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Project Based Learning as a Catalyst for Academic Evolution and as an Incubator for Academic Innovation

Abstract

As engineering education at the undergraduate level continues to evolve, the support structure required for educational approaches such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) is expanding to include not only the Department, College, and University levels, but also significant commitments from industrial partners. While the benefits of project based learning approaches are clear, there are a number of challenges in establishing and maintaining the deep level of institutional and industrial interaction required to create a successful program.

This paper discusses several approaches adopted by the Project Based Learning Institute (PBLI) in developing project-centered relationships with external organizations. PBLI serves as an academic incubator that has been used to overcome institutional inertia by creating a structure that lies outside existing well-established “territories”. It discusses the self supporting nature of the approach, which allows resource issues which typically shackle initiatives to be obviated. It describes how the program has developed into a catalyst for industry participation that benefits both students and corporate sponsors. It describes the how the juxtaposition of high-potential faculty, coupled with incentives for multi-disciplinary faculty collaboration, embellished by more effective access vehicles for industry to university resources, and a more effective mechanism to uncover and respond to industry needs, leads to the development of an educational outcome that provides for an engineering graduate who is steeped in multidisciplinary, who is exceptionally team-oriented and who is able to function in today’s complex environment.

Introduction

Preparing the engineering workforce for both public and private sectors is a significant task in the face of the intensifying global competition. Engineers of tomorrow must be able to work in an increasingly interconnected world with a diverse group of colleagues from dispersed geographical locations. The ability to solve real problems facing businesses hinges on a multi-disciplinary education enriched by general skills in teamwork, communication and project management. The PBLI is underpinned by the principle that durable, robust, sustainable partnerships between faculty, students and industry are beneficial to each stakeholder.

The California Polytechnic State University College of Engineering Strategic Plan states that: ***“The mission of the College of Engineering is to be a flagship college of engineering that benefits humanity by educating socially responsible engineers inspired for life-long learning using an innovative learn by doing philosophy in partnership with industry and other stakeholders.”*** PBLI is consistent with this mission because it promotes the use of a multi-disciplinary, participatory, learn by doing, “hands-on” laboratory, project and design centered approach. The PBLI enhances educational outcomes for students in accordance with the strategic plan, it enhances the professional development of the faculty in conformance with the strategic plan, by encouraging and supporting expansion of faculty research and by provide appropriate

infrastructure for faculty, including adequate computing/information systems and technical support, and it enables relationships with industry in harmony with the strategic plan.

History

The college has a long history of using a learn-by-doing approach to engineering education. Indeed, it is embodied in the motto of the university “Discere Faciendo”, to learn by doing. Through this pedagogical approach, understanding theory is facilitated and enhanced by demonstrating its application to the real world situations. This learning and teaching paradigm has allowed the colleges graduates to be more productive *ab initio* in their professional careers than their counterparts with a less rigorous laboratory and project based exposure. As evidenced by the growth of the “learn-by-doing” approach to education in the United States and the rest of the world, project based learning has been accepted as a valuable component in the educational experience of nascent engineers.^{1,2,3}

The nation’s requirements for innovation clearly show that educational programs must provide engineers who can deal with both design and manufacturing. It is important and justifiable to include much science and engineering science in an engineering curriculum, but that alone is not adequate preparation for a career as an engineer. Furthermore, colleges of engineering cannot just be a stop on the educational assembly line which takes increasingly inadequately prepared high-school students, provides them with an academic exposure to theory and then graduates them to be trained, as needed, by their employer. Students must be educated to be life-long-learners, and industry and the university must become constant and persistent collaborators in this process. This will require universities to rethink the educational paradigms which have shaped engineering education for the last half century. PBL is one approach that provides a solution to improving the education of incipient engineers on campus and engineers on the industrial site. Instead of a “step function” interface between the college and industry, this model provides a “sigmoidal segue” between the two.

