HOW TO APPROACH AND WORK WITH A PROFESSOR FOR YOUR CO-OP

Students seek co-ops with professors for various reasons. Some students are interested in graduate school and immediately know they want to conduct faculty-led research instead of working in their industry. Other students may struggle to find full-time paid work, for a variety of reasons, and need to work with a professor on a special project to fulfill their co-op requirements. Our office supports this opportunity only under certain, extreme circumstances and with permission from your Co-op and Career Advisor.

It should be noted that these experiences are quite often unpaid, unless a professor has secured grant funding or the department is willing and able to provide them with additional funds.

To assist you in this process, we offer the following guidelines for outreach:

- Consider which professors may be a good fit for you
- ASK, do not assume a professor will simply take you on
- Create a research/project outline and set dates for check-in
- Set expectations for each other
- Have a tangible product/paper/end-point by the conclusion of the term

Finding a Good Fit

When considering who might work with, think about the following before conducting outreach:

- What classes did I do well in? Might those professors be willing to take me on?
- Which professors do I know well? Do I have any mentors in the department?
- Are any professors I know working on independent research or do they have ongoing projects in their labs?

It may be more productive to reach out to those professors before cold-contacting those you don’t know or know well. They may be more likely to take you on, as they have a pre-existing relationship with you.

Inquiring About Projects

Not all professors have the time or available work to supervise a student through a co-op experience. When reaching out, do not assume that any given person can take you on as a co-op. Some professors may not have ever supervised a student in this capacity before; some are seasoned veterans in hiring co-ops. It takes a lot of work to supervise a student on a co-op project – work that is added to their already full workload.

Always ask if a professor is willing and able to take you on as a co-op. Consider providing some suggested projects (if you have some you would like to pursue) or asking if they have any special projects that they need help getting off the ground/moving forward/completing.

Create an Outline/Timeline

Your classes and labs are typically highly structured, but this type of co-op experience is NOT. We strongly suggest creating an outline/timeline to keep you on track. This will help alleviate some of the pressure off of the professor, as you can both refer back to the outline/timeline to track progress. This can always be revisited should obstacles prevent you from moving forward at the pace you anticipated.
Set Expectations

Communication is a critical component for success with this type of co-op. You may not be working 9 AM – 5 PM side-by-side and much of the experience could be independent and outside the physical bounds of the Institute.

Set expectations surrounding how often you will check-in and how you will communicate progress or ask questions. Does the professor want you to have a face-to-face meeting twice per week? Would they prefer you do all of the work on-campus in their lab space? How will you know if you are on the right track? Can there be a method for feedback?

Answering these questions at the onset of the term will make the experience run more smoothly.

Identify an End-Point

Your co-op experience must be 12 weeks, as always. But how will you know you have completed your project? And what does the end goal actually look like? Is it a working prototype of a device? Is it the makings of a publishable paper? Is it so abstract that you can’t tell?

Talk about this with the professor, so you have something concrete to work towards through the experience.