

# ANYTHING THAT STARTS WITH A "C": COMBINING CO-OP WITH CAREER SERVICES

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## **Background**

In 1991 we were two former co-op directors responsible for developing new units composed of the cooperative education, career planning and placement functions on our respective campuses. Aware that the same process was occurring in other places and needing some perspective, we planned a meeting for the March 1991 conference of the Cooperative Education Association, Inc. in Denver and issued a general invitation for other directors to join us.

Twenty-five directors attended "Two Hats: Combining Co-op and Career Services," which turned out to be a fast-paced, thought provoking discussion about the origins, benefits and difficulties of managing larger, more comprehensive career service organizations. We concluded the session with the clear impression that there was much more we could have discussed. Subsequently, we developed a questionnaire based on the issues raised at the meeting and distributed it to the participants as a follow-up. In the questionnaire, we asked the directors to select from the following definitions when describing the changes taking place on their own campuses:

*Consolidate* - Bring together separate parts into a single whole; unite; combine; to make firm or secure; strengthen.

*Integrate* - Bring together or incorporate parts into a whole; make up or produce a larger unit.

*Merge* - Cause to coalesce; blend gradually to blur the individuality of; to become combined or absorbed; lose identity by uniting or blending.

Nineteen directors with experiences similar to our own sent back completed questionnaires. Among the nineteen, ten had been in cooperative education seven

years or more, five had come from career planning and/or placement and the remainder had from four months to twelve years experience doing both. Responses came from nine private and eight public four year colleges and universities, as well as from two two-year colleges. While the majority of the respondents were from the Northeast, we received completed questionnaires from institutions in Texas, Georgia, Colorado and Missouri.

On the basis of our definitions, eight directors used the term "consolidation," eight more used "integration," and three used the term "merger" to describe the process by which cooperative education and career services were reorganized on their campuses. Once the questionnaires were analyzed, there seemed to be little real distinction between the terms "consolidation" and "integration" as we were applying them. Among the responses we discovered some striking similarities, some surprising information and a number of creative strategies that we believe are worth sharing with a wider audience.

### **Why Combine Co-op And Career Services?**

In our questionnaire we offered six possible reasons for combining cooperative education, career planning and placement offices into one program. In recognition of the dynamic nature of campus decision-making, we encouraged the group to cite as many of the items on our list as they felt appropriate and/or to supply motivating factors of their own. Our choices included: a vision or plan developed by the directors involved; an opportunity occasioned by a retirement or other senior staff change; consolidation of services perceived as similar; better services for students; budget cuts — current or anticipated; and a philosophical shift by the institution's leadership.

Three factors emerged as primary. Fifteen out of 19 of the directors cited "better services for students" and "more comprehensive career development," followed closely by "consolidation of similar services" (14) and "a vision or plan" they themselves had devised and were allowed to implement (13). Surprisingly, only six cited either "budget cuts" or "a philosophical shift" among the leadership as significant reasons behind the change. Several indicated that a positive change in administrative attitudes toward cooperative education and career services had occurred much earlier, making it easier for the individual directors to garner support for their own plans.

Next we asked our colleagues to comment on how reorganization affected them personally and professionally. Since most had played a key role in consolidating preexisting units to create something new, their responses were overwhelmingly positive. For many, the change meant increased visibility, greater responsibility and a promotion. For about half, new responsibilities were accompanied by a salary increase, although this tended to be more the case in

private institutions. Most of the respondents said they were excited by the prospect of change and welcomed the opportunity for professional growth and achievement. The few who described themselves as skeptical or as having mixed feelings said they were nonetheless committed to making it work. Most placed integrated career services and "one stop shopping" for students above whatever practical considerations they knew would have to be addressed.