The position of the U.S. in the 21st century will rely on a continuous supply of well-educated, professionally-oriented engineers in addition to those educated in the traditional research-based programs focused on feeding the Ph.D. pipeline. Engineering education in the United States nucleated epitaxially upon the template employed by colleges of science. These templates were developed in reaction to a report prepared in 1945 in reaction to experiences during World War II². Engineering programs grew mimicking these structures and developed policies typical of the colleges of science. This cookie-cutter approach neglects a basic difference in the philosophies of science and of engineering. Admittedly, the distinction between science and engineering is often blurred, and some of the very best of engineers and scientists are tantamount to indistinguishable. However, science is typically driven by discovery, and its main output is information, whereas engineering is driven by creation and its main output is innovation.

Cal Poly’s College of Engineering has recently established the Project Based Learning Institute (PBLI) to address this need by enhancing its current “learn-by-doing” approach to education. This new institute is the catalyst for bringing together the needs of the industry, the students and the faculty. In this paper, we will provide one approach adopted by PBLI in developing project centered relationships with external organizations.

There are a number of sources and sinks for projects at the institution. These include the capstone design courses that are an integral part of each departmental curriculum, the senior project and thesis requirements for students, and the individual interests and efforts of both students and faculty. In the current nascent stage of the PBLI there are a range of activities across the spectrum of departments. Unit requirements for the capstone design experience range from 4 to 9 quarter units, senior projects are occasionally integrated with capstone design, but many are stand-alone classes or individual study experiences. Single student experiences are the norm, with a few departments offering “interdisciplinary” experiences. Projects range from instructor selected activities across an entire course to self-selected and created projects. Many projects are not funded externally, some programs have developed an infrastructure to seek external funding and these instances are invariably multi-student and interdisciplinary⁴.

Because of the growth of the college, the unfunded, single-project, single-student, single-advisor model is not sustainable, neither is it academically desirable in most cases. Several courageous faculty have come together, under the rubric of the PBLI, to explore pan-departmental (and pan-college) associations of students and faculty working on externally supported activities that satisfy not only the design requirements in the curriculum, but may address other outcomes mandated by accreditation, by department goals or by university initiatives.

The initial effort does not mandate a project format, but focuses on the voluntary participation of a number of motivated faculty to develop a course centered around high-quality, multi-disciplinary capstone projects that can be accomplished in a pertinent academic timeframe using PBLI as a self-sustaining infrastructure.

The primacy of the individual-student, independent-study model was driven by historical factors that governed the development of the institution, and by the availability of infrastructure. A number of factors now provide the opportunity to create a more academically beneficial, a more interactive and a more vigorous system. Figure 1 schematically depicts the supporting infrastructure for PBLI at the university. The College is committed to the departmental structure, and understands the value that structure provides in the educational environment. Similarly, the college understands the value of loose federations of departments, joined in response to both operational requirements and strategic opportunities. In our system, this federated structure provides benefits in scheduling laboratories, optimal usage of laboratories, optimal assignment of office spaces, optimization of instructional delivery patterns for faculty and for lecturers. It also provides benefits by increasing the opportunities for interaction among individuals, promoting the creation of interdisciplinary curricular approaches that satisfy educational objectives and student outcomes in a better and a more efficient way and potentially offers a more sustainable approach to admissions. The structure recognizes partnerships and common interests that exist in instructional laboratories, and also recognizes interdisciplinary laboratories and soft-money facilities. Use of the PBLI spaces and the interdisciplinary spaces is limited to those activities involving students and faculty from a number of programs, joined in efforts on a particular project.

