

Creating Co-op 2.0 On-Campus: An Accessible, Affordable Model for Meaningful, Paid Internships

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of an initiative at the University of Cincinnati to elevate and create high-impact, paid, work on-campus experiences. The pilot project authors discuss aims to shift the paradigm of on-campus employment from remedial work to high-impact internships that foster professional growth and learning. Students and on-campus employers benefit from this model and through our pilot, we identified the following benefits to students: (a) removal of transportation barriers; (b) supportive, on-campus professionals as supervisors who are invested in student success; (c) transcription of course work on their degree audit internship experiences; (d) paid, part-time experience with flexible hours; and (e) prompted reflection to help students articulate their growth and learning. Benefits to on-campus employers included: reduced training time; streamlined onboarding; promotion of on-campus, employment opportunities from a central office; and high-quality student work. Theoretical underpinnings of our pilot project included Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, Perry's theory of Intellectual Development, and King and Kitchener's (2004) Reflective Judgement model. Additionally, when working with on-campus employers, we helped them to understand what constitutes a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). This included: time-on-task, interaction with faculty and peers, diversity, structured teamwork, authentic problem-solving, and feedback on performance. This framework will help us transform the way students think about their contribution as an employee of the university. Our article provides an overview of the pilot project, reviews challenges and opportunities for growth, and includes theoretical foundations for this form of work-integrated learning and how we apply them in practice.

INTRODUCTION

The rising cost of college tuition and associated expenses is a growing challenge for students. Two in three college seniors who graduated in 2017 from public and private nonprofit colleges

had an average loan debt of almost \$30,000 (The Institute for College Access and Success, 2017). Student debt continues to climb. Thus, students need to earn money to pay for expenses.

es while in college and be prepared to secure employment upon graduation. These concerns have been expressed on a national level, but addressing this issue is a focused priority at the University of Cincinnati (UC) through “Co-op 2.0”—one of the pillars of UC President Neville Pinto’s *Next Lives Here* strategic plan. The initiative is intended to build on UC’s rich history in cooperative education and create flexible pathways to meaningful, career-oriented, compensated experiences for all UC students. Additionally, UC introduced career education learning outcomes as part of the general education revision that will be implemented in the 2019-2020 academic year. The outcomes address multiple aspects of career readiness, which is defined by the National Association of College and Employers (NACE) as “the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace” (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019, para. 3). These initiatives will prepare students to respond to the evolving needs of a global workforce upon graduation.

UC is the founding institution of cooperative education and developed the educational model in 1906. Mandatory co-op programs at UC require alternating semesters of academic courses with full-time, paid, work experiences for students in the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences (CEAS); the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning (DAAP); and the School of Information Technology (SOIT). The earnings a student makes through their paid co-op experiences have the potential to fund the majority of their educational expenses. The remaining students at UC, particularly those in the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), have

the option to complete internships, but face barriers to taking advantage of the opportunity. In many cases, gaining internship experience can carry hidden financial burdens including transportation costs to/from the work location and the opportunity costs of the time available to work in an (traditionally) unpaid internship. Consequently, students need to appropriately value the professional enrichment an internship provides, in order to justify the potential cost. The immediate financial pressures students face as they pay for their educational and living expenses often result in students finding part-time employment in retail or service industries, instead of having a work experience that more directly connects to their career goals.

In alignment with a broad institutional goal of increasing the number of paid work experiences, the Division of Experience-Based Learning and Career Education (ELCE) at UC has been charged with elevating and creating high-impact, paid, work experiences for students on-campus. ELCE is leading a paradigm shift to view campus employment as high-impact internships that foster professional growth and learning versus remedial work. Additionally, we are creating infrastructure that supports students’ abilities to describe the impact of what they are learning and how they are contributing to their community while remaining sensitive to the full load of responsibilities carried by our campus employers.

CONCEPTUALIZING ON-CAMPUS INTERNSHIPS

This pilot was led by Erin Alanson, Program Director for Academic Internships/Assistant Professor and Dr. Annie Straka, Director of Multidisciplinary Initiatives/Associate Professor within the Division of Experience-Based Learn-

ing and Career Education. In the initial stages of development, we aimed to distinguish between an on-campus job and an internship—considering opportunities for tiers of employment on-campus. While there is some distinction between positions that only involve remedial tasks versus positions that promote the development of transferrable skills, we realized that the day-to-day job responsibilities themselves were often not the problem. Rather, we focused our attention on how we might shift the ways in which students think about the work they are doing and develop their ability to identify and seize opportunities for skill development and learning. We realized it was important for students to set goals, reflect on their skill development, and integrate their learning in their on-campus jobs. Without asking campus employers to radically change their job structures or devote extra time to mentoring students, we wanted to strike a balance between what was expected from the internship “site” and what could be supplemented by a faculty member with educational expertise in professional development and career readiness. As a result, we developed the following requirements to define on-campus internships:

1. Students are expected to participate in a meaningful work experience that is related to their major or career objective (broadly defined).
2. Students must be supervised by a full-time staff member or upper-class mentor and have two opportunities per term to receive feedback related to goal development and project development.
3. The supervisor must provide an evaluation of the students at the end of the semester.
4. Students must enroll in a 0- or 1-credit hour internship reflection course.

