

Tips for Establishing an Effective Co-op Program

Most universities have their own guidelines and policies regarding co-ops. This information is provided courtesy of California Polytechnic State University, but should be used merely as a resource. Be sure to consult with the school of your prospective co-op student for details pertaining to that specific campus.

The following information is provided to assist you in establishing and maintaining a successful Cooperative Education program. The time and effort you put into advance planning and ongoing supervision of your Co-op program will directly affect the quality of the experience-both for the students and your company. Please feel free to contact our staff if you need additional information and assistance.

INITIAL PLANNING

- Complete a job description and task analysis that details the student's job responsibilities. This should include short-term work assignments and long-term projects and goals.
- Choose a supervisor for the Co-op students. The supervisor should be accessible, supportive and interested in working with Co-op students.
- Provide appropriate workspace and technical support for your Co-op students. This may include a computer workstation, software, telephone/fax, e-mail account, and any supplies necessary to conduct business.
- Establish a formal pay structure and define any benefits offered to Co-op students. This may include Co-op tuition reimbursement, relocation costs, sick leave/paid vacation, etc. The pay structure and/or benefits should be applied consistently to all students. Career Services can advise you on competitive salaries and benefits.
- In most cases, students will be required to relocate to your area. Determine what level of assistance you can provide, if any, in locating safe and affordable housing.

STUDENT ORIENTATION

- Present a history of the organization, including annual reports, brochures, product information, company newsletters, articles or other information that students can read.
- Provide an organizational chart with contact names and telephone numbers. The students will need to see how their positions fit into the overall organizational structure.
- Assist students in understanding the corporate culture. This includes the company philosophy, standards, attitudes, traditions and values that exist within the work environment.
- Conduct a tour of the facilities to orient the students to the physical work environment.

- Provide information about the local area, including maps, commerce information, local attractions, housing/rentals or other information that might be of interest to students who are new to the area.
- Define employer/supervisor/student expectations for the overall Co-op experience. It is important to consider students' special interests, knowledge, skills and abilities.

WORK ASSIGNMENTS

- Be sure assignments are challenging, career-related, doable, and rewarding both for the student and the company. Assignments should offer students the opportunity to expand current skills and learn new ones. Do not assign Co-op students to mundane jobs that no one else wants to do.
- Because Cooperative Education is an academic program, plan projects and activities that are related to the students' academic major and career interests. If possible, give students well-defined assignments that involve a variety of tasks and projects. Choose initial assignments carefully, since many students will be obtaining their first work experience in their chosen field, as well as forming attitudes about your company.
- Expect Co-op students to be part of the team, able to write reports, make presentations and attend meetings.

SUPERVISION

- Provide on-going training and direction. This may include any internal or external training activities and continuing education.
- Be accessible for questions and consultation. Assist students with any problems. In the absence of the supervisor, it is important that an alternate individual be designated for students to contact.
- Provide encouragement and support.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS

- Some employers have enhanced their Co-op programs by offering special programs and events for students. It is important to understand that Co-op students will be returning to the University to complete their education and will be sharing their experience with other students on campus. The quality of your Co-op program can increase your visibility on campus and improve the effectiveness of your recruiting efforts for new graduates.
- An increasing number of employers are able to help students combine a Co-op work assignment with the senior project—a unique requirement of a bachelor's degree. The employer works with the student to integrate specific industry-related issues into a project that fulfills senior project requirements.
- Several employers have established a mentoring program for students. An individual separate from the immediate supervisor is identified to provide advice, counsel or direction to students on personal issues related to the Co-op experience, career plans and goals, continuing education or other areas of importance to students.

- Many students conclude their Co-op assignments with a formal presentation to management and other appropriate staff. This not only provides valuable experience for students, but also helps companies evaluate and improve the effectiveness of their Co-op program.
- Many employers make Co-op a fun experience for students by sponsoring special events or activities outside the work environment. This may include baseball games, barbecues, picnics, etc. Such events can help employers build teamwork, strengthen students' commitment to the company, promote smooth transitions from school to work, and help students meet new people.

EVALUATION

- Co-op students require honest, constructive feedback about their performance. This can be accomplished through weekly meetings, monthly assessments, and/or a quarterly evaluation.
- Establish an evaluation process to provide formalized feedback to Co-op students. This interactive process affirms their strengths, as well as generates discussion about areas that might need to be developed. Supervisors can make suggestions for improvements that will positively impact students' future professional development.
- Allow students to provide you with an evaluation of their Co-op experience, encouraging appropriate suggestions for the betterment of your program. A confidential "exit" interview with Human Resources may be a suitable means of obtaining straightforward information from students, which can be used to assess your Co-op program.

PROBLEMS

- Established procedures should be in place to handle problems relating to Co-op students. In the event of a problem, the supervisor needs to openly discuss the matter with the student, providing the student with a corrective action plan. Depending on the seriousness of the problem, the Human Resources Department should be notified.
- Because Co-op is an academic program, it is also important that you contact the University immediately with any problems concerning a student's performance or the possible discontinuation of a student's work assignment.
- It is in the best interest of all Co-op students to return to the University to finish their degree program and graduate. In the past, some employers have enticed students into accepting immediate permanent employment before they have graduated. The intention should be to support the academic success of students and help them reach their goal of graduation.