JSAIII

Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact | Volume 9, Issue 1
Special Issue Series: Career Preparation and Outcomes

Early Career Development Through Micro Work-Integrated Learning Experiences

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Abstract: Employers expect post-secondary students and recent graduates to be increasingly career ready, even for their first internships. To support career readiness, institutions are developing innovative Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programs. Our study showed that a one-week structured career development experience entitled Micro-ExP yielded positive results for participants. This program provided valuable insights into the efficacy of WIL programs for post-secondary students with no or limited prior work experience. The findings highlight the positive impact of students' participation in a WIL program, irrespective of their field of study, on their skills development, job search confidence, and career readiness.

Keywords: Innovative Work-Integrated Learning, NACE Career Readiness skills, Career confidence, Career development

Employers seek career-ready graduates with academic knowledge, experience, and a blend of technical and soft skills to ensure a seamless transition into the workplace (Giammarco et al., 2020). The Future Is Social and Emotional: Evolving Skills Needs in the 21st Century emphasizes that employers are increasingly prioritizing social and emotional skills alongside technical expertise (Giammarco et al., 2020). The report highlights that competencies such as resilience, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication are among the most valuable for current and future work environments.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)'s Career Readiness Competencies Framework describes a set of eight core competencies that employers seek in new college graduates. According to the NACE's Job Outlook 2024 survey (2023), nearly 90% of employers are looking for evidence of problem-solving abilities, and almost 80% prioritize strong teamwork skills in potential candidates (Gray & Koncz, 2024). For career services professionals, the NACE Career Readiness Competencies framework

continues to be a vital tool for assessing the impact of career development initiatives, including Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). They also serve as a benchmark for both educators and employers, ensuring that students develop essential skills needed to thrive in professional environments. Integrating NACE competencies into experiential learning models helps institutions bridge the gap between academic preparation and career expectations. WIL plays a critical role in equipping students with the comprehensive skill set demanded by today's employers. By combining academic knowledge with hands-on, real-world experience, WIL fosters the development of technical expertise, practical application, and essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Employers increasingly value WIL experiences that align with these competencies, recognizing them as indicators of workforce readiness (NACE, n.d.).

WIL is a vital component of the Canadian post-secondary educational system, providing students with hands-on, real-world experiences that complement their academic learning. Understanding the Canadian WIL landscape becomes essential to developing inclusive and accessible experiential learning opportunities. Traditional WIL experiences involve collaborations between educational institutions, employers (industry or community partners), and students, often embedded within course or program curricula. However, funding and subsidies for WIL opportunities are generally limited to Canadian citizens and permanent residents, creating barriers for students who do not meet these requirements. International students also face inequalities in accessing work-based WIL opportunities, often encountering greater challenges in securing placements compared to their domestic peers (Gribble & McRae, 2017).

In Quebec, where French is the primary language, international students seeking work experience in a new country must navigate cultural differences and, for some, additional language barriers. While WIL programs can help international students gain insights into Canadian workplace culture and build professional networks, there is limited provincial data on their effectiveness from Quebec. Much of the existing research on WIL benefits focuses on co-op programs, leaving gaps in understanding how other WIL models, including micro-WIL, address accessibility challenges in the Quebec context.

While students in traditional WIL opportunities have significantly more hours of experience (anywhere from 150 to 400 or more) during which they can develop career readiness and technical skills (Gribble & McRae, 2017), our study has shown that a carefully constructed short program can also offer tangible career development benefits to post-secondary students.

Addressing Barriers to WIL

It is important to note that there is no one-size-fits-all model for WIL, as each student's needs, circumstances, and career goals are unique. Common barriers to equitable access persist, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches to different student cohorts. Barriers to accessing WIL also include limited professional networks, financial constraints, systemic inequities, and a lack of prior experience, disproportionately impacting historically underrepresented groups (Malatest & Associates, 2018). Expanding diverse WIL practices across educational institutions is a strategy used to ensure the continuity of experiential

learning during challenging times that can limit access to traditional WIL opportunities (Business + Higher Education Roundtable, 2020; Jackson et al., 2023). Multiple approaches to WIL provide institutions with flexible alternatives during periods of change and disruption, such as a pandemic (Dean & Campbell, 2020; Zegwaard et al., 2020). These adaptable models ensure continued access to experiential learning opportunities, enabling institutions to maintain career development and student engagement despite evolving challenges.

Established WIL models (e.g., internships, entrepreneurship programs, project-based learning, apprenticeships, and cooperative education programs) are also in high demand as institutions build these more frequently into the curriculum, yet the number of experiences and hosts required are not keeping pace (CEWIL Canada, 2024). Jackson et al. (2023) examine participation and outcomes for diverse student groups in WIL programs. While not specifically addressing the issue of limited placements in mandatory WIL components at Canadian universities, the article highlights how certain student demographics may face barriers to participation, which can be exacerbated by the limited availability of placements. The C.D. Howe Institute's report "From Class to Career: How Work Integrated Learning Benefits Graduates Looking for Jobs" (Wyonch & Seward, 2023) notes that while WIL participation is mandatory for many post-secondary programs, the growth in WIL opportunities has not kept pace with increasing student demand leading to a shortfall in available placements. Notably, financial concerns were a major challenge for 24% of university WIL students as published in a recent report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (2023).

