

Putting Education to Work

Cooperative Education at Columbia Union College

By Richard Moyers

Students at Columbia Union College are making a name for themselves in America's capital city. Because of their participation in a work-study program called cooperative education, CUC students are developing a reputation as capable, dependable workers.

These students follow in the footsteps of generations of Seventh-day Adventist students who have "worked their way through" colleges and secondary schools manufacturing everything from furniture to brooms, binding books, baking bread, planting strawberries, and baling hay. This commitment to a combination of classroom learning and practical work experience became a cornerstone of Seventh-day Adventist education out of financial necessity and because of strong statements by Ellen White about the importance of combining work and study.

In 1909, after working to set up Avondale College in Australia, Ellen White wrote that, "we persevered in our efforts until the lesson was learned that in order to have an education that was complete, the time of study must be divided between the gaining of book knowledge and the securing of a knowledge of practical work."¹

In *Education*, Ellen White wrote:

An education derived chiefly from books leads to superficial thinking. Practical work encourages close observation and independent thought. Rightly performed, it tends to develop that practical wisdom which we call common sense. It develops ability to plan and execute, strengthens courage and perseverance, and calls for the exercise of tact and skill.²

And writing specifically in the context of higher education, Mrs. White said: "Very many youth who have gone through a college course have not

More than 1,200 American colleges and universities offer cooperative education programs, and nearly 200,000 students participate each year.

obtained that true education that they can put to practical use. They may have the name of having a collegiate education, but in reality they are only educated dunces."³

Mrs. White wrote to a world dominated by agriculture, where most Americans lived in rural communities. Can her advice and the historic Adventist commitment to education and work experience be adapted for education in the 1990s and beyond?

Co-op at CUC

In the early 1980s, administrators and faculty at Columbia Union College were looking for ways to help students earn money to finance their education, enhance their classroom experience, and continue the Seventh-day Adventist tradition of combining education and practical work experience. They discovered and implemented a program called cooperative education, or co-op, because it involves the cooperative efforts of employers and educational institutions. Cooperative education is a

national program with a proven track record. According to the national Cooperative Education Association, more than 1,200 American colleges and universities offer cooperative education programs, and nearly 200,000 students participate each year.

Co-op education makes career-related work experience part of a student's college curriculum. Co-op students are placed in jobs directly related to their majors and career goals. Nearly all co-op positions are paid, with the average co-op student at CUC making about eight dollars an hour. Through cooperative education, students explore their career before they graduate, make professional contacts that can lead to job offers, earn money to pay their college tuition, and learn how the concepts they study in classes apply to real-life work situations.

Co-op seemed a logical choice for an Adventist college, but even more so for a college located in a suburb of Washington, D.C., a metropolitan area of more than three million people with one of the fastest-growing job markets in the country. Since the introduction of co-op at CUC in 1981, more than 800 students have participated in the program. Their employers have included the Central Intelligence Agency; the U.S. Departments of Defense, Energy, and Labor; DuPont; the General Conference of SDA; the Internal Revenue Service; National Aeronautics and Space Administration; the National Institutes of Health; Sears; the Smithsonian Institution; the U.S. Customs Service; Washington Adventist Hospital; WRQX-FM; and WJLA-TV.

How Co-op Works

Co-op is a flexible program that allows schools to choose different ways to implement the program while providing students with different options to complete their college work. The two main

types of co-op experience are parallel work experience and alternating work experience. Students who choose parallel cooperative education work part-time while they attend school; students who choose alternating co-op take a semester or a summer off to work full-time.

Co-op is a required part of the curriculum for about half the majors at Columbia Union College, but students in any majors can participate. Majors that require co-op include accounting, business, broadcasting, computer science, engineering, English, graphic arts, health/fitness management, journalism, mathematics, music, nursing, and respiratory care.

Before students can participate in cooperative education, they must have earned 30 hours of college credit, eight in their major area of study. They must also have maintained at least a 2.0 grade point average and be recommended by their major professor. In addition, before they can register for cooperative education experience, they must have completed COOP 210, Introduction to Career Planning, a course that teaches résumé-writing and job interviewing skills.

