

Much Learning Does Not Teach Understanding: Classroom Knowledge Isn't Enough **By: Mardy Ashe**

We learn by example and by direct experience...– Malcolm Gladwell

Two years ago, Cooperative Education celebrated its 100th birthday. It was in 1906, that Herman Schneider of the University of Cincinnati observed that several of his more successful students had “worked” to earn money before graduation. Through the years, his idea of working while learning caught fire and by 1962 one hundred fifty schools were on board with co-op. Programs were now relating academic preparation to the work experience. This factor seemed to enhance the experience for both the student and the employer. From one program in 1906 to now hundreds nationally and internationally, co-ops and internships are recognized as ways to improve the learning experience and better prepare the student for career and life.

In 1977, Western Carolina University began its co-op program. This began as a semester or alternating semester long program where students could “learn while they earned”. The alternating semester is still an option today, however, most students elect to do one semester, usually in the summer. Through the years the departmental internships (initially unpaid experiences) and co-ops have come to more closely resemble one another. Both are semester long programs offering academic credit for a structured job experience and in many situations, both are paid. All three experiential programs at WCU, cooperative education, departmental internships and service learning all provide students with meaningful, major related (many are) experiences created to ease the transition from school to work. The Co-op program is centralized, offered through the WCU Career Services/Cooperative Education Office, whereas, internships are primarily departmentally based.

This fall 2008, Western will take the initial steps towards implementation of the Quality Enhancement Program. Co-ops and internships are an integral piece of this plan--- moving students towards synthesis, integrating knowledge from different areas into an original whole. As students begin their college career, choose a major, take classes in that major, the co-op/internship presents an opportunity to apply this knowledge in a meaningful way and in a real world setting. As a requirement of the co-op/internship, students write reflective journals and papers documenting their learning experiences and feelings. It is a reality check of their academic classes as students “see” their major at work, how their classes may or may not apply and, in many cases, learn what they need to learn when they come back to school. By-products of this experience may include: refinement of self or major/minor, a renewed motivation towards learning, enhanced employability and vocational maturity.

Career Journal, February 2008, Vol.5 Issue 3

http://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/PDFs/careerservices_cj_feb-08.pdf