

Best Practices: Co-op Models

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November 1, 2006

Almost 20 years ago, I was asked by our Vice-President of Academic and Student Services to develop a survey of colleges in the northwest to assess different ways to offer Cooperative Education. What I found at that time was a wide range of models in use. A current survey of literature around Co-op Models shows a similar spectrum of models used today by colleges, universities and high schools. As Co-op has evolved, the one constant has been its flexibility to meet the needs of a variety of educational institutions serving a changing student population with work-based learning opportunities.

Co-op Essentials

While different schools do Co-op differently, some core elements remain the same in any work-based learning model. The National Commission for Cooperative Education developed a definition in 1994 that recognizes these essential characteristics:

Cooperative Education is a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals. It provides progressive experiences in integrating theory and practice. Co-op is a partnership among students, educational institutions and employers, with specified responsibilities for each party. (1994)

This definition is mirrored by the Accreditation Council for Cooperative Education in its "Attributes of Cooperative Education Programs" including "institutionalizing" Cooperative Education, faculty involvement, student involvement and employer involvement. (2006)

The State of Oregon guidelines for Cooperative Work Experience (2001) and the State of Washington guidelines for Cooperative Education (2005) also reflect the primary elements of integrating work-based learning with academic studies in partnership with employers through formal agreements.

However, universities, colleges and high schools differ widely on a number of basic elements including how Co-op is formally recognized; how Co-op is structured within an educational program; the roles of faculty, employers and student services staff; required paperwork and documentation; whether or not pay is required; etc. Different institutions may be structuring Co-op around the needs of their students, the culture of their institution and/or the availability of resources.

Co-op Model Characteristics

Research over the past 30 years has identified several variations to Co-op programs. Some of these have been discussed and debated for decades. Others are relatively new. All can shape how an institution offers a work-based learning experience to its students.

Required v. Elective Co-op

Co-op may be a required component of an academic program, a "technical" elective or a general elective open to any student. Program majors may be required to complete a Co-op. Often professional-technical training programs will require a work experience for degrees or certifications. Sometimes the profession itself may require some training experience prior to entry into the field. However, many experiences may

be of value to the student not only as an academic elective, but as an additional learning experience and added qualification to offer employers on completion of studies.

Alternating v. Parallel v. Combined Alternating and Parallel Schedule

Co-op experiences can be offered using a variety of schedules. Alternating programs place the student in full-time experiences between terms, often giving the student a “term off” to pursue the Co-op. Parallel programs integrate part-time work experiences into the student’s schedule, with the Co-op occurring in the same term as classes. Some programs allow students to pursue both alternating and parallel experiences, with students doing some Co-op part-time and some full-time. Summer and “capstone” experiences often fit into this model.

Single Term v. Multiple Term

Depending on the amount or type of experience a school wants for a student, a Co-op may be offered within a single term or may be offered over multiple terms. When programs require many hours of Co-op or require training that can only be delivered over an extended length of time, a multi-term experience may be the only option. Some schools will let the student Co-op with more than one employer over several terms, providing a variety of experiences. Schools may also defer to a minimum hours requirement in lieu of a term requirement.

Credit v. Non-Credit

Nearly all Co-op programs provide some sort of formal recognition of completion. Credit is probably the most common, especially among colleges. But some institutions do not provide credit, instead granting a certificate of completion or notating a transcript. The method of acknowledging Co-op in articulation agreements will also vary depending on the institutions involved.

Paid v. Unpaid

Most university models require Co-op experiences to be paid. However, community colleges and high schools often have a mix of paid and unpaid experiences. Some academic programs and their corresponding career fields may traditionally use volunteer positions, while others typically offer paid positions.

Both paid and unpaid positions must comply with Wage and Hour guidelines and Worker Compensation requirements. High school students may also be limited by Child Labor Law and other issues around minors in the work place.

Centralized v. Decentralized Organization

Cooperative Education can be administered in several ways. Some institutions utilize a centralized model, with funding, supervision and curriculum development consolidated within a central department. This department may be identified as “Cooperative Education” or be associated with Career Development, Counseling and Guidance, etc. Other colleges and schools may distribute administrative functions throughout the organization to reside within various academic departments, usually identified with FTE generation. Still other institutions may have a “mixed model”, with some responsibilities and/or funding coming from a central administration, but primary curriculum and teaching responsibilities spread throughout academic programs.

Roles of Students, Instructors, Support Staff and Employers

Regardless of the model, the core relationship in Co-op is between the learner, student, and the co-teachers, instructor and employer. However, the level of involvement and responsibility for each of these partners can vary quite widely.

In some programs, the student is assigned learning outcomes by the instructor. Other programs will actively involve the student in developing individualized learning goals. The student may also be part of the evaluation process directly or indirectly.

Traditionally, curriculum development has been seen as the responsibility of the instructor and academic department. However, the employer can be given much more input into both program outcomes and

individual outcomes by schools. Advisory committees, various feedback methods, and active participation in individual student assignments are all ways to do this.

While the most common partners in Co-op are student, instructor and employer, some institutions utilize student services professionals, either to provide auxiliary support (such as job search preparation) or as primary service deliverers. Additionally, where Co-op is viewed as part of the career development process, advisors and counselors may provide significant services before, during and after the Co-op experience itself.

Linking with Other Programs

Because of its career and work focus, Cooperative Education has often been connected with career counseling and student employment services. However, a recent trend has been the identification of several programs with complimentary, if not parallel, objectives.

Service learning has a direct experiential learning component with its focus on volunteerism in the community. Often a service learning experience can be continued and expanded into a full Co-op experience at the same site and doing many of the same activities. Additionally, employer contacts and others resources can be shared effectively in partnership within an organization.

Co-op has always had a “distance learning feel”, as the student typically completes his/her experience away from the college or school. Co-op seminars and requisite documentation can be delivered electronically. Where schools offer degrees or certificates strictly on-line, Co-op can become an integral way to give the student a “hands on” component to their program. Even site support may be delivered via distance through “proctored” visits from local education professionals.

Flexibility or Inconsistency?

With so many variations of the Cooperative Education Model, it is tempting to conclude that universities, colleges and high schools may be compromising the fundamental elements of learning to meet the preferences of students, employers, faculty and others. However, when we return to the essential characteristics of Co-op, we see that the core pedagogy is sound.

For experiential learning to work, we must have a “structured educational strategy.” Experiences must integrate “classroom studies with learning” and “theory with practice.” Activities must be productive experiences “related to a student’s academic or career goals.” And Co-op must be partnership between student, educational institution and employer.

While variations of the model may differ, these differences do not necessarily prohibit an institution from offering a quality program that fits its individual needs. The ACCE has noted that even under “...accreditation guidelines, an institution's co-op offerings are allowed to be diverse without compromising the program's integrity.” (2006) Instead, institutions can utilize the elements of Co-op that best fit the learning needs of their students and the opportunities within the community. In fact, this model for experiential learning has been working for over 100 years.

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