Students who have fulfilled those requirements meet with a cooperative education coordinator, who interviews

the student about his or her job history, skills, and career goals. The coordinator then provides job leads and/or helps arrange interviews using the bank of available jobs and employer contacts

Cooperative education is a national program with a proven track record.

maintained by the co-op office. The student makes contact with the potential employer. If the student is hired, he or she works with the employer to develop a learning agreement that outlines objectives for the job and activities to meet those objectives. Near the end of the co-op experience, both the student and the employer evaluate the student's performance, and the employer gives the student a letter grade for the class. Although CUC does not award academic credit for cooperative education experiences, the co-op grade becomes a part of the student's permanent transcript.

Participating in co-op helps students make career decisions before they graduate—and before it's too late to change their major. Paulo Seidl, a junior business/marketing major, is responsible for marketing and procurement of equipment at Royal Enterprises, Inc., a business that exports medical equipment to South America. Seidl says, "The exciting thing is, I'm out there. Those people depend on my decisions." He says his job is exactly what he wants to do in the future.

Unlike Seidl, Jay Cole, a sophomore accounting major says, "I don't really know if I want to go into accounting." Cole, who works as an accounting clerk for the Smithsonian's Museum Shops, says that because of his job he knows now that he finds accounting "boring." His co-op job has prompted him to consider another career.

Fred Facemire, a senior at CUC, says his job exposure has given him room to be creative because "there is more freedom in methods" on the job than in the classroom. Fred works as a student trainee in physical sciences in the hydro-acoustics division of the Naval Research Laboratory, a division that maps the sea floor. Facemire's work involves writing computer programs that process data from field experiments. "In most class-

room settings you're given a job to do with specific criteria," he says. But at work, his boss tells him to do what he can to make the material understandable. "When you come back to the classroom [from co-op jobs], you have real-world knowledge. Not only do you know why you're learning, you can tell other people why."

Co-op also gives students a chance to share distinctive Seventh-day Adventist beliefs with coworkers and employers. Jay Cole works with non-Adventists and has had the opportunity to show—and tell—his office about his life-style. He gives as an example an office party at which his colleagues discovered that he didn't drink alcohol. He has told them about summer camp and what Pathfinders is like. Cole says that his job is definitely a witness, also he describes co-op as "easing you into life."

After telling his boss that he wouldn't be able to work on Friday nights or Saturdays, Fred Facemire was told that it wouldn't be a problem. "Since I've been there I've met a lot of people that are curious about Adventist beliefs," he says. He and a Catholic colleague have discussed the two churches' school systems, the state of the dead, clean and unclean meats, and the Sabbath.

Though important, witnessing isn't the

Participating in co-op helps students make career decisions before they graduate—and before it's too late to change their major.

primary focus of co-op. Co-op is designed to help students test the waters in their career and give them a competitive edge after they graduate. "Co-op is important for students, because it gives them exposure to real-world work experience," says Tom Boyce, a computer specialist and work supervisor at National Institutes of Health. "It's very important for students to have some sort of perspective on what the real world is like, what it'll be like once they get out of school. And they get experience at whatever career they plan. Co-op helps them figure out what the jobs in that field are really like and whether

they're really interested in that kind of work."

According to the Cooperative Education Association, about 60 percent of co-op students receive job offers from their final co-op employer. "I was impressed by CUC students' ability to learn quickly and their self-starting attitude," says Boyce. "They're always looking for something to do instead of just sitting around waiting for a supervisor to tell them what to do."

Co-op is one way to make sure that a Christian education is worth the investment. Students graduate with textbook knowledge and real-life experience. They've developed a reputation for excellence. That's Christian education at its best. □

Richard Moyers is Director of Public Relations at Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland. Columbia Union College students Kenneth Piner and Loretta Rogers conducted interviews and contributed material for this article.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1952), p. 508.
- ² _____, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1903), p. 220.
- ³ _____, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1923), p. 44.