

Basic Considerations

An employer considering cooperative education as a component of the human resources plan should consider the following:

Employer Expectations

1 Analyzing why the company wants to develop a cooperative education employment program and what results are expected is the first step towards a successful program. Most potential Cooperative Education employers hope the student will not only be an excellent part-time or temporary employee, meeting normal standards of production and behavior, but will also be a potential permanent employee upon graduation. If this is the employer's goal, then it makes sense to build a sequence of work assignments as described above so that the student can spend most of his or her employment period with that employer. In this way, students are tested for employability over many weeks or months, a relationship is established that leads to a high offer/acceptance ratio, and the student begins full-time employment fully trained and immediately productive.

2 If the goal is to tap a temporary semi-skilled workforce, then the employer may not require a student to return for succeeding employment periods. In such cases, the student, within a set period of time, meets the needs and objectives of the employer. While the employer may offer the student full-time employment after graduation, this is not the main objective. It is profitable to simply employ the student for the specific time frame.

3 A third type of employer might participate with no thought of any specific gain for the organization. He or she might regard it as good citizenship, cooperating with a school as a way of becoming involved in this valuable educational concept. An interest in developing the youth of our country serves as the employer's only motivation. There are other reasons why employers participate in Co-op, such as to build a diverse work force. But whatever the reason, the goal(s) should be clearly articulated within the company business plan and all subsequent structures should be designed to meet the basic goal(s).

Student and Institutional Expectations

Every co-op student enters the first work term with preconceived notions about life within the company. Along with those expectations, the co-op student arrives at the work place with a background of rigorous academic work where learning new things was a daily responsibility. While the student realizes that work assignments may not always present a new challenge each day, he or she may be wary about a work function that reduces itself to boredom after the initial training period. Although the employment setting does not always match the classroom in pure learning, the employer, and the experience offered, play a very important part in the student's total educational experience. At the same time, whatever learning goals and objectives the faculty coordinator may hope for the student, he or she should understand that all employees share the responsibility of achieving the company's goals and objectives. The co-op student must fit within this context. So while learning at work is the student's first priority, the needs of the employer and the expectations of the educational institution must also be recognized and understood. These guidelines will help create good working relationships between the college and the employer. They examine the factors to be considered before participating in a Co-op program and after the student reports to the job.

Elements of a Successful Cooperative Education Program

Successful Co-op programs must be planned carefully. The employer should consider the following factors:

1 Seek top-level commitment to fully support the Cooperative Education program with appropriate resources and staffing and to sustain the program to a reasonable degree should economic recessions occur.

2 Develop integrated work assignments that mesh academic requirements with company goals. Cooperative Education is first and foremost an educational program and so this requires proper use of the students who will be employed. Develop a series of planned experiences for the student in work areas that are the most conducive to learning and that integrate long-range objectives of both the student and the employer

3 Appoint a well-qualified employment coordinator who understands and believes in the objectives of Cooperative Education. The coordinator should be skilled in human relations, have a good knowledge of the company's processes and personnel, and should have enough time, energy, and interest to promote the program internally as well as externally.

4 Establish a separate salary/benefit budget for Cooperative Education students which allows the students to be placed in any appropriate department without hindrance. This avoids imposition on normal operating budgets and tends to safeguard the program in times of recession.

5 Pay a fair and competitive salary to the student.

6 Consider granting fringe benefits. Although not a requirement for participating in a Cooperative Education program, it is desirable to give the student as many advantages as possible. The more one is treated like an employee, the more one will think and act like one.

7 Establish relationships with area or target institutions from which to screen candidates for Co-op openings. The Co-op staff will be able to assist in screening and monitoring the student and are a valuable partner in the Co-op process.

8 Demonstrate a genuine interest in integrating the Co-op student as a team member into the organization.

9 Pay close attention to supervising students. Provide training and support to supervisors who see their roles as trainers and teachers as well as supervisors in the normal sense.

10 Consider a mentor program for students.

Operating a Cooperative Education Program

Upon reporting to a Co-op employer, a student is no longer a student but an employee. Fellow employees should recognize a Co-op student as part of the team rather than a trainee.

