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Professional Development for College Students in Tough Economic Times: The Drexel University Co-op Program Model

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Introduction

The United States is currently experiencing a financial recession with large and lasting consequences. College students and recent college graduates have certainly felt the impact of the current recession. The staff and faculty at Drexel University's Steinbright Career Development Center (SCDC) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania have developed many initiatives to help both graduating seniors and students enrolled in our cooperative education program land meaningful, relevant employment opportunities. One initiative aims to provide our co-op students with the most effective preparation to not only secure jobs, but to excel at those jobs and make lasting positive impressions on their employers. To accomplish this goal during these extraordinarily tough economic conditions, the faculty revised the curriculum of our Career Management and Professional Development course, otherwise known as COOP 101. This required course provides students with the practical tools they need to be successful during their job searches as well as on the job. By changing the course from a *lecture in class, practice out of class* model to a *demonstrate in class, practice in class* model the COOP 101 faculty aimed to prepare students for the realities of a difficult job market.

Facts and Figures of Drexel's Co-op Program

Drexel University introduced the cooperative educational program in 1919 with students alternating periods of study with periods of full-time professional employment related to their academic and career interests (Drexel University, www.drexel.edu, 2010). Drexel's co-op program has become one of the largest, most diverse and most well established experiential programs in the nation. Every year Drexel students hold placements at over 1500 businesses and organizations. Over the past four years, students have worked in 41 states and 50 countries around the world. Approximately 92% of all eligible students attending Drexel choose to participate in one to three six-month cooperative education experiences.

Drexel University operates on a quarter academic calendar and conducts courses during the fall, winter, spring and summer quarters. The majority of students complete their co-op experiences over either the fall and winter quarters or the spring and summer quarters, but a small number of students in certain majors do complete two three-month experiences in consecutive summers. Many of the 73 majors at Drexel University require co-op as part of their core curriculum. Despite the economic downturn, the Steinbright Career Development Center still helps over 97% of eligible co-op students secure positions each two-quarter cycle.

Preparing for Co-op: COOP 101

The SCDC designed COOP 101 exclusively for Drexel University students to prepare them with the skills necessary for career planning, the co-op job search and a successful workplace experience. All students in the co-op program must take COOP 101 and pass the course in order to participate in the co-op experience. The COOP 101 model provides consistency in preparation across the diverse

majors in the co-op program. The goals of COOP 101 are:

To prepare students for successful cooperative education experiences.

To introduce students to the SCDC and cooperative education requirements.

To achieve realistic expectations of cooperative education and develop career planning /job search skills and techniques that will remain relevant throughout students' lives.

There are two requirements to pass COOP 101: attendance and creating an *acceptable* resume. For the attendance requirement, students may have two absences and attend two make up classes. Students who exceed the two absences and two make up classes will fail COOP 101. The criteria by which the faculty determine an *acceptable* resume includes students successfully completing resume sections such as: contact information, education, relevant coursework, skills, work experience and activities. Additionally, instructors assess factors such as format, style, spelling, and grammar to determine a quality resume. The instructor will address *unacceptable* resumes on an individual basis. Students may resubmit their resumes with corrections for additional review. Each academic year, approximately 4% of the students who take COOP 101 fail the course. Failing the course almost always results from not meeting the attendance requirement.

COOP 101 meets once a week for 50 minutes over the course of 10 weeks. Despite its status as a prerequisite course for co-op, it does not carry any credit hours. As often as possible, students enroll in major-specific sections (i.e. a section of engineering majors, a section of graphic design majors, a section of nursing majors). Dividing the sections by major insures that students learn major and industry specific information for their resume and their job search. The COOP 101 faculty members teach 5- 13 sections and 75- 300 students per term. Since Drexel University operates on a 10 week quarter system, COOP 101 meets year round with the summer term having the least number of sections and students and the winter having the most. The variation of students and sections throughout the year results from the requirement of students taking COOP 101 at least nine months prior to the beginning of their co-op cycle.

Drexel University has offered COOP 101 since 2005 and the curriculum has essentially remained the same since then. Based on current economic conditions, the unique attributes of the generation represented by the majority of our students and feedback received from students and employers, the necessity of making curriculum changes became evident and necessary.

