

# Creating a Talent Pipeline Through Your Co-op Program

Matthew Thomas // VEGA Americas, Inc.

---

## Abstract

This article highlights key factors that led to the development of a best-in-class co-op program at VEGA Americas, Inc. It is the story of how a once relatively unknown company on college campuses became a sought-after experience. Empowering students to take ownership of the process of creating a top rate co-op program proved paramount to its success at all levels of the company.

When I was the Employee Development Manager of VEGA Americas, Inc. in the late 2000's, I had just finished a project and had begun searching for a new one to start. My boss at the time indicated that several managers across the company had projects to be completed, but had trouble finding the bandwidth to work on them. These projects didn't necessarily need any type of skilled expertise, but they did need someone who had some basic business knowledge, a good work ethic, and a degree of self-awareness. With summer just around the corner and college students coming home from school and looking for work, we decided it was the perfect time to try to create a pilot co-op program.

We started by asking managers from various departments throughout the company what kind of projects they could anticipate being completed in a three-month timeframe. We then asked ourselves how many students we would need to complete the work, how many hours they would need to put in, what kind of basic skills they

would need, which majors would align best with the project to be completed, which colleges offered the programs that taught these skills, etc. My boss and I compiled this data and created a formal proposal to design and develop a pilot co-op program, which we presented to the executive leadership team. If the presentation was successful, the intent was to utilize the co-op program as a permanent workforce development and recruiting solution.

Our presentation included some of the following points:

- 1) The budget needed to hire co-ops would be minimal compared to full-time hires.
- 2) This was a good way to get high productivity at a low cost to the company.
- 3) There was not a long-term commitment or cost.
- 4) It would not detract from the regular day-to-day responsibilities of higher tenured managers.

- 5) It had the potential to create a pipeline of talent by enabling the company to determine if a particular co-op student would be an appropriate fit for a long-term position with the company.

After presenting and reviewing the proposal, the executive leadership team approved the pilot co-op program.

Initially, our recruiting process involved asking people in the company if they knew anyone who would be a good candidate. Nieces and nephews of current employees made up the majority of our candidate pool. We also approached professors at the local colleges and asked them to recommend some of their best students. We selected candidates and interviewed them using the same hiring process we used for full-time employees. We wanted our potential co-ops to gain real experience applying for a job and gaining exposure to an authentic corporate culture.

The cost for the pilot was minimal. We started out with three students for three months in the summer. They didn't need much space, supplies, or equipment. We put them in a huddle area and gave them computers. From the start, the students were in front of leadership, building relationships and setting expectations for their co-op experience. The students received a warm welcome from the executive team and everyone treated them as regular full-time employees. They each received an overview of some of the projects VEGA Americas, Inc. wanted to see completed by the end of the summer. Projects were assigned based on students' individual skillsets, academic focus, and self-reported strengths. Students received the clear message that the opportunity in front of them was going to be a real chance to learn and experience what the corporate world was actually like.

In the past, we had hired interns with success, however one department had done one thing, while another department had done something else. There was not a coordinated effort, common process or protocol to lead the program. This time, everything was coordinated, understood and clearly communicated. We created a ball field of standards to "play" in, with flexibility to be creative, grow, learn and gain valuable experiences. We wanted to provide structure while still allowing flexibility for creativity and expanded experiences. While the students had direct connection to the manager of their individual assigned projects, they also reported to me on a high level so that I could answer questions, run the day-to-day coordination, provide coaching, as well as professional development. I communicated to the students that I wanted them to own this experience. The co-op program was theirs to own and make the most of. We gave them the opportunity to fail if they wanted to and to be successful if they wanted to. The outcome was up to them.

I learned early in my professional career, especially as a co-op myself, that half of knowing what you do want is knowing what you don't want. I had discovered what I didn't want in a co-op experience, which is what propelled us to structure the program the way we did. A great mentor of mine once told me "Fail early and fail often." It is within the failures that the greatest learning takes place. It is best to fail on a small stage and learn from it than a big stage and have it tarnish you. From these experiences and guidance, I wasn't afraid to put students in a position to fail because we were there to help support their learning.