The employer's Co-op coordinator should monitor the Co-op employee's progress in terms of the preplanned program, usually established through a learning agreement. This monitoring should include the student and the supervisor who provides a

performance evaluation and appraisal of the work responsibilities. Problems must be addressed immediately to ensure success. Specific considerations to bear in mind:

1 Meet frequently with the Co-op student, preferably away from the work area, to check how things are going. A little personal interest goes a long way in making a person feel worthwhile. If the co-op student has any problems, this is a good time to discuss them. Help the Co-op student create learning objectives.

2 Ensure that the Co-op student doesn't have idle time. A common complaint from students is that they had too little to do.

3 Design progressive work assignments so that the Co-op will move from the more routine activities early in the program to more complicated responsibilities as the classroom and work-site experiences increase.

4 Emphasize the personal and educational development of the student rather than company production standards. Develop the student's strengths.

5 Encourage Co-op employees to attend professional society meetings and to involve themselves in civic and community work. Programs, such as mentor programs, after-hours social activities, and assistance with housing are worth the investment if a large number of students come from out-of-town institutions.

6 Avoid relegating the Co-op student to those jobs that no one else wants to do. The clean-up role will soon be recognized and resented.

7 Conduct an exit interview once the assignment is completed. Discuss performance ratings and explore potential for the future. If possible, reach an agreement on further Co-op work terms. If the student is to return as a Co-op employee, it is a good idea to define a specific work experience for the subsequent work term. Such planning is valuable to the student in selecting classes for the upcoming term.

Cooperative Education combines classroom study with practical paid work assignments relevant to a student's studies and/or career goals. The Cooperative Education/Internship experience (*referred to as 'Co-op' for remainder of this document*) is a component

of the academic curriculum just as world civilization and college algebra are. In a Cooperative Education course, learning remains the primary objective. The work-site is a laboratory where a student builds skills, expands knowledge and tests career choices. The employer trains and evaluates, and the supervisor becomes a true partner in the educational process.

Within a Co-op curriculum, employers should be mindful of the following:

The work experience should relate to the student's field of study and particular interest within that field.

When developing a Cooperative Education program, the nature of the work assignment must be balanced with the employer's expectations for results and the student's educational needs. Each work assignment is unique.

1 Establishing objectives allows the work assignment to be tailored to meet both employer and student needs and allows each situation to be tapped for its full learning potential. In such situations, the overriding issues are whether the student gains from the experience, whether he or she is receptive to new discoveries, and whether he or she gets along with co-workers.

The work assignment should be considered a regular, continuing, and essential component of the educational process with established periods of employment and standards of performance.

2 Methods used to develop a series of sequential and structured work assignments will vary. For example, an Engineering student may complete five sequential work assignments with a single employer while a Liberal Arts student may complete five assignments at different work sites. In one case, the student uses the Cooperative Education work assignments to build a depth of skill and understanding; in the second, the student uses Cooperative Education not only to build multiple skills but also to test career choices. All Cooperative Education students gain values, insights, and experiences from their work assignments that enrich and affirm their education.

The work assignments should increase in difficulty and responsibility as the student progresses through the academic curriculum.

3 Cooperative Education differs from other forms of experiential education in several important ways. Co-op relies on multiple periods of work experiences throughout the academic curriculum to truly integrate work and learning. Multiple experiences allow the student to combine the classroom work site experiences.

A student returning to the classroom fresh from a work assignment will contribute much about what is new in industry and how classroom learning is applied in the work place. A student returning to a work-site for a second assignment brings maturity and focus. Work assignments and classroom study build upon each other to everyone's benefit.

Typical Employment Patterns

The basic characteristics for all co-op work patterns are that they are multiple with at least two or more separate work periods. The oldest pattern involves full-time work every other semester, often with two students alternating with each other to keep a work function covered year-round. This is *Alternate Co-op*. In some cases, the alternating work and academic terms are a full year's duration. Other time combinations can be used to meet the needs of individual employers and students.

The second work pattern involves part-time work and study such as morning classes and afternoon work. This is *Parallel Co-op* and is limited by the commuting distance from a given campus. This work pattern is particularly popular in two-year institutions, although it is also common in baccalaureate programs.

An option to an alternating Co-op work term is *Back-To-Back* semesters. Often longer work sessions enhance both learning and student productivity. Another work pattern is *Summer Only*. A summer work session may be perfect for a set training period for new employees such as "Manager Trainee" job positions.



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Guide for Employers



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