Co-op Program Celebrates 30th Anniversary!

When Pitt’s Swanson School of Engineering reestablished the co-op program in 1987, our initial goal was 20 percent participation among the undergraduates. Currently, almost 50 percent of undergraduates at the Swanson School of Engineering participate in the co-op program. The program also has expanded to include engineering students from our regional campuses, including the engineering technology program at Pitt–Johnstown. Some of our other Pittsburgh campus programs include computer science, information science, and graduate-level participants in both engineering and information science. Throughout the years, more than 6,000 students have participated in the co-op program, with more than 80 percent completing all three rotations. Our students work from coast to coast and even internationally!

We hope you enjoy this tribute to the last 30 years. I wish there were a way to include all of the success stories, but hopefully you will know someone who benefited from this program—perhaps a coworker, sibling, supervisor, entrepreneur, or even a parent!

Maureen Barcic
Director
Cooperative Education Program
Philpot Starts Co-op Program at Kolmar

Not all routes to landing a co-op job are the same. Some take time, others happen in the blink of an eye, while some are hiding in plain sight. Zackary Philpot’s road to his co-op job was unconventional, but he wouldn’t change a thing.

Philpot, a chemical engineering major, co-oped at Kolmar. He knew very little about the company or the industry before he started, he didn’t even realize how close the company was to his hometown of Shohola, Pa. He did know that he needed to gain experience while in college.

“My uncle used to work as a packaging engineer for a cosmetic brand that used Kolmar as a third-party manufacturer. He suggested I apply for a summer internship,” Philpot says.

Thanks to his connection, he was able to do an internship with the cosmetic and personal care custom formulation and manufacturing company.

“During that summer, I learned an incredible amount about the manufacturing industry itself, and I highly enjoyed working with the people in my department,” Philpot says. “I realized there was much more to learn from such a diverse place and that it would be beneficial for my future to continue to grow and learn at Kolmar.”

That is when he had an idea: He wanted to turn his internship into a co-op so that he could return to work for two more rotations and continue to gain more experience and grow with the company. However, Kolmar had not done a co-op before, and Philpot didn’t know how to get a co-op program started with a company.

“As the summer neared an end, I remember thinking that Kolmar would be a fantastic place to co-op, as there was still so much to see and learn. I had no idea if starting a co-op program from scratch was even possible, so I reach out to the co-op office about where to begin,” Philpot says.

He worked with the co-op office to get all the information, paperwork, and instructions he needed to propose the idea to his boss, who was thrilled.

“Having really liked my performance and personal skills shown over the internship, he was very enthusiastic about the opportunity to see my return and give me more in-depth projects,” Philpot says. “He took the time to create a more sophisticated outline of my responsibilities and projects.”

Philpot was surprised at how smooth the process of setting up the co-op program at Kolmar was. It isn’t a difficult task if the company and program work together and is an option for students to pursue.

“We had everything settled within the week. Overall, it was actually a lot easier than expected,” Philpot says.

During his years’ worth of experience, the array of work he was able to do was what stuck with him the most.

“My favorite part was definitely the variety of experiences I was able to gain within one company,” Philpot says. “Kolmar offered insight to numerous fields of engineering, including industrial, mechanical, and chemical, all of which were present on a daily basis and interconnected. There is an unbelievable amount of behind-the-scenes work put into taking cosmetic products to market. I was fortunate enough to have learned and contributed firsthand in many different areas.”

Philpot says that the biggest things he learned during his co-op that he will take with him when he graduates in December 2017 were “being open-minded and willing to adapt/learn in the workplace.” He believes that simple things like your willingness to learn or help others and even something as simple as just showing that you care go a long way with the company and coworkers, too.

He wanted more than just a “one-and-done” work experience. He wanted to return to Kolmar to grow with the company and gain more responsibilities and projects as he went along. He wanted to continue to gain knowledge on the job and become better prepared for his future.

“The multiple-rotation commitment allows you to become a depend- ed on and reliable presence in a company and prove your worth. It may vary by company, but overall I think you gain more knowledge and better experience and receive more in-depth tasks than you would in just one term,” Philpot says.

“I think it’s the best thing you can do to grow as a professional, to expand your knowledge, and to build a solid engineering foundation that is enticing to potential future employers.”
Co-op Experience Gives Lucas Family a Strong Bond

Family traditions are pretty common. Whether it is decorating the house together during the holidays, going to the same vacation spot every summer, or eating the same meal on New Year's Day, a lot of families have them. The Lucas family has one unique one: co-oping as an undergraduate engineering student.

Caitlin Lucas is currently a bioengineering student at the University of Pittsburgh and is co-oping with Zimmer Biomet in Warsaw, Ind. Her brother, Andrew, who graduated from Pitt in December 2016, co-oped with Honeywell. Her father (BSME Purdue University, 92’) co-oped with IBM in Virginia.

Caitlin’s mother, Jennifer, also attended Purdue University and also co-oped at Zimmer Biomet in Warsaw. With the entire family having deep roots in co-op programs, Caitlin’s parents made it a requirement for their children when they decided to study engineering in college, too.

