "fostered over time through a combination of elements that support developing interests, relationships, skills, and a sense of purpose" (Connected Learning Alliance, 2020). Yet, the term ABL evolved at the intersection of active learning and blended learning discourses, until a substantial narrative creating a layering of both terms came to signify the thoughtful and purposeful pedagogical approach associated with ABL.

In the beginning, "'active learning'...relied more on intuitive understanding than a common definition" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. iii). Faculty across disciplines were broadly encouraged to shift from passive knowledge engagement to engaging students with course material through critical thinking, application, experimentation, problem-solving, and discussion. Historically, the active learning discourse evolved to offer concrete methodologies for implementing active learning in course design. The existing repertoire of active learning approaches continues to evolve, providing a smorgasbord of instructional design options, including simulations, case studies, debates, project-based learning, peer instruction, game-based learning, and role-playing. With the addition of technology, active learning opportunities greatly expanded in recent years and converged with ideas around blended learning, creating an emerging discourse on ABL.

Blended learning is some combination of virtual and face-to-face learning (Graham, 2006). Yet, this description is very broad. Blended learning can take many forms, including flipped classrooms or hybrid instruction, and is often "perceived as some nebulous combination of online and face-to-face instruction" (Picciano, 2009, p. 8). Although a concise definition of blended learning is still being debated, it is widely acknowledged that blended learning describes both the learning process and the pedagogy that facilitates learning. As a learning process, blended learning is "learning that happens in an instructional context which is characterized by a deliberate combination of online and classroom-based interventions to instigate and support learning" (Boelens et al., 2015, p. 5). As a pedagogy, blended learning is a "pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment" (Dziuban et al., 2004, p.3).

Blended learning is a pedagogical approach being utilized across disciplines and throughout institutions to foster communities of inquiry. "What makes blended learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a community of inquiry. Community provides the stabilizing, cohesive influence that balances the open communication and limitless access to information on the Internet. Communities also provide the condition for free and open dialogue, critical debate, negotiation and agreement—the hallmark of higher education" (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 97). The best blended learning programs are defined not by the technology used, but instead by the way learning takes place. The study further explained that, "Blended learning has the capabilities to facilitate these conditions and adds an important reflective element with multiple forms of communication to meet specific learning requirements" at the intersection of mobility and technology, and opens doors for students (Milakovich & Wise, 2019, p. 25). Student engagement with peers, faculty, administrators, and other professionals or experts, expands the conceptualization of what is possible through a community of inquiry.

ABL refers to the intersection between the pedagogical approaches associated with active learning and the technology infused conceptualization of blended learning, leaving administrators and educators the space to re-envision the geography of mind and space. ABL is expeditiously emerging as both a domain of practice and research, requiring us to rethink the classroom space and the urgency of adopting a connected learning framework, with an expanded understanding of what it means to be educated and the forms education can take.

Combining the tenets of both active learning and blended learning to create ABL focuses on a student centered, community of inquiry learning approach. ABL highlights not only the convergence of technology and content, but the ways in which students engage with the content (Halverson et al., 2014). The use of technology alone is not additive and does not imply ABL. Virtual learning should not simply supplement what is occurring in face-to-face spaces, but rather ABL assumes the rigorous and thoughtful integration of both virtual and face-to-face approaches (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Important consideration to pedagogy, learning goals, program assessment, and competency-based criteria need to be holistically considered in order to create true ABL programs.

Sometimes understanding something requires an understanding of what it is not. ABL does not use technology to simply access course content. Instead, ABL includes a balance between asynchronous and synchronous learning and explores the ways students can apply, evaluate, analyze, question, integrate, and editorialize knowledge. ABL does not use technology to hinder the co-construction of knowledge. Instead, ABL uses technology to foster connections and to systematically consider what modality is the most effective for achieving learning outcomes and objectives. ABL does not use technology to stifle human connection. Instead ABL fosters the creation of communities of inquiry to co-construct understanding and to give students access to a wide range of support, including tutoring, advising, and counseling. ABL does not use technology to foster complacency. Instead, ABL resides in the realm of continual evaluation and constant innovation. ABL does not use technology to create academic segregation. Instead, ABL created inclusive communities for an increasingly diverse student body, designed to help students expand their understanding and scaffold learning. ABL does not use technology to create silos. Instead, ABL provides the space for students to make connections across disciplines and experiences. Most important, perhaps, is that ABL fosters in students a sense of human agency, creating change agents, cultural brokers, and critical thinkers.

