2026 EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ANNUAL REPORT

Western Technical College embeds **CBL AND WBL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING** into every one of our degree programs. The college is proud of its hands-on education—a proven powerful learning method. Experiential learning increases student success by adding work-based and community-based experiences that bring learning to life.

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Western uses the term **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING** to explain the process of learning by doing. By engaging Western students in community-based learning and work-based learning experiences and reflection activities, they are better prepared to accomplish their career goals and be active community members.

COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING (CBL) is a fluid and purposeful approach to engagement designed to immerse Western students and faculty in an experience that develops skills, enhances learning, and strengthens the communities they serve.

WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL) allows Western students to apply the technical and employability skills learned in the classroom to the industry that corresponds with their program.



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Western Technical College



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DESIGNING WITH PURPOSE

Interior Design Students Put Their Ideas to Work Through Community Collaboration

At Western Technical College, Interior Design students do more than learn what professional practice looks like in the best way possible: Through personal experience. The program's studio courses are intentionally structured to function like a professional design environment to give students both the independence and responsibility that come with real project work. Instructor Jennifer Stangl approaches her role less as a traditional instructor and more as a project manager, guiding workflow and accountability as students move through the design process from programming to presentation.

That sense of ownership extends beyond the projects; students treat the studio as a working space—arriving early, staying late, returning between classes, collaborating with each other, and managing their time much as they would in a professional office. For Stangl, that independence is part of the preparatory strategy, in tandem with creating opportunities for students to put it to the test.

One such opportunity emerged with the redesign and relocation of The SPACE (Student Place of Action, Culture, and Empowerment), a campus resource serving students, staff, and the broader community. The project brought together The SPACE team, HSR Associates, commercial furniture dealer Schmitt Goodman, and Western's Interior Design students.

The students weren't observing the design team. They were part of it. For Macy Zielke and Natalie Kessel, that distinction changed the work. They were designing for a real campus space, presenting to professionals, responding to stakeholders, and making recommendations that could influence actual decisions.

At one point, a student asked Stangl whether the class would eventually meet with the "real clients." Her answer was simple: "You already did."

The people listening to the students' recommendations were the people making decisions and purchasing equipment for the space. The realization brought the stakes of the project into focus: their work carried weight, and their ideas mattered. That responsibility demanded more than creativity.

"You can't just say, 'I like this,'" one student explained during a feedback session. "You have to explain why it works—and who it works for." Every choice needed a reason behind it. Students considered user needs, commercial building codes, furniture performance, durability, budget, function, and long-term use. They learned that good design is not simply about creating something appealing; it is about balancing possibilities with constraints, along with the ability to explain and show why a solution works.

Presenting those ideas to professionals added another level of responsibility. What initially felt intimidating became one of the most valuable parts of the experience as students saw their ideas heard, challenged, and taken seriously.

The learning moved in both directions. HSR's interior designers appreciated the students' fresh perspectives, while architects noted their impressive knowledge of commercial codes and user navigation. Western's facilities staff valued the students' thoughtful evaluation of existing and new furniture, including budget considerations, revitalization, and sustainability.

That exchange reflects what Stangl wants students to experience before they graduate: the pressure of real expectations, the confidence that comes from meeting them, and the understanding that professional design depends on listening, collaboration, evidence, and judgment.

By the end of the project, students had gained more than technical experience. They had seen themselves differently. Their recommendations could shape a space. Their knowledge could contribute to a professional discussion. Their ideas could serve a community.

Projects like The SPACE demonstrate the strength of Western's community-based learning model by closing the distance between education and practice. Students don't have to graduate wondering what it feels like to do meaningful work in their field. They are already doing it!



LEARNING THROUGH PRACTICE

Interior Design Internships Turn Classroom Knowledge Into Professional Confidence

A daily plan is great, but learning what to do when the plan changes is something else. For Western Technical College Interior Design students Estanna Graewin and Josie Brown, an internship at I.D.ology offered both lessons. "You might have a plan for your day, but things change constantly," Josie said. "You have to be flexible."

That flexibility is difficult to replicate in a classroom. In a professional design studio, a client can change direction. A problem at a job site can demand immediate attention. A meeting can reshape work already underway. Priorities move, and designers must move with them. Through Western's 60-hour Integrative Interiors Internship, students experience that reality firsthand.

I.D.ology regularly welcomes Western Interior Design students as interns, including four over the past year. Owner and interior designer Mike Tumilowicz gives students a close look at the day-to-day work of a professional design studio. Interns participate in client meetings, visit job sites, work with furniture and finish selections, organize materials and samples, meet product representatives, and observe how designers collaborate with architects and contractors.

Organizing materials and returning samples helped the students become familiar with manufacturers and products encountered in class. Client meetings offered another kind of lesson: how to listen, redirect a conversation, respond when a client changes course, and keep a project moving. It's difficult to overstate the importance of this skill. "We saw how clients can change their minds from one meeting to the next," Josie said. "It showed us how important it is to guide conversations and keep things on track."

The internship expanded their understanding of just how collaborative design is. A finished space appears seamless, but behind it is a network of designers, architects, contractors, electricians, product representatives, and clients, and all the work must connect. "There are so many people involved—everything connects," Estanna said. That kind of discovery is part of the value of work-based learning. Students test assumptions, discover preferences, make professional connections, and begin to understand what kind of work fits them best. "Each student comes in with enthusiasm and a willingness to learn," Tumilowicz said. "Over the course of their internship, I've seen their understanding of real design applications grow along with their confidence."

By entering professional environments before graduation, Western students learn to adapt when plans change, communicate when decisions become complicated, recognize the people behind the finished product, and trust their growing ability to contribute. They return to the classroom with valuable experience and a clear understanding of the profession.

I.D.ology
Comprehensive Interior Design

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