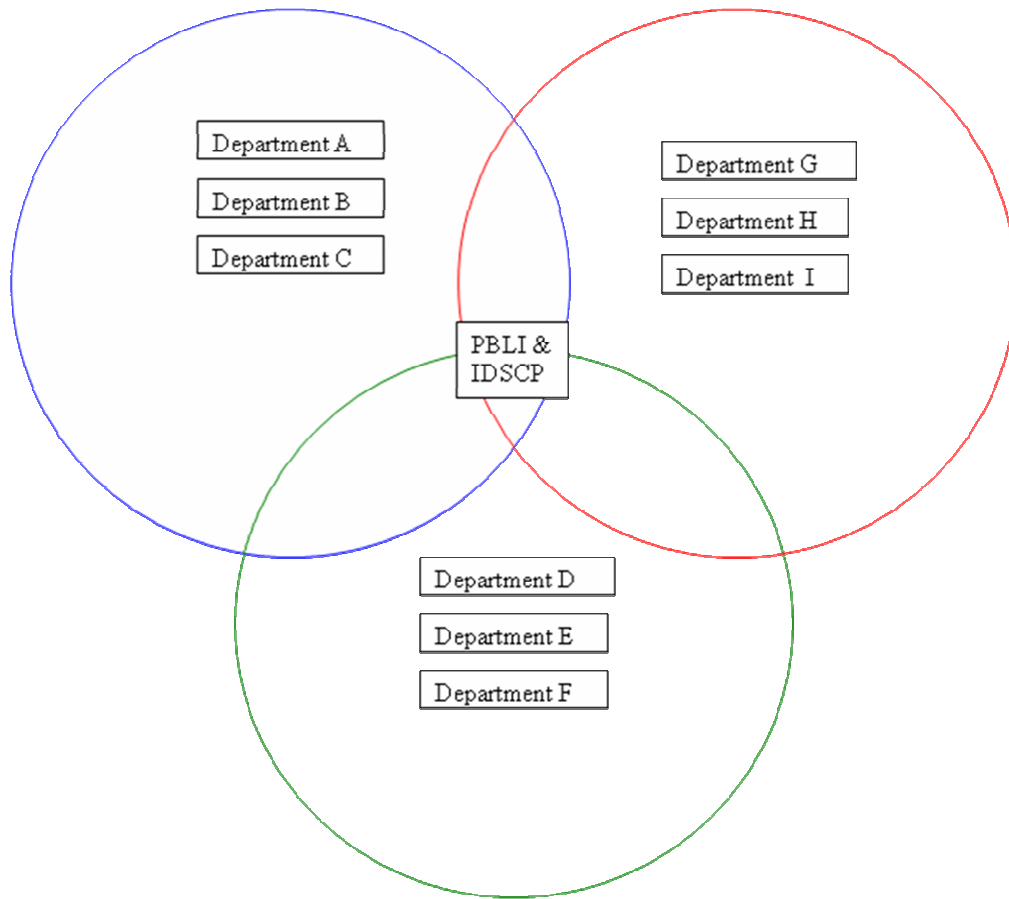


Figure 1. Borromean Ring Depiction of College Facility Structure

Thus, PBLI is viewed as a non-departmental entity that has the potential to provide the funds and infrastructure to support pan-program efforts, including Senior/Capstone projects. PBLI serves to create an intersection of incoming targeted funding, customer-based project opportunities, students seeking multidisciplinary capstone experiences and faculty who are interested in this alternative to department-based efforts. PBLI serves as the focus for activities and provides the interface upon which “planktonic” entities can become “sessile” around concentrated resources and produce stable activity centers based on their competencies. The self-supporting infrastructure is critical, as any existing multidisciplinary efforts have a hidden cost to the hosting department, and this cost would become significant and limiting as multidisciplinary activities increase. The obvious source for this resource is industry and foundations.

PBLI Model for Partnership

The central motivation for the formation of PBLI is to provide an opportunity for all senior students to participate in solving a real world problem. Fulfilling this requirement is possible only through the sustained participation of public and private organizations outside of the university. The model we have chosen is based on an annual membership arrangement according to which each partner can propose several senior design projects each year, for a fixed annual fee. This approach allows each partner to participate in our Project Based Learning programs

with a modest investment and the opportunity to increase the level of participation if it is satisfied with the outcome.