Additionally, the requirement for long-term, full-time commitment, especially for unpaid WIL in social, educational, and health sectors, is challenging for students who cannot afford to step away from paid work or are balancing academic and personal responsibilities (Mackaway et al., 2023). These disparities underscore the need for innovative approaches to expand WIL offerings and ensure equitable student access. As a result, higher education practitioners are increasingly adapting opportunities in innovative ways to make them more accessible to a broader range of students (Kay et al., 2019).

The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges, making it even more difficult for students to secure meaningful first-work opportunities to develop skills and gain experience and career confidence. By disrupting how we work and making it hard for people to interact, the pandemic interrupted many established traditional WIL programs, straining an already short supply of student work opportunities. This was particularly true for those not meeting the eligibility requirements for traditional WIL programs (Zegwaard et al., 2020). To address this gap, McGill University, which offers very few structured co-op programs and internships, developed innovative WIL by introducing Micro Work-Integrated Learning (micro-WIL) experiences. Micro-WIL refers to short-term, flexible forms of WIL, such as applied research projects and field studies programs, that are typically less than a full academic semester (e.g., shorter than about four months; Business + Higher Education Roundtable, 2024; CEWIL Canada, 2024). By creating micro-WIL experiences, McGill was able to provide more flexible, accessible, and scalable opportunities for students, particularly targeting those with no previous work experience or seeking their first

professional experience. Micro-WIL opportunities were designed for early-year undergraduate students, regardless of residency status, ensuring equitable access to experiential learning. This paper outlines the Micro-ExP program approach and findings to support practitioners wanting to implement innovative and impactful WIL programs for post-secondary students.

Micro-ExP at McGill University

McGill University is a publicly funded, research-intensive university serving over 39,000 undergraduate and graduate students from over 150 countries. The composition of the student population includes a wide range of backgrounds and identities, such as 2SLGBTQ+, students with disabilities, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), international, Canadian, U.S, and Quebec students, first-generation, mature students, religious and cultural groups. McGill is an environment that values learning, enrichment, and achievement with and for the benefit of a diverse community of students (McGill University, n.d.). Within the McGill University context, the Micro-ExP program tackled traditional employment barriers by prioritizing equitable access for students with limited work experience and addressing the skills gap among early-year students (Fletcher et al., 2021). Over a three-year period, more than 600 students, the majority with no prior work experience, participated in a weeklong co-curricular career readiness program, which included onboarding, training, access to an online learning community, participation in an experiential project/placement, and reflection activities. The program's flexible structure, short duration, and focus on accessibility made it possible for a diverse group of McGill students, including those from historically underrepresented backgrounds, to engage in valuable early career opportunities.

By actively recruiting students early in their academic journey, especially those without prior work experience, the program ensured that participants who might otherwise be overlooked by traditional opportunities could develop essential professional skills. Micro-ExP also focused on recruiting students from all backgrounds, addressing barriers faced by historically underrepresented groups, and supporting a more equitable transition into the workforce (Malatest & Associates, 2018). To ensure that Micro-ExP reached the students who would benefit the most, recruitment efforts were designed to prioritize those with limited or no prior work experience. The communication/recruitment strategy was built around a website created to inform students and employers about the program and serve as the main access point. A multi-pronged recruitment strategy for early-year undergraduate students was conducted through multiple channels, including: live, virtual info sessions; recordings available on the program site to help set expectations for the program (time commitment required, etc.); cross-promotions with university and faculty partners; targeted mass email campaigns for first- and second-year students with featured testimonials; promotion in the university's career management system; and social media campaigns. Students signed up for the program through an easy-to-navigate online form, where they indicated their areas of interest and availability. The program was open to all students, regardless of residency status or prior work experience, which ensured that those who may not typically meet the eligibility criteria for traditional co-op or internship opportunities were not overlooked. Selection criteria prioritized students based on interest,

early-year academic standing, and a lack of prior professional work experience. This targeted approach enabled a wider and more diverse group of students to benefit. In our first 4 cohorts, 50% of participants were from underrepresented groups.

To increase accessibility, the program was designed as an unpaid short-term experience—lasting just one week—allowing students with varied commitments to participate without the long-term demands of traditional internships. The program ran during academic breaks, such as the Winter Study Break and after the winter semester, to avoid conflicts with academic demands. To further remove participation barriers, the program incorporated remote work opportunities and a variety of experiences untied to specific locations, ensuring students outside major employment hubs could still engage. Additionally, there were no program fees or costs for students. The timing and length of the program ensured that international students were eligible to participate without the need for co-op work permits. Participants who completed the program received recognition on McGill's Co-Curricular Record, further enhancing their employability.

