



Testing the waters

Texas A&M students work full-time jobs through co-operative education program

By MELISSA PRICE
 THE BATTALION

While some students are worried about passing Chemistry 101, others are just hoping they are pleasing their professors.

Cooperative Education students take semesters off from school to work in a "real" job, gaining worthwhile experience — and a grade.

Co-op is a program in which students work with academic advisers to design a degree plan allowing them to alternate semesters of school with semesters of work. Paid co-op jobs are usually related to the students' majors.

Martha Boerema, associate director for cooperative education at Texas A&M, said students who co-op are able to get an early focus on a career path, to ascertain if it is really what they want to do.

"It enables them to reality-test a career decision at a time when there are less problems before graduation," Boerema said. "It enhances their marketability at graduation."

Boerema said that A&M was ranked nationally among the top five accredited voluntary co-op programs for the 1995-1996 academic year. With the exception of the Colleges of Medicine, Education and General Studies, all A&M colleges have a cooperative education program.

Although requirements differ among the colleges, all co-op students are required to maintain an overall grade-point ratio of 2.5 or higher and must have taken 30-45 credit hours at A&M before their first work term.

To receive co-op credit, students must also agree to work three alternating semesters at the same company, and are required to occasionally meet with a faculty adviser.

Approximately 1,250 students each year are taking advantage of

the benefits co-ops have to offer. Not only do students generally gain expertise in a particular field of employment, they also earn money, and possess a competitive edge over other students when looking for a job after graduation.

Troy Schwartz, a junior chemical engineering major co-oping with Glitsch, Inc., said he has gained a great deal of hands-on training he can use in the future.

"It's a lot different than school," Schwartz said about his co-op job. "It's more of a real-world experience and has made me get a lot more organized."

During the semester they are co-oping, students must enroll in a co-op course that enables them to keep their full-time student status even though they're not actually attending classes at A&M. Students are also required to submit a technical report evaluating

their work experience at the end of the co-op semester. These reports, which are graded and factored into a student's GPR, are available to other students in the Co-op Center.

"This is a unique aspect of our program," Boerema said. "Students describe their work experience in what is called an addendum, and other students get to look at what their peers have said."

Boerema said students' expectations of a co-op job are sometimes higher than they should be. Some students don't find their first term co-op jobs to be as challenging as they would like, but the purpose of the first term is to acquaint the student with the company and its clients, she said.

Co-oping seems to be popular among students participating in the program. A study conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers said 58.6 percent of new hires had previous work experience in the form of a co-op or internship. Furthermore, 29 A&M co-op students were employed by Fortune 100 companies in the 1995-1996 academic year,

Boerema said.

Beth Wilder, a senior finance major who worked two terms as a co-op with Price-Waterhouse, said she would recommend co-oping to

I've learned that the real world isn't so bad."

Eighty-five percent of the 450-500 co-op employer sites are in Texas, and other sites are spread throughout the country.

Although Boerema realizes students may want to live at home while co-oping, she said they should keep as many options available as possible in order to increase the number of potential employer sites.

Jason Rosewitz, a senior biomedical science major who is co-oping at Campbell-Nantucket Animal Hospital, said he is glad he had the opportunity to co-op, even though he was nervous at first.

"People are more emphasizing work ethic and experience these days than grades," Rosewitz said.

Boerema said that all students should seriously consider co-oping as an option to further their career goals.

"Learning what you don't want to do is just as valuable as finding out what interests you," she said. "Students can work with an employer and hit the ground running."

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every student.

"I knew co-oping would give me great experience for future job hunting," Wilder said. "It's given me a taste of the real world, and

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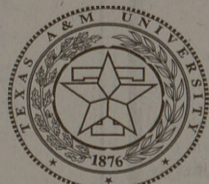
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