

The career test-drive

Internships and co-op programs give employers first crack at the best and brightest

By
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Stephanie Fudge's last work placement through the Brock University co-operative education program was out of this world – or so it felt. As a planetary research associate with the Northern Centre for Advanced Technology Inc. in Sudbury, Ont., the 22-year-old environmental geoscience major spent much of her time in a lab with conditions designed to simulate properties of the moon, driving a rover and testing drills for use in space exploration.

"I had never tested a drill before working here or anything like that. But I have a lot of geological knowledge to bring to the table, and I think that was needed for the research side of things," says Fudge, whose fall work term is with the environmental office at the Canadian Forces base in Petawawa, Ont.

"The projects I got to work on at NORCAT were just awesome, with NASA and the Canadian Space Agency. When you are writing a report that you know people at the Canadian Space Agency will be reading, that's pretty special," says Fudge, who accepted the Petawawa posting this semester to find more grounding in "the environmental work that people do here on Earth, instead of what's done on the moon."

As one of more than 80,000 Canadian university students who alternate their academic studies with co-op placements in work related to their courses, Fudge figures she will have a decided advantage when it comes to finding full-time work after graduation.

The numbers, at Brock at least, bear this out. "Our permanent hire rate, from co-op to full-time employment on graduation, is 97 per cent."

Neil Claydon, now an account executive with Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, did a co-op placement with the company when he was a Brock University sports management student

It's very high," says Cindy Dunne, director of co-op education at Brock. While the co-op option allows students to test-drive careers, it also allows employers to test-drive prospective employees. It gives them first crack at the "the best and the brightest," Dunne says.

Co-op placements are typically paid positions, while internships are not necessarily so. Still, even an unpaid internship can be well worth the time invested, says Neil Claydon, an account executive with Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, which owns teams including the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Toronto Raptors and Toronto FC.

Given the choice of writing a thesis or doing an internship to complete his sports management degree at Brock, Claydon opted for an internship selling executive suites for sporting events at Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment in the fall of 2007, having previously volunteered for a stint at the Hamilton Bulldogs hockey club. For a diehard sports enthusiast, the MLSE internship was a dream assignment and one that ultimately led to full-time employment.

"It really is a terrific way to augment your traditional classroom studies and develop knowledge of business," says Claydon. "MLSE is an organization that values promoting from within, and that's why you find that a lot of our full-time employees are graduates of the internship program. They know the culture, they know our values and vision."

All Canadian universities offer some co-operative education, to varying degrees, and the opportunities range far beyond the typical business and information technology work placements. History students, for instance, have highly developed critical thinking, communication and research skills, says Dunne. "We may not be able to place every single history student as a curator in a museum," she says, but if an employer needs someone to look at historical documents involving aboriginal treaty rights, with a view to developing a policy document, "that's a perfect fit for a history student."

To meet the burgeoning demand from students – and parents worried about their children's future employment prospects – campus co-operative education directors are making cold calls, attending trade shows and banging on the doors of employers to find positions for their students. They tap their alumni network, staying in touch with people like Claydon in the hopes they will help train and educate the next generation of employees. It is a challenge in a tough economy, says

Michelle Larsen, co-op co-ordinator in the faculty of science at Nova Scotia's Acadia University. "Our office has been known to dance when the offer comes in."

Students do not always know where their studies will lead them. "Sometimes you will see students try out different sectors to see what it is they like and, more importantly, what they don't like. They may have come into biology thinking they might want to be a microbiologist and get a placement in microbiology where they are in a windowless lab," she says. Some will love it; others will decide to shift course and try a placement in a different field. "These students are graduating with, at a minimum, a year's worth of work experience, and it gives them a huge competitive advantage," says Larsen.

To ensure successful placements, university co-op offices generally require students to participate in pre-employment professional development courses before they set foot in a workplace, so they will know not only how to write a résumé and handle the interview, but also how to comport themselves once they are on the job.

The competition to get into co-operative education and internship programs can be intense, given the growing popularity of this mode of study. Marks matter and – in the case of a new management and international business program offered at the University of Toronto's Scarborough campus – it helps to speak more than one language. "In our inaugural year, we had 25 openings and 700 applications. Our ratios were a little off; we thought it would be a little less popular," says Christine Arsenault, director of management co-op programs at U of T Scarborough.

The new four-year management and international business program, which bumped its first-year enrolment up to 43, involves one study term abroad and at least one international work placement, says Arsenault, who is also incoming president of the Canadian Association for Co-operative Education.

"Employers were telling us they need students who are more mobile, and who understand the cultural differences of the business world," says Arsenault. She adds that co-op program directors often have better insights than most about labour market trends, and the evolving needs of the workplace, because of their constant discussions with employers.

"What's interesting about co-op is that it is sort of newly charted territory, a weather vane of what's going to go on down the road." ■

THE SURVEY

CO-OP/INTERNSHIPS

LARGE (ENROLMENT OVER 22,000)

University of Waterloo	A
Ryerson University	B+
University of Alberta	B
University of British Columbia	B
University of Manitoba	B
University of Western Ontario	B
University of Calgary	B-
Carleton University	B-
Concordia University	B-
McGill University	B-
McMaster University	B-
University of Ottawa	B-
University of Toronto - St. George	B-
York University - Main	C-

MEDIUM (ENROLMENT 10,000-22,000)

Université de Sherbrooke	A
University of Guelph	A-
University of Saskatchewan	B+
University of Victoria	B+
Brock University	B
Dalhousie University	B
Memorial University of Newfoundland	B
Queen's University	B
Simon Fraser University	B
University of Regina	B
Wilfrid Laurier University	B
University of Toronto - Mississauga	C+
University of Windsor	C+

SMALL (ENROLMENT 4,000-10,000)

Mount Royal University	B+
University of New Brunswick - Fredericton	B+
Nipissing University	B+
Saint Francis Xavier University	B+
Thompson Rivers University	B+
University of Lethbridge	B
University of Ontario Institute of Technology	B
University of Prince Edward Island	B
Saint Mary's University	B
University of Toronto - Scarborough	B
Grant MacEwan University	B-
Lakehead University	B-
Laurentian University	B-
Trent University	C+
University of Winnipeg	C+
Vancouver Island University	C

VERY SMALL (ENROLMENT UNDER 4,000)

Acadia University	A-
Redeemer University College	A-
Trinity Western University	A-
Concordia University College of Alberta	B+
The King's University College - Edmonton	B+
Bishop's University	B
Mount Saint Vincent University	B
University of Western Ontario - Huron	B
University of Western Ontario - King's	B
Cape Breton University	B-
York University - Glendon	B-
Brandon University	C+
University of Northern British Columbia	C+
St. Thomas University	C
Mount Allison University	D