

# Making the Grade with Cooperative Education

By Gary J. Erwin

Let's face it: in a tight economy, good gigs are tough to come by. On top of that, gaining the academic preparation necessary to land a great-paying position is getting more and more expensive.

**W**hy? Because most academic institutions must increase tuition between 2% and 10% each year just to pay bills. This means that students starting their college careers often have difficult choices to make—take out student loans, thus falling deep into debt even before school begins; try to obtain financial aid before the semester or term starts; or work a few years to earn enough money to get through their first semesters of college.

But for those who believe 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 devastating burden of student loans, the financial fiasco of financial aid, or a degree paid for through professional work experience that can jump-start your first job and help you develop a career network?

A 2005/2006 survey of high school counselors and associated research conducted by the National Commission for Cooperative Education (NCCE, [www.co-op.edu](http://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 one-third of counselors who responded had no knowledge of what co-op is.

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.

**The Real Deal** Robert Evangelista, author of *The Business of Winning* ([www.businessofwinning.com](http://www.businessofwinning.com)), an award-winning book on business man-

agement, is president of the Kettering University Alumni Association. He is also the youngest business unit manager in the history of General Motors Corp., with more than 18 years as a manufacturing manager. He believes his Kettering co-op experience gave him the jump to his successful career other college programs simply could not provide.

"In all my years of managing, I saw hundreds of recent college graduates come into the organization," Evangelista explains. "Most college grads come in with tons of ambition—they say, 'I know there's a mountain here, and I'd sure like to climb it.' The Kettering grad comes in with four years of work experience and says, 'Okay, I've got my map of the mountain. I want to set up my base camp here, here's the list of supplies I'll need, here's the estimate of how long it'll take, and if it's okay with you, I'd like to end this meeting and go start climbing.'"

Jim McCaslin, president and COO of Harley Davidson Motor Co., says his co-op experience helped him learn to solve real-world problems: "Learning theory in the classroom is very important, but to be able to actually apply theories to a

problem in a professional environment is absolutely essential for companies to succeed in the global marketplace."

Rachel Charron, of Nottingham, Maryland, was an Environmental Chemistry major at Kettering

who performed her co-op assignment at the GM Powertrain Flint Engine South. Started in 2004 by GM's environmental group, the project focused on helping the facility become greener.

Charron says her experience at GM helped her apply what she learned in the classroom. "Because I had on-the-job experience, I was able to start a full-time position as an environmental engineer with a bang."

**>>> For more information  
on co-op programs,  
visit the NCCE web site:  
[www.co-op.edu](http://www.co-op.edu)  
then click on FAQs.**



**“Because I had on-the-job experience, I was able to start a full-time position as an environmental engineer with a bang.”**

**Rachel Charron**  
Environmental Chemistry, Kettering University; co-op assignment at the GM Powertrain Flint Engine South.

### 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 University, 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 help develop 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 institutions build their stable of positions for students.

### Co-op enhances student and employer outcomes

The NCCE also reports that students who engage in cooperative education gain a number of advantages. These include:

- the ability to integrate classroom theory with workplace practice;
- clarity about academic goals;
- technological knowledge through the use of state-of-the-art equipment;
- understanding of workplace cultures;
- increased maturity and motivation;

- productive and responsible citizenship skills.

Employers who hire cooperative education students gain, too. Advantages include:

- employing well-prepared, short-term employees;
- increased staff diversity;
- flexibility in addressing human resource needs;
- access to candidates with needed skills and backgrounds;
- partnerships with schools and opportunities to provide input on quality and relevancy of school curricula;
- cost-effective productivity.

### 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. 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.

Finding the right school—one that offers the program you want at a price you and your family can afford—can

## Did you know...

### Co-op facts and figures

- A recent study reports that a third of high school counselors have little or no knowledge of co-op education programs, and 11% are “not at all” familiar with them.
- Co-op education programs let students work in positions that provide extensive experience in their chosen field, which results in higher starting salaries upon graduation.
- Earnings through co-op programs can range from \$2500 to \$14,000 a year; many students make as much as \$40,000 during their entire college career.
- Currently, 50,000 companies offer co-op positions, including 80% of the Fortune 500 firms.
- Co-op provides a unique opportunity to network with high-level executives, which could lead to fruitful professional opportunities for students.

be a real challenge. But adding cooperative education into the mix can give you a definite advantage.

Gary J. Erwin is Director of Publications and Communications and a lecturer of Communications at Kettering University in Flint, Michigan. Grateful acknowledgement is made to the National Commission for Cooperative Education publication *The Best of Co-op* (2005-2005 editions), from which much of the research information in this article was derived.