There are certainly perceived risks inherent in adopting ABL approaches. Student and faculty perceptions about what constitutes teaching and learning can be harnessed by administrators to build rigorous programs. Pedagogical design choices, collaborative learning and social co-construction of knowledge,

online presence, accessibility issues, recognition of human agency, the clarity of assignments, and rigorous academic content are all significant multifaceted considerations that require a solid understanding of institutional support, faculty willingness, and student expectations (Palmer et al., 2017). Faculty might question their roles and abilities to engage students through ABL, resist change or experience anxiety that can come with adopting new instructional approaches, feel overwhelmed by a lack of support, or incentives during the course design process (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). For faculty, ABL signals a shift from digital competency to digital fluency, a space where many students already reside.

However, ABL is an important approach for rethinking education at the program level. The instructional design approaches, research, and publications based on faculty adoption of ABL in specific classrooms is prevalent. Yet, at the other end of the spectrum, research into the institutional adoption of ABL as a guiding principle is mostly nonexistent (Porter & Graham, 2016). In between the two, institutions and faculty, is a void in the literature of cases that explore the ways ABL is incorporated at the program level, through structures, initiatives, and interactions. Administrators must realize that virtually every program "policy and practice - from class scheduled, attendance regulations, and research participation to work-study, faculty office hours, student orientation...affects the way students use their time and the amount of effort they devote to academic pursuits" (National Institute of Education, 1984). Therefore, thoughtful and purposeful consideration about how to design an ABL program that recognizes specific institutional characteristics is important. Holistically understanding the ramifications and complexities of program policies, strategic and operational planning, resources, scheduling, and support can help foster innovation in program design (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Yet the capacity and commitment for ABL varies among programs.

Since the definition of ABL varies widely between institutions, there is no consistent way to collect meaningful data. Yet, the demand for different learning modalities in recent years increased. Each year, the Babson Survey Research Group measures enrollments of students taking distance courses at the same institution at which they attend in-residence courses. According to the data, the percentage of students surveyed that were taking exclusively distance courses located in the same state as their institution has consistently been over the 50% line since 2012. In 2016, the percentage reached 56.1% the highest ever. This presumably means when presented with a wider variety of learning options, students will take advantage. The interpretation of this data reinforces the perspective that today's contemporary student seeks non-traditional avenues of learning and ways to connect that learning with everyday experiences.

ABL propels programs into the realm of student-centered learning, realizes the value of communities of inquiry, and provides the space for students to engage in rigorous academic experiences at institutions around the globe. While this chapter primarily highlights Western research and uses a US-based case study, it is important to acknowledge that ABL is being utilized around the world. In Brazil, where students are more likely to use mobile technology at home as part of flipped classrooms, nearly all learners use "online learning in some way" for formal education (Fisher et al., 2017, p. 21). During a webinar hosted by the Centre for Higher Education, Innovation, & Development (2020), several senior administrators at African academic institutions recently "agreed that blended learning will emerge as the standard for African universities in years to come." In Malaysia, a country investing and developing the use of technologies in schools, cites ABL for increased access, collaboration, and engagement, "allowing learning to be 'anytime, anywhere'" (Fisher et al., 2017, p. 36). In Saudi Arabia research demonstrates that ABL is an "active student-centered learning that enhances critical thinking and application, including information retention" (Sajid et al., 2016, p. 284). In the Netherlands, ABL or "the combination of self-regulated pre-class learning...in combination with in-class activities incorporating collaborative learning activities

facilitating deeper learning, was considered to have merit, especially in a diverse student population" (Goedhart et al. 2019, p. 308). Institutions around the globe find themselves effectively utilizing ABL or on the pathway to developing programs grounded in ABL design.

Yet, it is also important to recognize that ABL is not a cure-all for the challenges faced by educational systems or individual students. Students come into classrooms with a range of abilities and life experiences that shape the co-construction of knowledge and ability to productively interact with technologies. Yet, when ABL is designed in combination with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), it has the potential to foster inclusive spaces that acknowledge the range of student abilities. UDL is defined by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) as "an instructional approach that considers the range of skills and abilities of all learners to create an inclusive learning environment." Programs utilizing UDL are designed to effectively accommodate the needs of specific types of learners, allowing students with a diverse range of strengths and weaknesses to learn from one another in inclusive environments where differences are valued. Rather than being for students with a specific learning difference, ABL enables accessible learning for neurodiverse populations. UDL is a foundational consideration when designing impactful ABL programs and courses that incorporate a variety of engagement styles and accommodates different student needs, allowing each student to fully participate in an inclusive educational experience.

