

# INPUT EVALUATION FOR CO-OP EDUCATORS

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Deciding whether to initiate a new educational program is a complex and demanding process. This is particularly true for those deciding whether to implement cooperative education since the program may have an impact on many members of the college community as well as on the employer community. What is needed is a clear and structured approach to making the decision. This article will show how to use input evaluation to facilitate the decision-making process. In particular, it will provide a structured approach to use in determining whether to initiate a co-op program and, given a decision to implement, what type of program to develop. We will begin with a description of "input evaluation" and then apply those concepts specifically to the adoption of cooperative education.

## **Input Evaluation**

An input evaluation is conducted after program goals have been defined but prior to implementing an educational program to meet those goals. It is commonly known as a "feasibility study." The intent is: (1) to provide decision-makers with information needed to assess whether their goals are realistic, given the available resources;<sup>1</sup> (2) to suggest the most efficient way to utilize the available resources; (3) to suggest alternatives when the desired resources are not available. These alternatives could be a redefinition of goals or a proposal for substitute resources. The final outcome of an input evaluation is a detailed plan for achieving program goals, i.e., for implementing that program.

The first step in conducting an input evaluation is to identify the decision-makers. Will one person be responsible for the final decision or will the decision be made by an advisory committee? If a committee approach is used, who will sit on that committee? This is an important choice since the

<sup>1</sup>The term "resources" is used in a broad sense and includes staff, finances, and institutional support.

acceptance of the decision will, to some extent, depend on the credibility and influence of the decision-maker(s).

Once the decision-making body has been chosen, the input evaluation activities begin. The first role of the evaluators is to gather relevant information and data. Advice may be sought from consultants as well as from others who have already been through or are going through a similar decision-making process. A thorough review of the literature should also be conducted. Discussions with those who will be affected by the program will provide information on probable impacts, anticipated difficulties and suggested modifications. Based on these data, decision-makers can judge whether and how a proposed educational program responds to desired goals.

There are various ways to analyze the data that have been collected. For example, evaluators can use a *cost-benefit analysis* to assess which, of a number of proposed programs, will achieve their goals at the lowest cost. The procedure for conducting a cost-benefit analysis may be summarized as follows: (1) state program objectives; (2) identify paths to achieve objectives; (3) estimate costs and benefits associated with each path; (4) select best alternatives. This is a sophisticated technique which requires close examination of alternative ways to achieve the same benefit. Other input evaluation techniques are: Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT); Delphi Technique, and Systems Analysis.<sup>2</sup>

No matter which analytic approach is used, the final outcome must be a decision to either accept or reject the proposed educational program. If the program is accepted, specific plans for program implementation are developed. This planning phase is the final stage of an input evaluation.

### **Application of Input Evaluation to Cooperative Education Statement of Educational Goals**

The first and most important step in the development of a program is to state the objectives. Quite simply, you must know what you are trying to do before you can determine how you are going to do it. While this may seem to be an obvious statement, it is surprising how many educators will adopt a methodology first and then develop a rationale for it later.

The learning needs of students must thus be clearly defined. Furthermore, it is important that there be some consensus from various segments of the college community as to the importance of these needs and their congruence with the mission of the college. For instance, if the goal of the col-

<sup>2</sup>These techniques are described in the *Encyclopedia of Educational Evaluation* by Scarvia B. Anderson and Associates, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1975.

lege is to prepare students for life through a liberal education and the perceived student needs are for preparation for specific job opportunities, then this discrepancy must be faced and resolved.

Let us assume a college has defined its objectives and is considering cooperative education as a strategy to meet their objective. It is now recommended that an input evaluation be conducted. This would require three inter-related activities:

- Gathering of information on cooperative education
- Assessing the following institutional resources: support for the notion of cooperative education and financial resources to plan and develop the program
- Given the decision to adopt cooperative education, planning the structure and operation of the program

Although these activities will be discussed separately, it is important to note that they are strongly inter-related and need not occur in the order presented above. For example, in order to assess faculty support for cooperative education, it may first be necessary to involve faculty in developing a policy for the awarding of academic credit for off-campus learning. The reason for discussing the three activities separately is simply to provide a clear presentation that can be conveniently used as a checklist by those considering or planning a co-op program.

An individual or committee should be designated to carry out the input evaluation activities. In a small college, it may be possible for one person to conduct the evaluation. This individual may be a respected member of the faculty, a Special Assistant to the President or a member of the Institutional Research Office. In a larger institution, it would be advisable to form a six person committee which would accurately represent the views of the college administration, the faculty, and the employer community.

### Collect Information

Information on cooperative education is available from a number of sources. There are federally sponsored training centers which offer workshops on cooperative education.<sup>3</sup> There is an annually updated bibliography of literature in the field of cooperative education.<sup>4</sup> The professional societies also can provide some literature as well as consulting and education services. Attendance at workshops and professional society

<sup>3</sup>George H. Miller, *Hotline*, Southeastern Center for Cooperative Education, Tampa, Florida (33620).

<sup>4</sup>Cynthia Jahn Whitten, *Clearinghouse*, Cooperative Education Research Center, Northeastern University, Boston, Mass. (02115).

meetings provides a valuable opportunity to talk with practitioners in the field.

