

THE CO-OP EXPERIENCE

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[Assignment: Select a topic concerning liberal arts you feel strongly about. Argue for your point of view as persuasively as possible. Use 3-5 outside sources for support, but remember that the basic ideas must be your own.]

(1) While working at General Motors, in the fall of his junior year at Boston University, computer science major Alan Samuels designed a program that enabled GM researchers to easily analyze test data taken from experimental automobile parts. In a similar manner, Kim Anderson, although only a sophomore sociology major at Syracuse University, was placed in charge of developing and managing a child care program for illegal aliens while working for New York's Health and Human Services Department. Jeff Brinkley, a senior geology major at Bradley University, completed his fourth semester working for Texaco Oil Company by coauthoring a research book on the earth's alternative energy resources. These three bright students are fictitious, but nonetheless they are representative of more than 190,000 college students throughout the United States who are involved in cooperative education programs today ("College"69).

(2) The federal government, NASA, law firms, radio and television stations, newspaper and magazine publishers, and technological centers such as IBM, General Electric Company, and AT&T take college students off campus and introduce them to the world of professional work. These students are trained in areas related to their academic fields of study and are employed in various jobs from accountants and chemists to technical writers and social workers. Co-op (cooperative education) students incorporate the co-op program into their college career usually by working one semester and going to class the next. In order for students to fulfill their academic major requirements it will probably take five years both on and off campus for co-op students to earn their degrees, but during these five years co-op students benefit greatly. Through cooperative education programs students experience the benefits of "hands-on" training, career exposure, increased motivation and maturity, and even a modest salary. Ideally all college students should have the opportunity to participate in cooperative education programs and experience these invaluable rewards.

(3) Before college students decide to enroll in co-op programs, a few points should be considered. First of all, students involved in cooperative education programs will probably need five years or a very intense four years to earn their degrees and to graduate. Since co-op students usually spend one semester every year outside the classroom, they do not earn as many credits per year

as full-time students. This, however, is not serious. Co-op students will easily be able to make up the course work and earn the required credits for graduation. Furthermore, co-op students may not gain credits while working, but they do gain the invaluable experience of applying classroom ideas to real-life situations.

(4) Back in the classroom, though, these students must complete their major's requirements. Their class schedules will reflect this and most of their classes will be those needed to fulfill such requirements; thus electives may have to be sacrificed as well as extracurricular interests in the pursuit of a degree. As Joseph C. Lawler, chairman of the board and executive officer of the firm that he co-oped for in 1940 sums it up, "Time constraints and the general pragmatic atmosphere relevant in cooperative education companies tend to make the development of academic interests outside the student's discipline more difficult" ("College" 72; emphasis added). "More difficult" is emphasized because it is not impossible to include other interests; merely less time is available to do so. Following the cooperative education route does allow less time for exploration of other interests; nonetheless, it can offer experience and involvement in an area that is of interest to students.

(5) College students also need to consider some other drawbacks of cooperative education which the co-op student experiences in the move away from the secure and structured college campus to the real world. Once off campus, co-op students may miss university friends and social events. In addition to leaving their customary way of life, co-op students may be inconvenienced by the actual moving of belongings and may also be overwhelmed by the added responsibilities of apartment living--the bills, the cooking and the cleaning. The adjustment of moving back and forth will not be trouble free. As Jennifer Sugiyama, director of Berkeley's co-op program, said, "After you've been fully engrossed in the world of work, it's sometimes hard to come back to a campus atmosphere, but no one regrets the experience" ("Work" 319). By living in the real world and by handling the added responsibilities, students gain independence. Furthermore, to move and successfully adjust should be considered an invaluable training experience that may be unrelated to academic studies but nonetheless is essential to life.

(6) Actual work experience in a student's academic field of study is the major goal and benefit of cooperative education programs. Students are hired as employees and learn as they work. The training process usually begins with performing routine tasks such as filing and answering telephones. These tasks are simple, yet are necessary to familiarize the students with the company's environment and purpose. Soon, however, these little jobs are set aside and students move on to more important endeavors and take on greater responsibilities.