The Micro-ExP Program Overview

The Micro-ExP program was launched in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it harder for students to find meaningful early work experiences. The program began in winter 2022, and as of fall 2024, six cohorts participated. These opportunities allowed students to work on a project or in a placement, providing concrete experience with an expected set of deliverables or tasks that "real" professionals complete using their transferable skills. The Micro-ExP program offered students the following 3 types of practical WIL opportunities: micro-project (virtual), micro-placement (hybrid), and micro-course (virtual). All of the options followed the same sequence of instructions outlined in Table 1.

Micro-Project (Virtual)

Micro-projects provided students with short-term virtual projects hosted by employers. Each student completed a maximum of 12 hours of project work. Depending on project deliverables projects were assigned to an individual or a team of students.

Micro-Placement (Hybrid)

Micro-placements, either partially or fully on site, provided students with valuable in-person exposure to real workplace environments. Each placement allowed students to observe and assist with daily tasks or complete project work tailored to the employer's needs, with a commitment of up to 15 hours per student.

Micro-project and micro-placement opportunities were provided by 98 distinct organizations, across a wide variety of industries, such as not-for-profit, digital marketing, data analytics, human resources, communications, information technology, research and web design.

All three experiences helped students put their learning into practice through hands-on tasks or assignments, which were key to ensuring a meaningful learning experience. Through program components like standardized in-person and online training, tools,

Table 1. *Micro-EXP Program Schedule*

Day	Activity	Description
1	Onboarding Session	Introduction to the program, setting expectations, responsibilities, and success tips (e.g., effective communication skills). Access provided to the e-learning course, "Preparing for Your Internship."
2	Micro-ExP and Your CV Workshop	Workshop on enhancing CVs to reflect professional development experiences, including how to highlight micro-projects, courses, placements, and relevant skills gained during the program.
3	LinkedIn Profile Workshop	Workshop on building a compelling LinkedIn profile, showcasing skills, and integrating the WIL experience effectively to create a unique professional brand.
4	Project/Placement /Course Work	Students work on their project, course, or placement applying their skills in a professional setting, supported by access to supervisor support, digital tools, resources, and a virtual learning community for peer interaction.
5	Wrap-Up & Reflection Session	Reflection activities were facilitated to guide students to share their experiences with one another and practice articulating what they gained. Students were coached to consider their experience through the lens of NACE career readiness competencies. Finally key actions to help pave a path towards new jobs and internships were discussed (e.g., securing LinkedIn endorsements, supervisor references, etc.).

resources, and guided reflection activities, the program helped students internalize their learning throughout the week.

Micro-Course (Virtual)

This option gave students access to online (LinkedIn Learning) courses, taught by industry experts, related to the employability skills they were interested in building. The course offerings included project management, digital marketing, written workplace communication, Excel data analysis, and Python coding. Unlike some placements and projects, courses were completed independently. However, private channels allowed learners and program coordinators to deepen their understanding and engagement with the content through group discussion. The micro-course option was dropped from the program after the first offering due to funding constraints.

Integrating NACE Career Readiness Competencies

The Micro-ExP program allowed students to develop essential skills in a structured, targeted manner, making them more competitive candidates for future internships or employment. Employers also used Micro-ExP to help students gain and refine NACE career competencies, ensuring a pipeline of well-prepared students who are better prepared to

meet industry needs. These short-term, flexible WIL opportunities allow students to engage in real-world projects that enhance their skills and confidence. According to a study by Parker Dewey, 96% of students who participated in Micro-Internships reported improvement in at least one career competency, with nearly 90% indicating improvement in three or more competencies (Parker Dewey, 2025). These short-term, flexible WIL opportunities let students work on real-world projects, boosting their skills and confidence. To effectively prepare students for the workforce, the Micro-ExP framework is aligned with the eight NACE Career Readiness Competencies.

Students say these experiences help them develop important skills like communication, professionalism, and critical thinking. For example, project tasks require them to present findings, write reports, and communicate professionally, which improves their communication skills. Problem-solving exercises and real-world challenges enhance their critical thinking abilities (Parker Dewey, 2025). This research utilizes the NACE Career Readiness Competencies as a structured framework to assess and develop essential skill competencies within the Micro-ExP program. By evaluating the impact of these experiences, the study aims to determine how they have influenced students' career readiness and their perceptions of improvement in key areas of career development. The NACE Career Readiness competencies developed through Micro-ExP include career & self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity & inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology.