My message to students was: “We have three months. We have to complete these projects, but what do you want to learn while you are here and why do you want to learn it? This is an amazing opportunity to build a co-op program that students will value and want to be part of. What footprint do you want to leave that will be valued for years to come after you are gone? Let’s be creative as we target our audience in a new creative way, and let’s have fun doing it.

We provided flexibility and autonomy to the students by asking them what they wanted out of a co-op program, and what would make a company interesting to them? We needed to know what types of experiences and opportunities would make them want to come to work every day with a high level of engagement, drive, and passion. We wanted the co-op program to be created and managed by co-ops so we adopted a kind of “For the co-ops by the co-ops” approach. We wanted them to meet as a team of “owners of the program” and talk about their ideas, strategies, and opportunities for growth. Their instructions were, “What do you want to know as a result of this experience? If you could do anything, what would you do? Let’s do it here.”

Of course, we were there to make sure the wheels didn’t fall off and that we were all staying inside the parameters of the “ball field.” I monitored each student and project by evaluating the program via touchpoints throughout their experience. I asked the students what they liked about the experience and what they would change. In doing so, we could be agile and pivot with any adjustments along the way. I noticed students taking great pride in their work and in what they were creating and accomplishing.

While each student had their own individual projects to work on, they were also working on developing their VEGA Americas, Inc. Co-op Program. They were able to bounce ideas off each other since they worked in a common space together. They collaborated with each other on their individual projects and on developing ideas to grow and establish a holistic co-op program. We challenged them to be owners of their own “department,” the Co-op Department. As the summer came to an end, they presented their experiences, progress and recommendations to the leadership team. This leadership presentation was created and led by the co-ops. They pitched their progress and recommendations to the leadership team which included the president of the company. They treated this opportunity with great pride and professionalism. They wore color-coordinated outfits and aligned their presentation to show they were a team. It is through this presentation, which showed great progress, pride, professionalism, and passion that sold the success of the pilot co-op program and solidified in the minds of the leadership team that this was something they wanted to continue. In fact, we received permission to run another co-op program the next semester.

This initial core group of students had paved the way for a foundational co-op program. They took the initiative to create targeted approaches to attract future co-ops by designing a complete web portal home page devoted to the co-op program at VEGA Americas, Inc. The portal described the various co-op positions that were available, as well as the types of projects to which a student would gain exposure in each category. They also created a Frequently Asked Questions page, an interview guide, and they provided examples of the projects they had completed at the end of their experience.

We did not have a very strong recruiting strategy at first. We set up booths at career fairs and no one came to see us because they did not know much about VEGA Americas, Inc. Therefore, I invited our co-ops to come to the career fairs with us. In turn, they invited their friends to visit our booth. They created marketing materials and brochures specifically to attract their peers as future potential colleagues. They could speak students' language. It ended up that the co-op students essentially ran the career fairs. We eventually had lines of students waiting to speak to us.

Initially, we did not have very strong relationships with the local colleges since they weren't that familiar with our company. In order to remedy this, I scheduled meetings with various professors and explained that we had one of the best co-op programs around. I told them that students were working on real projects, projects usually earmarked for full-time employees. We treated students like real employees and even put them through employee orientation. I asked them to recommend their top students, students they would want to award a top experience. We were fortunate to receive some excellent recommendations.

As more students started reporting their co-op experiences at VEGA Americas, Inc. to their professors, they began recommending even more top candidates. Relationships, as well as our reputation, at the colleges grew and they continued to send us their top students. The students would go back to the professors and ask if we could come in to speak to their classes and then we got even more applicants as we continued to grow the program. With students now coming to us, our recruiting time started going down which freed our time for other projects.

