

Creating Best Practices with Employer Partners - How to Construct Quality Off-Campus Educational Pedagogy

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Abstract

Starting or growing a co-op/internship program can be intimidating; for both educators and potential employer partners. In an effort to learn the pain points for both parties, opportunities to break down barriers and build bridges, and identify actionable steps to get started, faculty from the University of Cincinnati's Division of Experience-Based Learning and Career Education conducted a two-year research project with 65 co-op and internship employers from more than 15 unique industry clusters, and 50 university faculty and staff representing 24 unique institutions. This poster will graphically share the resulting findings from more than 1250 qualitative responses, and generate discussion on the educational pedagogy of creating best practices for employer partners. Find out what "the survey says"!

Keywords: Cooperative Education, Internship, Career pathway, Employer partnerships, Best practices

The University of Cincinnati is known as the institution that "invented" or began the cooperative education practice in 1906. As defined, cooperative education and internships are an immersion in the practice of workplace. At the University of Cincinnati, there are separate and distinctive definitions for the terms "cooperative education" and "internship" and it is necessary to clarify and discriminate between these in order to frame the educational pedagogy of how each is delivered by both faculty and employer partners to student participants. The definition of cooperative education (co-op) is a full-time (35+ hours per week), paid, supervised, career-relevant and work-integrated learning experience for a student. At the University of Cincinnati, co-op is most commonly delivered in alternating semester rotations with school semesters and delivered every other semester - year-round. Internships can be part or full-time, supervised career-relevant experiences for students, often completed while simultaneously enrolled in classes. These experiences are most often paid, yet can be unpaid if working for a non-profit organization.

Whether an internship or a co-op, work-integrated learning provides a student with the opportunity to learn in an off-campus setting with unique learning outcomes that differ from the traditional classroom model. This "off-campus" learning supports a student's preparation for the world beyond the classroom and in their field of study. When students assemble experiences in the workplace, they learn to problem solve, adapt to change, develop self-confidence, and manage both time and projects in a manner that is tied to performance.

Associate Professor Cindy Damschroder and her colleague Assistant Professor Aaron Bradley in the Division of Experience-Based Learning and Career Education at the University of Cincinnati

conducted a two-year research project with 65 co-op and internship employers from more 15 unique industry clusters, and 50 university faculty and staff representing 24 unique institutions. The resulting research yielded 1250 qualitative responses and extracted key insights regarding opportunities to improve the experience for all parties engaged with educating students in the workplace - employers, faculty and staff.

Literature Review

Those who study learning theories generally accept that learning can happen in a variety of contexts, and therefore locations. The issue of credit or non-credit bearing experiential learning semesters notwithstanding, students look forward to applying the theories of the classroom to the “practice” of the workplace. There is a substantive body of research regarding the benefits of cooperative education from the student’s perspective yet employers who treat students as valued members of their organizations stand out to those in experiential learning and are top choices for students when applying to these positions. According to Scott Weighart,

There are many possible motivators for employers when it comes to the rationale for hiring student employees: they are seeking cost-effective resources for getting work done; they are concerned about the high cost of benefits and like the idea of co-ops or interns as benefit-free labor; when the economy is unpredictable, co-ops or interns allow them a way to get work done without making a long-term commitment to a resource that may not be needed in the future. If the economy picks up, the employer could hire a full-time employee or additional co-op. If business gets worse, they simply can opt against hiring another co-op without having to lay-off someone and provide unemployment compensation; they have a seasonal or cyclical need or a temporary project; a co-op or internship program is a great mutual trial period to help employers and students figure out if they are a good match for each other after graduation. Given how costly it is to hire the wrong individual - as well as the fact that interviewing is not necessarily a highly scientific predictor of job success - this is an important factor in having a co-op program (7).

Nevertheless, the benefits of relationship building between the university and the employer partner go beyond this. According to NACE’s 2017 Internship & Co-op Report the average conversion rate from intern to full-time hire is 51.3% and the five-year retention rate for interns who are converted to full-time hires is 51.8%

(<http://www.nacweb.org/store/2017/internship-and-co-op-report/>).

