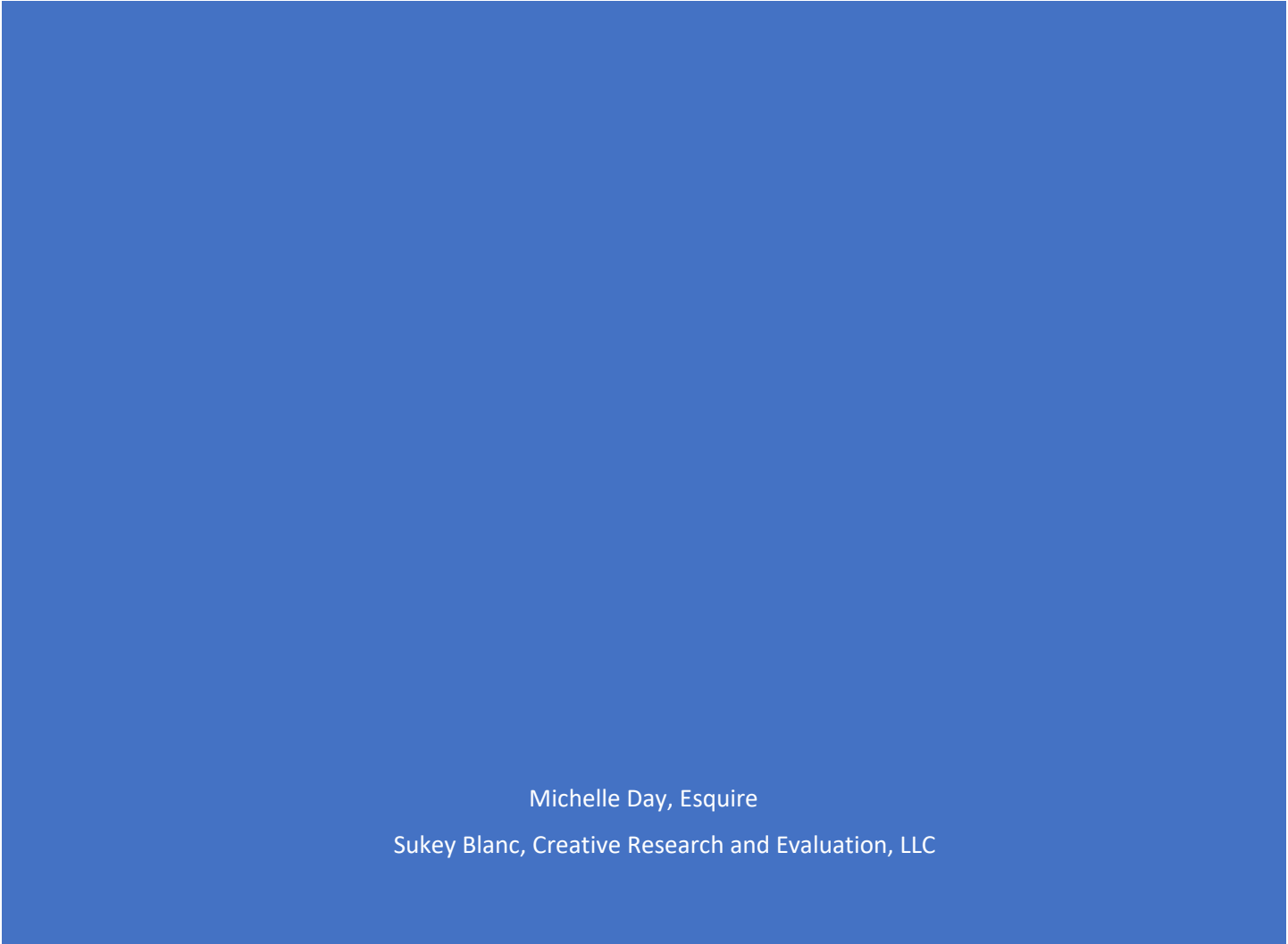




THE PENN EXPERIENCE:
EXTERNAL EVALUATION
2021-2022



Michelle Day, Esquire
Sukey Blanc, Creative Research and Evaluation, LLC

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BACKGROUND

In this overview, the external evaluators are pleased to share an analysis of our work with the online course, “The Penn Experience: Racism, Reconciliation, and Engagement.”

