

A blurred photograph of a blue and white truck, possibly a delivery or service vehicle, with a yellow sign attached to its side that reads "JUST HIRED". The truck is moving, as indicated by the motion blur. The background is a mix of green and blue tones, suggesting an outdoor setting. Above the main title, there is a decorative horizontal line consisting of many small, slanted black dashes.

# EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:

# A ROAD TEST & A GOAL MINE

BY TOM ROBINSON

**M**any employers feeling the squeeze of body count and skills shortages are no longer checking out the Career Services showroom for gleaming new graduates. The wiser ones have already been making payments on entry-level models of their choice through internships and co-ops.

The next generation of worker for those employers is not a starry-eyed graduate, naively taking his or her first drive down the career highway after graduation. He's been looking under hoods and kicking employer tires. There are some miles on the odometer by graduation day — and for good reasons.

A U.S. labor shortfall in the tens of millions is just over the horizon as Baby Boomers retire. Growing also are employer complaints that graduates produced by the undergraduate higher education system are not ready to work.

With that double-whammy in mind, we talked with four people who understand the problem and are part of the experiential learning solution. Among them are the director of the grandfather of all co-op programs, the head of career services for one the nation's

most successful student placement programs, head strategist for the world's largest association of human resources executives and an expert in experiential learning. All agree that employers and students need to be working together well before graduation.

## There's an elephant in the room

Steven Miranda, the head strategist of the Society for Human Resource Management, says studies indicate employers, especially large employers, consider the workforce shortage to be their top problem. Those same studies also show that across the board, industry is not doing enough about it. One such study by The Conference Board reveals only 19 percent of the employer respondents believe workforce readiness is primarily the responsibility of the hiring employer. Even fewer say it is primarily the responsibility of the U.S. business community.

Virtually all the Fortune 200 companies have internships and/or co-ops to recruit potential entry-level workers. Smaller employers are less likely to

be so equipped, and are therefore quite vulnerable. Miranda cites the example of the disastrous consequences for a 75-person shop that makes a bad hire, with no back-up to dilute the negative impact.

Industry experts point out that many colleges, even fine colleges, do not accept a responsibility to prepare workers. Academic faculty may not distinguish between graduating well-educated people versus graduating people ready to work productively. Some colleges relegate anything that smacks of workforce development to their continuing education division or to community colleges.

Campus career services offices are often under-staffed, under-funded and under-skilled. Their focus may be on corporate recruiters who are hiring for permanent positions, rather than supporting co-op students or interns. Colleges that are graded



***Employers who accept unpaid interns probably get what they pay for — a semi-motivated student who will make only a minor contribution to the business.***



UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

## Kettil Cedercreutz

*Associate Provost, Division of Professional Practice*

**EXPERTISE** After running away to the Finnish circus at 16, he became an engineer, academic department head, and now directs the oldest mandatory cooperative education program in the U.S. with a passion for the interface between industry and academia.

### Highlight some of Cincinnati's co-op history.

The co-op program here is 100 years old and is embedded in the culture. Each year, 4,000 students work with 1,500 employers worldwide. Co-op involves six quarters or 1½ years of the five required years. It's mandatory in the Colleges of Engineering, Design, Architecture, Art and Planning and Applied Science. It's an option in the Business School.

### Are students paid?

The 1,500 students earn \$35 million or about \$14,000 a year on average, although that varies from minimum wage to \$30 per hour. While on co-op, students pay no tuition, only a \$200 administrative fee.

### When does co-op work best?

Co-op works when it caters to a bottom-line-oriented industry and when the university makes co-op available to employers who need important jobs filled year-round. Many corporations use co-op as their main recruitment strategy, commonly extending co-op opportunities offers to two of three students, one of whom will eventually be hired full-time. One of them often gets an even stronger offer from a competitor.

### What is one campus factor that optimizes experiential learning?

Cultural immersion. We've been engaged in co-op for 100 years, and industrial values have permeated every level of the university. The constant exposure of our students to industrial demands forces faculty to keep up their familiarity with the real world. Theory is tightly linked to state-of-the-art practice here.