Administrators are challenged with creating program structures and requirements that foster student engagement online and on campus, the central tenet of ABL. What follows is a case study of how one institution created a graduate program grounded in the experiences of its students, or Academic Nomads, on the pillars of ABL. Flipped classrooms, collaborative learning, experiential learning, and problem-based learning create the foundation for an online graduate program that recognizes the value of student experiences inside and outside of the classroom, structures learning through a constructivist lens that connects knowledge through practical application and dialectical perspectives, and provides the framework for rigor and engagement across the program.

ACADEMIC NOMADS

The portrait of the average student is changing. In previous years, the typical undergraduate student would apply to one institution, devote all of their time to that institution, and pay for tuition out-of-pocket. Today's student looks a bit different. Now, students tend to use financial aid, work part-time or get an internship while pursuing their degree. Today's students are also involved in co-curricular activities such as student organizations, more interested in pursuing opportunities to travel abroad, complementing academic work with professional skills, and engaging technology (Council of Economic Advisers, 2015). The non-traditional or contemporary student is becoming the new norm.

These trends also hold with graduate student populations. In 2016, the Online Learning Consortium (Allen & Seaman, 2016) estimated that 85% of Americans enrolled in post-secondary institutions are contemporary (or non-traditional) learners. A contemporary graduate student is working full-time and pursuing graduate studies part-time. Contemporary graduate students are returning to academia with several years of experience, while maintaining the responsibilities and obligations associated with an independent adult life. Contemporary students are returning to academia after realizing that an additional credential is necessary to further their career, required to stay abreast in their field, or essential

to change careers. As the profile of the typical graduate student shifts, so does the ability to enroll in traditional degree programs.

Academic Nomad is a phrase often associated with highly mobile faculty who engage in short-term teaching at various higher education institutions, bounding from one to another to cobble together a less traditional academic career path (Kahn & Misiaszek, 2019). Yet here, the term Academic Nomad captures the mobility of students, the fluidity of student contexts, and hybridity inherent in student pathways in an increasingly blended learning environment. The mobility in the lives of students and the categories or labels used to silo student experiences, such as "online student" or "international student", need to be reimagined, providing higher education with the impetus to innovate, redesign, and rethink ways to engage students. As institutions, program administrators, and faculty focus on creating authentic, rigorous academic experiences that create communities of inquiry, the realities of Academic Nomads must be considered as a vision for education is renegotiated.

Working with hundreds of students inside and outside of the classroom, and thereby learning more about the unique situations of Academic Nomads, the authors recognize the myriad of ways mobility can impact the student learning experience. After working with these students, innovating creative program elements to foster community and defining pathways toward graduation, it is evident that mobility influences the Academic Nomad experience in three specific ways - *geographic mobility*, *mobility among platforms*, and *mobility across programs*.

First, geographic mobility refers to the physical location of Academic Nomads, whose profession, lifestyle, or family require frequent geographic mobility. In any given semester, Academic Nomads often find themselves logging in from various time zones to attend class. The ability to participate regardless of location and to incorporate learning through formal and informal experiences is paramount. Academic Nomads who are also active duty can complete a degree while completing the mission. Professional Academic Nomads, who are often not in the same city each week but juggling a traveling schedule or working on temporary consulting projects, can engage with coursework, classmates, and faculty from around the globe. Academic Nomads can conduct research in the field, travel to conferences, or participate in trainings, all while navigating a pathway toward graduation.

The geographic mobility inherent in the lives of many graduate students leads directly to the second way mobility influences the Academic Nomad experience. The mobile lifestyle of Academic Nomads dictates options around modality and across platforms. Academic Nomads engage in a sense of community online, on campus, and in the spaces students meet through travel. Academic Nomads take classes online and on campus, partake in campus immersions, study abroad, and attend webinars. Academic Nomads participate in internships and practicum online and then join together in person to co-present projects and findings at conferences in cities around the world. The spaces where learning takes places, are not grounded in one modality or the other, but facilitated by various platforms that cross boundaries.

Finally, mobility is also represented in the choices that Academic Nomads make about programs, concentrations, certifications, and trainings. Academic Nomads expect options, a lot of options, to customize a program that does not require concessions or compromises. Academic Nomads balance coursework at various institutions or across departments, creating specialized concentrations that are not reflected in traditional siloed academic disciplines, but rather through customized coursework to obtain specific cross-discipline expertise.

Situated across time zones and cultural contexts, Academic Nomads bring diverse perspectives to communities of inquiry. Academic Nomads maintain busy schedules, live at the intersection of obligations

and opportunities, and are continually engaged in a balancing act that falls somewhere on the spectrum of adhering to institutional rules and creatively configuring a unique academic pathway.