Sobering Economic Conditions

The collapse of the United States housing market and financial sector in 2008 caused widespread consequences felt throughout the country and around the world. Drexel University's co-op program was no exception. One segment of the United States population – college students, their parents, and the higher education faculty and staff who work with them – wondered how the recession would affect the job market, especially the availability of employment opportunities for current college students and new graduates. From October 2008 through April 2009, the United States lost 3.871 million jobs, with an average of 645,000 jobs lost per month (Fogg & Harrington, 2009). By June of 2010, the national unemployment rate reached 9.5% (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

While job losses certainly occurred across the board, two segments of industry most heavily affected were construction and manufacturing. Researchers have also noted a sharp decline in employment among those under age 25. By the second quarter of 2009, the high percentage of unemployed workers meant that there were five persons available to fill each vacancy (Fogg & Harrington, 2009). By April of 2010, the jobless rate for college graduates held steady at 8% (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Economists predict little new net job creation through 2012 and surmise that the job market may take five years to recover.

Consequently, our country will experience an excess supply of college-educated workers, resulting in more competition for jobs and a higher number of college graduates facing unemployment, underemployment and mal-employment (Fogg & Harrington, 2009). With these realities anticipated, the SCDC faculty and staff began a variety of initiatives in the fall of 2008 to meet these economic challenges and position Drexel students as competitive job seekers ready to enter a difficult job market.

Co-ops and Internships: More Beneficial and More Competitive

Drexel's co-op program provides approximately 4500 students a year with opportunities to increase their competitive edge and secure appropriate positions upon graduation. According to a 2010 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), 42.3% of seniors with at least one internship or co-op experience who applied for jobs received at least one job offer, compared to 30.7% of seniors without an internship or co-op who received an offer. Obtaining relevant experience as a student can greatly improve one's chances of employment. Employers seem to recognize the value of experiential learning as well, given that 44.6% of surveyed employers' hires from the class of 2009 came from their own internship or co-op programs (NACE, www.naceweb.org, 2010). The interest in attending a co-op school may have gained more appeal to students and their parents during the current recession. The new class entering Drexel in September 2010 supports this assumption as enrollment specialists predict the number of incoming freshmen to be over 20% larger than the class that entered in 2009.

Challenge of Millennial Students

The movement to expand college teaching methods beyond lecturing has been steadily growing over the past two decades. To meet the needs of the diverse learners who attend college, faculty must increase their repertoire of teaching methods. A unique population of learners – Millennials or the Net Generation – has entered higher education institutions at a rapid rate and has brought the issue of college classroom instruction and learning styles to the forefront. This group differentiates themselves from other groups such as Boomers (born 1946-1960) or Generation X (born 1965-1980) by their age, their personal attributes and their learning expectations. Some characteristics of Millennial students include digital literacy, experiential and engaging learning, interactivity and collaboration and immediacy and connectivity (Skiba and Barton, 2006). Tapscott (1998) defined the characteristics of this group by creating these broad themes:

Fierce independence

Emotional and intellectual openness

Inclusion

Free expression and strong views

Innovation

Preoccupation with maturity

Investigations

Sensitivity and corporate interest

Authentication and trust

These characteristics clash with the traditional teaching paradigm, prevalent in higher education for many years, which focused on the role of instructor as the “sage on the stage” who disseminated knowledge through lectures and PowerPoint slides (Skiba and Barton, 2006). Conversely “[Millennial] learners focus on understanding, constructing knowledge, using discovery methods and active engagement; want tailored and option rich learning; and view the teacher as expert and mentor” (Brown, 2005). These generational differences provided the framework and contributed to the inspiration to make the COOP 101 curriculum changes.

Emphasizing Soft Skills

A study conducted by Hanneman and Gardner (2010) noted that co-op and internship experiences are becoming even more important as the traditional “entry level” job for new college graduates has essentially disappeared. Historically, one’s first job after graduation taught the new employee “soft skills” such as applying major-specific content knowledge to the job, writing, collaborating with a team, learning new concepts, navigating organizational politics and norms, and demonstrating initiative. Now, employers expect full-time hires to have mastered these skills before even walking in the door, meaning that the responsibility for teaching students these skills has fallen squarely upon colleges. Essentially, internship or co-op has replaced the traditional starting position in terms of skill development (Hanneman & Gardner, 2010). Therefore, focusing on key soft or transferable skills in the COOP 101 course will better prepare students for the expectations of the professional work world.