### When faculty are hesitant, what can win them over?

A full professor, who moved to Cincinnati from a prestigious state university, used his master's level engineering exam on baccalaureate engineering students here. Co-op seniors outperformed the theoretically educated master's students by a clear margin. Such stories are told and re-told. Outcomes win faculty over.

or funded on time-to-graduation may feel that co-op programs or internships that add months or years to the process reflect poorly on them.

### Experiential learning is a goal mine

Everyone agrees — experience is a good thing. At the very least, it's a noticeable item on a resume. It's often a tie-breaker between equally credentialed graduates. But the real value of a co-op or internship becomes evident in its contribution to experiential learning.

Lynn Montrose is director of the Academic Internship Program at Regis University and vice president of the National Society for Experiential Learning (NSEE). Montrose believes in the power of experiential learning to integrate praxis and theory. She describes the internship as the lab for a student's major. Interns also learn valuable professional behavior skills — networking, company culture, conflict management and negotiation. So doing, they personally mature.

Kettil Cedercreutz is associate provost at the University of Cincinnati where he directs the university's 100-year-old co-op program. He has constructed a hierarchical model that examines the levels of experiential learning. Its base is the simplest form — the internship. Its upper layers include variants of cooperative programs. Among the top layers are feedback loops, continuous improvement and cultural immersion that shape a true learning organization. He suggests that there is a difference between campuses with embedded experiential learning and those with just some available co-op or internship opportunities.

Cincinnati and Wentworth Institute of Technology are among the embedded, and they both have mandatory co-op programs. Cincinnati requires six quarters or a year-and-a-half. Wentworth has two mandatory four-month co-ops, and in some programs, an optional third.



WENTWORTH INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

## Gregory Denon

*Director, Career Services*

**EXPERTISE** Greg Denon directs cooperative education, career development and employment recruitment at Wentworth. His bachelor's degree in Human Resource Management is from LeMoyne College, and he earned a master's in College Student Development and Counseling at Northeastern University.

### **How does co-op education work at Wentworth?**

As students enter junior year, they prepare to be hired for the first of two mandatory co-ops. Working with Career Services counselors, they build resumes, hone job search skills, apply for and actually earn their co-op positions. We have existing relationships with some 700 companies, but students are not restricted to them. We don't "place" students in predetermined slots. In January, they begin 4 months of employment. During the first three weeks, they commit to measurable learning objectives with our co-op coordinator and a supervisor. In addition to periodic evaluations, students write what we call reflection papers in which they discuss the impact on their career goals and academic pursuits. A second co-op occurs during the next fall — senior year. Some students stay with the same company. Others choose a second employer.

### **Does co-op extend the time to graduation?**

No. For instance, an interior design student who wants to graduate in four years can make use of the summer semesters and finish in four years at Wentworth with two co-op experiences. Similarly, five-year programs here are completed within five-years, including the two co-ops.

### **How do Wentworth faculty members differ from their M.I.T. counterparts across town?**

While our instructors' primary concern is teaching, many work actively in their craft as engineers or architects or designers. The faculty here incorporates practical experience in the academic program — in classroom instruction, in the labs and in the studios. We embrace a cycle of learn-practice-apply.

### **Are co-op experiences and content customized by employer?**

They certainly are. For example, Centillum Communications bases each co-op assignment on a student's curricular progress. The responsibilities and work group assignment for a senior are more advanced than those of a junior. Our Industry Professional Advisory Councils are a blend of employer personnel and our academic departments refining curricula to meet industry dynamics.

### **Why are four-month co-ops desirable to an employer?**

Four months is a good number. In construction management, for example, the ebb and flow of projects involve short cycles. Four months, rather than six, enables flexibility to ramp up for peak times. Four months helps insure that students will get meaningful work and be able to concentrate on quality performance, rather than filling up time with administrative chores. For those employers eager to hire, four months provides opportunity to see more potential employees.

### **How many co-op students actually get jobs?**

We graduate 700-800 students each year, and 98 percent of them have accepted employment within six months. About 40 percent of them accept full-time jobs with a former co-op employer.

At all three schools with interviewees in this article, it's about learning — not about hours on the job. The work opportunities at Wentworth, Cincinnati and Regis are all graded for academic credit. There are formal processes, syllabi, learning goals, learning contracts, numerous self-evaluations by students, site supervisors, as well as testing for proof of learning.

