

Cooperative Education - An effective way to build a productive professional workforce



Last Saturday, December 13th, I presided over the Kettering University Commencement Exercises as I always do. But this time was different. For the first time in the three and one-half years I have been at Kettering, I was going to deliver the commencement address, and for the first time I saw science, engineering and business graduates who were truly facing uncertainties in their future – new and troubling economic realities ranging from a financial crisis and a deepening world recession to the threatened viability of the U.S. auto industry – a threat that had reached a critical stage just the day before.

I first addressed the nearly 1,700 family members and friends in the audience. “Ladies and Gentlemen, these graduates have experienced a lot of change over the past few years – both within this institution and in the world around them. . . In the world around them they are seeing new and troubling economic realities, interesting and historical times politically, and a continuing persistent evil in the world that is intent on destroying our culture and our way of life. Are they prepared to deal with the challenges ahead? I think they are. I see before me some of the most capable, mature, articulate, self-confident, and focused college graduates in our nation.”

Then I turned to the graduates and I asked, “Are you ready?” There was a collective “Yes” response. And then, with some prompting from me the graduates shouted in unison to their family members and friends, “We are prepared! We are confident! We will do good things! We will do the right things! We will succeed! We will help build a better world!”

The confidence expressed there was very real. The reason for it is simple. Every single one of those graduates has not only been through a rigorous and challenging learning experience in the classrooms and laboratories of Kettering, they also have up to two and one-half years of cooperative education learning experience in a professional work environment. Additionally, every one of those graduates has worked on a senior thesis project of interest to their corporate co-op sponsor. I know of no other institution of higher education that provides every one of its students with this set of learning and developmental experiences. Yes, many of these graduates will encounter some bumps in the road ahead, but they are indeed as prepared as any college graduate can be to deal with them.

Many companies have discovered the incredible benefits of co-op education. They find that co-op students rapidly become productive members of their workforce. During the co-op experience, the company can accurately determine if the student will fit well into the company’s culture as a productive prospective professional employee. The company then saves the expense of recruiting a college graduate – all they have to do is make an offer to their graduating co-op student. When they hire the student as a professional employee, they enjoy instantaneous productivity that no college graduate without co-op experience can deliver. They also find that co-op students (if utilized properly during their co-op experiences) have a systemic understanding of the organization – they know how that particular corporate system works. Consequently, they see problems in context and find better solutions.



President Stan Liberty

Employees who were co-op students are more loyal to their employers and are better retained by their employers than employees who were not co-op students with the company. They also tend to rise more rapidly within the organization due to their systemic perspective of it, and they are more apt to become leaders within the organization. Although some of our corporate partners are temporarily freezing hiring, it is gratifying to see that most are remaining committed to co-op employment. Co-op students are cost effective and are critical to developing a productive, professional workforce for the better business conditions ahead.

If you are a business leader who hasn’t utilized co-op as a way to develop a future professional workforce, then you really should consider it. But, just as with any other product or service, make sure you are getting the real thing. There are multiple co-op models, and many colleges and universities claim to provide co-op. However, most of them offer little more than internships. This is because running an effective co-op program is not an easy undertaking and requires a lot of experience. The most effective co-op programs in the country have been in place for many decades.

Visit the Kettering University website, www.kettering.edu for more information about co-operative education in science, engineering or business; or contact me directly at sliberty@kettering.edu.

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