

## **Getting Started with Co-op**

Welcome to Cooperative Education (Co-op) at the College of Southern Maryland. Co-op is an academic course that integrates your academic training with a practical paid/volunteer work experience relating to your major. This section of the guide is to provide information prior to registration for the program. If you are already registered for Co-op, please visit page three of this guide.

## **Credits and Required Work**

Most Co-op courses are designed to provide 3 academic credits. Much of the work is done at the Co-op site but you will work with a faculty member who will require assignments as well. For every 3-credit Co-op course you select, you will be required to accrue 225 hours at your Co-op site. In the fall or spring semester, you would be working or volunteering about 15 hours per week. During a shorter summer session, you would need to work or volunteer about 30 hours per week to get to the 225-hour requirement.

## **Student Benefits**

### **Resume Building**

Your college education will allow you more career options than you would have had as a high school grad. Co-op makes you an even more desirable candidate in a competitive job market since you will have real job experience and enthusiastic references to add to your résumé. In some cases references are not necessary. Many students end up staying with the company that sponsored their Co-op experience.

### **Discover Your Career Match**

Co-op gives you a chance to try out what you have learned in the classroom for a short period of time. If you enjoy the experience you can proceed with the job search. Co-op can also give you the chance to fine tune your career goals and discover the array of choices that will match your skills.

### **Acquire Academic Credits For Your Current Work Situation**

If you are already working in your major, Co-op may be a great way to expedite progress to degree completion. Depending on the duties of your job, it may be possible to use your current experience for academic credit.

## **How to Get Started**

Co-op is a course that requires some pre-registration planning. Factors for you to consider are:

1. GPA Required: You must have an overall grade point average of at least 2.0. CSM wants students to be well prepared for the world of work and this is one way to document that preparation.
2. You must complete the prerequisites for your Co-op course. Prerequisites vary with each discipline. You will want to check your selection to find out what is required.
3. You must identify a location where you will be working or volunteering.
4. You must have a list of job duties or be working on a project that relates to your current major. This information must be reviewed and approved by a faculty member before you register for the course.

Check on all preregistration factors by accessing the Co-op page and course specific checklists.

If you are already employed this information should be easy to collect. If you are not employed in your field, Advising & Career Services can help you market yourself for a Co-op site. They will let you know about Job Connection, CSM's online employer database for local employment opportunities. They can also review your resume and/or cover letter.

## **When to Get Started**

Checking prerequisites, identifying an employer, and defining your project or objectives takes time. You should begin reviewing the Co-op website and Co-op student guide at least **8 weeks prior** to the semester you want to take this course. You can also complete and submit the **Co-op Intake Form** during this time. If you don't currently have a job/volunteer site in mind, you will want to contact Career Services even sooner.

## **The Co-op Intake Form**

Submitting a Co-op Intake Form does not guarantee enrollment into the course. It simply lets Advising & Career Services know that you are interested in a particular Co-op course. The sooner you get started the better. This form can be found here (add hyperlink)

## **Co-op Guide**

This section of the guide is targeted to students that are currently registered for Cooperative Education in their respective program of study.

### **Co-op Instructor**

Co-op is both a work experience and an academic course. At the time of registration, you will be given the name of the instructor with whom you will work. Some coop courses require that you meet with the instructor early in the process. Contact your instructor when the semester begins to set up a meeting and receive your syllabus. Your Co-op instructor will evaluate your work for academic credit by requesting assignments, reports or presentations. In addition, your instructor will contact your work supervisor for an additional evaluation of your work performance. Once your Co-op experience has been completed, you will receive a grade (Pass/Fail) for the course. Remember, this is an academic course. When you meet with your instructor, make sure that you have a clear understanding of what is expected of you and how you will report your progress to your instructor.

### **Class Schedule**

Some Co-op courses require weekly or monthly meetings with the instructor. Other instructors will meet individually with students at appointed times throughout the semester. Still other classes are conducted through Blackboard with little face-to-face contact with the instructor. During these meetings you will get individual feedback about your progress. Throughout the course of your employment, questions may arise that need to be discussed. Keep a journal of any questions you have as you begin your employment experience. You may also want to ask for feedback concerning the documentation of your employment assignment. It is advisable to address these issues and other concerns early on. It may be helpful to request a conference prior to mid-semester to give you the opportunity to make corrections and improve your chances for an excellent evaluation at the end of the semester.

### **Tips For Success**

Refer to your syllabus often during the semester. Make note of any deadlines for reports, projects, etc. on your personal calendar. It is easy to let deadlines slip in a class that meets infrequently and involves work responsibilities with your employer. Again, it is important to emphasize that this is an academic course. Failure to complete all assignments set by your instructor may cause you to fail the course, even though you have been an exemplary employee at the worksite.

### **The Work Supervisor**

As a Co-op student, you are viewed as a representative of both the College of Southern Maryland and the employer for whom you work. Your work supervisor will be asked to evaluate your progress through the semester, with a focus on the work habits and work ethic you demonstrate.

You will not be expected to be an expert in your field of study. Co-op is a learning experience and mistakes occur with even the most experienced employee. Qualities such as attendance, dependability, initiative and communication skills are examples of traits that even the most inexperienced employee is capable of demonstrating.

### **First Steps with Your Employer**

Meet with your work supervisor to your course syllabus and information on the topics on which s/he will be evaluating you. It is impossible to measure success in the absence of goals. Meeting with your supervisor will get the process started. Your supervisor may have a list of established objectives, but the student's input is always appreciated and reflects initiative. Share any guidelines provided by your Co-op instructor.