Greg Denon, Wentworth's career services director, says faculty are enthusiastic supporters because experiential learning integrates classrooms, labs and studios with a real workplace in a cycle of learn-practice-apply. At Regis, Montrose stresses that internships are not tangential to the curriculum, but integrated at the core. Interns are graded based on what they learn. Cedercreutz says that at co-op schools like Cincinnati, Georgia Tech, Drexel and Northeastern, theory and industry practice are curricular focal points.

### **The Millennial factor**

For the first time, four generations inhabit the U.S. workforce. Generational differences are emerging as more significant than race or gender. This is quite evident when a Boomer supervisor manages a Millennial. Born between 1980 and 2000, Millennials are a generation nearly as numerous as the Baby Boomers. They're also called the Internet Generation, Echo Boomers, the Boomlet, Nexters, Generation Y, the Nintendo Generation, the Digital Generation, and, in Canada, the Sunshine Generation.

They were shaped by parental advocacy; scheduled, structured lives; multiculturalism and globalism; terrorism; heroism and patriotism; and technology. Says Ms. Montrose, "Millennials may not be as compliant or willing to 'earn their stripes' as we were, but they have a lot to offer. They grew up being told they were special, and indeed they are well-educated, bright and motivated." Consequently, as interns, they need to feel that they are a part

of the team and respected for their contributions.

They want to work with others who are positive. While they want a challenge and new skills, they also like a friendly work environment that rewards them with excitement and fun. When dissatisfied, they leave.

### **The business of experiential learning**

Experiential learning costs money. Whom and how much are not so obvious. If accompanied by a semester's tuition, an unpaid internship or co-op is really expensive. Paid internships and co-ops range between minimum wage and \$30 an hour. The average is around \$13-14 per hour or about \$7,000 a quarter. A student who is not paying tuition, and who can earn several thousand dollars that semester while learning, is getting a good deal.

Employers who accept unpaid interns probably get what they pay for – a semi-motivated student who will make only a minor contribution to the business. In all probability, that employer forfeits any chance of attracting the intern or co-op student as a full-time employee later on.

At the University of Cincinnati, six semesters of co-op delays graduation about a year. At Wentworth, using summer sessions, there is no delay.

Presently, more students are seeking the experience than employers are creating spaces. Enter the placement services. In four years, University of Dreams has placed 1,800 students in companies such as Paramount Pictures and MTV Networks. Students are paying \$6,499 to \$8,999 for eight-week summer internships with housing in dorms, some meals and transportation to work.

Fast Track Internships helps students identify companies who suit the students' goals, but either don't have formal internship programs or don't advertise them. Fast Track also composes resumes and then helps students distribute them, seeking unpaid internships at a cost of \$799



**REGIS UNIVERSITY**

## **Lynne Montrose**

*Director, Academic Internship Program*

**EXPERTISE** Ms. Montrose began the Service Learning department at Regis in 1987. She is the vice president of the National Society for Experiential Education and is a faculty member of the Experiential Education Academy.

### **Do English majors benefit from internships?**

Internships may be twice as valuable for the English or philosophy majors whose career paths are not so obvious. A work component helps crystallize what a student might want to do — teaching, museum management or research. A math major once told us she was more interested in jewelry design than in being an actuary or doing research. An internship with a prominent designer disclosed that her skill with CAD and intricate problem-solving was directly applicable to jewelry design.

### **Do employers embrace internships as good business?**

Overwhelmingly. Interns are a valuable resource for employer projects when students contribute in meaningful ways. Employers view getting students into the human resource pipeline early as smart and fiscally responsible. You can hire someone at a career fair based on a resume and an interview. Or you can hire an intern as a junior, then grow him. Once hired full-time, he or she is trained and assimilated and ready to work at your company.

### **Explain the Learning Contract.**

At the outset, each student lists at least three objectives to be accomplished. The student, a faculty sponsor, a site supervisor and Director of the Academic Internship Program all sign the contract. During each internship, students and their contracts are evaluated by their site sponsors at six and twelve weeks. I visit the intern and supervisor as well. At the end of each internship, each intern evaluates the experience and the learning accomplished. Meanwhile, outside the internship, students attend scheduled meetings with their faculty sponsor and are graded, based on what they learn, not just on the hours worked.

