

---

# CREATING A “CO-OP CULTURE”

---

## IN THE LIBERAL ARTS:

---

## LESSONS FROM A FORMER

---

## COMMUNICATION STUDENT

---

Annie Straka, Assistant Professor // University of Cincinnati

I can remember the feeling of anxiety in my belly before going home for Thanksgiving break during college as I anticipated the dreaded questions about my future that would come from my well-meaning relatives. Our conversations would go something like this:

**“SO WHAT IS YOUR MAJOR?”** they’d ask.

**“COMMUNICATION,”** I would reply with a nod and a smile, trying to sound confident.

**“HM. SO WHAT EXACTLY WILL YOU DO WITH THAT?  
BE A BROADCASTER ON THE NEWS?”**

**“UM, YEAH, NO, I’M NOT TOTALLY SURE. CAN YOU PASS  
THE GREEN BEANS?”**

---

As a communication major, it took time for me to find my professional path and feel confident in my ability to articulate the value of my liberal arts education to those who are unfamiliar with the communication field. I always envied the nursing majors and the accounting majors whose career titles were explicitly named in their degree. Somehow telling people I was going to be a “communicator” when I grew up didn’t sound quite as impressive. After graduating with my bachelor’s degree in communication, I went on to graduate school (also in communication), and have since found my place in an academic career where I apply my communication degree every day.

I no longer change the subject when I’m asked about my communication roots. I am a proud advocate of the true value of a liberal arts education — and I am particularly biased toward communication. I believe that as a student of communication, I have a better understanding of myself, and my world, and I attribute my relational orientation in the workplace to my communication background. So you can imagine my delight when I had the opportunity to develop a cooperative education program in my home discipline at the University of Cincinnati.

## “COMM CO-OP” AT UC: PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND CURRICULUM

As the founding institution of cooperative education, we have a robust history of experiential learning at UC. Because of this history, I felt confident designing the comm co-op program with our existing, successful co-op program structures in mind. In particular, we were able to anticipate some of the challenges of an optional co-op program based on past experiences. That being said, the comm co-op track is a unique offering at our institution and its structure and curriculum are unlike any other program in several ways.

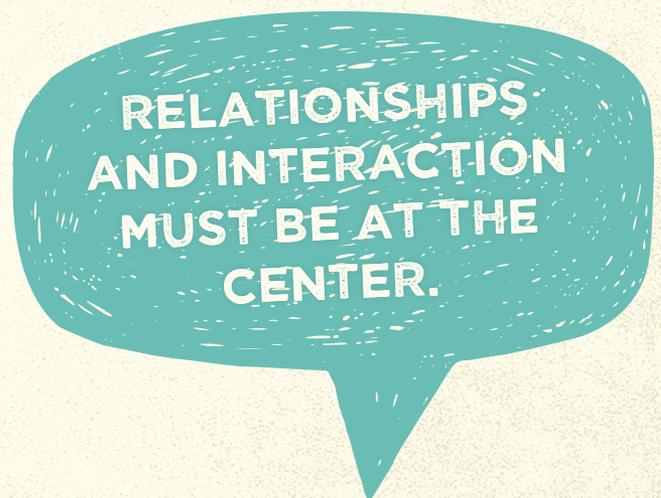
The comm co-op program was designed as a competitive, optional track within the communication baccalaureate degree. Students apply and are accepted into the program using a split cohort model, meaning we accept two groups of students per year from roughly the same class year and those students enter the program on a staggered basis. This split model allows for increased flexibility in the program and provides more consistency for employers because half of the students in the program are available to work and the other half are in classes during every term. Once the

---

students are accepted, the cohort enrolls in a professional development course to prepare them for the professional world and support them in their job search for their first co-op rotation. From there, the students complete three, full-time, paid co-op rotations before they graduate (the intention is that students rotate back and forth between full-time work and full-time school, though some may complete a back-to-back work or school rotation due to employer needs or class schedules). During each co-op rotation, students are enrolled in an online course that includes reflection and assessment assignments and that are completed by both the student and their supervisor. A final defining element of the program is that the students enroll in an in person reflection seminar during the semester immediately following their first co-op rotation to share and process their experiences in community with their peers.

The program launched during the 2015-16 academic year, with the first cohort enrolled in the professional development course during spring semester 2016 and working their first co-op rotation during summer semester 2016, so the program is very much in the infancy stage. However, in just the first several months of the program,

I have learned more than I could have anticipated about what is needed to establish an experiential learning culture and how to support liberal arts students in their career education. The program is ever-evolving for the better and I am excited about what's to come, but I have to admit that I went into this work expecting things to go smoothly, just as we planned, and instead — perhaps for the better — it's been a year of surprises and changes. I'd like to humbly share a few of the lessons that I believe will be relevant to others who are engaged in similar work at their own institutions. I thought it only appropriate that these lessons reflect many of the foundational building blocks of the communication discipline.