Revising the COOP 101 Curriculum

Taking into consideration the shrinking number of jobs, the professional skills needed to be successful in the workplace and the learning styles of our students, the faculty began the process of revising the COOP 101 curriculum. Drexel University integrates practical application of knowledge across the academic curriculum. For example, engineering majors complete an engineering design project in their freshman year, in which they collaborate with a team to research and design a product or device to meet a need in society. Since students have come to expect practical learning environments, implementing cooperative and active learning strategies in the COOP 101 classroom was a natural extension of Drexel’s philosophy and purpose.

Implementing active learning strategies corresponds with the teaching theory and practice of the COOP 101 faculty in their previous classroom experiences: if active learning techniques were

engaging and successful with younger students, why not apply them to Drexel students? Some general characteristics of “active learning” in the classroom are:

Students are involved in more than listening.

Less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on developing student skills.

Students are involved in higher-order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation).

Students are engaged in activities (reading, discussing, writing).

Greater emphasis is placed on students’ exploration of their own attitudes and values.

(Bonwell and Eison, 1991)

Active Learning in COOP 101

While the new COOP 101 curriculum covers the same concepts as before, stressing topics such as resume writing, interviewing, the job search and professionalism; the revised curriculum presents these topics through activities and in class experiences instead of lectures. The faculty created a set of activities for each topic in the 10 week term, so that each class period allows the students to do more than listen; they actively practice the concepts presented in class.

Writing Experience Descriptions

An active learning activity utilized in COOP 101 helps students write strong experience descriptions for their resumes, emphasizing their soft skills. Prior to class, the faculty members create several typical student job descriptions written in a conversational paragraph format. For instance, this one describes working at a supermarket (Appendix 1):

I was a cashier at a grocery store. I didn’t like the job. I worked there 2 summers and that was all I could take. I didn’t do that much- just worked the cash register. I also had to keep my work area “tidy” (as my boss would say) and assist with the dreaded “clean up in aisle 5” announcements. I answered a lot of questions about the stuff people bought, so I had to learn about the products AND know where they are located in the store. This was a big store, too!! I helped put together those end of the aisle displays with cereal and grapefruit juice.

After viewing a short PowerPoint presentation detailing tips for writing effective experience descriptions, students work in small groups to rewrite this job description in three to five bullet points that reflect the tasks of the job as well as skills learned and accomplishments derived during the experience. The faculty members provide a list of sample action verbs to guide this exercise. Usually students can harvest from the paragraph soft skills such as communication, organization, applying content knowledge, and even teamwork. With additional thought and analysis, a seemingly unrelated position can highlight transferrable skills to a potential employer. Additionally, collaborating with each other to write the job descriptions provides an opportunity to practice soft skills. Exercises such as this help to improve the very same group of skills that Hanneman and Gardner (2010) emphasize as crucial to the success of a student’s internship or co-op experience.

Peer Review

Another exercise that improves students' skill sets takes place after they complete a first draft of their resumes. Students are required to bring a draft of their resumes to class for peer review, in which they exchange resumes with their classmates and complete a guided critique of

each resume. The faculty will ask students to complete tasks such as circling the action verbs, underlining spelling errors and / or writing their first impressions of the candidate based upon the resume. After reviewing their own critiqued resume, students can assess whether or not they indicated those crucial soft skills throughout their resumes. Since Millennial students typically personify traits such as emotional and intellectual openness, this activity allows them to utilize those traits to receive criticism from a peer. The exercise also requires teamwork and writing skills, two skills which employers expect of students on their co-op (Hanneman & Gardner, 2010).