Career & Self-Development

Micro-ExP activities encouraged students to explore careers by working on industry-relevant projects, reflecting on their professional growth, and setting career goals. For example, a student works on a marketing project for a local business, identifying target audiences and creating a campaign. They reflect on their strengths and areas for improvement and set goals to enhance their marketing skills.

Communication

Effective workplace communication was developed through project-based tasks, requiring students to present findings, draft reports, engage in professional email correspondence, and participate in virtual or in-person meetings. These experiences helped students refine their verbal, written, and digital communication skills essential for professional success. Example: A student presents their recruitment strategy to attract French/English bilingual candidates at a team meeting to discuss project progress and writes a detailed report.

Critical Thinking

Micro-ExP initiatives incorporated problem-solving exercises, case studies, and real-world industry challenges that required students to analyze information, evaluate possible solutions, and make decisions. These experiences developed students' ability to approach complex problems with strategic thinking. For example, a student is given a real-world problem, such as determining whether needs-based funding is available to support all First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities and organizations with literacy and essential skills. They analyze data, evaluate different solutions, and decide on the most effective strategy to implement.

Equity & Inclusion

Projects may focus on inclusive workplace practices, cross-cultural collaboration, and exposure to diverse work environments, ensuring all students can participate. For example, a student collaborates with peers from diverse backgrounds on a project to improve website accessibility. They ensure that all voices are heard and considered in the final design, incorporating feedback from users with different abilities and backgrounds to create an inclusive and user-friendly website.

Leadership

Students gained leadership experience through self-directed projects, decision-making responsibilities, and opportunities to lead small teams or initiatives. Example: A student leads a small team in creating LinkedIn content, delegating tasks, setting deadlines, and motivating the team to achieve their goals.

Professionalism

Workplace readiness is reinforced through structured deadlines, feedback sessions, and performance expectations. Micro-ExP provides students with opportunities to demonstrate reliability, work ethic, and adaptability—all critical components of professionalism. For example, a student consistently meets project deadlines, engages in regular feedback sessions with their supervisor, and adapts to changes in project scope, showcasing their reliability and strong work ethic.

Teamwork

Collaboration was central to the Micro-ExP framework, where students worked in teams with peers, mentors, or industry professionals. Experiences included joint problem-solving tasks, cross-functional team projects, or collaborative presentations, enhancing students' ability to work effectively with others. Example: A student works with a team to organize a community event, coordinating logistics, managing budgets, and ensuring effective communication among team members.

Technology

Micro-ExP experiences incorporated digital tools, industry-specific software, and remote collaboration platforms to ensure that students gained technological fluency. By working with real-world applications and emerging technologies, students developed skills that align with employer expectations. Example: A student uses industry-standard software (WIX) to design a prototype for a new product, gaining hands-on experience with the tools and technologies used in their field.

Integrating Community of Inquiry (COI)

To further enhance the impact of these experiences, the Micro-ExP program was designed using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 1999; Swan et al., 2009), which emphasizes engagement, learning, and reflection in both online and in-person settings. The shift to remote and blended learning environments, driven by the 2020 pandemic, necessitated innovative approaches to maintain student engagement and build a sense of community. By integrating cognitive, social, and teaching presence, the CoI framework reinforced the program's experiential nature, ensuring students actively

participated, collaborated, and reflected on their experiences (Briant & Crowther, 2020). This structured, interactive approach was designed to help students gain insights into workplace dynamics and strengthen their self-awareness and career readiness, bridging the gap between academic learning and professional success.

Cognitive presence was emphasized through workshops where students reflected on their skills, articulated experiences, and learned to present themselves effectively to potential employers. Teaching presence was established through deliberate design, facilitation, and direction of learning activities to ensure meaningful educational outcomes. Starting with a comprehensive onboarding session on Day 1, students received clear guidance on communication and professional behavior, which was reinforced by the “Preparing for Your Internship” e-learning course.

Social presence became the cornerstone of the Micro-ExP program's design, essential for fostering a collaborative and engaging learning environment within its largely asynchronous format. By emphasizing social interaction and community-building, Microsoft Teams served as the central collaboration tool, offering virtual spaces that encouraged students to connect, communicate, and actively participate, enhancing the WIL experience regardless of the format. Dedicated channels like "Introduce Yourself," "Question of the Day," and "Networking Lounge" allowed participants to interact asynchronously, discuss career topics, and access shared resources, such as recordings of workshops. This supported our goal of creating a sense of belonging and engagement within the program and the cohort.

Facilitators also played a crucial role throughout the program, guiding students’ career and self-development while supporting their networking and employability skills. Workshops, onboarding sessions, and wrap-ups provided students with practical tips for their careers, encouraging them to seek references, career conversations, and endorsements on LinkedIn, equipping them with valuable connections and experiences for their resumes and interviews.

Methodology

This paper focuses on Micro-ExP participant self-reported survey data from Spring 2022, 2023, and 2024. During the Spring 2022 semester, most instruction at McGill University took place online (synchronous and/or asynchronous) due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the institution also offered some hybrid (a mix of online and in-person instruction) and in-person courses.

