

Professional Practice Seminar

A successful course for preparing students for their Cooperative Education Experiences (or the work place in general)

Gary R. Martin, Ed.D.

September 23 2002

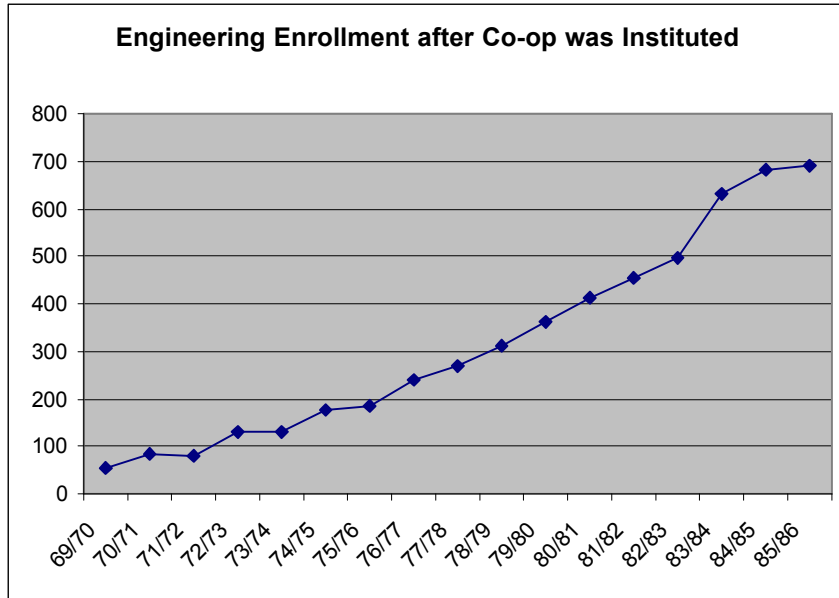
Abstract

The School of Engineering and Computer Science at the University of the Pacific requires all their engineering students to complete 12 months of full-time Cooperative Education. The program has included a mandatory orientation class since its inception in 1970. This paper presents and outline of the class with corresponding details of the content and rationale when appropriate. The primary topics comprise: Co-op Program Requirements and Logistics, How to Get a Job, Making the Transition, Professionalism. A literature review revealed a dearth of articles even related to the subject; nothing was found regarding content recommendations. The authors' experience confirms literature suggestions that such a course facilitates a smoother placement process, and fosters an enhanced experience.

Introduction

Cooperative Education programs take all shapes and sizes across the country. The extent of elaboration varies from a simple "Jobs Announcements" bulletin board maintained by a clerical staff member, to requiring 12-18 months of full-time participation carefully integrated into the curriculum. The more elaborate programs have professional staff interfacing between the students and the employers. The students typically alternate semesters of full-time coursework with full-time semesters on their Cooperative Education assignments (Co-op). The level of development yields substantially greater value, ensuring that all graduates of the program acquire the practical experience necessary to help them relate the theory to applications. The required practicum component enhances curriculum respect, emulating such respected professionals as Medical doctors, with their residency requirement; teachers, with their student teaching requirement; and certified public accountants, with their two-year practicum requirement.

Twenty years ago, many schools were at the low end of the above continuum. Since then, most programs have enhanced their programs. The School of Engineering and Computer Science at the University of the Pacific (Pacific) implemented a 12-month mandatory Co-op component in 1970. The program is credited for saving the Engineering School. The school's enrollment increased 100% the year after its inception, from 50 to 100, and continued to increase substantially the next ten years.



The program is touted today as the primary reason for students choosing to attend the school. Students take one semester off during their junior year in order to work full time on their first Co-op assignment. Students return to school for 12 months before going out on a second Co-op, for a complement of 12 months. (See

curriculum plan below.)

The program used to place students out for four 3-month periods of employment. We changed it to the two longer periods to accommodate industry's request that the students have more time to get up to speed.

All of our students enroll in a one-unit class called the Professional Practice Seminar (PPS) the semester immediately prior to their first term out on (a full-time) Co-op. The class meets one hour each week and covers the following topics:

Co-op Program Requirements and Logistics

- Class Overview
- Co-op Placement Process
- Final Details

How to Get a Job

- Résumé Development
- Company Profile Research
- Personal Job Search Skills
- Interviewing Skills
- Mock Interviewing Exercise

Making the Transition

- Guest Lecture by Visiting Co-op Employer
- Student Panel (i.e., by past Co-op students)
- Finances

Professionalism

Professionalism

Ethics
Time Management
Gender and Cultural Sensitivity in the Work Place

The reader can see how these topics are lined up throughout the semester by reviewing the syllabus below. Many sections include reading assignments in the text book, *Welcome to the Professional World* (Kendall-Hunt).

There is limited research available addressing the orientation of engineering Co-op students to industry with a preparatory class or extensive orientation seminar. The requirement of the Professional Practice Orientation course by virtue of Pacific's mandatory engineering Co-op program translates into a unique curriculum. While other programs promote and encourage students to enroll in mini-seminar courses covering such topics as long-term and short-term goals, résumé writing, interview skills development, employer expectations, professional attire, it is extremely rare to find a required course lasting the duration of the semester prior to the student entering the job market. Although most Co-op programs have course prerequisites before entering the field, Pacific is unique in its presentation of such comprehensive topics in the form of an orientation prerequisite course taught by full time faculty.

The balance of this paper will briefly discuss each of the topics in terms of content and purpose.

Co-op Logistics

The "Co-op Logistics" component of the class articulates the mechanics of the actual job of getting the students through the Co-op process.

Class Overview: The first day of the course introduces the class to the syllabus, participation expectations, grading, etc. (The second half of the hour jumps into how to develop their résumés. See below.)