In essence, we developed a working definition for an on-campus internship by creating an academic experience that is layered on top of the student’s on-campus job. This academic layer provides structure for students to consider the importance of their work and to reflect on what skills they can build during the experience that will aid in their professional success. The beauty of this model is that the focus is not on changing the structure of the employment opportunity, but instead on changing the mindset of the student. It is our intention to develop high-quality, on-campus jobs. As we continue to partner with new, on-campus employers, we plan to help them develop their student-employment opportunities through the framework of a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). According to Kuh, high-impact practices include: (a) time-on-task, (b) interaction with faculty and peers, (c) diversity, (e) structured teamwork, (f) authentic problem-solving, and (g) feedback on performance. This framework will help us transform the way students think about their contributions as university employees, as well as the ways on-campus employers develop student talent.

PURPOSEFUL PARTNERS

Our partner for this pilot project was The Learning Commons—the largest student employer at UC. They hire over 300 new students each academic year. Prior to this initiative, they provided competitive wages, robust training (25+ hours), ongoing professional development, guided reflection and mentorship, and flexible work hours. Student employment opportunities within the Learning Commons include: (a) academic coaches, (b) tutoring, (c) learning

assistants, (d) learning-community leaders, (e) supplemental-instruction leaders, and (f) front-desk assistants. These student employment roles provide academic support to students within and outside of the classroom. Most positions require a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) and cater to students who are academically high-performing, although the front-desk assistant serves as a pipeline for first-generation-college students who may not have a strong academic record. This opportunity aligns with the UC Gen-1 Theme House requirement that students seek employment. In partnership with the Learning Commons staff, we set the following goals for our year-1 pilot:

- Increase the number of Arts & Sciences (A&S) students participating in a paid, transcribed internship.
- Increase the number of Gen-1 students participating in a paid, transcribed internship.
- Create a sustainable-revenue model through enrollment and/or course tuition/fees.
- Decrease Learning Commons training costs (i.e., financial and time).

During the pilot project, all participating students were required to enroll in a 0- or 1-credit hour, online course — a critical aspect of this model. The course was delivered fully online and consisted of nine modules, which addressed the following topics through recorded lectures, readings, and discussion board prompts:

1. Getting started: Value add of internships,
2. Professional etiquette,
3. Goal setting,
4. Leadership,
5. Conflict management,

6. Evaluating progress toward goals,
7. Cross-cutting skills,
8. Professional storytelling, and
9. Wrapping up your internship.

The online reflection course included assignments intended to hold students accountable for the module content. Each module provided opportunities for reflection and integration and required only one hour of students' time per week. The major assignments included:

- pre- and post-self-assessment of skill;
- Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound (S.M.A.R.T.) goal setting connected to the cross-cutting skills outlined in UCs career-education-learning outcomes;
- reflection through discussion posts;
- identification and completion of a project that is related to students' major or career goals;
- oral and written practice articulating cross-cutting skill development; and
- mid-semester and final evaluation based on progress toward goals and project work with their supervisor.

Applying Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning was a key framework in developing the course. While campus employers may not have time to dedicate to deep-reflection meetings with student employees, the course modules prompt student to reflect on what is happening during their experience, which helps them understand their own preferences for work and learning as well as the transferable skills they are gaining through their on-campus job.

STUDENT AND PARTNER FEEDBACK

The findings from our pilot project demonstrated that both students and on-campus employers benefitted from this model. Through solicited and observed feedback gathered during our pilot, we identified the following benefits to students: (a) removal of transportation barriers; (b) supportive, on-campus professionals as supervisors who were invested in student success; (c) transcribed internship experiences; (d) paid, part-time experience with flexible hours; and (e) prompted reflection to help students articulate their growth and learning. The benefits to on-campus employers included: reduced training time; streamlined onboarding process; promotion of on-campus employment opportunities from a central office; and high-quality, student work.

Requiring students to reflect on their internships and co-ops helped them to articulate the cross-cutting skills they developed (via the UC Career Education learning outcomes), which prepared them for future success. The following are course evaluation statements from the on-campus, internship, online-reflection, course pilot. These examples point to the impact of this course on the student experience:

“The internship reflection course definitely played a significant part in helping me gain perspective on my time at the LC, and it helped me better understand how I could transfer skills learned at LC to a full-time position.”