Our goal is to encourage multi-disciplinary and team-based projects. The compositions of the teams are determined based on the specific requirements of the projects. We strive to bring projects which allow students from other colleges, such as the College of Business, to participate in them in a meaningful way. Most engineers will have to interact with functions such as sales and marketing quite often in their professional careers and as such would benefit from such an interaction during their senior design project. Similarly, people in functions such as sales, marketing and finance need to interact with engineers in the workplace. The opportunity to work with engineering students in the context of real projects provides the students who are studying other fields to learn the engineering process and be able to communicate with engineers. This approach allows all students to experience work in a real world environment and practice the critical skills of communication, conflict resolution and project management.

Levels of Membership in PBLI

We have established two levels of membership for prospective partners. In the Standard Membership, for a fixed annual fee, the partner will propose several projects out of which 3 projects will be selected. The selection is based on the fit between the project scope and content and the learning objectives as set by the faculty members involved in the senior design project. In the Premium Membership, the partner can propose an unlimited number of projects. These projects will be presented to students and any project with a sufficient number of interested students will be carried out.

In addition to the annual membership, we offer single project participation to small companies. Our goals here are to expose many organizations to the benefits of working with Cal Poly, and to grow the relationship into an annual membership.

Our Approach for Project Definition

The PBLI staff normally take the lead in working with the engineering team from the participating organization in order to agree on the broad scope of the projects. With this knowledge, the staff can identify the most suitable faculty to lead these projects. In the next step, the selected faculty will meet with the engineering team from the partner organization (in person or using a conference/web meeting) in order to refine the problem description. This step is very critical since, on one hand, we want the problems to be challenging and rewarding for the students and, on the other hand, we want to avoid assigning projects that are beyond the reasonable stretch of students capabilities.

During this stage the reporting arrangement will be discussed and the liaison from the partner organization will be identified. The availability of a technical liaison among the partner's engineering team is a critical success factor. The interaction between the liaison and the students allows the partner to select the most suitable student for future employment. At the same time, the students will be able to learn much from the technical liaison not the least of which is

corporate culture. The liaison's role is to make sure that the student's questions are answered so that the project remains within the original boundaries.

One approach to creating linkages follows. During the first week of the quarter, an engineer from the partner organization will make a presentation to the entire Senior class about the organization and the project. This allows students to sign up for the available projects. The faculty will take this information into account when assembling the teams and assigning the team projects.

The student teams are then assembled and the project starts on the second week. The projects are normally two quarters long (10 weeks per quarter). During the first quarter the teams are engaged in the design of the solution. At the end of this quarter there is a single design that the students feel can address the problem posed. In the second quarter the students build a physical prototype, test it and document it. The final stage of the project is a presentation to the partners and a written report.

Another approach provides a database of projects and allows interested students to bid for participation, in much the same way some career centers allow students to bid for interview slots with particular companies. In either of these cases students select their projects and are, *a priori*, more motivated.

Resident Scientists

Cal Poly's College of Engineering is blessed to be located in beautiful San Luis Obispo where many California residents choose to retire. Among these there are many senior scientists and engineers who can become active in our institute and help the students with their projects. The experience that these scientists/engineers can transfer to students through coaching can have a significant and positive effect on the quality of learning throughout the senior design project.

The faculty supervising the projects are normally engaged in other teaching activities and do not have sufficient time to devote to coaching the students. Our scientists-in-residence will fill this gap and can provide guidance on all technical and non-technical aspects of running a successful project.

Currently we have two scientists-in-residence. This number will be increased as we increase the number of industry sponsored projects.

