



The Conference Board
of Canada

CASE STUDY 20

*A core product of the
Employability Skills
Forum, National
Business and
Education Centre*

Program

*Business–education
partnership*

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Name of Program

*Seneca College's Co-
operative Education
Programs*

Skills Developed

- *Academic*
- *Personal
Management*
- *Teamwork*

Assessing and developing community college students'
employability skills

SENECA COLLEGE'S CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION

A Three-Way Partnership for Assessing and Developing Students' Employability Skills

BY KURTIS KITAGAWA

August 1998

Seneca College is developing students' employability skills through its co-operative education programs.

Overview

Co-operative education is an important feature of teaching and learning in many Canadian postsecondary institutions. More than 40,000 students from approximately 80 colleges and universities participate in co-operative education programs with more than 5,000 employers.

With 880 students registered in its 15 co-op-eligible programs, Seneca College accounts for 7.3 per cent of all Ontario co-operative education students.

Seneca uses the Co-operative Educators of Ontario's common curriculum, *Working to Learn*, in its co-op programs. This curriculum was first published in 1989, with a second edition in 1992.

Co-operative education links the student, the college and employers in an exceptional academic partnership. Although individual programs vary from college to college, co-op programs formally integrate students' academic studies with relevant work experience. Students combine academic and work

terms in keeping with the following principles:

- co-op placements must provide students with a "suitable learning situation,"
- co-op students must engage in productive work, not in passive observation,
- co-op students must be paid for the work they do,
- employers must supervise and evaluate students' work, and
- colleges must monitor students' progress on the job.

The *Working to Learn* curriculum sets parameters for a co-operative education partnership that benefits students, employers and colleges. In this case study, we shall analyse those benefits.

Program Goals

- Integrate students' academic learning with practical work experience.
- Provide practical workplace experience for students.
- Develop students' generic employability skills.
- Help students to pay for their education as they go.
- Ensure the relevance of college programs and enhance graduates' competence in their chosen fields.

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NBEC Mission

We help business and education leaders work collaboratively to promote the development of a learning society that will prepare Canada's young people for a changing world.

- Provide employers with highly motivated workers, who can be hired as permanent employees after completion of their co-op programs.
- Enable employers to influence program learning outcomes in response to a changing economy, new technologies and workplace innovations.

Groups Served

- Students, employers, employees, educators, colleges and the Canadian workforce.

Activities

The co-op education curriculum takes students, educators and employers through a multistage process of preparing students for the world of work, educating instructors in the importance of tracking the progress of their students, and sensitizing employers to the particular needs of co-op student employees.

In the first stage of the process, students assess their personal characteristics, interests, values and their generic and specific skills to develop a concrete concept of themselves as potential employees. In general terms, a proper self-assessment can:

- identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses,
- develop self-confidence,
- underline areas for improvement,
- draw a baseline against which to measure improvement,
- put challenges in perspective and make progress seem achievable
- give students' the means to communicate their qualifications to employers, and
- facilitate career choice.

After performing a self-assessment, students can measure their academic, personal management, teamwork and technical skills and match them against the skills valued by employers. Doing such a skills assessment can also help students to find a best fit in terms of their compatibility with the culture and conditions of a particular workplace, including pay and location.

Self-assessment and skills assessment lead into the more applied phases of career planning, including researching different careers and deciding upon a career, which are applications of academically learned skills such as problem solving.

After deciding on a career, students set goals for themselves as they map out their career paths. This gets students in the habit of setting specific targets to be achieved in a certain space of time. These targets should be realistic, incremental, action-oriented and measurable. For example, "This is the sort of job I would like to have over the long haul. By following a typical career path, I will need to pause on x, y and z stepping stones."

On the skills development side, students should formulate specific learning objectives relating to the various stopping points along their career routes. Setting proper learning objectives involves identifying achievable outcomes related to their career goals and specifying measurable levels of performance they would like to achieve at given tasks. Students should include criteria that indicate whether desired performance levels have been reached and deadlines met for attaining performance targets.

The next stage in career planning is incorporating learning objectives into a personal plan that can be developed into an educational plan. Such a plan includes students' strategies for developing their own personal programs of study, identifying their career paths, cultivating workplace success, integrating classroom and workplace learning and ensuring self-improvement.

Once students have set their career objectives, they need to relate them to the task of choosing suitable co-op placements. *Working to Learn* encourages students to determine precisely (1) what they want to achieve in their job placements in terms of their roles and responsibilities, (2) the training their employer will provide, and (3) the relationship between the likely outcomes of completing a given work

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The Employability Skills Forum Mission

We are committed to improving the productivity and quality of life for individuals, organizations and society by enhancing the employability skills of the current and future workforce of Canada.