“I have learned how to apply the skills I have learned from my peer leader experience to the professional world. I have also learned what cross-cutting skills are and how I can apply them to my life.”

“I delved deeper in assessing my skills and growth in weaker areas. I also learned how to articulate my experience and skills developed. This can be used when interviewing in the future.”

“This reflection course has allowed me to look at my work in slightly a [sic] different way, reflecting on things I would not normally have looked at. It also has allowed me to see my work in terms of skills that are different than those that I learn within the Learning Commons, as in seeing my skills in terms of cross cutting and not just the professional development through the learning commons.”

As we continue developing this model, we plan to gather additional data to explore the experiences of all stakeholders and enhance the experience for both students and on-campus employers.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The first year of this pilot project was considered a success by campus administrators because 60 students earned academic credit for their paid, on-campus internship. Additionally, the student feedback was overwhelmingly positive with most students agreeing that it was an impactful experience that enhanced career readiness. There is ripe opportunity and interest for more on-campus internships to be developed. As a result, the Division of Experience-Based Learning and Career Education is in the process of hiring a full-time program director to oversee the on-campus internship initiative at UC and expand the model throughout the university. As we look to year two, there are several challenges that need to be addressed.

First, at a university as large as UC (almost 45,000 students), it is critical that efficient processes are created to effectively scale this kind of learning model to impact as many students as possible. The issue of scale was brought to bear as the content of the course was developed and delivered during the semester. The depth of feedback that the instructor was able to provide was somewhat limited by the volume of students in the course; this will only increase as the model grows. We are considering how we might structure the course content to be delivered to a larger number of students and exploring how student teaching assistants (TAs) might support the course to ensure that those enrolled in the course receive timely and meaningful feedback throughout the semester.

Second, we are considering how best to balance customization of the course content for specific internship sites and generalization of curriculum to be applicable across different contexts. The pilot version of the course included specific content developed in partnership with the Learning Commons staff, which made the course a highly customized experience. However, as this model grows, it may not be feasible or effective to develop customized sections to make the program as inclusive as possible.

Finally, we are considering how we can scaffold the course material to be relevant to students at different levels of learning. We have a range of students enrolled in the course — from freshmen to seniors. As the program grows, we will need to attend to those levels with the aim to build a course that meets each student where they are.

Along with the challenges discussed above, growth of this model also brings great opportunity. This model has the potential to off-load training efforts from on-campus employers at a larger scale. We are in preliminary conversations about creating a student employment office that would exist within the UC Human Resources (HR) department. Creation of such an office would not only create infrastructure for on-campus internships but also would create student-worker jobs within HR that could provide additional on-campus internship opportunities for students.

We are also considering how to build a funding model that makes on-campus internships sustainable and accessible for students and on-campus employers. Budgetary constraints often discourage innovative collaboration across different campus offices, and this model presents an opportunity to work together to develop a creative solution that benefits all stakeholders with the best interests of the students remaining at the center.

As we reflect on the pilot year, we are energized by potential ways to incentivize students and on-campus partners to participate. A few of our preliminary ideas include:

- ***Using on-campus internships as a launching point for students to pursue off-campus positions.*** We envision hosting a recruiting event for students who completed on-campus internships to connect with off-campus employers. This kind of event would give employers a chance to connect with students who are professionally prepared and have a consistent level of experience gained through a full semester of developing transferrable skills in their on-campus work.

- ***Offering a sequence of online reflection courses for students who continue to work at the same on-campus internship site.*** For some of our larger on-campus internship partners, we envision developing nuanced learning competencies and objectives for enhanced development within a specific, on-campus, internship site such as the Learning Commons. For example, the first course could be focused on general competencies, the second course could focus on leadership development, and the third course could focus on critical thinking and decision-making. We would then recognize students who complete multiple, on-campus internships through a certificate.
- ***Building in incentives for students earning credit at their on-campus internship site.*** We envision offering monetary incentives for students who participate in on-campus-internship coursework as a form of professional development and training. For example, we might partner with on-campus employers to offer a more competitive wage to students who enroll in the online reflection course.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

As described in this paper, we are energized by the potential of this accessible model for meaningful, paid internships. In their book, *A Good Job: Campus Employment as a High-Impact Practice*, McClellan, Creager, and Savoca (2018) examined the theoretical frameworks that support on-campus employment. It is our goal to continue to put those principles into practice at UC. Some of our immediate next steps include: (a) developing structured training for on-campus employers, (b) collaborating with our centralized human resources department to streamline student hiring, (c) working with

on-campus employers to integrate transferrable skill development into the student job descriptions, and (d) hiring a full-time staff member to execute and expand this initiative. Our focus is to develop sustainable, scalable, efficient processes to continue to make higher education more affordable and accessible while preparing students to thrive after graduation.

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