In a proposal submitted to the University of Pennsylvania’s Excellence through Diversity Program in April 2022, the course was described in the following way:

...[It] was developed through a partnership between the School of Social Policy & Practice and the School of Dental Medicine. In 2021, Carey Law School, Graduate School of Education, Master of Public Health Program, the Weitzman School of Design, and the School of Veterinary Medicine joined the partnership.

Designed as a non-credit asynchronous online course, the Penn Experience aims to establish common language and concepts for incoming graduate professional students to facilitate conversations about race, racism and difference in the classroom and beyond. Using video interviews, presentations, short readings and podcasts, the course highlights the significance of Penn’s and Philadelphia’s history of racism, Penn’s evolving relationship to West Philadelphia, and Penn’s efforts toward greater engagement and inclusion. Modules also focus on harm, healing and transformative justice; different forms of oppression; gender identity; equity and access to healthcare; and social determinants of health. One module designed primarily for white students addresses the antiracist work that must be done to dismantle white privilege and white supremacy while another module addresses racial literacy and racial stress for students of color.

In the fall of 2021, Dr. Amy Hillier (School of Social Policy & Practice) and Dr. Beverly Crawford (School of Dental Medicine), who had jointly spearheaded the development of the Penn Experience sought input from an external evaluator to complement their internal evaluation. Student surveys completed for the first iteration of the course, as well as other input from students, had been very positive overall. Online surveys administered to all students were to be continued in the second year of the program. The goal for the external evaluation was to provide a set of skilled, outside eyes to review the survey data and to conduct interviews and focus groups to provide another view on the successes, challenges, and opportunities for this program.

Sukey Blanc, Ph.D. of Creative Research and Evaluation LLC and Michelle Day, Esquire, were selected to fulfill this role. Together, Michelle and Sukey brought many decades of experience with evaluating and implementing education programs designed to enhance equity and inclusion.

OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

The objectives of this work were to identify the strengths and areas of opportunity regarding the second, expanded iteration of the Penn Experience course by analyzing the trends and feedback received and to make recommendations designed to augment the success of future offerings of the course.

METHODOLOGY

The data collection and analysis were conducted in two primary phases, with preliminary feedback provided after the first phase.

In the first phase, the external evaluators conducted the following activities:

- An in-depth review of the course itself was made by reviewing the online course materials and resources. Materials from the original Penn Experience reviewed in the fall of 2021. (The materials from the revised curriculum developed by the Master of Public Health Program were reviewed later).
- Review of 436 surveys conducted after students completed the first two course modules of the Penn Experience. These included students from the School of Social Practice and Policy, the School of Dental Medicine, The Weisman School of Design, the Public Health Program, and the School of Veterinary Medicine. The survey was created by the course developers and disseminated by the participating schools. The external evaluators reviewed and analyzed the surveys to identify broad themes, as well as similarities and differences across schools.
- Interviews with selected faculty and staff, including graduate assistants, were conducted and feedback during the fall early winter of 2021. A total of six faculty members and graduate assistants from four schools participated.

Following the first phase, the evaluators provided preliminary findings and feedback to the course developers.

In the second phase, during the early spring of 2022, student focus groups and individual student interviews were conducted. All participants in the course were invited to participate in interviews or focus groups. Approximately 40 responded to fliers shared by their departments or schools. 17 students, representing the School of Social Policy and Practice, the Dental School,

and the Masters of Public Health Program were actually able to participate, with the 13 being from the School of Social Policy and Practice.

FINDINGS: PHASE ONE

Findings from student surveys:

- **Overall students were satisfied with the course.** Based on surveys about the first two modules, students value the history. It helps them understand where Penn stands in relation to the West Philly community. Scientific racism is new and surprising for many.
- **A smaller group of students feels like Penn is self-promoting** and in denial about its current oppressive practice.
- **Students work through materials (videos, text, maps, etc.) in different ways.**
- **Students need additional clarity about course expectations and requirements** in order to plan ahead and integrate the work for this course into their schedules.