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placement and their career objectives and learning goals.

The common co-op education curriculum then prescribes that students further refine their learning objectives at different points during their job placements based on on-the-job experiences.

Finally, the published curriculum advises students to reflect on their work term experiences to determine (1) which learning objectives they either met or exceeded, (2) which ones they did not meet, and (3) how these findings will shape their learning objectives strategy for their next work term(s).

The published curriculum also includes detailed information relating to preparing résumés, writing job search letters, developing job search action plans, and preparing for job interviews. It also describes the process of writing work semester reports and work journals to help students document and analyse their workplace achievements and activities. This helps students assess their academic program, their experience of co-op education, and the strengths and weaknesses of specific workplace environments in terms of (1) the general purposes of co-op education, (2) providing workplace experience and (3) developing the workforce of the future. Writing-based reflection on their co-op experiences also enables students to assess their skills development, identify what they value in their work environment and clarify their personal, career and educational goals.

Finally, the published curriculum helps co-op students to prepare verbal work experience presentations to develop their communications skills.

Achievements/Outcomes

As students complete the workplace component(s) of their co-op programs, they gain relevant practical work experience that is highly valued by their employers, many of whom hire back former co-op students after they graduate.

Benefits

Students

- Gain career-related workplace experience, which helps them get a job afterwards.
- Acquire insight into expectations of, and requirements for, their chosen fields.
- Have access to specialized facilities, equipment and systems not available to them at their community college.
- Develop generic employability skills.
- Apply classroom learning in a practical workplace environment.
- Appreciate the relevance of academic training and enhance their motivation to learn in the classroom.
- Are better able to assess the suitability of their career choices.
- Begin the process of networking, which enhances job search and communications skills.
- Gain insights into their personalities, values, individual strengths and weaknesses, and areas they need to work on in preparation for a career in their chosen fields.
- Demonstrate proven ability in their career area.

Employees

- Enhance their communications and supervisory skills.
- Take pride in their own work based on the renewed focus that teaching gives them.

Employers

- Gain access to highly motivated personnel who can assist or spell off permanent employees or complete important projects that have been set aside to achieve shorter term objectives.
- Profit from new ideas, approaches and techniques that may enhance productivity and efficiency.
- Profit from reduced recruitment costs; this is especially important for small firms.
- Benefit from improved retention rates because new hires have already

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demonstrated their suitability for their new positions during their co-op placements.

- Can influence college curricula to reflect changing workplace needs.
- Become good corporate citizens by developing the generic and technical skills of the workforce of the future.

Educators

- Are brought into closer contact with business and the professions, which sharpens the focus of their teaching.
- Teach more enthusiastic students.

Colleges

- Increase their involvement in the community.
- Gain recognition from employers, students and the community.

Innovation

In May 1998, Co-op Ontario: Post-Secondary Co-operative Educators of Ontario was established as a joint organization by Ontario's universities and community colleges. Its mission is to promote co-operative education in the province of Ontario.

Co-op Ontario is committed to:

- providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and information for co-operative education professionals,
- liaising with various groups (e.g., boards of education, educators, governments, boards of trade and commerce) regarding co-operative education at the postsecondary level,

- Promoting co-operative education with students, educators, employers, governments and the community at large.

Keys to Success

- Dedicated faculty, who impart the knowledge and skills that students need in the workplace.
- Motivated students, who recognize the value of applying classroom learning in a workplace environment.
- Committed employers, who recognize the benefits of participating in the training of the next generation of workers and value the currency of skills co-op students bring to their companies.

Greatest Challenge

Building successful partnerships depends upon business and education both having a clear understanding and appreciation of the goals a partnership is designed to achieve, the process to be followed to achieve these goals and the benefits that accrue to both business and education from a successful partnership.

Partnerships can start small and grow as connections are established, commitments deepen and benefits start to become visible. The most successful and sustainable partnerships are the ones that are based on a mutual commitment to long-term involvement and make good fiscal sense. Successful and sustainable partnerships are in tune with the dynamics of both business and education and benefit the communities they serve. In such partnerships, business and education respect each other's needs, communicate effectively and adapt in mutually beneficial ways.

NBEC Publications Relating to Employability Skills Development and Assessment

Employability Skills Profile

Science Literacy for the World of Work

Best Practices in Assessing and Developing Employability Skills—20 Case Studies (Sept. 98)

The Economic Benefits of Improving Literacy in the Workplace, 206-97 Report.

Enhancing Employability Skills: Innovative Partnerships, Projects and Programs, 118-94 Report.

Linking Teachers, Science, Technology and Research: Business and Education Collaborations That Work, 144-95 Report.

1998 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook

1997 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook

1996 100-Best Partnerships IdeaBook