Co-op Placement Process: The next class meeting describes the entire Co-op placement process. We present a simple animated flow-chart which illustrates the following stages or steps:

- Students develop résumés
- Students research potential companies
- Students submit list of companies to which they wish to apply
- School mails résumés
- Employers screen résumés
- Students interview
- Companies make offers
- The end and the beginning

Final Details: The final class is held in the evening to accommodate all students going out on a Co-op (i.e. both first- and second-timers). This is a valuable time for instructions and reminders in such areas as:

- Tuition costs and payment plans for participating in the Co-op Program
- Special instructions for students who receive financial aid
- Evaluations by students in the PPS and the general Co-op Office performance
- Written assignments during the Co-op

Regarding the latter, all students complete a 3-5 page Co-op report during their Co-op assignments describing various aspects of their Co-op experiences. Besides being used for assessment by their Co-op coordinator, these papers assist future student applicants to research the various companies. (Discussed below.)

The final class is also a somewhat heart-warming time to send the students off with best wishes and success-oriented exhortations.

How to Get a Job

This section reviews the primary job search skills.

How to Develop a Résumé: We pride ourselves in being as early out of the starting blocks as possible to get our students' job searches going. Thus, we get our students going in developing their résumés the very first day of class. Most of our students use the résumé template in M.S. Word to develop their résumés. Our employers like this format with its high readability. They know exactly where to look for what, rather than having to relearn how to read each résumé. And it is easy for the students.

How to Research Company Profiles: We have found it to be a tendency for our students to try to just choose companies to which they would like to apply based on name recognition and geographical location. We prefer the students do some research among our employer files to learn of other opportunities which may be well-suited to their interests and abilities. So, after advising them of the resources available for this task, we ask each of them to make a 1-minute presentation on one company of their choice the next week. This forces students to learn how to research at least one company. It also helps all the students to learn a lot about other companies by just attending class that day. (This is not to mention the points scored with the accreditation people by providing more public speaking experience and training.)

Conducting a Personal Job Search: Because all of our students must obtain 12 full time months of Co-op experience, there is an added element of pressure to succeed in securing their Co-op offers. Pacific accepts shared responsibility in this process to the extent that we print a guarantee in our college catalog that all students will receive at least one Co-op offer each semester that one is required, given their full cooperation in the process. In addition to the extensive job placement activities which we facilitate, we also encourage

students to conduct smaller job searches on their own. To this end, we offer a 20-minute motivational talk on how to network, how to utilize job ads, and how to identify potential employers through such resources as web career indices and the yellow pages.

Interviewing Skills & Mock Interviewing Exercise: We devote one full class session to the art of interviewing. We then spend the next week conducting video-taped mock interviews. In student groups of three (plus a Co-op staff member), we have one student interview another while the third student observes. The Co-op staff member facilitates the exercise including asking a few interview questions him or herself (usually including at least one question which the interviewee was not likely expecting). The interview lasts 10-15 minutes. We then spend 15-20 minutes offering positive as well as constructive feedback along with playing the tape back. This exercise always yields by far the highest scores in the final class evaluations by the students.

Making the Transition

This section addresses some more personal aspects of the actual transition for the students from the classroom to the work place.

Guest Lecture by Visiting Co-op Employer: We invite an employer representative who has supervised Co-op students in the past to speak to the class on such topics as tips for securing a Co-op, how to get a good start on the job, and how to deal with various challenges during the tenure of their Co-op assignments. The industrial representatives always appear honored to be invited to speak, and the students are uninhibited in their questions.

Student Panel: We also invite a few past Co-op students to serve on a student panel. This is a no-holds-barred session of candor which, like the above session, also reveals to the class ideas on how to get a good start and how to excel in their Co-op experiences.

Finances: Most of the students report to us that they have never been in a position of making the amount of money they will be making on their Co-ops. We invite an accounting professor or an accountant from the community to come in and discuss budgeting, taxation, and investment ideas.

Professionalism

The “Professionalism” topics of the class seek to offer a series of crash courses in some more academic aspects of the professional transition. The following topics generally seem to encompass awareness levels which are important in the professional setting, and that are relatively easy to at least introduce to students, sensitizing them to an hour’s worth of basics along with hopefully instilling a desire to study and think about each of them further on their own.

Professionalism: We define “professionalism” and distinguish professional occupations from others.

Ethics: We present some basic tenets of ethics. We then present some actual ethical dilemmas reported by past Co-op students, inviting the class to propose what they might have done themselves in those situations.

Time Management: We introduce time management concepts and practical personal organization systems.

Gender and Cultural Sensitivity in the Work Place: We introduce some related history, theories, and laws. We then present some related situational dilemmas, inviting the class to propose how the situation should be handled.

Conclusion

As our Co-op staff members attend various Co-op related conferences, we hear countless problems and frustrations aired by other Co-op coordinators from both academe as well as industry. As we listen to these problems, it is surprising how few of them occur in our program. As we track down the difference, it often comes down to the Professional Practice Seminar. The assistance engendered by fifteen captive hours presenting logistics, job development skills, transition discussions, and professionalism seminars eliminates problems and enhances the overall Co-op experience for the students, the employers, and the School.

University of the Pacific School of Engineering Curriculum Layout

1st Year	Fall	<i>Classes</i>
	Spring	<i>Classes</i>

2nd Year	Fall	<i>Classes</i>
	Spring	<i>Classes</i>
	Summer	<i>Classes</i>
3rd Year	Fall	<i>Classes</i>
	Spring	1st Co-op
	Summer	<i>Classes</i>
4th Year	Fall	<i>Classes</i>
	Spring	<i>Classes</i>
	Summer	2nd Co-op
5th Year	Fall	2nd Co-op
	Spring	