Benefits to Partners

Cal Poly's College of Engineering is known for its hands-on approach to engineering education. Our approach to engineering education uses a project-based teaching/learning strategy that has enabled our program to attain national recognition as the exemplary model for undergraduate engineering education. Combining this practical approach with a strong theoretical foundation is producing engineers that are sought after throughout California and its neighboring states. As such the demand for our top graduates is very high. Instead of relying on general purpose job fairs, the PBLI members have an opportunity to "test-drive" a number of students over an

extended period of time. This familiarity is an excellent platform for selecting the candidates with the highest demonstrated capability.

In addition, the relationship built during the project execution between the faculty advisor and the technical liaison can expand beyond the senior design project. As a result of this extended interaction, the faculty members learn about the critical issues that our partners would like to address and the partners in turn learn about the capabilities of our faculty and the applied research infrastructure at the college.

Benefits to Cal Poly

Student education through a project based learning paradigm is the top priority at Cal Poly's College of Engineering. It is therefore, obvious that we benefit immensely from the direct involvement of our partners.

In addition, by being in a regular contact with the engineers from the partner organizations, our faculty will learn about the learning objectives that they should incorporate into the curriculum in order to align our students' skill set with the needs of the industry. Graduating students are our primary products at the college and the partners are the primary customers for these products. It is, therefore, critical that the customer participate in all stages of the product development. Our graduates are known to hit the ground running on day one with little on the job training required. Our goal at PBLI is to help train engineers who can be productive on the first day of their employment. In addition, through working in a team environment, our graduate can play as an effective team member and utilize all of the non-technical and leadership skills they have learned through their senior design experience. (In addition, our graduates are in high demand upon graduation, which is a quality that will attract even more competitive applicants to the university in the future)

An Ideal Platform for General Engineering

The general engineering program at Cal Poly's College of Engineering is a unique multidisciplinary program designed to produce competent engineers across all engineering disciplines. The mission of Cal Poly's General Engineering program is to provide students with the highest quality technical and professional engineering education, with a particular emphasis in new or evolving interdisciplinary areas. The primary educational goal is to provide students with a rigorous theoretical, laboratory-centered, practice-oriented, hands-on education that will allow them to immediately participate and to excel in the complete spectrum of professional environments, industrial or academic. Graduates will have engineering, design and problem-solving skills requisite to develop and market competitive products and services for human benefit. With its emphasis on a multi-disciplinary education, this program is a natural ally to the Project Based Learning Institute.

Challenges Ahead

The senior design class is designed and executed at the departmental level and as such it is natural that they have grown in different directions. Each departmental faculty has designed a course they deem to match the learning objectives of that department. While this model works for a given department, it does not lend itself to a multidisciplinary project environment. Success of our program hinges on the ability to engage a large number of our senior and junior students in a multi-disciplinary project environment without being limited by the interdepartmental boundaries. Developing a uniform structure for all senior design projects is, therefore, of utmost importance to our efforts. An alternative approach may be to offer a multidisciplinary senior design class offered through the general engineering department that can be substituted for the departmental level senior design class based on students' desire and interest.

In addition, the challenge of attracting and retaining volunteer senior engineers must be properly managed as the number of incoming projects increase. A streamlined process for stewardship and for delivering the sought after value to the clients is also a critical success factor for PBLI.

Conclusions

We have presented an outline of the mission and activities of a new initiative, the Project Based Learning Institute. Several models for acquisition and managing industry sponsored projects have been described in detail. With eight (8) industry and government members in its first year of operation, the PBLI seems to be able to serve as a successful model for university industry relationship. It has been robust, and flexible enough to accommodate the different needs of each member. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing this new institution is to facilitate a transition from a departmental level senior design course to a multi-disciplinary and intra-departmental model. The bottom up approach, where courageous faculty are enabled to create functional implementations has been shown to work. It is a slower process than declaring that all projects will be structured in that fashion, but it is enduring and embraced by faculty. This evolutionary approach to curricular change is not as gaudy as some revolutionary efforts which have been made, but it has the potential of being more persistent.

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