

# The La Verne Experience: A Common Core for Undergraduate and Graduate Students

By Devorah Lieberman

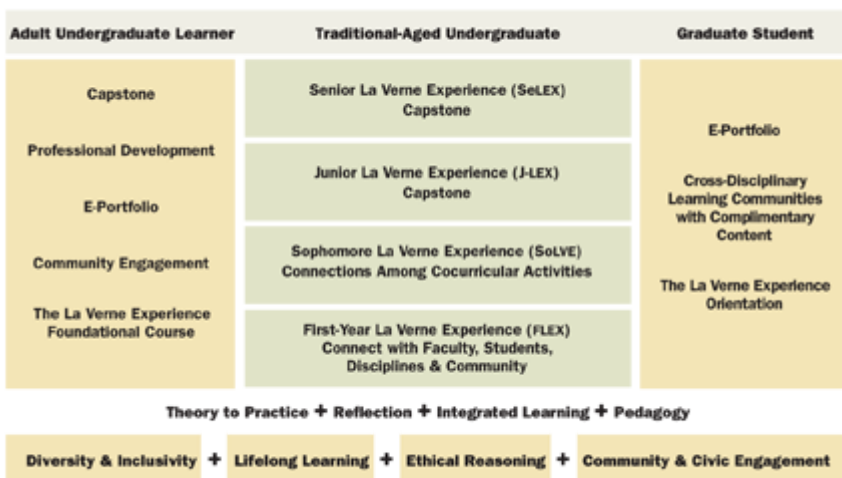
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The lasting sense of connection that a graduate feels for his or her alma mater is often rooted in those especially memorable aspects of the college experience—the times spent bonding with friends and faculty, practicing and playing on athletic teams, collaborating with professors on research, and serving as leaders in student government. Such fond memories may enrich the graduate’s life, both personally and professionally, but do they really reflect the achievement of an institution’s mission? At the University of La Verne, we want to give our students more than “fond” memories. We want to ensure that all receive a high-quality education and are well prepared to meet the needs of twenty-first-century employers. Yet, variables such as campus geography and student demographics can present challenges to meeting these goals.

Spread across eleven campuses and distributed among more than seventy different academic majors, the University of La Verne’s approximately 8,700 students reflect the rich cultural and ethnic diversity of Southern California. Approximately 40 percent of our students are Latino, 9 percent are African American, 6 percent are Asian, and 50 percent are the first in their families to attend college. How, we asked ourselves, can we ensure that all our students benefit from a consistent pedagogical approach? How can we be intentional about incorporating the core elements of our mission into every student’s program? Ultimately, these strategic questions resulted in the La Verne Experience (see fig. 1, page 54). Launched in the fall of 2012, this signature program is the cornerstone of the university’s new long-term strategic vision. For every student, the La Verne Experience integrates the academic curriculum, cocurricular activities, and civic and community engagement with the university’s values and traditions.

Figure 1. The La Verne Experience



Founded in 1891 by the Church of the Brethren, the University of La Verne is a mid-sized comprehensive independent institution offering bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. It comprises four colleges—the College of Arts and Sciences, the College of Business and Public Management, the College of Education and Organizational Leadership, and the College of Law. Though no longer officially affiliated with the church, the university maintains its core values through a mission focused on ethical reasoning, lifelong learning, diversity and inclusivity, and community and civic engagement.

As I interviewed for the La Verne presidency in the fall of 2010, an opportunity emerged to unify all elements of the university and its diverse populations through a signature program grounded in the institution's foundational values. The program would be academically competitive, relevant, and distinctive. Its development would provide an opportunity to galvanize the faculty, the eleven campuses, the 8,600 students, the board of trustees, and the alumni. The timing, I felt, was right.

Shortly after becoming president, I began a discussion with faculty that led to the creation of a steering committee charged with developing the La Verne Experience. The process was facilitated by the provost and a highly regarded faculty member, the LaFetra Family Endowed Chair for Excellence in Teaching and Service Dr. Peggy Redman, who was soon after appointed director of the La Verne Experience. The steering committee was co-chaired by Professor Redman and Professor Gitty Amini of the College of Arts and Sciences, and its members included the deans of all four colleges along with nineteen faculty and staff members spanning La Verne's curricular and cocurricular universe.

Within one year, with the concurrence of the board of trustees and through shared faculty governance, the committee designed and implemented the first phase of the La Verne Experience. It was understood that the design and implementation of subsequent phases of the program would continue until the fall of 2015, when all 8,600 students would be participating in the program. Unsurprisingly, this process required much thought, many meetings, and constant campus communication.

