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DEVELOPING PROFESSIONALISM THROUGH EXPERIENCE:
A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN LEISURE SYSTEMS STUDIES AND COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The experiential component of the recreation and leisure curriculum is important because it helps develop a perspective between theory and practice. It is in understanding these relationships that students develop their professional ethic. This article explores the use of the experiential component of the curricula as an element to better professional preparation.

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EXPERIENCE

The role of experience in training and educating recreation professionals has long been recognized. Indeed, most recreation curricula provide some form of experiential component both by way of short term practica and intensive fieldwork preparation. Such preparation serves to provide the student with an exposure to the field, in the first case, and an in-depth capstone experience in the latter. The purpose of this paper is to describe the use of progressive, multiple experiences a means of improving both the students' educational experiences as well as their professional development within the recreation field.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT FROM COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

The recreation curricula at East Carolina has long recognized the importance of experience to the education of students seeking a career in the recreational services industry. However, like most academic departments, there are limitations on the faculty's ability to integrate experiential components with the students academic preparation. Working with the East Carolina Office of Cooperative Education it has been

possible to integrate experience with classroom education to improve the students education and enhance the students professional development.

Any experiential program requires two elements. First, the identification and placement of the student in a suitable site. Second the evaluation of the student's learning experience. At ECU the responsibility for the former is jointly shared by cooperative education, the student, and the department. The evaluative component remains with academic unit. The Leisure Systems program offers academic credit for students gaining experience prior to their fieldwork experience.

With this system of shared responsibility it is possible for the student to plan and implement a program of progressively responsible positions, explore career alternatives, and develop professionalism over the course of their enrollment in the program. Faculty retain control over the students academic preparation, the awarding of credit, and the career education process. The co-op office provides support for the department by developing potential placement sites, counseling the students in terms of options, and assisting the student with the job search process.

MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES AND STUDENT PROFESSIONALISM

Students are encouraged to begin their career preparation at the earliest possible point in their academic career. Students are placed in career related positions from their freshmen year onward. This results in providing the student with the opportunity for career exploration, progressive skill development, networking with professionals, and integrating classroom learning with career related experience. Through working with the co-op office the students learn resume development, the relationship of experience to professional preparation, interview technique, and job search techniques. The result is often for students to receive fieldwork level experiences at the sophomore and junior level thereby allowing them to be better prepared for more responsible positions their senior year and at graduation. Importantly, multiple experiences allow for feedback from employers regarding related coursework that may serve to improve their career preparation. The relationship between the academic component and the experiential component of the program is diagrammed in Appendix A.

Through multiple experiences the student is able to explore the recreational field in increasingly responsible positions. A corollary advantage is the ability of the student to enter their fieldwork with a resume detailing their previous work experience. Typical student resumes of students in the Commercial Recreation Option are contained in Appendix B. These multiple experiences allow students to graduate with an increased awareness of the recreation field and a well developed resume for their first career position.

The integration of academic preparation and career related experience provided by the link between cooperative education and the leisure systems department serves to prepare students well both academically and professionally. Students leave the program well aware

of their career options, with a firm preparation academically, a strong base of experience, and an understanding of the job search process as they begin their professional careers.

THE ROLE OF COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

While the faculty retain contain control of the academic component of the program, the cooperative education program supports their efforts by coordinating the placement process. The cooperative education office assists students in four major areas:

1. Site Selection
2. Student Counseling
3. Employer Liaison
4. Student Job Search

The effect of these efforts is to relieve faculty of these responsibilities while at the same maximizing resources available to the student.

The cooperative education office actively seeks to identify sites suitable for student work experience and fieldwork opportunities. During the course of the last three years the cooperative education office at East Carolina has developed a data base of over eight hundred employers in the recreational field. The office works closely with the faculty to develop additional areas for student experiences. Utilizing the data base and surveys of employers positions have been developed throughout the nation in such diverse areas as corporate fitness, convention and visitor bureaus, sports promotion and military recreation. Cooperative education also seeks to provide students with the opportunity to interview with prospective employers on campus. Each year a Recreation Program sponsored jointly by co-op and the academic department provides students with the opportunity to interview with over eighty employers for career related summer positions.

The program works closely with students to counsel them regarding the employers that will best meet their needs in terms of academic preparation and career development. The data base enable students to examine various types of experiences offered by employers as well as personal factors such as housing or salary which may effect their choice. Recently, the cooperative education office has begun to video tape students who have worked with a particular employer thereby providing students who are considering this employer first hand information on their experience. This counseling improves student expectations for their internship and enables them to better prepare for the interview process.

The employer liaison function served by the cooperative education office provides faculty with a source of feedback from employers regarding their needs in student employees. From a employer perspective, this

centralization of contact provides access to a wider range of students than would be the case with the academic department. Employers are able to request students from related majors who also would benefit from experiences in a recreational setting.

Perhaps the support most appreciated by students is the role cooperative education provides in assisting with the job search process. The office assists students in resume development, interview preparation, cover letter design, development of learning objectives, application transmittal and obtaining feedback and references. As the volume of students has grown the office has taken the lead in developing a manual to guide students through this process from their first placement to their first professional position upon graduation.

RESULTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

The results of the collaboration between Leisure Systems Studies and Cooperative Education can be seen in several areas. The collaboration has enabled faculty to better service a vastly increased student population while at the same time increasing the quality of student experiences. The collaboration has also resulted in increased resources for the program.

As enrollment in the program increased, increased collaboration was needed to provide students with work experience and fieldwork placements. As Appendix B demonstrates, student placements have grown nearly four hundred percent over the past five years. This has resulted in a corresponding increase in academic credit for student experience. This growth occurred without sacrificing the quality of student experiences. The diversity of agencies in which students work has grown thereby providing students with a broader exposure to careers in the recreational field.

The support provided to the academic department by cooperative education has also enabled the development of additional resources to support departmental goals. Employers have proven to be an invaluable resource as guest lecturers for classes and for conference programs. Cooperative education has also provided support for faculty site visitations and promotional materials. The computer capability of cooperative education has been a valuable tool to support faculty research regarding employers in the recreational industry. This support in turn improves the education of the students enrolled in the program.

CONCLUSION

The partnership between cooperative education and Leisure Systems Studies has produced benefits for both the program and its students. Students graduate well prepared academically and often with as much as one full year of experience. They graduate with a well developed resume and a thorough understanding of the job search process. From the perspective of program, the partnership enables the faculty to better

prepare their students and to devote additional time to research and teaching. It has provided improved access to the employer community and additional resources.

In short, the partnership between cooperative education and Leisure Studies Systems is a partnership that works. It is a model that works to develop student professionalism through multiple work experiences. It bridges the gap between the short term exposure of the practicum and the cap stone experience of the fieldwork. It is a partnership that improves the development of the academic program and our students. The experience at East Carolina suggests that such partnerships between experiential educators and the faculty of recreation departments would be of benefit to other institutions as well.