BUCK INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION
PBLworks

From K–12 to Higher Ed: Expanding Project Based Learning Pathways for Career Readiness

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Project Based Learning (PBL) is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects. Grounded in the Gold Standard PBL framework from PBLWorks, high-quality projects are designed around seven essential elements: a challenging problem or question, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, and a public product.

For decades, PBL has transformed K–12 classrooms by making learning more relevant, challenging, and engaging. Students who experience PBL not only master academic content but also develop essential success skills—such as collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity—that are vital in today's world.

The next frontier is higher education. Colleges and universities are increasingly exploring how PBL can bridge academic learning to career readiness, giving students opportunities to apply disciplinary knowledge in authentic contexts while preparing them for professional and civic life.

Spotlighting Success: Western Michigan University

In 2024, Western Michigan University (WMU) partnered with PBLWorks to host a Gold Standard PBL Workshop (four days in duration) with faculty from across its seven colleges. The workshop introduced PBL as a model for experience-driven learning. It challenged faculty to embed projects in their courses, offering a clear example of how higher education can adapt and apply this approach.

Experience-driven learning is an instructional approach where students engage in real-world problem-solving with instructors, peers, and community/industry partners to build knowledge and skills that shape professional purpose, while reflecting intentionally on their learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

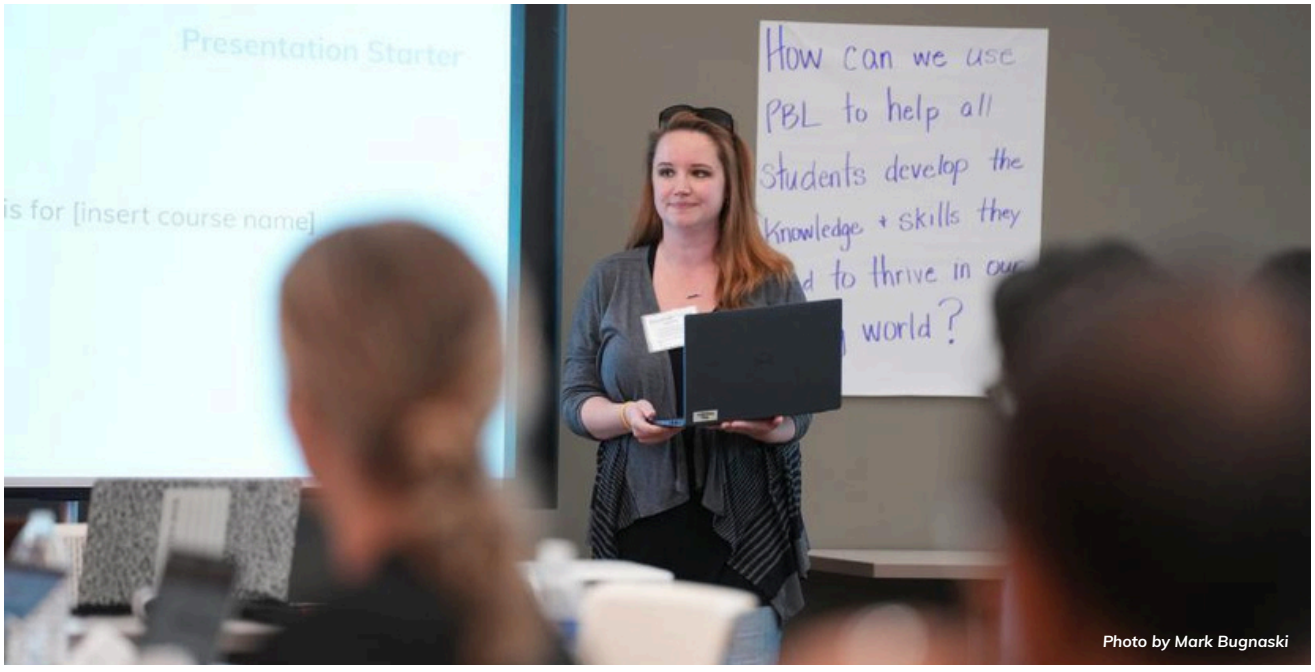


Photo by Mark Bugnaski

During the workshop, faculty designed ready-to-implement projects that ranged from student-led advertising campaigns and oral history projects to cybersecurity ethics, public health initiatives, and marketing energy drinks. They experienced PBL as learners, translated it into their own disciplines, built a cross-campus network for support, and subsequently implemented their projects with students.