As noted in *Beyond the Skills Gap*, qualitative research with industries such as manufacturing and biotechnology in addition to interviews with community colleges and universities throughout Wisconsin resulted in a two-year study, 145 interviews representing 17 institutions and 52 companies. “What are the competencies you think are most essential for success in the workplace?... If they had to imagine a composite ‘ideal’ employee, they envisioned a hard-working individual with appropriate technical training (knowledge as well as the ability to apply technical information), solid problem-solving skills, and the abilities to communicate well, work in teams, and to continually learn new things” (<http://www.nacweb.org/career->

[readiness/trends-and-predictions/beyond-the-skills-gap/](#)). Much of this qualitative data will be echoed when discussing the industry clusters that were interviewed during the research in Ohio.

When employers are designing a co-op program and wish to incorporate “best practices” there are scholarly sources to refer to in order to shape their program. According to *Learning Outcomes and the Educational Value of Cooperative Education* a program should be built around the principles for effective student learning such as: encouraging feedback; setting expectations; an expectation for student success; transfer knowledge to student and monitor progress; and design a program that has an educational focus or “purpose” (Cates & Jones, 1).

Research Methods

Professors Damschroder and Bradley held four workshops in four cities across Ohio; Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland and Toledo. At the onset of these workshops an initial goal was to facilitate dialogue with both existing and prospective co-op and/or internship employer partners, supplemented with training “tips” for best practices. Dialogue was facilitated with a slide deck focusing on discussion topics such as brand building on campus, interviewing techniques and onboarding methods.

The first workshop, held in Cincinnati had more than 75 attendees traversing a wide variety of industry sectors and discipline hiring needs. In addition to employer partners in attendance however, were educators from other academic institutions who were equally interested in learning about employer partner practices, needs and their perspective with on-campus engagement. A rich dialogue ensued, existing employer partners came to the workshop armed with a wide array of questions as well as concerns that ran deeper than the “surface-level” discussion of brand building, recruiting and onboarding. As the workshop evolved, it revealed an authentic desire for either “following” or “establishing” best practices and this set the stage for the subsequent three workshops.

Learning outcomes of the Columbus, Cleveland and Toledo workshops addressed “pain-points” from the perspective of both the educator and the employer and how to work beyond them; opportunities for quick wins in a program of any size; and long-term strategies for growth and program improvement. In all, 1250 qualitative responses were gathered from the 65 co-op and internship employers from more than 15 unique industry clusters and 50 university faculty and staff representing 24 unique institutions.

Discussion

The distillation of the qualitative responses led to the creation of both an educator and employer infographic as a means to convey the “best practices.” Focusing on the employer account, broad categories such as: On-Campus Engagement, On-the-Job Engagement and Future Planning are defined. On-Campus Engagement is inclusive of brand building and the ability to tell your story, envisioning your program and the “why,” crafting a job description and preparing for

interviewing and having a pre-hire engagement plan. On-the-Job Engagement consists of student onboarding, setting expectations, providing feedback in real-time, connecting co-ops/interns throughout the company and providing end of term evaluations. Future Planning should include an exit interview and an examination of how the semester “went” - what went well and what can be improved.

Conclusion

The process of building and growing a co-op or internship program is not a “cut-n-dry” static process rather it is “fluid” and ever changing as organizational needs change, students are hired for different projects and with different competencies. Educators/advisors strive to prepare students with resumes and portfolios that target appropriately the correct audience, they empower students with skills to research companies thoroughly and practice mock interviews. Furthermore, once the co-op/internship has concluded the teaching pedagogy needs to be in place for student reflection - what, so what, now what. With reflection on the part of both the employer and the student, and leveraging these “best practices” learnings - educators, advisors and employer partners can work together to make experiential learning at best a conversion to full- time hire and at the least a memorable journey!

Works Cited

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Author Biography

Cindy Damschroder

Associate Professor and Director of the Design and Arts Initiatives, Cindy is a long-term member of the Division of Experience-Based Learning and Career Education. As an advisor who facilitates placement of the Interior Design students into their co-op jobs on alternating semester appointments, her instructional background has been focused primarily on first and second year learning. The undergraduate environment and how successful learning objectives, modules and assessments are elements of Professor Damschroder's research pedagogy.

Cindy is a passionate advisor and educator that places students at the center of their educational goals. She strives to create an experiential environment that engages the student, helps them to feel personally invested in their learning, and often offers advice and counseling to those students looking to define themselves within a large-scale university environment.