### **Assess Institutional Resources**

Assessment of institutional resources is a continuous activity. Initially, it is necessary to assess the level of support of faculty, students, administrators and employers toward the notion of cooperative education. Assessment may be done by interviewing or sending questionnaires to a random sample of each group. If the response to the concept of co-op is negative or ambiguous, efforts must be made to ascertain the reasons for their views and re-evaluate the potential for co-op on that campus. If it is positive, plans must be made to maintain that support.

If the level of initial support is encouraging, then plans may be made for developing a co-op program. At this stage, it is critical that representatives from each group have input into the projected program design. Obviously the likelihood of continuing support for co-op is enhanced if those who will be affected by co-op are involved in policy formulation. Although broad-based support for cooperative education is important, research shows that the support of the top administrator, i.e., the chancellor or president, is particularly crucial to subsequent program success.<sup>5</sup> The president has the power to allocate funds and resources as well as to influence the views of the college and local community. Hence, if he or she supports cooperative education, at least some of the necessary resources will be forthcoming.

Input evaluation requires an assessment of available financial resources which will be needed for planning and operating a co-op program. Consideration of the following costs is recommended:

- Cooperative education staff. Staff members may include full-time co-op coordinators, job developers, faculty, and secretaries.
- Travel money. This is needed to develop, maintain and monitor co-op jobs and to attend professional meetings and workshops.
- Printing. Placement forms, instructional material (e.g., career educational, resume writing), and public relations brochures are important to the operation and promotion of the program.
- Instructional costs. When students participate in co-op, required courses may have to be offered more frequently and faculty/student ratios may become less cost-effective. The overall cost of running co-op may be prohibitive unless sufficient numbers of students are

<sup>5</sup>James W. Wilson, et al., *Implementation of Cooperative Education Programs*, Cooperative Education Research Center, 1975, p. 75.

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recruited into the co-op program. What the number will be for a given institution will depend upon specific costs and income amounts.

Although eternal sources of funding have been available, such as monies made available through Title VIII of the Higher Education Act, 1965, ultimately the co-op program must be supported by the institution. The potential for an institution to achieve an acceptable net program cost must be carefully assessed.

Another required "resource" for operating a co-op program is adequate manpower. Initiating a co-op program demands time to: develop jobs; recruit students; prepare program and career guidance literature; and maintain good faculty and administrative relations. Some institutions have chosen to hire a person to work full-time as a director or coordinator of the beginning co-op program. Others have asked interested faculty members or career counseling/placement persons to work part-time until the program grows. It is recommended that someone be appointed on a full-time basis to accept responsibility for the initiation and development of the co-op program.

Assuming that the evaluators have collected information on cooperative education, have carefully assessed the institutional support for the program, and have decided to adopt co-op education at their college, more specific program decisions must be made. Since each decision will have an impact on a number of people, evaluators should continue to meet with their colleagues during this last stage of input evaluation.

The following is a listing of planning decisions that must be made. Each decision should consider the compatibility of the proposed activity with the program objectives and availability of resources:

### **Operational Decisions**

- Will cooperative education be available to students in all majors or to students in selected majors?
- Will participation in cooperative education be required or an option?
- Will a minimum GPA be required of all co-op students?
- Which operating mode(s) will work best at your college? (e.g., alternating, parallel)
- How many terms of co-op experience do you want students to have?
- Where will the co-op program be located in the organizational structure of the institution? In an academic department? Reporting to the Dean of Student Services?
- Is academic credit to be awarded? If so, what will be the criteria for

- awarding credit? Who will be responsible? How many credits will be given? Are they to be non-additive? Will faculty be involved in making these decisions?
- Will tuition be charged for credits earned through cooperative education? Will these be at the same rate as credits earned through other means?
  - Will a co-op fee be charged as a method of defraying costs?
  - Will a career development course that precedes or runs concurrent with co-op be required or made available? What will the content be? (e.g., resume writing, interviewing techniques, decision-making skill development, goal-setting)

### **Resources**

- Where is the financial support for cooperative education? If it is federal money, what are the plans for institutional support when federal money ceases? What steps are to be taken to try to reduce costs of running a co-op program?
- How will employer interest and participation be developed?
- How will student participation be encouraged? Is there a planned cooperative arrangement with the admissions office? With area high schools?

### **Structure of Co-op Program**

- Who will be in charge of running the co-op program? What background should that person have? Do you want one centralized Director? A staff of released-time faculty?
- What is the role of the co-op staff? Clearly define expectations with regard to: job development; student counseling, recruitment, and placement; on-job supervision; evaluation of co-op learning.
- How will concerned faculty be involved in cooperative education? What will be their role, if any, in job development, on-the-job supervision, and awarding of credit? How will their interest be encouraged?

### **Future Plans**

- How will you evaluate the success of your co-op program?
- Will the co-op concept be applied to "non-traditional" groups, e.g., older students?
- Will the advisory committee be maintained to help set the direction of co-op in the future?

Input evaluation activities should culminate in a final report. The report

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would contain the recommendations regarding the adoption of cooperative education, proposed structure it would take, and a plan for implementation. Relevant data to support the recommendations should be included. These data would include: (1) a summary of findings from the literature, from consultants and from discussions with members of your own college community; (2) an analysis of these data; (3) recommendations regarding a specific cooperative education plan for adoption and implementation.