Faculty reported:

- High enthusiasm for the model – Experiencing PBL as learners deepened their buy-in
- Concrete instructional changes – Participants incorporated at least one PBL-inspired project, using thinking routines and protocols to structure in-class discussions
- Positive student outcomes – Students were more engaged, produced higher quality work, and connected with professionals and community partners

What We Learned

PBL for Higher Education: The Strengths and Challenges

The WMU pilot highlighted both the promise and the challenges of adapting PBL for higher education:

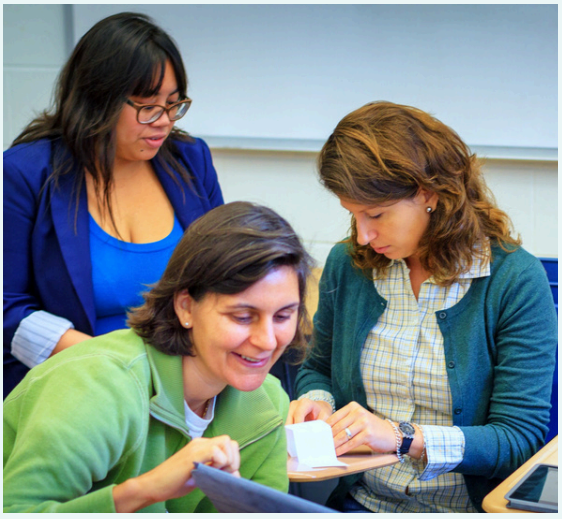
Strengths

- Faculty found PBL applicable across disciplines, from nursing to business to the fine arts
- Students gained hands-on industry-ready experience, applying their learning to authentic challenges while building transferable skills valued and needed in their future professions
- Departmental support and instructional design coaching provided educators with ongoing guidance and tools to advance their practices continually

Challenges

- Faculty desired more higher education-specific examples of PBL as part of the workshop content
- Balancing inquiry with required course content and assessments was complex
- Adapting PBL to large classes, hybrid formats, and early-year undergraduates required additional scaffolding
- Faculty called for ongoing professional learning, peer collaboration, and dedicated time to plan and reflect

WMU News



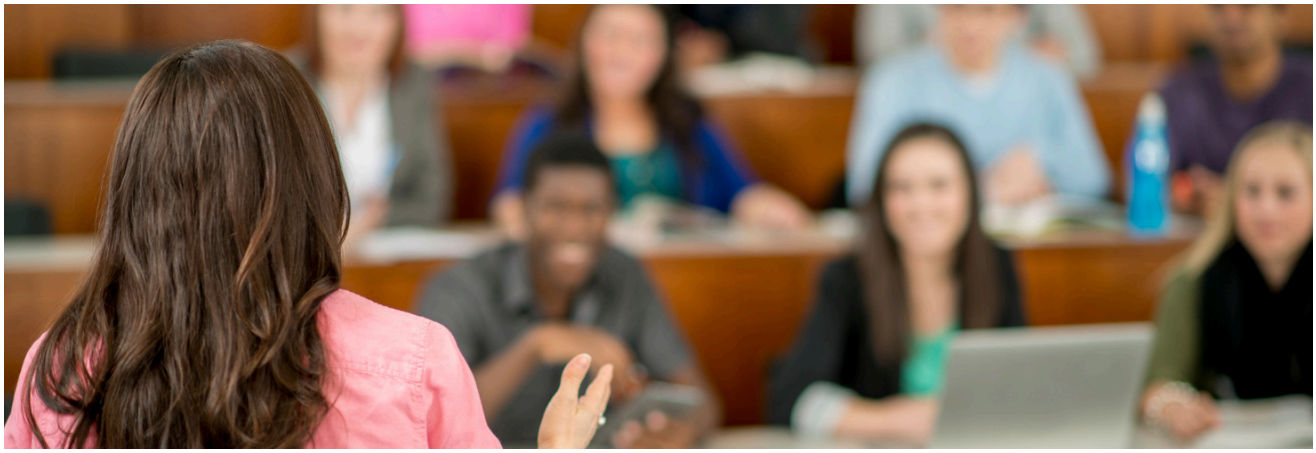
Interdisciplinary faculty cohort works to expand project-based learning at WMU

