

CO-OP SURVEY

Guidance Counselors Want More Information on Co-op Education

A report on the nation's largest-ever survey of high school guidance counselors regarding college-level cooperative education

Most high school counselors are familiar with the concept of cooperative education (co-op), but they want more guidance to help their students take full advantage of it, according to a recent survey. Co-op combines classroom studies with paid professional work experience related to a student's education and career goals. Although co-op is one of the oldest and most important forms of higher education, the majority of high-school counselors say they are only moderately familiar with the concept. Nearly a third of them have little or no knowledge of co-op, and 11 percent are "not at all" familiar with it (see Figure 1).

The survey, sponsored by the National Commission for Cooperative Education (NCCE) and conducted by an independent research firm, was mailed to every high school guidance director in the nation and netted 2,344 responses. Additional information was gleaned in separate focus groups of guidance counselors and high school students in Chicago and Boston.

The survey highlighted the need for solid information that will help guidance counselors better understand and present the benefits of co-op to students. The following are the key findings of the study and facts that respond to those findings.

1 FINDING

While nearly two-thirds of survey respondents could identify one or more benefits of co-op, the vast majority desired more information about the advantages of a cooperative education (see Figure 2 on page 12).

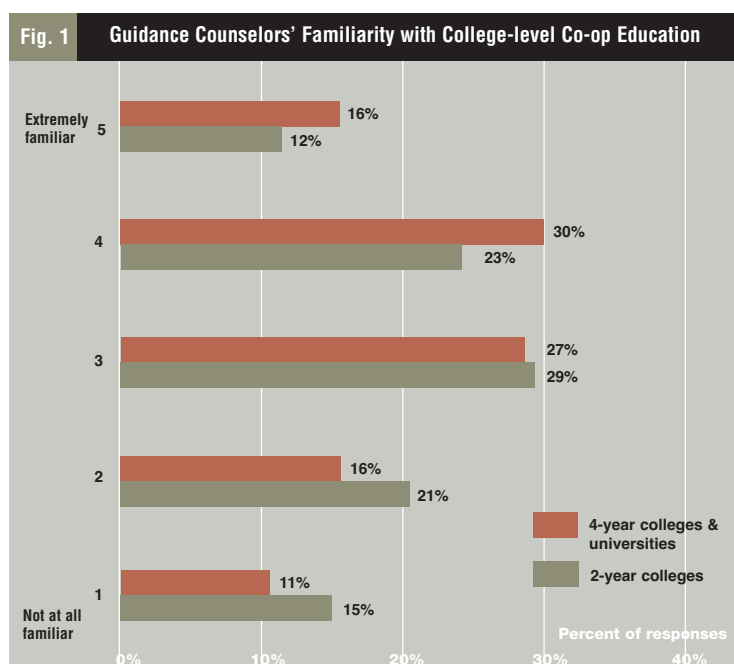
FACTS

◆ Learning by doing is one of the most effective pedagogical tools. It enriches the learning experience by showing students how information acquired in the classroom is used in the workplace. This approach to teaching is gaining in popularity at colleges and universities throughout the United States.

◆ Co-op programs offer many career advantages, particularly in a tight job market. About 50,000 employers nationally participate in cooperative education, including more than 80 of the Fortune 500's top 100 companies. Typically, more than 60 percent of students accept permanent jobs from their co-op employers. More than 95 percent of students secure some kind of employment immediately upon graduation.

◆ Studies have shown that co-op students, while in school, earn from \$2,500 to \$14,000 per year. This income can substantially reduce a student's college debt burden.

◆ Co-op programs allow students to gain considerable professional experience, which results in higher starting salaries when they enter the workforce full-time.



2 FINDING

In focus groups, many guidance counselors and students expressed confusion about the differences among co-op, internship and work-study programs.

FACTS

- ◆ Co-op programs are based on students' academic and career interests. They are progressive, allowing students to build on their professional experience as they acquire it.
- ◆ Co-op students hold real jobs and are paid actual wages based on their skills and experience.
- ◆ Internships are not necessarily related to students' majors and career interests. They offer only short-term employment and they often involve low-level duties. Wages for interns, if there are any, are lower than for co-op students.

3 FINDING

More than half of the counselors responding to the survey had the impression that co-op programs invariably delay the completion of a bachelor's degree and the launch of a student's career.

FACTS

- ◆ On average, college students take more than four years to complete a bachelor's degree. While the nation's first co-op programs, which were in engineering, added a year to a student's education, that's no longer always the case. By using the summer months, many co-op programs today are completed within four to four and a half years.
- ◆ One of the primary reasons non-co-op students take more than four years to earn their degrees is that they take time off to get real-world experience before deciding on a major field of study. Co-op programs provide that opportunity while the student stays in college, thus reducing the potential for dropout. In providing valuable on-the-job experience, co-op also lessens the time required to adjust to the workplace.

4 FINDING

A significant number of respondents believe that co-op programs are primarily for students in "applied" or technical fields.

FACTS

- ◆ Although co-op programs include technical fields, they cover all academic disciplines. Furthermore, co-op programs are not solely for students who've decided on a career path. All students can benefit from the opportunity to "try out" a profession and determine whether it's a good match for them.
- ◆ Even when students do not permanently enter their co-op fields, they can use the professional experience they gain for networking and resume-building. Most of the skills they acquire are transferable to other professional roles.

CO-OP Close-up

NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

Emily Dupre

Political Science major Emily Dupre, raves about the value of cooperative education and her two six-month co-ops at MFS Investment Management in Boston. "I was treated like a full-time employee, given my own marketing projects, and took part in every team meeting. After co-op Emily continued working for MFS during her final semester of classes last spring, and is now working full-time in sales for the company. "My co-op in marketing gave me lots of exposure to the sales division."

“I was treated like a full-time employee, given my own marketing projects, and took part in every team meeting.”





GULFSTREAM AEROSPACE

“The cooperative education program at Gulfstream serves as one of the most important and effective means of staffing our engineering organization. The technical training and hands-on experience gained by students who complete our program enable them to rapidly become valuable members of our staff as graduate engineers.”



RICHARD JOHNSON
Vice President
Engineering
Gulfstream Aerospace

CO-OP SURVEY

continued

Even when students do not permanently enter their co-op fields, they can use the professional experience they gain for networking and resume-building.

5 FINDING

Guidance counselors often don't discuss co-op with students or parents until late in the college selection process.

FACTS

◆ Focus groups revealed that students quickly became enthusiastic about co-op when it was explained to them, indicating that counselors should give it a higher priority. Students might want to include it among their primary selection criteria.

◆ Discussing co-op's professional, academic, and financial benefits with students and parents early in the college selection process allows them to assess all of their options and make an informed choice.

6 FINDING

Guidance counselors rated the *NCCE Annual Guide to Cooperative Education* as the most informative source about college-level co-op programs.

FACTS

◆ This year's NCCE guide, *The Best of Co-op: A Guide to the Best Co-op Colleges and Employers*, can be obtained through email at ncce@neu.edu, by phone at 617-373-3770, by fax at 617-373-3463, or by mail sent to 360 Huntington Avenue (384CP), Boston, MA 02115-5096.

◆ Counselors, students, and parents also can learn more about college-level cooperative education by visiting the Web site at www.co-op.edu.

The National Commission for Cooperative Education, along with its college and corporate partners, provides national leadership in maintaining the excellence of college-level cooperative education programs.