Reading Job Descriptions

Once students have written their resumes, some of the next steps include applying to relevant positions, writing strong cover letters and preparing for interviews. Instructors emphasize the concept of "fit" throughout the term -a job applicant must communicate that he or she fits the skill set that the employer seeks. In order to strengthen students' critical thinking and writing skills, the instructors charge them with analyzing job descriptions of typical first co-op jobs in their major. After reading the job description, the students must complete a chart by writing the skills that the employer requests, then taking it a step further by indicating their proficiency of the skill and an example of a time when they have demonstrated that skill (Appendix 2). For instance, an engineering firm may identify that the ideal candidate has experience working in a team and using drafting software. After completing our exercise, students understand that they must go beyond simply restating their skills and provide specific, concrete examples of their ability to implement those skills.

The completed skills charts can be applied to three purposes through a student's job search. First, students can use the chart to assess if they meet the qualifications of a particular job. If they cannot provide examples for skills that the employer identifies as important to the job, then perhaps the students would benefit from pursuing other options instead. Second, the chart serves as a starting point for writing a cover letter. By simply converting their briefly worded examples into paragraphs, students will have a strong foundation for a customized cover letter. Finally, reviewing the chart prior to an interview will help the student formulate examples and anecdotes to convey in an interview. By explaining their skills in the context of an actual situation they have experienced, students can better communicate their skills to the employer.

Not only does this exercise help students to communicate their existing skills, it also strengthens soft skills. The activity could improve writing skills, and it also helps students to conceptualize and convey how the knowledge gained in class applies to a job. The activity fits with the Millennial students' learning style, as it provides an individually tailored experience (i.e., major specific job descriptions) and requires students to independently complete a task.

Mock Interviews

The last week of COOP 101 focuses on a group oriented experience. With the help of the SCDC's co-

op coordinators, faculty and staff conduct mock interviews in a small group format. In turn, each student answers an interview question. As often as possible, the questions measure important soft skills, such as demonstrating initiative, working in a team and learning new concepts, all of which Hanneman and Gardner (2010) identify as important skills to demonstrate and improve during one's first employment experience. After listening to their response, faculty and staff provide a succinct critique of the student's answer, focusing on what he or she could do to improve the content and delivery of their response. The instructors remind students of principles learned throughout the term, which provides an opportunity to reinforce important topics. Students also critique each other's responses, which creates a participatory atmosphere in the group. Students tend to provide the faculty with the most positive feedback from this experience, perhaps due to the opportunity to express themselves freely and demonstrate their innovation and independence.

Professional Tips

COOP 101 students are given a weekly "professional tip" (Appendix 3). Instructors provide students with a concept to consider as rising professionals in the workplace and use this concept as a springboard of class discussion. For instance, one tip reminds students of the importance of making a positive first impression, specifically having a strong handshake. After providing some helpful tips for handshakes, the faculty members ask students to stand up, introduce themselves and shake hands with one or two of their classmates. Rather than give the professional tip as something they need to do in the future, this activity allows students to practice the concept right away and hopefully receive immediate feedback from a peer. For the professional tip "identify and follow all company policies", students play the role of advice columnist and respond to a reader who wonders if it is acceptable to be ten minutes late for work each day.

Next Steps for Drexel University's COOP 101

Assessment

Though difficult to achieve, the COOP 101 faculty certainly must assess the effectiveness of the class. Instructors do administer end of term surveys to the students, but that compiled data is not always the truest evaluation tool. Not every student attends the last week of class, and the students who do attend do not always invest the time necessary to carefully complete the course evaluation. Although the results can be considered as benchmarks, the faculty could utilize a couple of alternative ideas to measure successes and shortcomings. The cooperative education coordinators who work with the students to help them secure positions are a source of assessment for COOP 101 students, but their feedback can be limited by the amount of time that they have to meet with each student, and then subsequently relay their findings to the teaching staff. Feedback from the co-op employers can be a strong measure of success or shortcomings, but since the students generally go to work six to nine months after finishing COOP 101, it will take time to collect this data.

One of the best methods of assessment is the continual review and retooling of the class. This review takes place every week and every quarter as the COOP 101 instructors determine the strengths and weaknesses of the topics and activities. With this reflection and discussion, the faculty members constantly evaluate the effective delivery of the course and how to best meet the needs of our students.