Are institutions, programs, and classrooms able to accommodate the worldwide demand for higher education in an age of increasing mobility? In 2016, Project Atlas reported that there were 4.1 million people pursuing higher education worldwide. In recent years, the realm of higher education adapted somewhat to new trends, demands, and innovations, but in order to truly create capacity for today's learners, boundaries need to be further expanded. Reconceptualizing the traditional classroom space allows for the exponential growth of possible ways to learn. Space does not need to be neutral, culturally bounded, or tied to a geographic locale. It is only when the definition of space is broadened that can it accommodate the full spectrum of today's learners.

COMPLEXITIES

There are many ways in which the program uses ABL to foster connected learning and student engagement. This section will provide concrete examples and share ways ABL is infused throughout the program. Figure 1 represents the considerations, components, and complexities represented in the program. ABL is considered through asynchronous and synchronous learning components, online and on-campus aspects of the program, and the flexibility inherent in the program to allow students multiple pathways to graduation. Flipped classrooms, collaborative learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, and credentials are five structured categories thoughtfully incorporated to create a program infused with ABL.

Flipped Classrooms

Courses are flipped in the sense that each incorporates a combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning. As a review of the literature demonstrates, a flipped classroom enables faculty "to cultivate critical and independent thought in their students, building the capacity for lifelong learning and thus preparing future graduates for their workplace contexts" (O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015, p. 94). For each course, students are required to complete an estimated 80 minutes of asynchronous content (recorded lecture, roundtables, interviews), and attend an 80-minute synchronous session per week (live session facilitate by faculty), with the weekly 160 minutes equating to the average time spent in a weekly on-campus face-to-face class. The flipped format keeps students committed to and engaged with the content while also ensuring adequate balance and coverage of both foundational theories and paradigms (which can be pre-recorded) and practical applicability (which can be discussed or debated in live sessions). Students and faculty join weekly live sessions from 15 different time zones, making the program both rigorous and flexible for contemporary learners.

Collaborative Learning

Through instructional design strategies and online co-presence in groups, students engage in collaborative learning inside and outside of the classroom. Research acknowledges that collaborative learning is the "joint intellectual pursuit of a common goal" and fosters "the realization of positive social interdepen-

Figure 1. Complexities of Active Blended Learning Program Design

dence," providing students with a sense of community, while recognizing the importance of diversity and inclusion in fostering that community (de Hie et al., 2020, p. 191).

Instructional Design Strategies

Collaborative learning opportunities are woven throughout the program, but perhaps most salient are the instructional design strategies adopted by faculty to create communities of inquiry. A collaborative approach to teaching through simulations, case studies, interactive presentations, and group projects create in each class a connected and student-centered pedagogical approach to learning. Students are encouraged to approach discussions and activities through a lens grounded in professional, personal, and academic experiences. Faculty teaching the same course create a community of inquiry and support each other by sharing best practices, readings, resources, and challenges. Instructional design strate-

gies used by faculty that foster connected and collaborative learning strive to recognize and expand on contemporary students' existing knowledge through ABL.

Online Groups

Students can set up online groups through the Learning Management System (LMS) to interact with each other about courses, shared goals, and co-curricular activities. These online groups offer many ways to collaborate and foster connected learning, including wall posts, file sharing, and live discussions. At times, groups started online also met up in person for a social hour, a professional event, or dinner. While sometimes students in these groups have geographical proximity, it is not a necessity, as the groups are set up for members across locations and time zones who also meet at conferences or through work-related travel.

Experiential Learning

Immersions, study abroad, skills institutes, site visits, and webinars are examples of experiential learning that expand the academic curriculum. Through professional development, skill building, international experiences, networking, and global citizenship initiatives, students engage in experiential learning, or "learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied" (Keeton & Tate, 1978, p. viii). The program includes a variety of experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom that are designed to help students choose a career path, develop the qualifications to be a successful professional, and discover how the academic content of the program is applied in and connected to the field.

Immersion

Though the majority of the coursework for the program can be completed online, students are required to physically visit campus to participate in an Immersion. The Immersion is a three-day experience which combines a one-credit hour skills workshop with social networking, professional development activities, and faculty interaction. The program helps students engage face-to-face with classmates, staff, and faculty, demonstrating positive impacts on the online interactions that follow. In a student survey conducted by the program in February 2020, students were most likely to attribute a connection to campus first to coursework, with the Immersion program coming in at a close second. Students immensely enjoy the opportunity to interact with peers and faculty, to connect with the campus community, and to learn in both curricular and co-curricular settings, that many will attend several Immersion before graduating.

