

"Real World" Program may be Future of Higher Ed

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CORVALLIS - An Oregon State University internship program that has Pacific Northwest businesses chomping at the bit for its graduates is continuing to expand, and the concept holds potential to be applied at many other institutions and fields of study, officials say.

In fact, this Multiple Engineering Cooperative Program, or MECOP, is so sophisticated it bears little resemblance to the ordinary internships that are increasingly common in higher education. Most college students, for instance, will look for a job when they graduate this June, and many will find one.

But most MECOP graduates already have a job or will be sorting through multiple offers.

"At the end of my junior year I was actually offered a job by the company where I spent my first MECOP internship," said Robert Ayers, 22, an OSU industrial and manufacturing engineering major from Bend who will graduate in June. "They even offered to pay for my final year of college if I'd return to work for them. So I took them up on it, and in July I'll be starting a new career with Sentrol, Inc., a Tualatin electronics firm."

MECOP internships, Ayers said, allowed him to "see what you're good at, what you're not so good at and what you like." He treasured the real world experience, he said, where he was treated like a real engineer and paid well while still in school. "They don't throw you into the fire, but they don't baby you too much either," Ayers said.

Gary Petersen, coordinator of the MECOP program at OSU, said it continues to be an internship concept with few peers in either the state or nation.

"MECOP is a true collaboration between business and academia, in which we ask industry what they want and see if we can find students who help meet that need," Petersen said. "That close cooperation is what makes it so successful. And Oregon businesses have been overwhelmingly supportive, not just financially but also with the time and effort they contribute to make this happen."

MECOP is, and has been since its inception more than 20 years ago, self-supporting. Dues paid by participating businesses and industry support the staff needed to develop, monitor and fine-tune the internship experiences.

It takes a little longer to graduate for MECOP students, because each of them has two paid internships of six months each. But the results are worth it, they say.

"I would say MECOP is by far the best thing that happened to me during my studies at OSU," said Linda Petersen, 45, a Corvallis resident who is studying environmental engineering and plans to graduate in June, 1999. "You learn about real work, not just classroom theory, and it's really helped me clarify my career goals and understand the relevance of my course work."

"And it's a good break from classes," she added. "I'm a mom with three kids, I've been going to school for six years, and these internships are really helping me sustain my energy and enthusiasm."

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Working for Freightliner, a Portland truck manufacturer, Petersen has already been immersed in the real world of environmental engineering. She studied the underlying causes of how coolant chemicals were lost, the levels of emissions from welding operations, and wrote an annual environmental report.

This type of real work experience takes place in a situation where jobs and an intern's abilities have been closely matched, Gary Petersen said. Students are screened, interviewed and prepared. Industry "mentors" are trained in how to work with them. Both student and company are repeatedly evaluated and adjustments made as the internship progresses. And students later provide feedback to peers about their successes, failures and experiences.

This process gives graduating students a level of experience, confidence, people skills and real-world exposure that few other programs can match.

In the last couple years, MECOP has expanded to work with 48 companies instead of 42, Petersen said, including Intel, Boeing, Tektronix, Hewlett Packard, Freightliner, Roseburg Forest Products, Oregon Freeze Dry, Rogue Wave Software, and many others.

"This year we will have about 100 MECOP graduates, and we're still planning to grow about 20 to 25 percent a year as we bring in more companies," Petersen said.

In an era when business and industry routinely complain about the quality of preparation of some new employees, Petersen said, the sustained accomplishments of MECOP and demand for its graduates have not gone unnoticed. The Oregon University System has embraced the idea and last year sought \$300,000 from the state legislature to expand the concept to all seven state institutions over a six-year period, he said. But the plan was at least temporarily tabled due to budget constraints.

"Right now we're doing what we can to expand the program using our existing resources," Petersen said. "But I remain convinced this same approach will work at other institutions and in other disciplines. We'll continue to spread the word."

About the OSU College of Engineering: The OSU College of Engineering is among the nation's largest and most productive engineering programs. In the past six years, the College has more than doubled its research expenditures to \$27.5 million by emphasizing highly collaborative research that solves global problems, spins out new companies, and produces opportunity for students through hands-on learning.

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