Technology

Students come to class with a variety of technology items, from cell phones to MP3 players to laptops. Therefore, the faculty must consider the technological training and dependency the average Millennial student possesses. Integrating new technology into the COOP 101 curriculum will continue to enhance the co-op preparation experience for our students. New technologies could also help the COOP 101 instructors provide meaningful feedback to students. Devoting ample time to grading each student's resume presents a problem due to the large number of students who take COOP 101 each term. Making a resume change or explaining a change in writing is sometimes limiting for instructors. *Adobe* offers software which allows the user to add audio and video comments to a document. This technology could prove to be time saving for instructors who could have upwards of 300 resumes to grade for a term and quite useful to students as well.

Programs such as Interview Stream (www.interviewstream.com) insure that every student gets sufficient feedback on eye contact, the use of hand gestures and clear, audible speech when conducting a mock interview. This product records students' answers to pre-set questions that can be specified to students' major fields of study. The student or the advisor/coordinator can then view the recorded interview together or separately to try to identify strengths and weaknesses. This exercise can be completed anytime and anywhere, as long as the student has a webcam and a quiet place. Implementing Interview Stream as an optional assignment for COOP 101 is a possibility in the future. The sheer number of students that go out on co-op each year presents a challenge to the staff and faculty at SCDC, making one on one mock interviews difficult to conduct with each student. Interview Stream could provide students with the additional and individualized practice that they want.

Professionalism

The weekly professional tips provide students with examples of professional behavior in the work environment using concrete examples and hands on activities, rather than just listing things not to do. Adhering to the principles of action learning, there are possibilities of expanding this idea. Faculty could create a short video portraying the tips in a medium that Millennial students can relate to. For instance, a video showing an employee asking himself or herself the question of "how was I supposed to know that I needed to be on time every day?" could come from a muffled voice and a blurred out face as in "America's Most Wanted." A problem such as, "I finished all my work, why can't I send an IM to my friend?" could be acted out as a video confessional from a reality television show. Instructors could create vignettes acting out scenarios captured on a "hidden camera" or even a mock "intervention" to discuss the usage of emoticons in work emails to reinforce the importance of professionalism in an engaging and entertaining fashion. These formats can accommodate visual learners and connect with students on a variety of levels.

Non-Traditional Students

With the emergence of the Yellow Ribbon Campaign – the federal program providing veterans financial aid to attend public or private universities – and the tough economy possibly motivating more people to go back to school, Drexel University has seen an increase in non-traditional students. These learners often do not need the entire ten weeks of COOP 101, as they may have already had years of work experience. With this in mind, SCDC will offer a new, five week co-op preparation course in the fall of 2010 called Co-op Essentials. This course will focus on restructuring students' current resumes to co-op resumes, providing interview practice and discussing career changes specifically for the non-

traditional student. The course will target their needs, respect their experience and also build a cohort from which they can draw support.

Networking Skills

A more difficult challenge in co-op preparation rests on providing students opportunities to network. Networking is a critical job search skill, but practicing networking within the confines of a 50 minute class period is not ideal. The faculty has discussed creating a capstone event for COOP 101 to bring together staff, alumni, students and employers to provide a more realistic environment to practice networking and hone the skills students learned in COOP 101. While the logistics of planning such an event are difficult (approximately 1200 student participants, numerous and varied professionals needed to participate, securing location on campus, schedules of students), this is an exciting possibility for the future.

Conclusion

Today's college students face a bright future, despite some grim economic predictions. Career development professionals can incorporate activities from COOP 101 into their own co-op or internship preparation courses or workshops to best position their students for employment success. By constantly reevaluating, changing and looking towards the future, students will be equipped with the tools they need to smoothly transition to successful careers.

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Appendix 1: Sample Job Descriptions

Office Assistant

Wilken Ganey and Greene

Philadelphia, PA

Worked there summers 2006, 2007 and 2008

This is my mom's law practice so that is how I got this job. I worked here in the summer, and I just helped out the office staff. It was pretty boring. I Xeroxed, filed papers, sent faxes and entered information in the database. I answered phones and covered the front desk when the receptionist went to lunch. I did get a lot better using Excel for some of my projects. I delivered documents that were personal and confidential. I ran errands for the office staff, too.