The La Verne Experience is anchored by four pillars: (1) learning communities with courses from different disciplines, (2) integrated learning, (3) community engagement and experiential learning, and (4) reflective practice. The driving purpose is to graduate students who embody the following three overarching areas: exceling in critical thinking, complex problem solving, written and oral communication, collaboration among diverse groups, and application of knowledge and perspective; demonstrating deep knowledge in a particular discipline; and living out the university's core values in their communities. The acquisition of such skills, knowledge, values, and capacities helps prepare students for success, both in their chosen careers and in their roles as civic members of their communities. Naturally, the effective integration of these goals and values throughout the curriculum, cocurriculum, four colleges, and all eleven campuses has been a massive undertaking. Each of the four undergraduate years has a distinctive La Verne Experience program: FLEX (First-Year La Verne Experience), SoLVE (Sophomore La Verne Experience), J-Lex (Junior La Verne Experience), and SeLEX (Senior La Verne Experience).

## A matrix for implementation

To help determine how common elements of the La Verne Experience would be incorporated into each major and degree program, the steering committee created a matrix organized according to the six elements of the La Verne Experience:

- *community and civic engagement*—experiences through which students and community partners work collaboratively to achieve mutually beneficial and lasting change
- *theory to practice*—applying an approach that ensures theoretical concepts learned in the classroom are applied in community- or industry-based settings
- *learning communities*—linking interdisciplinary courses that touch on common themes, along with coordinated active-learning activities that encourage close interaction with student peers and faculty members outside the classroom
- *reflection and communication*—providing opportunities to enhance critical thinking skills while solving problems and exploring issues, learning to think reflectively, and clarifying understanding through written and oral communication
- *integration*—making connections across disciplines or courses, providing multiple perspectives on how to view and resolve challenges
- *cocurricular activities*—participating in all university-related activities that take place outside of regularly scheduled classroom-based courses (e.g., participation in student clubs, organizations, and athletics)

Applying the matrix, faculty members in each academic department identified those elements of the La Verne Experience that already existed in departmental offerings and practices, courses, assignments, and other activities.

It became evident that human and physical infrastructure was needed to support successful outcomes. As a result, the new position of director for civic and community engagement was created, reporting to the director of the La Verne Experience and serving as the nexus among the external community, the internal community, faculty, staff, and students. To introduce community and civic engagement to entering first-year students, the university organized a “community and civic engagement day” during the weekend prior to the beginning of fall term. More than 650 entering students (organized by their learning communities) and faculty members participated in a variety of community-engaged projects throughout Southern California. Students, participating in their particular learning communities, began to connect with peers and faculty prior to the first day of classes.

## Creating paths for all students

While all students benefit from the similar pedagogies associated with the La Verne Experience, the individual student’s path of engagement with the program varies depending on whether he or she is a traditional-aged undergraduate, a nontraditional or returning adult student, or a graduate student. In the fall of 2012, the 650 first-year full-time students began their First-Year La Verne Experience (FLEX). The students selected learning communities from among twenty-two options, each comprising three integrated courses and a total of twelve credit hours. Linked to potential majors, the learning communities were specifically designed to connect subjects taught in different colleges. For example, an economics course was connected with a religion course, a

kinesiology course was connected with a physics course, and a theatre course was connected with an education course. Students in each learning community formed a cohort that studied together throughout their first semester. The third course in each FLEX learning community focuses on writing and oral presentations through which students reflect on course content and community engagement. Every FLEX course is taught by a full-time faculty member, with the goal of increasing opportunities for interaction and connection between faculty and students. The linked reflection course is taught by a writing faculty member.

One of the greatest challenges facing those charged with facilitating the development of the La Verne Experience concerned how best to integrate cocurricular activities. After all, we know that participating in university-sponsored clubs and organizations and attending campus cultural events contribute significantly to student learning. Careful consideration of how to integrate these important dimensions into the La Verne Experience led to the development of the program's second phase, the Sophomore La Verne Experience (SoLVE). To be fully implemented during the 2014–15 academic year, SoLVE is a two-credit course in which students explore the values of the university as contained in the mission and expressed in the cocurriculum. All sophomore students will take a SoLVE course, participate in a wide range of campus activities, and articulate how those activities reflect university values.

During the SoLVE course, each student maintains an e-portfolio, which will serve as a foundation for self-assessment, a tool to enhance academic and career development, and a repository for the student's reflections on how, when, and why he or she demonstrated each of the university's four values: ethical reasoning, lifelong learning, diversity and inclusivity, and community and civic engagement.

