

Firms get engineers, students get experience in intern 'draft'

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Next month in Corvallis, Oregon's top engineering students will go through what few outside the pro sports arena ever experience – a daylong series of interviews that ends with engineering companies drawing numbers for a shot at hiring their top picks for internships.

"We lovingly call it the pro draft," said Gary Petersen, director of the Multiple Engineering Cooperative Program, "because these kids are pros."

It's a high-energy way to get an internship gig. But, said Michael Humm, an Oregon State grad and engineer-in-training at Kennedy Jenks Consultants, the internship also one-ups the typical student work experience.

"There were jobs to be had, but you definitely had to put your resume out there," he said. "And those were jobs that weren't giving any kind of background or professional experience."

The Multiple Engineering Cooperative Program started in 1977 when Boeing, Freightliner and Tektronix noticed that fresh-out-of-school employees took a while to get the hang of the working world. The solution, put into practice by Oregon State University, was creating a program that would provide two six-month internships with two different engineering companies.

Students got professional experience and career direction – and companies got better workers.

"It's not driven by the university, it's not driven by the students," said Steve Cook, a vice president at CH2M Hill. "It's driven by the market."

MECOP, as the program is known, has expanded ever since, adding more students, companies and engineering disciplines every year. In 1997, the Civil Engineering Cooperative Program began, ultimately pulling in companies such as CH2M Hill and David Evans and Associates. The program's also now open to Portland State University and Oregon Institute of Technology students.

"Over time, the university and other departments started saying, 'This makes sense,'" said Steve Townsen, a Portland city engineer who's worked with CECOP interns at the Portland Office of Transportation.

Students layer their studies with the two internships, one in their third year and one in their fourth year. The longer work period, companies say, lets students work on actual projects, taking on tasks just as an entry-level engineer would.

"That's what six months does for you," Petersen said. "It changes it from a task-oriented, shadowing experience to a project experience."

Companies pay program dues: \$2,800 plus \$500 for additional interns for MECOP, and \$2,000 to \$4,000 per year, depending on company size, for CECOP. They also pay interns a salary that's equal to about 70 percent of an entry-level

engineering salary – the average two years ago was \$18 an hour.

Good pay. But also, said Kristen Mathes, a former CECOP intern who's now on the organization's board, a way for students to get a better idea of what the careers they're considering actually involve.

"You come out of school a much better engineer when you have had actual engineering experience," the 2002 Oregon State grad says.

Getting to the February draft is a feat in itself. Of the 350 students that apply – usually at the end of their sophomore year – the universities pre-screen for academic performance, which usually whittles the number of candidates down to around 280. The final test is an interview with a team of industry reps who are focused mostly on whether the student is ready for the professional world.

"For each of the companies, it's, will this student fit in my company if I take them?" Townsen said.

Usually, students will. About 80 percent of students go back to work for one of their two internship experience companies.

"Our best salesmen for the program," Townsen said, "are the students themselves."

Humm's first internship was with Kennedy Jenks. And Mathes joined CH2M Hill directly out of her first internship.

"The interaction with all the different civil engineering disciplines, and mechanical and electrical, just really intrigued me," she said.

Professional benefits extend, too, to the classroom, program grads say.

"It was pretty amazing to be back in school after the internship," said Humm, who graduated in 2005. "You're thinking one step ahead, which is good for you, but it also raises the impact of the whole class."

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921 S.W. Washington St.

Suite 210

P.O. Box 10127

Portland, Oregon 97296

Phone 503-226-1311 | Web: www.djcoregon.com