Create 3-5 bullets using the information from this paragraph and following the instructions of how to write experience descriptions.

Waitress

Dragon Café

Philadelphia, PA

Worked there from 2006 to the present

As a waitress, I work hard to provide the best service to my customers because I am a people person. I serve food and drinks. I always smile, and I am friendly even when they complain about the food or want to substitute a salad for fries. That really bugs me, but I don't let it show. I often have to train the new wait staff, which I like to do. I probably have trained 20 new wait staff since I have been at the restaurant. It is a busy restaurant, so I need stay on top of all my work. I am always on time for this job. Almost every weekend, I stay late to close up the restaurant and get it set up for the morning shift.

Create 3-5 bullets using the information from this paragraph and following the instructions of how to write experience descriptions.

Cashier

Acme

Philadelphia, PA

Worked there from 2007-2008

I was a cashier at Acme Supermarket. I didn't like the job. I worked there 2 summers and that was all I could take. I didn't do that much- just worked the cash register. I also had to keep my work area "tidy" (as my boss would say) and assist with the dreaded "clean up in aisle 5" announcements. I answered a lot of questions about the stuff people bought, so I had to learn about the products AND know where they are located in the store. This was a big store, too!! I helped put together those end of the aisle displays with cereal and grapefruit juice.

Create 3-5 bullets using the information from this paragraph and following the instructions of how to write experience descriptions.

Sales Associate

The Style Shoppe

Philadelphia, PA

Worked there from June 2008 to present

I worked this job full time over the summer and part-time during the school year. I love the clothes here. It was fun to help people select outfits. The stuff here was expensive, so there was a lot of money coming in each day. I would say about \$2000 is the amount I processed in transactions. I would often have to make trips to the bank with deposits. I kept the changing rooms clutter free, organized the clothes on the racks, checked the inventory and advised my boss on re-ordering select products. This fall I created a cool display for the front window. I got a lot of compliments on that!

Create 3-5 bullets using the information from this paragraph and following the instructions of how to write experience descriptions.

Lifeguard

Montgomery County Swim Club

Wynnewood, PA

Worked there from June 14, 2007 to September 2, 2007 and then from June 10, 2008- August 31, 2008

I was a lifeguard at a very busy private swim club for 2 summers. I not only was the lifeguard, but I was the head lifeguard and made all the weekly work schedules for the water safety staff. I also had to explain to the other lifeguards what the pool rules were since I had worked there longer than most everyone. I also taught swim classes for the young kids ages 5-8. The groups were small, but I taught a lot of classes. Thankfully, no one drowned while I was a lifeguard here!

Create 3-5 bullets using the information from this paragraph and following the instructions of how to write experience descriptions.

Appendix 2: Skills Chart

Essential Job Duties/Skills	My Skills		
	What skill is required?	When did I use this skill?	Where is this skill on my resume?

Appendix 3: List of Weekly Topics and Professional Tips

Week	Topic	Tip
1	Co-op Expectations: Review course requirements. Establish goals of the class, the job search and the co-op experience	Make a good first impression
2	Co-op and Resume Planning: Assess skills, interests and values to prepare for the job search and beyond.	Professional relationships are different than peer relationships
3	Market Your Skills I: Create a strong resume using appropriate	A professional appearance is key

	sections to organize information.	
4	Market Your Skills II: Demonstrate your skills through writing strong experience descriptions.	A good character is a professional character
5	Job Searching I: Explore practical approaches and resources to job searching for Drexel students.	Accept criticism gracefully
6	Optional Class: Instructors are available for one-on-one resume critiques.	Listen and follow directions
7	Job Searching II: Match your resume to a desired job. Writing cover letters that effectively highlight this match.	Show initiative
8	Professional Communication and Networking: Review the many ways you can network for job information and opportunities. Effective and professional communication methods.	Effective communication is essential for professional success
9	Preparation and Presentation: Detailed preparation for an interview plus writing a strong introduction	Identify and follow all company policies
10	Interview Practice: Practice answering interview questions in small group format.	A positive attitude will take you a long way in your career