### **Reporting Lines And Executive Support**

Beginning with the assumption that reporting lines are an issue in any reorganization, we asked the directors to tell us how the restructuring of co-op and career services affected their relationships with senior management. On eleven of the 19 campuses in our group, the changes were accomplished within the same executive area. Interestingly, most of the new units ended up in academic rather than student affairs. The reason for this was the historical designation of most of the cooperative education offices involved as academic programs with strong ties to the faculty. When the co-op directors assumed responsibility for career planning and placement functions, they invariably brought the career piece out of student affairs and onto the academic side with them. In two of the three cases where the opposite was true, that is, where the academically-based co-op program moved over to student affairs, the directors acquired dual reporting responsibilities.

We asked the directors to tell us the degree to which they felt upper management understood the value, purpose and potential of the new co-op and career services unit. While the majority reported strong support at the executive level, a few said they were as yet uncertain. Only one said there was little or no appreciation for the value of his service. Since most of the directors played a key role in designing their new programs, it follows that they would be successful in getting senior management to "buy in." However, there was some concern among the respondents that in the heat of reorganization financially squeezed administrations or those who lacked a commitment to employment services might try to include personal and academic counseling in the program mix.

### **Benefits And Opportunities**

All the directors expressed the belief that combining co-op, career development and placement creates a much better system for delivering career services to students. Among the areas where they had either experienced or anticipated improvements were service usage, publicity, career resources, employer relations, staffing, automation, space and budgets.

*Student Use.* On the campuses in our group, combining services has created multiple access points that engage students in career development activities earlier. Second semester freshmen and sophomores are attracted by summer jobs, internships and community service opportunities that can be used as a prelude

to applying for co-ops and, later on, permanent jobs. Consolidated services are beginning to offer broader access to constituents who might previously have used only one service in isolation, such as students of color, interns or co-op students. In theory, students who become experienced consumers of career services early will make more informed employment choices when it really counts.

*Publicity.* Our respondents told us that publicizing their programs has become easier and their outreach more effective because of pooled advertizing budgets, shared publications and joint events such as career fairs. They attract more students if for no other reason than a larger unit is harder for students either to miss or ignore.

*Career Resources.* The quality and scope of resource materials and career libraries have improved by bringing together smaller collections and making joint purchasing decisions. Co-op programs that previously could not justify having automated guidance systems see access to resources such as SIGI-PLUS as one of the benefits of joining forces with career planning. They also benefit from alumni networks and panel discussions that provide career information and can be used by field experience as well as placement offices to prepare students for initial work assignments.

*Employer Relations.* Consolidation has encouraged staff and employers to move beyond recruiting to relations work because it offers recruiters the opportunity to meet and hire students earlier in their careers. Industry contacts are traded back and forth between co-op and placement departments creating a wider pool of opportunities. Co-ops and internships are being used to introduce small and mid-sized firms to permanent recruiting. On a practical level, "one stop shopping" has begun to benefit recruiters as well as students, offering more efficient and less costly ways to maintain a presence, particularly on large, sprawling campuses.

*Staffing.* There have also been positive impacts on staffing, such as the opportunity for career counselors and job developers to cross train and acquire a wider, perhaps more marketable, mix of skills. With all the functions under one roof, opportunities for collaborative projects are more readily available. When both kinds of personnel are conversant in each other's programs, staff time can be used more efficiently and physically taxing tasks such as evening presentations and early morning recruiter duty can be spread out among more people. Larger staffs can make it possible to offer a wider range of programs and services.

*Automation.* On many campuses in our group office automation and database management have gained recognition as important priorities. Where disparate units might previously have competed for computers, software and technical support, larger units can often make a better case for a systems approach to their work. With laser printer and local area network technology, combined offices can demonstrate real efficiencies and make hardware allocations go farther than they might have if they remained apart. Instead of

each small program having its own student “techie” to help users who rely on more sophisticated equipment, shared word-processing and bigger databases may be able to justify full time staff support.