Read full article here

Opportunities for Higher Education

WMU's experience points to broader opportunities for universities nationwide:

1. **Build a continuous learning pathway** – Aligning PBL from K–12 through higher ed ensures students experience inquiry-driven, authentic learning consistently, preparing them for careers and lifelong learning
2. **Create faculty communities of practice** – Departmental or cross-college groups to share successes and troubleshoot challenges
3. **Support faculty champions** – Investing in instructors who can mentor peers and model PBL on their campuses
4. **Strengthen community partnerships** – Connecting students with local organizations, industries, and civic leaders to make projects authentic
5. **Protect time for planning and reflection** – Recognizing that sustained instructional change requires space for experimentation and recalibration



Workforce and Career Readiness

Project Based Learning extends naturally into higher education, where students expect more than subject-matter knowledge. They want hands-on experience and demonstrable success skills that prepare them for life beyond the classroom. PBL delivers on this promise by connecting academic content to industry contexts, allowing students to apply their learning in authentic ways.

Universities like WMU demonstrate how PBL equips professors with more engaging instructional approaches while providing students opportunities to collaborate across disciplines and engage with real-world problems. Faculty report feeling reinvigorated in their teaching, energized by designing courses that invite inquiry, teamwork, and creativity.

As Dr. Sakif Amin, assistant professor of marketing at WMU, noted:

"Professors from business, engineering, economics, and the arts are all working toward a common goal—preparing students for the professional world. Just lecturing will not equip them for a dynamic, changing future."

For both higher ed and employers, this is the major opportunity: PBL graduates aren't just knowledgeable, they bring evidence of success skills—collaboration, communication, problem-solving, and adaptability—essential for today's dynamic workforce.

Conclusion

Aligned with the future of work—marked by rapid change, evolving career pathways, and a growing need for success skills—PBL strengthens the continuum of learning from early schooling through higher education. It transforms instruction, deepens engagement, and prepares students not only for professional success but also for civic life, ensuring they are ready to thrive in their communities as well as their careers.

About WMU

Western Michigan University is a public research university in Kalamazoo, Michigan, offering a wide range of academic programs at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels. The University is recognized for its learner-centered approach, commitment to academic excellence, and community impact. Supporting this mission, the WMU Instructional Design Team collaborates with faculty, staff, and administrators to design and implement ideas that transform teaching and enhance the student learning experience.

About PBLWorks

The Buck Institute for Education/PBLWorks believes that all students, especially Black and Brown students, should have access to high-quality Project Based Learning to deepen their learning and achieve success in college, career, and life. Its focus is on building the capacity of teachers to design and facilitate high-quality Project Based Learning, and on supporting school and system leaders in creating the conditions for these teachers to succeed with all students.

NOTE: This report draws on findings from
Mergendoller, J. (2025). A Formative Evaluation of the Gold Standard PBL Workshop at Western Michigan University. PBLWorks, Novato, CA.

Join the growing movement of colleges and universities embracing Project Based Learning. Connect with PBLWorks to discover how we can support your higher education faculty in designing authentic, real-world learning experiences for students.

Connect with our team