Study Abroad

Students in the program are spread across 15 different time zones and over 30 countries; the concept of geographic mobility is inherent in their daily lives. Despite having full schedules, students in the program are as likely or more likely than on-campus counterparts to participate in study abroad programs. The characteristics of the contemporary student body requires international program offerings to be highly adaptable, including plenty of short-term and week-long opportunities for students who simply cannot afford longer periods away from other responsibilities. According to the same February 2020 student survey, 45% already studied abroad and plan to study abroad again, or intend to study abroad before the

completion of the program. A favorite study abroad option for students in the program is the Practicum Abroad, which not only allows students the ability to travel for a short-term (two to three week) period, but also has direct application to the Capstone requirement. The Practicum Abroad offers students yet another learning modality, and complements the learning completed in other forms, such as in-residence and synchronously/asynchronously.

Skills Institutes

The faculty who teach for the program number close to 100. They come from over a dozen countries and speak over 25 different languages, conducting live synchronous sessions from various international destinations where they are permanently based, temporarily traveling, or engaged in field research, affording students an enormous potential to learn from specialized practitioners. Online skills institutes are offered in a live session format on topics like visualizing diversity in international relations, writing op-eds, participatory research, or learning from survey design. Skills institutes provide students with yet another way to bridge academic coursework and professional skills through ABL opportunities in a community of inquiry.

Site Visits

The School offers online students the ability to participate in Site Visit Day. For this event, small groups of students visit the offices of different employers over the course of one day for career exploration. These informational visits offer exposure to various workplaces, career paths, and opportunities through discussions with employers. Site Visit Day is especially valuable for students who might need extra support breaking into the regional job market or making a career transition. Site Visit Day also helps students connect the concepts learned in class to real-world practice, a form of connected learning that provides a platform for students to engage in continued virtual conversations and to develop mentoring relationships with professionals in the field.

Webinars

Multiple webinars, with both academic and non-academic themes, provide students with opportunities to connect synchronously between their weekly live course sessions, network with professionals in the field, and explore current topics of interest. Webinars are hosted throughout the semester by program staff, faculty, and fellow students, focusing on a range of topics from "Choosing your Capstone Project" to "How to Network Online." Not only do these webinars help to build a community of inquiry, but also provide students the ability to interact with others online in ways that might complement their in-class learning.

Problem-Based Learning

Consulting projects are examples of problem-based learning that epitomize student engagement. Problem-based learning is a student-centered pedagogical approach that "empowers learners to conduct research, integrate theory and practice, and apply knowledge and skills to develop a viable solution to a defined

problem" (Savery, 2015, p. 7). Providing students the opportunity to apply knowledge, skills, and abilities in a culminating professional opportunity is a valuable problem-based learning scenario.

Practicum

Students are required to complete a Capstone project as the final requirement for the program. Students can choose to pursue either a Practicum or a Substantial Research Paper (SRP) for this requirement. Those who pursue the Practicum are assigned a group to collaborate with on a real-world project with an external client. Students work initially with the client to develop a scope of work and expected deliverables, then spend the remainder of the semester working on a solution, which is presented to the client at the end of the term. Practica focus on topics with regional relevance, such as national security, international development, and conflict resolution. The option to hold Practicum projects online affords students the opportunity to build consulting skills and make personal connections beyond their institutions. Online Practica, which are available to students in both the on-campus and online degree programs, showcase the way active blended education can be used toward experiential learning and can open windows to a wide variety of fields and industries.

Program Credentials

The program also offers online placement exams to recognize students' prior training and education. For example, students with prior knowledge of micro- and macro-economics have the ability to waive the program's economics prerequisite. Placement exams afford students in the program yet another way to connect their previous experiences with elements of our curriculum. Students who speak a language other than English as a native speaker are also permitted to use that language to satisfy their foreign language requirement instead of being asked to pass a language exam.

Of course, the same features that give the program its flexibility and accessibility can sometimes pose a logistical challenge for faculty, administrators, and students. When students can learn from any geographic location with access to a computer and the internet, more effort is required on the part of staff and faculty to connect students with campus and peers. Due to the program's flexibility, it attracts busy professionals, servicemen and servicewomen engaged in military drills, adults with small children, and executives on frequent work trips. Therefore, any number of competing obligations can be vying for attention on the other side of the computer screen. However, the program is deliberately infused with opportunities for ABL in order to not only keep students learning, but also keep them engaged with each other and with the University.

One indicator for the depth of an online student's engagement to campus is attendance at the commencement ceremony. In 2015, one of the program's first graduates delivered the School's commencement speech. Her speech opened with, "The vast majority of you have no idea who I am. You've never seen me on campus and you've never had a class with me." She ended by noting, "During my two years in this program I have sat through lectures in 15 countries. I have read textbooks and written essays on trains, planes, and automobiles. I have even submitted an assignment while crossing the English Channel. Why this erratic schedule? I am a serving lieutenant in the United States Navy." Last year, a sizable portion of spring graduates attended the commencement ceremony on campus. According to the program's 2020 student survey, close to 60% of respondents plan to cross the stage when they finish their degrees.

