

COOPERATIVE EDUCATION AND INTERNSHIPS: WINDOWS INTO THE WORLD AFTER COLLEGE

How do I figure out what I want to do? How do I get a job without experience? How do I get experience without a job? What if I spend four years studying this and it turns out I hate it? How do I learn what it really means to be in this field?

Many students ask themselves these questions when they try to imagine life after graduation. What can you do?

The first thing is to explore and experience a field where you think you want to begin through a cooperative education—co-op for short—or internship program at your college. Two-year and four-year colleges offer these programs in most disciplines to help students learn about themselves, their fields of study, and their career goals. They are windows through which you can view the world of work, while you still have time to modify your plans and behaviors.

Co-op and internship programs can offer you the opportunity to learn how to:

- Explore and clarify your major and career goals with professionals in the field, so you'll know if the field is right for you.
- Develop knowledge, competencies, and experience related to your major and career goals—you'll know you can do it and how to do it better.
- Gain practical employment experience that employers look for when hiring college graduates.
- Take responsibility for your own learning and create a more rewarding college experience.
- Establish a network of professional contacts, mentors, and references for after graduation.

Co-op experiences and internships provide you with an opportunity to learn in a real work environment with professionals in your field. You gain experience as an adult in an adult environment. As a result, you'll be able to develop key competencies, skills, and work characteristics that employers seek, including developing your communication and interpersonal skills and learning how to work with others. You'll also have a better

understanding of what people in your field do, gain more confidence in your abilities, and learn how to get things done. In general, you'll be better prepared to enter the world of work and your field.

Participating in a co-op or internship can also help you decide if you really suited to a particular profession or field. And if you decide it isn't for you, you'll still have time to modify your plans.

CO-OP OR INTERNSHIP—WHICH ONE IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

To reap the benefits of such programs, you need to know what to look for and discover which program is best for you. It may be that your college offers only one type of program, or you may have a choice. In that case, while both offer the opportunity to gain some experience, you need to judge how much you need to achieve your goals. More advice: Seek out "real world" assignments that give you a chance to learn things you can't learn in a classroom; look for programs that help you not only learn but also practice what you've learned; and judge programs based on what you will get out of your participation, not just on what they require of you. Finally, look for programs that demonstrate a belief that learning in a work environment can be an important aspect of a sound education.

Co-op programs and internships let you look into a new setting that you will move into after college.

Take full advantage of that vantage point: As you participate in co-op and internships, exercise your skills and abilities—learn to be a better communicator, critical thinker, leader, team player, and self-managed learner. Learn to be a better software designer, television production assistant, process engineer, environmental scientist, journalist, nurse, administrator, HR generalist—learn to be a better you. There's a lot to gain from cooperative education and internships. Be sure to take advantage of these valuable opportunities.

Courtesy of the [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#)