Participants

McGill undergraduate and first and second-year graduate students with no prior work experience were eligible to participate in the Micro-ExP program. Across all three years, a total of 849 students registered for the program, and 707 finished the program, with 47% of completers having participated in the survey. The participants were primarily undergraduate students with a few early-year graduate students. The majority of student participants aligned with the program goals, with 62% first-year, 27% second-year, and 6% third-year students. We recruited students from diverse backgrounds to address some of

the barriers that historically disadvantaged groups face in building career skills, including international students who are not eligible for traditionally funded WIL opportunities. While we did not specifically target historically underserved groups, we encouraged broad engagement, including among international students (49% in 2022). A substantial proportion of participants identified with equity-deserving groups: 54% racialized (compared to 38% undergraduate student body), 29% 2SLGBTQ+ (compared to 20% undergraduate student body), 20% first-generation (compared to 14% undergraduate student body), and 9% Black (compared to 4.4% undergraduate student body (comparisons to the undergraduate student body are from the McGill University Biennial Results of the Student Census 2023).

Each year, following completion of the program, the Assessment and Evaluation Team distributed survey invitations using Qualtrics software to each eligible student (n = 707) who participated in the program. As seen in Table 2, in the 2022 cohort 138 students responded in the course, yielding a 56% response rate, while 63 responded in the micro-placement/project streams, resulting in a 43% rate. For the 2023 and 2024 cohorts, responses for the micro-placement/project streams were 101 and 33, with 60% and 43% response rates, respectively. The survey respondents are representative of Micro-ExP program participants.

Study Measures

To assess the impact of Micro-ExP participation on enhancing participants' professional knowledge, skills, and experience, students completed online surveys following the completion of the program. The surveys included questions about students' motivation for participating, the NACE Career Readiness competencies and industry-relevant skills that students developed, the competencies they were interested in further developing, the impact of participation on self-efficacy and networking, long-term career reflection, and overall program experience. This paper presents findings exclusively from participant self-report scales, using quantitative methods with multiple-choice and Likert scale questions. The scales used for study measures are reported in Table 3.

Table 2. *Total Number of Respondents and Response Rates*

Program	Registered in program (*n*)	Completed program (*n*)	Completed survey (*n*)	Response rate
Micro-Course, 2022	429	327	138	56%
Micro-project/Micro-placement, 2022	164	147	63	43%
Micro-project/Micro-placement, 2023	177	169	101	60%
Micro-project/Micro-placement 2024	79	64	33	43%
Total	849	707	335	

Table 3. *Study Measures*

Survey question	Scale
Which of the following skills did you develop by participating in the Micro-ExP?	Select all that apply from 11 NACE Career Readiness and industry-relevant skills listed: Career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, teamwork, professionalism, technology, decision-making and problem-solving, ability to communicate my experience in a CV and job interview, openness to experience. Students complete the CSES before class begins.
Which of the following skills are you interested in further developing?	Select all that apply from 11 NACE Career Readiness and industry-relevant skills listed: Career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, teamwork, professionalism, technology, decision-making and problem-solving, ability to communicate my experience in a CV and job interview, openness to experience.
What are the top three expectations that were met through your Micro-ExP experience?	Select top three from 11 options listed: Gained job specific knowledge/skill, Explored potential career interests, Identified the skills I need to be effective in the workplace, Gained relevant experience, Opportunity to network with/gain references from employers, Developed career skills (e.g., teamwork, communication, critical thinking), Gained a better understanding of social norms and culture of the industry of the Micro-course/project/placement, Learned how to translate my experience to CV and interview, I know what a "day in the life" is like in the work environment, I understand the education and skills related to this particular profession, I feel that my placement experience is preparing me for this field.
Confidence as measured by: I gained skills I can use in a future job or internship. I learned strategies to clarify my career interests. I feel better prepared to look for a job.	Five-point response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
Career planning/ Career reflection and goal setting/ Career planning and goal setting as measured by: Micro-Exp helped think about long-term career goals	Five-point response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Survey question	Scale
Overall experience as measured by: How would you rate Micro-ExP? How likely is it that you would recommend Micro-ExP to a friend?	Five-point response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Four-point response scale ranging from 1 (definitely not) to 4 (definitely yes).
Do you feel you are more knowledgeable about the Micro-course/project/placement you worked on?	Four-point response scale ranging from 1(not at all) to 4 (very knowledgeable).
Do you feel you are more familiar with the Micro-ExP industry you participated in?	Four-point response scale ranging from 1(not at all familiar) to 4 (very familiar).