Academic Nomads are busy, committed, high achievers. While their commitment to coursework and academic performance is paramount, programs need to ensure options for strong co-curricular engagement as well. What follows are some recommendations for how similar activities might be integrated into other programs and initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What is the capacity for ABL in your program? What are the possibilities for combining face-to-face education and online education that would benefit your students? How does the shifting of boundaries with regards to what is technologically possible in education create opportunities for ABL? Who needs to be involved in conversations about adopting an ABL approach in your program? How can you advocate for ABL? What resources can your program utilize to foster ABL? These are all broad but necessary questions for programs to consider as the complexities, possibilities, and challenges unique to institutions define a path forward. Based on experience and research, Figure 2 highlights eleven significant considerations and recommendations for committing to an ABL approach in program design.

Emphasize Training and Mentorship: Throughout the program, establish communities of best practices to provide support networks for faculty and administrators. Faculty are cocooned in a support

Figure 2. Eleven Principles for Active Blended Learning Program Design
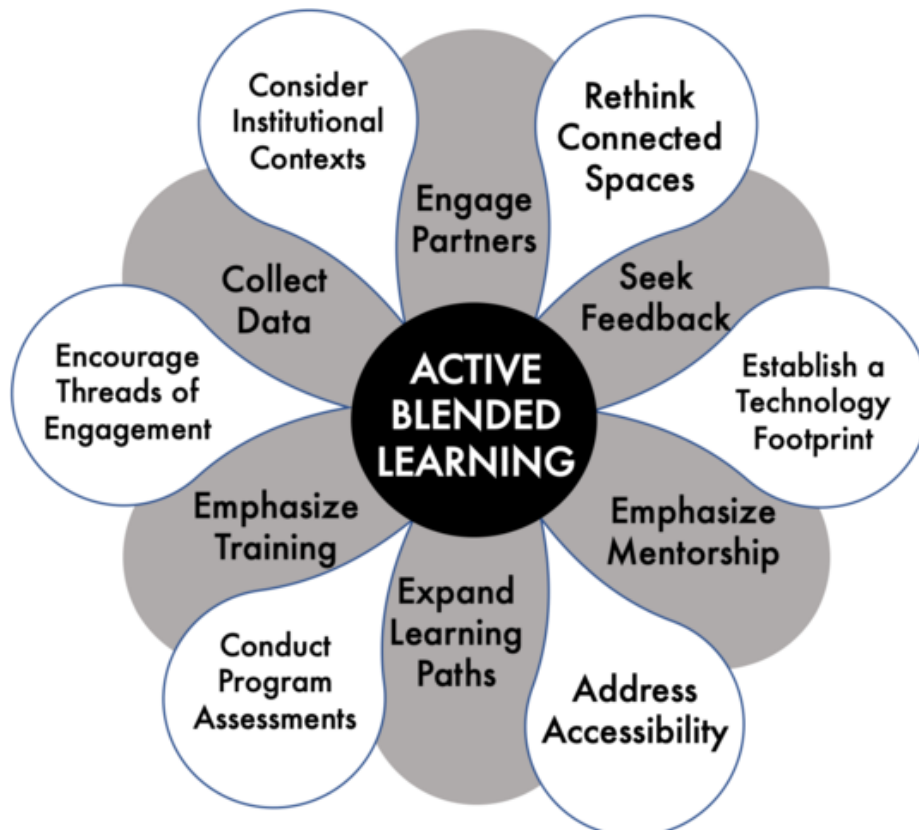
system that includes course content experts, technical support, administrative support from the program director, and other faculty teaching the same course. Teaching is a fluid, evolving process that allows faculty and administrators to collaborate in ways that bring course content to life for students in academics derived from ABL approaches. It can be helpful to set aside time each week to initiate conversations, online or in person, about best practices, shared resources, or trends in ABL, or to generate new ideas or partnerships. Connecting faculty with someone who understands ABL in the community or online, can foster mentoring relationships that benefit all involved.

Seek Feedback: The needs and expectations of students, faculty, and administrators vary across programs and should be sought out through formative and summative feedback, and thoughtfully acknowledged and incorporated through a transparent process that individualizes ABL for the program. Programs need to create spaces for everyone involved to share ideas, brainstorm goals, and innovate for overall program improvement.