Another professional development strategy we used was to include our current senior co-ops in the interview process so they had some say in who they would be working with next. This experience enabled them to see what it was like on the other side of the table in an interview, which ultimately helped prepare them for future full-time job interviews.

Senior co-ops did not like it if the new students coming in did not have a good work ethic. They were able to exert some influence to hold them accountable, which gave them an opportunity to develop leadership and conflict resolution skills and sometimes, to experience what it was like to have some uncomfortable conversations. Senior students with the longest tenure also had the opportunity to lead, manage, plan and coordinate the executive presentation at the end of the semester.

We continued to expand the co-op program as other managers and leaders saw the impact the co-ops were having. Those that did not have students assigned to them approached us saying that they wanted a co-op too. What at first started with co-ops in the areas of finance, marketing and operations spread to sales, international business and engineering, amongst others.

As an example of the types of real-world experience our students achieved at VEGA Americas, Inc., our sales co-ops developed presentations that our sales representatives presented to potential clients. We encouraged the sales people to take their co-ops on sales calls and field service visits so that they could understand what they were creating and why they needed to create it. Students had the opportunity to travel and attend actual client meetings. They had a seat at the sales table, which gave them an excellent opportunity to witness the impact of their work.

One of the benefits of the co-op program for us was that we did not have to pay a recruiter to find top talent and we did not have to pay to post on a recruiting website. For some of our open positions, there were no recruiting costs because we had our future employees working side by side with us in our co-op program. We had the opportunity to observe their work habits for three to nine months, sometimes longer, which allowed us to make an informed decision regarding whether to hire them, or not. During the first four years of the program, we had a 45% conversion rate of our co-ops to full-time permanent employees. Some students wanted to try other opportunities outside of VEGA Americas, Inc. after they completed a co-op with us while some just did not work out. Either way was good. We each learned from the experience, which was a key foundational value of the program. While the program grew and evolved, we continued to create a strong pipeline of talent from which to select our future colleagues.

Subsequent students created Lunch and Learns, which they invited career services representatives from local colleges to attend in order to learn about our co-op program. The co-ops presented the types of projects they were working on to the career services advisors. That way, the advisors could recommend students who aligned best with those types of projects. They could also recommend students to attend these Lunch and Learns so that they could see if they would be a good fit for the program. For prospective students, the co-ops would present on topics such as: what would be expected of you, here's what orientation looks like, this is what projects look like, etc.

Students also developed a social presence, speaking the language of a student to a student. In addition to presenting Lunch and Learns at VEGA Americas, Inc., they also presented to students at the local colleges. It was all part of creating a program and a work culture that people would want to be a part of. The program and its culture still exist today. In fact, some employees who started out as co-ops during our initial semesters are still working there and some of the original stories are still quoted on their website.

My favorite thing about working with co-ops was their creativity, their ability to think outside the box and take an imaginative, non-corporate approach to problem solving and projects. I also enjoyed getting to know them as individuals. I got to know some really great people and I still interact with many of them today. One of the best things for me was to see the difference in them from their first day to their last and see how much they grew and refined themselves, how they had matured. The absolute best part was seeing their face when we could offer them a full time position after they graduated.

So what are the secret ingredients for creating a successful co-op program? I think for us it was figuring out what the projects were, recruiting the right candidates for those projects, and overseeing all the projects as a holistic program. Then we stayed out of the way to provide them the flexibility and creativity to do great things. Our philosophy was, "Here's your ball field. It is wide open. Go play in it. Be creative. If you have questions, we are here to help." We operated under a principle I learned from Jim Collins' *Good to Great*: Put the right person on the right seat on the right bus at the right time going in the right direction. We knew the projects that needed to

be completed so we aligned the strengths of individual students with those projects and let them run in the ball field. It was their job to meet with the manager, and to meet with me.

Creating and leading the program is one of the most rewarding experiences in my career. VEGA Americas, Inc. owes the success and growth of their co-op program to the dedicated students whose enthusiasm, passion, professionalism and dedication made going to work every day a fun and engaging place to be.

---