“We did more than just ‘recommend’ co-oping; we have made it pretty much an imperative,” Jennifer says. “I feel that it is a crucial part of an engineering education.”

Although co-oping may have been mandatory for Caitlin, following in her parents’ footsteps and becoming an engineer was not.

“We didn’t push her toward engineering at all—in fact, maybe the opposite,” Jennifer says. “We knew that it needed to be a decision that she would make on her own.”

“I would say both of my parents’ being engineers made me want to be one as well when I was younger. Then, as I grew up, always having had a love for math and all things science related, engineering always fit,” Caitlin says.

Caitlin’s doing a co-op at the same company as her mom was something that Jennifer was wary of. She would have liked Caitlin to stay closer to home and wasn’t sure how she’d like the town of Warsaw. But after hearing about her mother’s great experience there, Zimmer was Caitlin’s number one choice.

“Having heard many things from my mom’s experience at the company, I knew it was something I was interested in,” Caitlin says. “My mom’s having co-oped there had a significant impact on my decision. It was what piqued my interest in bioengineering initially.”

Caitlin has not run into any of Jennifer’s former coworkers while working at Zimmer. She says that she had met some people who worked there at the same time her mother was there, so she got an idea of what the company was like then.

After about seven years, Jennifer decided it was time for her engineering career to come to an end so she could focus on caring for her four children. She has since become a middle school math teacher.

Caitlin has been able to work in two different departments during her co-op, quality engineering and development engineering. She worked with Specialty Surgical Instruments and was able to see projects from start to finish, and she even designed and manufactured her own project. She’s gotten to work with alterations to Zimmer projects such as knees, hips, extremities, and feet.

Caitlin has been able to make new friends, live somewhere different, and enjoy new experiences during her work rotations. One regret she says she has is not trying out for club soccer because she had heard it would be too difficult to juggle with everything else. She says that’s just not true.

“You can do it all,” Caitlin says. “You can do bioengineering, co-op, research, be a president of a club, be a UTA, study abroad, and play club sports. It’s all possible.”

Making co-op a requirement in the Lucas household has turned out to be a good decision. Jennifer says that Caitlin has “learned the value of real work experience” and has become more independent. It has given them something in common as well.

“The shared engineering experiences sure have bonded us and given us a lot to talk about,” Jennifer says.
Clark Mangelsdorf, retiring civil engineering co-op coordinator, with Dean Gerald Holder and co-op program director Maureen Barcic, 1998

Jaren Bailey (BSE '11), co-op student at McCormick Taylor

Dean Shuman with P.J. Wright of J&L Specialty Steel, the 1993 Co-op Employer of the Year

The first edition of the cooperative education program newsletter
Bweneke Fernando (BSA '11) co-op student at US Airways

Frank Meledandri of Curtiss-Wright Corporation, 1998 Employer of the Year, with co-op students

Dean Gerald Holder with 1999 Co-op Student of the Year, Bruce Diges (currently at Connors Group) and colleagues

Rich Kadvan of Packard Electric Company, Co-op program director Maureen Barcic co-op director, colleague from the General Motors Mexico plant, and Jay Rajgopal IE co-op coordinator at the GM plant in Monterrey Mexico, 1994.

Letter to Rob Simcik, student of the first class to complete the co-op program
Nominations Open for Co-op Student of the Year and Employer of the Year

The co-op program is fortunate to have smart, capable students and strong employer partners. The Co-op Student of the Year and Co-op Employer of the Year awards recognize the time, effort, and hard work the parties have contributed. This is the time of year to think about those outstanding companies and individuals and to submit nominations for the 2017 awards.

The criteria for Co-op Student of the Year are as follows:

1. Excellent academic record
2. Outstanding work contributions with co-op employer (students must have three rotations completed)
3. Volunteerism or contributions to the co-op or University of Pittsburgh community

Ideally, we would like to have one nominee from each department. The University of Pittsburgh can select one candidate to represent it in the National Co-op Student of the Year competition, which is sponsored by the Cooperative & Experiential Education Division of the American Society for Engineering Education. The winner will be flown to the annual conference, this year to be held in San Antonio, Texas in February 2018, to receive this recognition along with a plaque and a $1,000 award.

Pitt has held four national Co-op Student of the Year awards, including Kendra LaVallee last year for 2016, and one national Intern of the Year Award in 2014. We have had many outstanding finalists as well.

The criteria for Co-op Employer of the Year are as follows:

1. Sustained commitment to cooperative education at the University of Pittsburgh
2. Quality of projects and assignments

The Co-op Employer of the Year and all Pitt Co-op Student of the Year nominees will be honored at our annual recognition dinner, scheduled for Friday, December 8, 2017, at Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall & Museum.

We look forward to accepting your nominations. Please submit your nomination by Friday, October 13, to Maureen Barcic at paub2m@pitt.edu. Feel free to contact her with any questions pertaining to the nomination process.

Civil Engineering student James Bumstead worked on the Tappan Zee Bridge demolition in New York, N.Y., during his co-op with American Bridge Co. during summer 2017.

Photo by James Bumstead