Findings

Upon completing the program, students were asked to reflect on the impact of the three streams of Micro-ExP experience (micro-course, micro-placement, and micro-project) on their career readiness, as outlined by NACE competencies and industry-relevant skills. Sections below share students' self-reported perceptions of how Micro-ExP participation helped them improve in key areas of career development, the skills they are interested in further developing, career confidence, and reflection, and overall program experience.

Skills Developed and Interest in Further Developing Skills

As demonstrated in Table 4, for students aiming to develop competencies in openness to experience, career and self-development, communication in a professional setting, critical thinking, professionalism, and technology, Micro-ExP was effective in developing perceived proficiency by over 50% in these career skills. Students' engagement with workplaces through hands-on tasks, team collaboration, and client interactions may provide an environment where skills essential for future career success are developed. Our findings also show program participants are most interested in further developing Leadership (76%), career and self-development (75%), technology (74%), communication in a professional setting (72%), openness to experience (72%), and critical thinking (70%).

Confidence and Future Career Reflection

As shown in Table 5, program participation increased students' job search confidence, preparedness, and reflection on future career goals. Our findings show strong positive outcomes, with agreement levels ranging from 66% to 80%. The majority of participants reported gaining skills applicable to future jobs or internships (80%), feeling better prepared for job searching (71%), and clarifying their career interests (66%). Additionally, 71% indicated that participating in the program helped them reflect on their long-term career goals.

Research has demonstrated that confidence plays a crucial role in career success. Studies have shown that WIL enhances students' perceived self-confidence, awareness of career

Table 4. *Competency Development and Interest (*n=*235)*

Competency	Developed	Interested in further developing
Openness to experience	54%	71%
Career and self-development	53%	75%
Communication in a professional setting	52%	72%
Critical thinking	52%	70%
Professionalism	52%	69%
Technology	49%	74%
Work effectively as a member of a team	25%	32%
Leadership	23%	76%
Decision making and problem solving	22%	n/a*
Ability to communicate my experience in a professional setting	21%	n/a*
Equity and inclusion	12%	24%

** We did not ask about interest in further developing these skills.*

Table 5. *Career Confidence and Reflection (*n=*335)*

Goal	Strongly agree + agree
Gained skills I can use in a future job or internship.	80%
Feel better prepared to look for a job.	71%
Participating in the micro-course/project/placement helped me think about my long-term career goals.	71%
Learned strategies to clarify my career interests.	66%

prospects and provides practical research experience (Zegwaard & McCurdy, 2014). It also positively influences their perceived employability by strengthening human capital, work values, and career self-management skills (Ng et al., 2022) and increased confidence in their ability to secure employment and effectively transition into the workforce (Reddan, 2008).

Overall Program Experience

Students rated the program positively, with 93% rating the program experience as good, very good, or excellent, and 97% indicating that they would recommend the program to a friend.

Overall, the findings reveal gains in students' skills development, career confidence, and readiness after participating in the program. The findings also revealed that acquiring

experience, exploring a work environment, and expanding one's network were the top three factors motivating students to participate in the Micro-ExP program.

Correlations

To better understand the relationships between key career development constructs (skill development, job search confidence, career exploration) and program participation/study variables, we ran bivariate correlations. Table 6 displays the means, standard deviations, and correlations of the study variables.

Skills Development, Interest Exploration, and Job Search Confidence

Identifying career interests and skill acquisition were significantly correlated with job search confidence, r(389) = .54, p < .01, and, r(387) = .48, p < .01. These findings suggest that Micro-ExP participation supported students' skill development, exploring career interests, and increased job search confidence.

Table 6. *Statistics for Each Study Variable (*n=*335)*

			Bivariate correlations							
Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Learned strategies to clarify career interests	3.68	0.82	1							
Feel better prepared to look for a job	3.74	0.91	.543**	1						
Gained skills can use in future job/internship	3.99	0.91	.407**	.482**	1					
Micro-exp helped think about long-term career goals	3.80	0.84	.387**	.382**	.306**	1				
Feel knowledgeable about the micro-course/ project/placement	2.85	0.67	.158*	.183**	.381**	.134*	1			
Feel more familiar with the industry of the micro-exp	2.44	0.80	.215	.201	.368**	.307**	.570**	1		
Overall micro-exp rating	3.80	0.93	.361**	.389**	.483**	.408**	.446**	.600**	1	
Likely to recommend to a friend	3.48	0.56	.311**	.337**	.411**	.343**	.317**	.337**	.662*	1

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$

Skill Development, Interest Exploration, and Long-Term Career Reflection

Skill acquisition, identifying career interests, and job search preparedness were significantly correlated with reflections about long-term career exploration, $r(246) = .31$, $p < .01$, $r(248) = .39$, $p < .01$, $r(245) = .38$, $p < .01$. These findings illustrate that program participants reported developing job-relevant skills, clarifying career interests, and increased job search readiness while engaging in reflections about their future goals and long-term career planning. These findings further suggest that skill building, career exploration, and job search readiness are interconnected and reinforce one another. This, in turn, underscores the importance of a holistic approach to career preparation, supporting students in navigating both short and long-term career development.

