Cambrian College Facilitates Course-based Applied Research into their Graphic Design Program

Cambrian Innovates is exploring new ways to give advantage to their students in this competitive job market while finding a way to integrate applied skills into their curriculum. The intent is to provide a new mix to students and offer them an authentic experience that can't be offered in the classroom. To enhance their education, students are given a chance to use their skills in a workplace setting in order to benefit local businesses that would otherwise not have access to this type of service.

From October through December, Cambrian College's Graphic Design program offers an opportunity for its third-year graphic design students to work directly with local small businesses who want to improve their online presence. The Voucher for E-Business (VEB) program is made possible by a grant from the Ontario Centres of Excellence. The Sudbury Regional Business Centre coordinates business sourcing and Cambrian Innovates, the Applied Research department at Cambrian College, coordinates the VEB project at the college.

A total of 16 Cambrian College students and businesses have participated since the integration of the project into the Graphic Design curriculum in 2013. The project aligns with an assignment in the Website Design 3 course, and counts as credited work. Supervising faculty, Sean Grant sees a lot of student benefits to integrating applied research into his program. "The VEB program gives students an opportunity to get paid working experience in their field and something to put on their resume," said Grant. "This gives them a big advantage when it's time to enter the working world because they have already worked with a client."

At the start of the project, each student attends an initial briefing with all stakeholders, including: business owners (the clients), representatives from Cambrian Innovates,

contacts with the Regional Business Centre, and supervising faculty. During this meeting, the scope and deliverables for the project are discussed and determined together. Allowing the student to partake in the negotiation process - navigating the client's agenda and determining which objectives can be achieved within the time limits provides an experience that isn't possible in a traditional classroom setting.

In most cases, the deliverables identified at this initial meeting was the design and development of the client's website. To complete the project, the student uses a range of skills, including: photography; web design; programming language; jQuery. They also use a range of design software and presentation software.

After the initial meeting, Grant explained, "students are on their own, and are given real-world experience. They have to learn how to communicate with clients and how to achieve the objectives within the deadlines they were given." Grant said that this project offers a more realistic understanding of deadlines. "Within the classroom, students can submit incomplete work and the negative effect is a lower grade. But when a student fails to meet their deadlines for this project, it affects other people and it affects their reputation. Faculty can provide support when needed, but ultimately, it's up to the student to work with the client and figure out the specific needs and challenges."

During the semester, students are required to present their work to faculty in a succession of checkpoints (proposal, design, and development) every two weeks. After each presentation, feedback is provided to the student; revisions are made and presented to the client within the week. Once the projects are completed, businesses gain a new online presence to grow their exposure and students are given a credit and a potential new client. Most of the students have an ongoing relationship with their client.

"The key to integrating education into paid working experiences like the VEB program is to understand your industry, its trends and to work closely with each student," said

Grant. "Being accessible to the students helps their projects to succeed," Grant advised. "Think of yourself as a Creative Director working with a Junior Designer."

The integration of applied research into the curriculum keeps program content cutting-edge and provides access to industry-relevant skills and technologies. A 2015 survey revealed the Graphic Design program has an employer's satisfaction of 100%. Applied research is driven by community needs. This helps students understand the application of the skills they learn in the classroom and offers a better understanding of local business needs.