Findings from faculty and grad assistant interviews:

- **This course is an important starting point for student awareness.** It gives students needed information about Penn's history and systems of oppression and marginalization.
- **Most interviewees think there is a gap between messages of the course and the rest of the curriculum in their programs and schools.**

FINDINGS PHASE TWO

- **All findings identified above were supported by data collected through student interviews and focus groups.**
- Student interviews and focus groups identified additional strengths of the course.
 - **Participants noted that they valued what they learned about microaggressions,** especially how to talk to people and avoid microaggressions.
 - **Students provided many examples of how the course helped with specific aspects of their experience in and out of Penn.** For example, understanding the history of different Philadelphia communities provided background for asking clients about their experiences; learning about redlining was helpful for people

who worked in policy; and being sensitized to micro-aggressions encouraged students to be more open to the power dynamics in a “helper” role.

- **The online, asynchronous nature of this worked well for some students**, while others desire additional face-to-face interactions and discussion.
- Student interviews and focus groups also identified additional challenges.
 - **Three students mentioned that they or their friends felt that the course and/or modules were an imposition on LGBTQ or Black students.** (One person mentioned that the unit on LGBTQ issues should be optional for people who lived through this. One African American student and one African student thought the whole course should be optional. They mentioned thinking at first that that this was for white students who had to deal with their own guilt. Once into the course, these students thought it was very useful, but thought buy-in from Black students would be better if it was voluntary.
 - **A need to explore the experiences of students who share the same skin color but not the same experiences of discrimination and/or historic trauma of slavery and racism was identified by the African student.**
 - **A focus group for international students (all of whom were Chinese) identified specific issues** such as how to make the content more accessible for non-native English speakers, how to make the content more relevant for international students, and the importance of connecting US racism with racism/racist policies in China. Findings from this focus group were shared early and have already been integrated into planning for the next iterations of the modules.
 - Students also thought that their **peers who needed the course the most also needed an incentive to complete it**, and **some students would like the course to provide more specific connection to their individual interests and goals.**

EVALUATION FEEDBACK AND PROGRAMMATIC CHANGES

Course developers and course directors have moved expeditiously on recommendations shared by external evaluators in January 2022. Course developers have embraced the possibility for impacting the university and its diverse professional schools through building connections between the content of the Penn Experience course and the existing curricula in participating graduate schools. In addition to administrative modifications such as linking the Penn Experience to required courses, the directors are working to create deepen connections by increasing the investment of more graduate school faculty members in the course.

One important change is a decision by the School of Social Policy & Practice to make completion of the Penn Experience one of the requirements for the practicum required for all MSW students. The MSW students are the largest single group of students enrolled in Penn Experience. This change signals that the content of the Penn Experience is not considered as something outside of the regular curriculum. It also provides an incentive for students to engage with the content of the Penn Experience, and it potentially provides students with additional avenues for connecting the materials to their individual interests and professional skills.

Another avenue for integrating the content and engaging faculty is a proposal that would provide funding to teams of students, faculty, and staff in each participating school to develop new content for the course.

Other changes to the planned roll out of Penn Experience 3.0 include the following:

- Streamlining the modules to be completed in a shorter time. This will enable more programs to require students to complete the full course over the summer. Resources that are omitted from the required sections will still be part of the curriculum so interested students can dig more deeply into specific topics.
- The creation of a new module for faculty/instructors with the goal of helping faculty/instructors develop their pedagogical skills and build capacity to review their syllabi and incorporate Penn Experience content into their courses.
- The creation of module(s) specifically geared to the needs of international students.
- Requiring each participating school and program to have an on-the-ground contact person who is responsible for ongoing communication with students in that school.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The external evaluation team is pleased that we have been able to contribute to the evolution and deepening of this significant initiative. As the external evaluation moves towards its end, the evaluation team looks forward to a final conversation with the leaders of the Penn Experience.