Industry Familiarity and Long-term Career Exploration

The findings show that increased familiarity with the industry was significantly correlated with long-term career reflection, $r(76) = .307$, $p < .01$. This finding implies that exposure to an industry through a structured program could help/is likely to help students make more informed long-term career decisions.

Overall Micro-ExP Experience

Skill acquisition, job search preparedness, career interest exploration, and future long-term career reflection were significantly correlated with overall Micro-ExP rating, $r(388) = .48$, $p < .01$; $r(387) = .39$, $p < .01$; $r(391) = .36$, $p < .01$; $r(249) = .41$, $p < .01$.

This finding highlights the importance of skill-building, job-search confidence, and refining career goals in overall program satisfaction. Furthermore, when students feel the program helps them connect their short-term experience to their broader career aspirations, they view it more positively. Strong student interest in participation, including requests to repeat the program, confirms that this offering meets the needs of early years students seeking a first experiential opportunity in a low-risk environment.

Limitations, Implications for Practice, and Directions for Future Research

We implemented the Micro-ExP and collected student data to illuminate the efficacy of innovative WIL programs and potential next steps. We ran this program knowing that limitations to our data collection design and program delivery would impact the inferences we could make about program effectiveness. Hence, before sharing the implications for practice, we discuss limitations and lessons learned.

Limitations

The methodological limitations of the program are primarily related to studies in applied settings, namely, the correlational design and implementation at one site. Our study was cross-sectional and correlational in nature, thus limiting its potential for causal assertions. As with other programs implemented at one institution, the generalizability is limited (Yin, 2014). We weighed several options when selecting this methodology, including minimizing survey fatigue and maximizing limited resources for both the assessment and career service teams. However, other higher education institutions interested in implementing similar Micro-WIL programs could consider using additional methodological designs. For example, using a pre-post design can determine the extent to which skill development can

be attributed to the WIL experience versus prior knowledge or external factors. A second methodological option could be to include a control group to ensure the internal validity of the findings and determine whether the change in skill development is due to participation in the program. An additional methodological limitation is that the program relied exclusively on self-reported measures of Micro-ExP outcomes. While these data provided insight into students' perceptions of their proficiency, self-reported data for skills assessment only presents one perspective on the issue in a context where employers may have a different view. Future programs could use more objective measures such as supervisor/employer evaluation, rubric-based skill evaluation, and practical demonstration (e.g., presenting a solution to a workplace challenge in a controlled environment). A final methodological consideration, if resources are available, would be to conduct a follow-up with students six months to one year after they participate in the program to learn if the students secured employment following the program and if their position aligns with their WIL placement.

The following outlines a few methodological limitations related to program delivery. First, the program only recruited students who were self-motivated to participate. Future program delivery could examine new methods to increase student engagement by proactively recruiting participants to create a more diverse and representative sample. A second limitation of the program was that only a limited number (98) of employers were involved, which limited the diversity of workplace experiences available to students. Future programs could increase employer participation to provide students with a broader range of learning opportunities.

Despite these limitations, the present program provided an exploratory snapshot of the impact of micro-WIL experience on students' skill development, job search confidence, and career exploration that can be further investigated with longitudinal methodologies (e.g., to assess causality of relations) and supplemental measurement approaches (to supplement self-report measures).

Implications for Practice

Although this study was cross-sectional and exploratory in nature, the present findings bear important implications for post-secondary institutions with respect to implementing WIL programs and better supporting students' career development and employability. Given our findings on the positive impact of micro-WIL participation on students’ skill development, job search confidence, and preparedness, and their future career reflection, it is essential to ensure that students have access to these programs to be better prepared for their future careers. Our study expands on previous research, highlighting that perceived self-confidence can significantly impact employability and career success (Susanti & Ardi, 2022). For instance, our findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that work-integrated programs boost confidence and lead to better employment outcomes (Suyitno et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2022). These findings have practical implications for career services and program designers beyond the scope of Micro-ExP. Drawing on patterns observed in our data, we offer the following suggestions for future program development or scaffolding: enhance students’ career development, increase students’ career readiness, reinforce students’ confidence, and utilize a holistic approach.

Enhance Students' Career Development

Integrate structured career reflection exercises into work-integrated programs to help students critically reflect on their experiences and better understand their career aspirations. Examples include activities such as guided journaling, mentorship discussions, and career coaching sessions (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2020).

Increase Students' Career Readiness

Incorporate more simulated job search activities to provide students with practical experience and prepare them for real-world job searches. Examples include mock interviews, résumé workshops, and networking events. (Bieler, 2020; Budnick & Barber, 2021).

Reinforce Students' Confidence

Provide resources such as one-on-one career coaching and alumni panels. These resources are crucial in helping students build confidence in their job search abilities and form their emerging professional identities (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019).