Regardless of how experiential learning or career education is structured on your campus, whether its centralized or embedded in the

---

departments, mandatory or optional, nothing can be achieved without strong relationships at the center of your work. Truly meaningful transformation happens through interaction. As an alum of the UC communication master's program, I was uniquely positioned to develop mutually beneficial, trusting relationships with the department. However, building such relationships on campus in a performance-based budgeting environment can be quite challenging and we continue to navigate these challenges collaboratively. Commitment to a shared mission has allowed us to work toward our goal without getting discouraged when things didn't go as we planned. Cultivating trusting relationships with students and employers is also critical. I made assumptions about my students' level of preparedness and understanding of their professional selves prior to having them in class and advising them during their job search. When I took the time to really get to know my students to try to understand the life experiences they were bringing to the classroom, I was better equipped to support them as many of them dipped their toes into the professional world for the first time. I found that they needed clear, consistent feedback in addition to emotional support during class and

during their job search. This kind of relationship can only be accomplished through interaction and shared-meaning making. Additionally, open dialogue with employers is essential for supporting liberal arts students in the job search. I found it helpful to ask employers directly for feedback about my students as they interviewed for positions and we had some challenging discussions about the subjective nature of job search materials. I learned that my students needed more writing practice and as a result, I implemented a writing sample assignment into my course.



I mentioned that I made some assumptions about my students that turned out to be inaccurate. I have since learned to assume nothing and always be explicit in stating my expectations so as to work toward clearer, shared understanding with my students. As I continue to redesign the comm co-op curriculum and develop ways to better prepare

---

my students for the professional world, I continue to be reminded of the importance of language. For example, the fact that the comm co-op track is framed as an optional program affects the students' commitment to completing the requirements. One of the primary challenges I have faced in these early months is retaining students in the program, especially those students who struggle or experience a slow start during the job search. This is where language and framing becomes critically important from a program management perspective. For the second cohort of students, I was more intentional in my choice of language and I framed the program as an opportunity and a commitment rather than an option. I described my role as the instructor and advisor using specific language that emphasized the supportive nature of my work so as to make sure students understood that I was not able to "place" them in a co-op position if they didn't hold up their end of the bargain. They had to take responsibility for their own destiny and we would work in partnership to connect them with professional opportunities. I continue to think about how to frame the program to ensure that students understand what will be required of them to truly enhance

their undergraduate experience through structured experiential learning.



**STUDENTS NEED  
TOOLS TO  
ADVOCATE FOR  
THEMSELVES.**

I've found that one of the greatest challenges for liberal arts majors is that many lack the tools to communicate their skills to potential employers with confidence. As communication theory reminds us, those who have access to discursive tools can achieve greater agency and power. The tools needed by students are both discursive and material, and as professional development/experiential learning educators, it is our responsibility to arm students with these tools. In my case, I found that the communication students needed tools that would allow them to showcase their work and illustrate their well-roundedness. I chose to integrate an e-portfolio into the program so as to offer students a more interactive, creative space

---

beyond the paper resume or cover letter for showcasing their skills. Integrating this as a major assignment in the course allowed me to provide guidance and structure for my students as they compiled their materials to share with potential employers. Additionally, I try to be more intentional when I talk to students about the unique value of their communication lens. I found it helpful to work with students collectively and individually to articulate the ways in which a communicative outlook on the world can benefit an organization. We worked as a class to put the benefits of a communication lens in writing and from that list, students were able to integrate those discursive tools into their job search materials and draw from them during interviews. In the liberal arts at large, it is important for career educators to prepare students to describe their degree and their skills with confidence. As Albert Einstein (who was a student of the liberal arts himself) reminds us, “if you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” How can we expect our students to advocate for themselves in a competitive job market if they can’t simply explain the value of their degree?



**EXPECT  
MESSINESS  
AND EMBRACE  
CHANGE.**

Like the process of human communication itself, creating a “co-op culture” in the liberal arts is not a simple, transactional task. I (naively) expected the first year to be fairly smooth sailing, largely because of the strong co-op culture at UC. The first year has been messier than I anticipated, and I have learned to embrace the iterative, recursive nature of building a new program. At first, I felt frustrated and discouraged. We experienced some early student attrition and I worried that the program wouldn’t survive. I had to critically reflect on my own assumptions and expectations and I keep reminding myself that one must be resilient and humble when doing something new for the first time. One particularly difficult lesson is that some student attrition in an optional program may be inevitable and should be expected. That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t work diligently to identify and remove

---

potential barriers to student success, but it does mean that we don't dwell on the past and instead work confidently toward the future. Expecting messiness instead of being surprised by setbacks and embracing change instead of resisting it allows us to be adaptable and to continually improve our program. Students at every institution and in every discipline are unique and we should focus our energy on creating pathways that support our students in the best way possible. This cannot be accomplished if we approach our work with rigidity and hold too tightly to our preconceived visions of what success looks like.

**I am certain that these lessons will continue to grow and evolve and there will be additional new lessons that arise as we move the program forward. In spite of the messiness, I am proud that nearly thirty UC communication students will have completed at least one full-time, paid co-op rotation by the end of the first year of the program. These experiences will undoubtedly have a significant impact on the professional and personal development of these students. And at the very least, it is my wish that they will sit down at their respective Thanksgiving tables feeling a little more confident, ready to answer questions about their future with pride.**

---