Rethink Connected Spaces: Reconceptualizing what constitutes learning, in addition to when, where, and how learning happens allows for an expanded terrain of possibilities for structuring ABL opportunities. Learning happens inside the classroom and outside of formal academic spaces. Adopting a connected learning perspective and recognizing that through conversations, social interactions, professional pursuits, and academic challenges, students are learning. Creating fact-to-face and virtual spaces provides flexibility and creates ABL spaces. Program administrators need to continually seek out best practices, become familiarize with experts, and research current trends in ABL.

Address Accessibility: With the use of technology, accessibility issues and UDL need to be fully integrated into program design. All students need to be able to access course materials, engage in student governance, meet with academic advisors, and participate in professional and social events. Program design should, from the very beginning, consider accessibility and a range of student abilities through a comprehensive lens of institutional diversity and inclusion.

Collect Data: With the introduction of advancing technologies, ABL approaches provide touchpoints for programs to learn more about how students interact with the LMS and course content. The opportunity to delve into data can provide pathways for better course design, student support throughout the program, and student programming. Programs might also consider developing surveys or questionnaires and then share the results as a conversation starter to seek out authentic feedback.

Establish a Technology Footprint: Programs should identify, test, train, and support faculty, students, and administrators in the adopted technology to be used throughout the program. While the technology landscape is continually shifting, with new applications and platforms being developed and introduced, programs need to decide which technologies to adopt for conducting courses and supporting students. Administrators need to continually reevaluate what technologies are best suited for the program. Technical support can be provided by the institution or programs may decide to partner with a private technology provider.

Conduct Program Assessments: Program assessments are crucial for accreditation but also for understanding what is working or not working, and identifying areas for innovation. What is the goal of the assessment? What should be assessed? Which stakeholders should be involved? How and when should the assessment take place? (Pombo & Moreira, 2012). Building program assessments into the program proposal or charter from the beginning prevents program assessment from becoming an afterthought or overwhelming. There are many ways to measure success and a myriad of criteria, so give careful consideration to the learning outcomes, goals, and objectives established for the program. It is important to be aware of institutional and reporting requirements for program evaluation and accreditation.

Encourage Threads of Engagement: Program administrators should recognize the need to communicate often with faculty and students, continually engaging all stakeholders of the program. Through regular office meetings among administrators, to faculty newsletters that share best practices or program deadlines, to student bulletins that list events of interest or live streaming events, programs can encourage connection and ABL through regular, consistent communication.

Expand Learning Paths: Administrators and faculty designing an ABL program in higher education need to ensure the path to graduation is flexible and offers a variety of modalities that respect the lived realities of Academic Nomads. Ensuring that multiple options for completing any one program requirement are in place will establish expectations, aid in student retention and reduce student frustration, and allow program administrators to be proactive rather than reactive.

Consider Institutional Context: Program administrators should give some consideration to how the ABL program will be situated within the broader context of the institution or academic department, and create an organizational chart. How will the program be involved in the decision-making at the School level and integrate its own policies within the context of the School? How will institutional departments interact with the program or what resources can the program draw on from across campus? Program administrators should explore institutional opportunities for small grants or external funding to implement ABL initiatives. Sitting in on meetings to contribute to the ABL discourse on campus and sharing success stories or tools, can be important ways to influence the dialogue and decision-making about ABL. Program administrators may also consider establishing a working group of various campus units to gain consensus and leverage resources.

Engage Partners: Administrators also need to determine if the choice to adopt ABL should be a University-wide decision. If so, does the University have an active partnership with a third-party provider who might offer tools and services associated with the program? If not, should the program partner with an Online Program Manager (OPM) for the development of an ABL curriculum?

Program design is defined by the complexities that are unique to institutions and the individuals involved in decision-making. The areas for consideration outlined above are designed to help foster conversations around establishing an academic program grounded in an ABL approach or to suggest ways to revisit the goals and outcomes of an established program to make modifications that infuse ABL throughout.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There is an immense opportunity to develop a research agenda around ABL in online higher education programming. While current events, trends, and technologies will in some ways dictate the terrains of possibilities for ABL, there are many aspects of ABL that remain unexplored. Further research needs to be undertaken in several areas, contending that existing research can explicitly inform pedagogy. By holistically examining ABL from the perspectives of all stakeholders involved, a comprehensive understanding of how program design impacts student learning will continue to take shape.

Research on how students interact with technologies is a focus where additional studies are needed. Understanding how, when, and why students engage with some technologies and not others can be immensely helpful in program design. How can researchers merge the extensive discourse on how humans learn with the research on ABL to expand and innovate pedagogical approaches in higher education?

