

Co-op: The Path to a Debt-Free College Education

By Gary J. Erwin

Did you know . . .

- > Although cooperative education has been around for many years, many high school counselors are only moderately familiar with the concept.
- > Students can participate in cooperative education programs and still graduate from college in four to four-and-a-half years.
- > Cooperative education programs cover all academic disciplines—from engineering and science to writing and editing.
- > Co-op earnings range from \$2,500 to \$15,000 a year while enrolled in college.
- > Approximately 80 of the top 100 companies among the Fortune 500 employ co-op students.
- > Co-op can lead to full-time professional employment before college graduation and many students who engage in co-op during college graduate *debt-free*.

It ain't easy, baby: college costs a bundle. Most academic institutions must increase tuition between 2% and 10% each year just to pay bills and keep their heads above water. This means that students approaching the start of their college careers often have a tough choice to make—take out more student loans, thus falling deeper into debt even before school begins, or work a few years to earn enough money to get through their first semesters of college. Trying to chart a course to help fund your college career can be a daunting endeavor.

But for those who hang tough and feel that there must be a better way out there to pay for school, the answer is simple: professional cooperative education. You can earn enough money during your terms away from school throughout college to pay tuition and room and board and still graduate debt-free. So what will it be? The debilitating dangers of student loans or a degree paid for through professional work

experience that can jump-start your first job and help you develop a career network?

A 2003 survey of high school counselors and associated research conducted by the National Commission for Cooperative Education (NCCE, www.co-op.edu)—a premier organization dedicated to the advancement of the highest-quality college-level cooperative education programs in the U.S.—showed that while two-thirds of counselors responding to the 2003-2004 survey could identify one or more benefits of co-op, the vast majority wanted more information concerning the advantages. It's clear that people learn information more easily when they can immediately apply their learning to an actual activity.

Approximately 50,000 employers in the U.S. participate in cooperative education. In addition, more than 60% of students who participate in co-op accept permanent jobs from their co-op employers, and more than 95% of

students who engage in co-op obtain employment immediately upon graduation. Corporations find that cooperative education schools fill important needs by identifying and providing talented professionals *before* they graduate from college, which is critical in a tight, highly competitive economy. Co-op programs help companies because they spend less time and money training individuals for assignments, especially when students take classroom theories and apply them immediately and directly to a co-op position.

Give me some examples Mike Eagle, who is a retired vice president of manufacturing for Eli Lilly & Company in Indianapolis, Indiana, and vice chair of the Kettering University Board of Trustees in Flint, Michigan, believes that his Kettering co-op gave him the start in his career that he needed to succeed. “The adjustment from high school senior to college freshman can be difficult for many,” he explains.



Mike Eagle
Vice Chair
Kettering University
Board of Trustees



Sueann Wickstrom
Sophomore
Mechanical Engineering
Kettering University

“Having a co-op experience mixed in with the academic work in my freshman year provided an opportunity to learn from some experienced and supportive colleagues in the workplace. There is no doubt in my mind that the two-and-a-half years of practical experience gained concurrent with my degree gave me a head start in my career. As I began full-time work, I was more mature, more experienced, and already respected for my accomplishments in co-op work assignments. I would not do it differently if I was starting over.”

Current students in cooperative work assignments echo Eagle’s experience. Sueann Wickstrom, a sophomore majoring in Mechanical Engineering at Kettering, co-ops at Harley-Davidson Motor Co. in Milwaukee. “I am gaining hands-on engineering experiences related to my desired focus [acoustics] in the NVH [Noise, Vibration, and Harshness] Department,” she says. “Being a Harley-Davidson cooperative education student has given me the opportunity to gain experience in a technologically advanced NVH lab.”

Dozens of cooperative schools

The list of cooperative education schools in the U.S. continues to grow. Some of them include Kettering University, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Antioch College, Drexel University, Georgia Institute of Technology, the University of Michigan-Dearborn, Rochester Institute of Technology, Johnson & Wales University, Northeastern University, the University of Cincinnati, Pace Univer-

sity, and the University of Louisville. Many students participating in co-op at these and other schools receive excellent wages, stipends for travel, and assistance with locating housing during their co-op term. Faculty and staff at these institutions also have years of industry experience as well as lasting relationships with American companies. Corporations seek out these faculty and staff to aid in developing new products, conduct sponsored research, and assist in the future development of the organization. In return, many schools gain additional cooperative education opportunities with companies as the institution builds their stable of professional positions for students.


Co-op = test Co-op is perhaps one of the best tests for students trying to decide whether or not to go into certain fields. They develop solid skills in résumé writing, learn how to negotiate corporate structures and manage professional assignments, and develop network skills that will serve them for their entire career. Additionally, they have

the chance to work with and learn from people of diverse backgrounds, which is crucial in today’s global economy.

Other advantages of cooperative education In a tight economy, co-op can mean the difference between landing a job after graduation or a career in a chosen field of study. Based on NCCE research, more than 60% of students in cooperative education programs accept permanent positions from their co-op employers. In an environment where students find themselves at college for more than four years working toward their degree, gaining relevant, paid professional experience during this time means that students are less likely to

drop out of college altogether. Instead, they finish their degrees and graduate with up to two or three years of professional experience, an attribute that employers seek, yet one that students struggle to fulfill while enrolled at schools that don’t participate in cooperative education programs.

→ A good source for more information on co-op programs is the NCCE website: go to www.co-op.edu.org, then click on “FAQs.” Your school or community library may also have a copy of the *Directory of College Cooperative Education Programs*.

Finding the right school—one that offers the program you want at a price you and your family can afford—can be a real challenge. But adding cooperative education into the mix can give you a definite advantage. 

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