Meet with your work supervisor to discuss the specifics of your Co-op experience. You and s/he will want to reach an agreement on the dates, days, and time your Co-op will span. Within that time frame make a timeline of your course objectives and when each will be completed. It may be helpful to divide some of your objectives into smaller tasks. A schedule of achievement will help you stay focused on both immediate and long-term goals.

Be sure to tell your supervisor the type of evaluation that will be expected of him/her. Your instructor may provide a Co-op Employer Evaluation form or another form preferred by your academic department. Providing this form early on will ensure a valid summary of accomplishment at the end of your experience. It is also helpful for you to know, in advance, the aspects of work on which you will be evaluated.

### **Designing Course Objectives**

All academic courses have a list of course objectives. These objectives are stated in the syllabus and should have been mastered upon course completion. Since each Co-op experience is tailored to individual students, you may design your own course objectives based on what you want to learn and accomplish. If required, your instructor will assist you with a format for objective design, but the following information will get you started.

A measurable learning objective is a statement that clearly and precisely describes what it is that you intend to learn during your work term and how you intend to measure what you have learned. Start by carefully reviewing your job and noting tasks or subject areas that you would like to master. Ideas will vary with each program of study and each job. Some sample ideas might be: learning how to design and implement a database; designing a sales campaign that would boost sales by 5%; designing and presenting a training program for new software implementation.

**Your objectives should be:**

Understandable – written in clear, simple language

Challenging – difficult enough to stimulate interest, promote new learning, and be worthy of college credit

Achievable – realistically accomplished within a semester

Measurable – specific enough to see and prove the accomplishment

## **Factors for Success on the Job**

### **Attendance**

The importance of good attendance on the job cannot be overstated. It is one of the factors that employment supervisors are required to evaluate. If you miss days at work you lose the continuity of working on assigned tasks. Your employer is depending on you to show up daily and on time. Reach an agreement with your supervisor on the days and times that form your schedule. Once the plan is set, make sure you stick to it. Notify your supervisor in advance if you must miss time from work. Suggest alternatives for making up the hours (arriving early or staying late for several days). Taking initiative in making up missed time reflects well on you as an employee.

### **Confidentiality**

It is important to keep all information received at work confidential. In some employment situations you may see full time employees setting a bad example. Don't let yourself get drawn into office gossip. Maintaining a professional manner and respecting confidentiality regarding people and information makes you an asset to the employer.

### **Questions**

When starting a new employment experience the amount of information you receive may seem overwhelming. Don't be afraid to ask questions to clarify what is expected of you. Supervisors appreciate an employee who is not afraid to ask questions. It is far preferable to clarify components of an assignment than to spend hours on a task that may have to be redone because you did not clearly understand the requirements. Ask your supervisor to review your work product before sending it to its destination. As you become more comfortable with the job and tasks assigned your supervisor's input will not be as crucial. As you start out don't be afraid to ask for help!

### **Work Quality**

Even though your supervisor will not expect you to be an expert in all things, s/he will want an employee who wants to succeed. Take pride in your work. Neatness and accuracy do count.

## **Initiative**

Once you have become comfortable in your work setting and have mastered some of the tasks assigned, look for opportunities to be of help to your employer. Volunteer for additional assignments. Make sure you meet deadlines as far ahead as possible to insure the job is done correctly. Don't sit and wait for the next assignment. If you see something that needs to be done, take action. Your energy and enthusiasm will be noticed.

## **Constructive Criticism**

Suggestions will be made on improvement of your work. You should expect this. You are just getting started in your career field. One of the purposes of Co-op is obtaining experience. Don't take criticism personally. Think of it as a suggestion for improvement of your work product. Remember to always approach a supervisor calmly and professionally, when discussing your performance.

## **Personal Appearance**

Pay attention to your appearance and general hygiene. You don't have to spend a fortune on a work wardrobe, but make sure clothes are neat and clean. Try to dress in a similar style to those with whom you work. If your work site is casual make sure your wardrobe is neutral. Stay away from logos, pictures, or wording on clothing that might offend someone.

## **Employment Questions/Concerns**

### **If I have a personal emergency that requires missing a few days of work, will this have an impact on completion of Co-op?**

It very well may, which is why advanced planning is so important. Try to postpone any appointments that can wait until the semester is over. If you have to miss a day or 2 due to illness, make sure you contact your supervisor to let him/her know why you are absent. If something happens that will involve more than 3 days, confer with your supervisor right away. Depending on the nature of the work site or your emergency, make up days may be possible. You will also want your instructor to be aware of the situation.

### **What happens to my Co-op course if my supervisor leaves the company?**

If this is done with advance notice your supervisor will assign another person to oversee your work. If this event is sudden and you are without a supervisor, confer with the next level supervisor to see who will be designated to supervise you. Notify your instructor about the change.

### **What if the work site or supervisor turns out to be a poor match for my skills and I have concerns about my progress?**

Sometimes this feeling is due to "opening day jitters" and it can last for more than a day. Give yourself a chance to become acclimated to your new environment. If you still have concerns after

a couple of weeks on the job, talk to your instructor about the situation. S/he will help you plan options to resolve your concerns.

**What can be done if I have trouble connecting with my instructor?**

If the instructor has not stayed in contact with you, take the initiative to contact him/her. If after a couple of attempts you still have not heard from the instructor, contact the office of the academic department for your Co-op. The office manager or department chair will make sure your message gets delivered and things get back on track.