ABL is a relatively new discourse, so the long-term effects or student outcomes from participating in ABL programs are not yet known. Longitudinal research that explores how ABL fosters content knowl-

edge and the skills for professional success is a research focus that can further explore the complexities of ABL and contribute to the ways administrators can advocate, implement, or debate ABL. Considering the career prospects for students who complete a traditional program versus those that graduate from an ABL program, is data that can significantly contribute to the field.

As previously stated, ABL is often approached from a course or institutional perspective. There is a gaping hole in the literature when it comes to implementing ABL at the program level and across units in higher education. As a result, additional research at the program level and substantial program evaluations need to be conducted.

Contributing to forums, conferences, and publications, such as this one, are opportunities to share best practices and collaborate, furthering the field and the discourse of ABL. Researchers, authors, and practitioners may come to ABL through very different pathways. Yet, rethinking what is possible for student centered education through a lens grounded in ABL is an endeavor that will ultimately benefit students. Recognizing that learning happens inside and outside of a classroom and adopting a connected approach to learning, will allow program administrators to reimagine the components of an ABL program.

CONCLUSION

Drivers and barriers to the adoption of ABL vary across institutions, programs, and faculty. Institutions are increasingly recognizing the scope and scale of the benefits for adopting ABL worldwide. Program administrators charged with building, expanding, and assessing programs, are recognizing the context, constraints, and complexities that must be navigated in order to be innovative. Faculty designing blended courses are recognizing the importance of flexibility in learning and teaching. The ABL landscape is complex but presents terrains of possibilities that expand what was previously imagined in higher education.

Academic Nomads and contemporary students are inherently mobile, demanding flexible and multimodal academic programs. Higher education, in response, must broaden its understanding of how mobility impacts the lives of students, including geographic mobility, mobility among platforms, and mobility across academic programs. The new Academic Nomad provides higher education with the impetus to innovate, redesign, and rethink the ways higher education engages students. In this time of increased focus on blended learning and as institutions, program administrators, and faculty focus on creating authentic, rigorous academic experiences that generate communities of inquiry, the realities of the growing population of Academic Nomads need to be considered as a vision for higher education is renegotiated.

ABL in the form of flipped classrooms, collaborative learning, experiential learning, and problem-based learning has the potential to create inclusive learning spaces for all students, to recognize the learning that takes place inside and outside of a traditional classroom, and to engage students with each other and the world around them. While the task before higher education is immense in scope and scale, it is important to understand the inherent value to institutions and students to deliberately rethink what is possible. Faculty who question and critique existing pedagogy, to innovate and design new approaches for creating rigorous, authentic, active blended education will flourish. Programs that acknowledge the lived realities of Academic Nomads and create programs accessible across modalities and platforms will thrive. Institutions that create a culture of creativity, to solve problems, to collaborate, and to respect diversity, will endure.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Nomad: A contemporary student who, due to personal, professional, or academic circumstances, leads a mobile lifestyle and seeks education by connecting with a variety of sources and flexible modalities.

Active Blended Learning (ABL): A domain of practice and research, focusing on a student centered, community of inquiry learning approach that introduces rigorous and thoughtful integration of virtual, face-to-face, and combinations of other instructional approaches.

Active Learning: A student-centered instructional design approach that meaningfully engages students through experience, dialog, and relationships.

Blended Learning: An instructional design approach that utilizes a combination of face-to-face interaction with technological grounded learning opportunities.

Capstone Project: A student-driven project completed at the end of the program that includes consulting with an actual client or organization to solve a systemic problem, propose solutions, or conduct research.

Community of Inquiry: A community of learners that requires social, teaching, and cognitive presence to guide student engagement and further the co-construction of knowledge on a given topic.

Connected Learning: An approach to learning that recognizes learning does not only occur in a classroom, but at the intersections of learning principles (interest-powered, academically oriented, peer-supported) and design principles (openly networked, production-centered, and shared purpose).

Contemporary or Non-Traditional Student: A student with specific characteristics, life circumstances, and complexities that seeks flexibility and innovation when combining academic pathways and modalities for learning.

Experiential Learning: A student centered pedagogical approach of learning by doing.

Flipped Classroom: A course structure sequenced by students first exploring the content independently through lectures, readings, or other assignments, before coming to a live class to then apply, analyze, debate, or engage in other critical thinking skills utilizing the course content.

Learning Management System (LMS): A technology platform utilized to engage students through real time postings, provide access to course content, and function as a course management hub for faculty.

Skills Institute: A one-credit hour class that focuses on professional skill building.

Technology Provider: A company that provides services, including but not limited to marketing, recruiting, technology support, training, and content management, to higher education institutions.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): An instructional approach that considers the range of skills and abilities of all learners to create an inclusive learning environment.