### **How do academic deans and faculty at Regis view experiential learning in general and internships in particular?**

Internships, service learning, leadership and study abroad have been embraced and supported by faculty and administration for 25 years. Our mission is to educate men and women in the leadership of service to others.

### **In what Regis departments are internship activities overseen?**

The Career Services staff provides support services and reports to the Dean of Students. The Academic Internship Program and faculty advisors report to the academic dean of the College. Students receive credit and a grade from their faculty advisor. They also have a convenient Career Services facility for resume help, interviewing skills workshops, career counseling and access to an online database of hundreds of local internships, career fairs and employer recruiters.



**SOCIETY FOR HUMAN RESOURCE  
MANAGEMENT**

## Steven Miranda

*Chief HR & Strategic Planning Officer*

**EXPERTISE** Formerly vice president of Lucent Technologies, Steve Miranda was responsible for creation of global talent development, assessment, leadership development and organizational design. He is now head planner for the world's largest human resource management organization.

### **Are corporations worried about the looming workforce shortfall?**

Among large companies, every study we see says it's the number one or two top concern. Smaller companies with, say 100 employees, should be more concerned. A large company has backup for an open job or an employee who is a bad fit for the culture. At a small company, the results can be disastrous.

### **Do your member companies have intern programs?**

Virtually all of the Fortune 200 companies have some formal effort. Many holding companies let their division HR managers run intern programs for the business units. I don't think we know for sure how many smaller companies have them. I would render a guess they don't.

### **From universities, are employers looking for degrees or skills?**

Most business leaders believe that the ability to integrate the theoretical with the real world is an essential ability for any employee to have. Universities are torn. They worry that co-ops and internships slow the pace of graduation and the possible effect on their funding. Yet they know employers believe work experience makes a degree more valuable. Meanwhile, the completion of an undergraduate degree in four years is becoming the exception, rather than the norm. It's a serious challenge.

### **Is work experience an employment tie-breaker?**

If I had to decide between a top-tier university graduate with experience and one without, I'd pick the one with experience every time. But employers have a hard time choosing between an Ivy League graduate without experience and a second tier college graduate, even with the experience. It's not apples to apples.

### **If competition for hires becomes fierce, won't the large companies prevail?**

Large companies often attract employees with high base compensation and bonuses. But small companies can play to the Millennials' other motivators, like work style, go-go culture and flexible schedules to redefine the value proposition.

### **What should employers know about the students graduating from college today?**

Gen Y or Millennials are savvy, competitive and are looking to amass a personal portfolio that stands them well for their next opportunity. They are citizens of their discipline, not citizens of their company. An employer enticing a student to begin with an internship and later join the company needs to understand and fulfill their expectations.

or \$999 for paid internships. There are cottage industries popping up to find students housing, roommates and other services while away from home.

Some campus staffers are appalled that students are paying for help finding internships, claiming that their Career Services offices have access to willing employers. Matthew Zinman heads the eponymous Z University, which promotes the value of internships to employers and provides training materials and consulting to help them create and manage programs. The Z University cost is borne by the employer rather than the student. (See Matthew Zinman's article on "The Intern" at Rutgers elsewhere in this magazine.)

### **Road testing works**

Wentworth reports that 98 percent of all co-op graduates are working full-time within six months of graduation. Of them, 40 percent are working for one of their former co-op employers.

Employers responding to the National Association of Colleges and Employers 2007 Recruiting Benchmarks Survey reported that they offered full-time jobs to nearly two out of three of their interns. More than 70 percent of those offers were accepted, and nearly half of the interns came on board as full-time hires. Of the employers surveyed, nearly 31 percent of their new college graduate hires from the Class of 2006 came from their own internships.

A 2005 National Society for Experiential Learning survey notes that 45 percent of employer respondents offer 6.5 percent more in salary to incoming hires with intern/co-op experience than to those without such experience.

The students and employers who have been doing the road test know it works.

It's time for these and other players to dramatically expand the scope of opportunities to all employers and students who want this kind of performance. ■