The Junior La Verne Experience (J-LEX) brings the connection between courses and community together within the students' majors. An example of this is embedded in the College of Business and Public Management's integrative business curriculum. Students register for a one-semester block of sixteen units that includes marketing, management, finance, and experiential learning. The students apply theory introduced in the classroom by identifying a business opportunity, developing a business plan, presenting the plan to a group of bankers, securing funding, marketing the product or service for the duration of the semester, and donating the profits to a worthy nonprofit organization of their choice. In this one-block module, students are able to connect theory to practice, while also directly engaging with the local community.

When fully implemented, the La Verne Experience will provide opportunities for all students to add materials to their e-portfolios that reflect their learning and the university's core values as demonstrated through activities and community engagement related to their majors, minors, and cocurricular activities. Finally, a senior seminar focused on oral and written reflections will result in the capstone autobiographical essay, "My La Verne Experience."

In addition to making the undergraduate curriculum available to nontraditional and returning adult students who attend part time, La Verne offers seventeen specialized undergraduate majors for those who enroll in intensive courses that are taught in the evenings or on weekends. E-portfolios will provide a foundation for these students as well. Beginning in the fall of 2015, every nontraditional or returning adult undergraduate

student will complete a newly created course in which the e-portfolio template is used to introduce the practices, outcomes, and values of the university. Students will include in their e-portfolios materials that relate to advising services and engagement with community agencies and organizations, that speak to university values, and that demonstrate reflection on their current employment positions and career aspirations. The La Verne Experience ensures that nontraditional and returning adult students will graduate with the same skills and competencies as our traditional-aged undergraduates.

In the fall of 2013, graduate students were introduced to the La Verne Experience as part of their orientation. Each student was provided with a profile of the skill competencies expected of successful candidates for master's and doctoral degrees. The development of the La Verne Experience has encouraged scrutiny of graduate curricula and enabled the identification of commonalities. We believe it is possible to create cross-disciplinary graduate learning communities that will bring together common elements across different branches of learning as well as complementary content.

### **Benefits of the beginning**

Though we are only three years into the conceptualization and implementation of the La Verne Experience, the benefits of the program are already clear and measurable. Rather than concentrating on a major curricular revision and expansion with hosts of new courses and programs, we have instead taken an intense, bold, strategic, and measured examination of what we are now doing in order to find complementarity. Through the use of the matrix to identify common practices and values for each major and degree, we now have a way of sharing explicitly the philosophical and programmatic elements that unite faculty and students as a university community. I believe this is enhancing the strength of the university and its culture, for which the La Verne Experience provides a unifying context.

Though the program has not yet been in place long enough to provide robust, direct correlations with retention data, the early indications are remarkably positive. The freshman fall 2012 to spring 2013 retention rate reached 96 percent, which is higher than past rates. Additionally, the proportion of the undergraduate population that returned in the fall of 2013 (88 percent) was higher than in previous years. In fact, the predicted overall retention rate for returning students (fall 2013 to spring 2014) is approximately 96 percent. Early assessment data from students who participated in FLEX indicate that they report feeling more connected with the university overall. Such an impact is especially critical for the success and retention of underrepresented and first-generation students, many of whom have little familiarity with the college experience. The La Verne Experience increases feelings of inclusion on campus. And through the expansive disciplinary offerings of the learning communities, students are able to develop a closer sense of kinship with fellow students, faculty, and staff.

At the same time, the La Verne Experience provides direction for the future. The tenets of the program will be useful for orienting new faculty, particularly graduate adjunct professors drawn from business, industry, government, and civic organizations. The elements of the La Verne Experience will also undergird ongoing professional development for faculty, helping further ignite their passions for teaching, scholarship, and community engagement.

The benefits of the increased interdisciplinary activity across La Verne's eleven campuses will help us achieve one of our 2020 strategic goals: enhancing educational excellence through enriching the university's comprehensive and relevant curriculum and cocurriculum. By taking on the La Verne Experience and bringing it to fruition with little external financial support, we have demonstrated that this signature program will be able to sustain itself for years to come. Moreover, the willingness of students, faculty, and administrators to collaborate fully and undertake an initiative of this magnitude so successfully, and in such a short time, demonstrates that institutional transformation is not necessarily limited by financial resources. Rather, it thrives on the energy, imagination, and dedication of the people behind it.

The magic of the La Verne Experience is that it builds on the strength of what has existed at the university for 123 years. When the first graduates who participated in the coordinated La Verne Experience program—whether traditional-aged undergraduates, nontraditional or returning adult students, or graduate students—walk across the stage to receive their degrees, they will become alumni who, similar to alumni long before them, are strategically and intentionally bound together not only by a college experience, but by something greater than themselves: common core values, knowledge, skills, and capabilities that prepare them to be highly successful professionals, citizens, and community members.

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