Further Skill Development and Holistic Approach

As previously mentioned, participants reported high levels of interest in further developing skills. The high level of interest suggests that students recognize the importance of these competencies for their future career success and are seeking further opportunities to enhance them. The high level of interest indicates that the program effectively raised students' awareness of the importance of these competencies for future career success, motivating them to seek further opportunities to enhance their skills. According to Jackson & Wilton (2016), motivation to learn can be considered the most important aspect of a student's employability. Likewise, as Fugate & Kinicki (2008) argued, individuals with high motivation to learn will effectively identify opportunities and make necessary changes to enhance their employment prospects.

Our findings also revealed that skill-building, career exploration, and job search readiness are interconnected and reinforce one another, consistent with the literature (Jackson et al., 2023; Stirling et al., 2024). This underscores the importance of a holistic approach to career preparation, supporting students in navigating short- and long-term career development. This can be applied in WIL practice by 1) designing programs that incorporate a career competency framework to enhance students' awareness of skill development while fostering career exploration, 2) including a reflection component to enable students how these skills align with their career goals, 3) industry engagement and employer mentorship to provide students with real-world insights and networking opportunities that support their professional growth.

Our program's positive outcomes suggest that expanding access to micro-WIL opportunities, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds, can help bridge employment gaps and enhance career readiness skills across diverse student populations. By providing inclusive and targeted WIL experiences, such as the one-week micro-WIL experience in our case, these types of programs can empower students to gain

valuable work-ready skills, build professional networks, and increase their confidence, ultimately enhancing their ability to succeed in the competitive job market.

Directions for Future Research

Our study shows that conducting intentional assessment and program evaluation in an applied setting can yield practical insights. We outlined a few suggestions for future study designs above. Gaining a deeper understanding of student self-confidence, job search preferences, and career interests early on in their academic journey presents a valuable area for future research that can positively impact student career outcomes. Further exploration into effective Micro-WIL program implementation is another avenue that can support career services that are often stretched for resources. Finally, more research with employers to develop programming that aligns with workplace trends would benefit career development practices.

Conclusion

Micro-ExP helps students build their career confidence and equips them with the tools needed for success. Many students struggle to define their career goals and understand industry realities (Clements et al., 2018). Micro-ExP served as a starting point, helping students clarify their career prospects and develop strategies to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional success. The program offers an opportunity for students to receive guidance from experienced professionals, helping them understand job expectations, how to integrate into new organizations, and how to navigate professional settings.

By embedding NACE competencies into Micro-ExP initiatives, institutions can create inclusive, high-impact learning experiences that provide students with industry exposure and equip them with career-ready skills. This approach ensures that short-term WIL experiences are structured, intentional, and aligned with workforce needs, making them a valuable tool for increasing accessibility and equity in experiential learning. For early-year students, these experiences are a crucial first step in building professional confidence, fostering career exploration, and establishing meaningful industry connections, laying the foundation for long-term career success.

The Micro-ExP program provided valuable insights into the efficacy of micro-WiL programs, with appropriate support and training, for post-secondary students with no or limited prior work experience. The findings highlight the positive impact of students' participation in a micro-WiL program, irrespective of their field of study, on their skills development, job search confidence, and career readiness. Our study showed that a one-week structured career development experience yielded positive career development skills for participants. To build on these findings, future research can employ more robust methodological designs, incorporate objective measures, and conduct follow-up studies to assess long-term outcomes. Additionally, increasing the diversity of participants, employers, and projects/placements can enhance the generalizability and richness of the data.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of providing students access to innovative WIL programs that better prepare them for their future careers. Removing and mitigating

barriers to participation, such as competing academic priorities, additional work authorization, lack of experience, and time commitment, resulted in increased participation from traditionally underrepresented groups. By addressing the identified limitations and exploring new research directions, post-secondary institutions can continue to improve the effectiveness of these programs and support students' career development and employability.

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How to cite this article: Di Genova, L., Hnatchuk, D., Salimzadeh, R., Ajersch, S., Slone, A., & Zacharkiw, S. (2025). Early career development through micro work-integrated learning experiences. *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact*, *9*(1), 119–140. https://doi.org/10.18060/28276

Editorial Acknowledgement. The *Journal of Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact* (*JSAIII*) uses an open and transparent peer-review process designed to foster professional, rigorous dialogue that strengthens each article. This approach also enables us to publicly recognize the essential contributions of our editorial team–work that is often invisible and uncredited. By acknowledging these efforts, we aim to bring greater equity to scholarly publishing and highlight the collaborative labor behind every published piece. The following individuals contributed to the editorial development of this article.

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Production editing for this article was carried out by the Stewarding Editors, Shaun Boren and Heather J. Strine-Patterson, as part of the journal's commitment to publishing quality scholarship with care and consistency.