Co-op programs will not only utilize what students already know but they will also expand their knowledge and utilize their full potential. According to Paul Pratt, dean of cooperative education at Northeastern University in Boston, "Students are expected to participate fully and [to] produce" ("Work" 318). Students are given full credit for the intelligence that they have and moreover are given the chance to utilize their talents to reach a desired goal. As Klaus Mai, president of Shell Development Company in Houston, said, "Industry will emphasize applied research, with a specific market place objective in mind" (3). Since the co-op program is designed to coincide with what the student is learning in class, students usually have no problems in becoming involved in the company's goals nor in taking their co-op jobs seriously. In this way, the co-op jobs not only reinforce the basic principles and techniques learned in the university classroom and laboratories, but the co-op opportunity expands and utilizes these learned ideas. In addition, co-op programs are also designed to get more intense and more involved as the students progress ("College" 70).

(7) Another advantage to the co-op education program is the fact that companies are able to continue where universities unfortunately fall short. Companies can correct universities' shortcomings by providing the perfect environment for realistic application of knowledge. One of the problems that universities have, according to a National Science Research Foundation Study is that their equipment is outdated, averaging 15 years old, but fortunately co-op students can utilize companies' equipment which on the average is only five years old (Mai 5). Not only can students use the more advanced equipment, but they also can work true-to-life problems and come up with possible solutions that will benefit the company and mankind as well.

(8) Co-op jobs also provide a means for their students to explore jobs and job situations to which their majors can lead. Not only can these students study their main career objectives but they also can explore and observe the daily work of people of their own academic field of study. Therefore, co-op students can more easily discern if what they observe is what they want for their own careers. Students who do not co-op have no such advantage. As William Mobley, dean of the College of Business Administration at Texas A&M University points out, "An internship gives students a more realistic view of the world of work. It also gives them perception, maturity, and more accurate expectations" (qtd. in English). Having seen and experienced first hand their career interests, students can more easily determine what they want. If they come to the conclusion that their proposed major is not what they want, they will be able to choose another. But many times, their interests are closely related to other careers that work hand in hand with their initial career choice. Thus these students' career changes will not be drastic and will not affect

their academic major requirements greatly. In comparison to students who do not participate in co-op programs, students who are involved in co-op programs are able to pinpoint more specifically what kind of lifetime careers they want, and more practically, will not have wasted four years of expensive college education on the expectation of being suited for their work.

(9) Since co-op employment can affirm students' interests and career choices, these students are likely to display a better attitude toward college and toward the future. These students, according to Ralph Porter, president of the National Commission for Cooperative Education, "persist longer in school because they find meaning in going to school" ("College" 71). When students and people in general find meaning or purpose in something, they are inclined to be more serious about it. As a result both their maturity and motivation will increase. These students are more motivated to do well both in their academic studies and in their co-op jobs.

(10) If a co-op student finds a career that suits him, he will be pleased to know that his co-op employment carries with it a "50% chance of leading to a permanent position after graduation" ("College" 71). Many companies utilize their co-op programs as a "pre-recruiting program," as explained by Bob Patek, manager of recruitment and placement for Chrysler Corporation, which allows them "to find the best talent before somebody else does" (qtd. in English). Chrysler is not the only one; many companies hire those who have done well in their internship programs. According to Paul Pratt, "Many [students] stay with their original employer and advance to more challenging and well-paid work" ("Work" 319).

(11) Even if a co-op company or firm does not hire its co-op students for full time positions, these recent graduates still have an advantage over competition in the job market. Most importantly they have experience, and since experience is often a prerequisite for job placement, these students will be at a greater advantage. As R.J. Hay, manager of recruitment for Shell Oil Company, concludes, "Those who have had internships have a leg up" on competition (English). Besides having work experience in their academic fields, these students have met professionals in their fields who will not only prove to be important job references but may also be able to direct them to other jobs.

(12) A final benefit of co-op education is the nice salaries that many students are paid. Students can and do earn up to \$7,000 a semester which can mean anywhere from \$150 to \$400 per week (Miller). Northeastern University officials state that their students earn on the average of \$24,850 in their five years of co-op study ("Work" 318). These salaries may help some students pay for the rising costs of a college education. Even though co-op students' salaries may be modest compared to those

of their coworkers who have degrees, nonetheless they are supplementary to the many other invaluable rewards of cooperative education. The money is an excellent benefit of co-op programs; however, both the companies and the universities stress the learning by actual experience over the salary benefits ("College").

(13) Learning by actual experience is the major benefit of the many benefits of cooperative education. Universities and companies are realizing that cooperative education develops better educated people with a better chance for success. Interested in their students' success after graduation, universities will continue to train and educate their students to the desires of companies. In the near future, though, this may, and rightly so, include cooperative education programs for all students.

Works Cited

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