*Budgets and Space.* In addition to the budgetary dimension of each of the areas cited above, there are other financial advantages to consolidation. Where there is pressure to cut back on clerical functions such as reception, secretarial and bookkeeping services, combined units may be able to hold the line by pooling administrative personnel. Purchasing, mailing and telephone services can also be reorganized. In all cases, our respondents indicated either that their offices had already moved together or they were planning to occupy one space.

### **Challenges To Change**

Looking back on a past reorganization or planning for one in the future, it is reasonable to ask those who have done it (assuming they had a choice) whether they would do it again. Since change usually exacts a price, we asked the directors about the challenges they faced when implementing their reorganizations and the strategies they employed to overcome obstacles.

We asked several questions about staffing and staff responses to reorganization. Further, we asked the directors to describe the level of integration they had achieved and the degree to which the essential nature of the old staffs had either been retained or redefined. It was apparent that how people reacted had an impact on the initial stages of consolidation.

*Staff.* In a few programs, staff have been completely integrated, usually where downsizing was one of the goals of the merger. In others, responsibility for offering core services such as career advising, workshops and career fairs are now shared. As noted above, support functions such as information systems have been centralized on many campuses and now serve everyone in the new office.

A majority of our respondents ranked either “staff resistance” or “staff motivation” as their most serious obstacle. More than half cited managing a diverse and sometimes resistant staff, team building, training and organizational re-design as specific challenges related to staffing. According to the directors, staff reactions to consolidating co-op and career services were frequently negative, except among recent hires who, it was reported, were more likely to exhibit “enthusiasm and excitement.”

Our respondents described how members of the acquired group frequently viewed the consolidation of co-op and placement as a criticism or repudiation of their past work. They indicated that some employees felt passed-over for promotions or responsible positions in the new organization. Accustomed to a more collegial style of decision-making, staff at many programs resented having little or no voice in the changes affecting them. Some opposed being managed by or grouped with other staff whose grounding in career development

theory they deemed less thorough than their own. (Note: this reaction occurred regardless of whether the staff holding this belief had worked in cooperative education or placement.)

Most of the directors agreed that staff who responded in these ways could slow progress by resisting supervision and could frustrate the implementation of the new plan. They pointed out that negative reactions were sometimes delayed, occurring months after the initial shock, fear of job loss, or excitement created by the reorganization wore off.

*Other Concerns.* Time to manage new responsibilities effectively was cited as a second major concern. Related to this was a difficulty in establishing priorities. For example, the directors felt that important tasks, such as informing the campus about the nature and purpose of the new organization, could easily be sidetracked by personnel issues.

The third most frequently mentioned concern had to do with maintaining a balance between services. The directors expressed the view that it was very important not to let a strong program component suffer as a result of reorganization. For example, some former directors of smaller co-op programs reported that because they had less time to devote to co-op, fewer students were being enrolled and/or placed. On campuses where the units moved from academic to student affairs, there was a concern that ties to the faculty would be adversely affected. While maintaining good relations with the faculty after a reorganization was considered very important among former co-op directors, it was not mentioned by the former placement managers in our group. Computerization, long range planning and the need to create new measurements for assessing effectiveness were also listed as challenges.

Reading the questionnaires and drawing on our own experiences, we became convinced that while a sound paper and pencil plan is critically important, good ideas alone are not enough to launch or sustain a reorganization of career services. Budgetary constraints and what we have come to view through our research as the natural, or at least, predictable reluctance of some staff to embrace change, can be formidable problems. Units that are tacked on for administrative convenience, such as counseling and community service may dilute the primary mission. During the time between acceptance of the design and final approval by administrators and governance bodies, campus conditions that were once favorable to the move may erode considerably, limiting the director's ability to fully implement the plan. Turnover among senior managers or shifts in institutional priorities can alter the course of a reorganization mid-stream, leaving the director looking and feeling unsupported and the employees longing for the good old days. For these reasons, a sound organizational structure that supports the mission, adequate numbers of able

personnel, equitable compensation and sufficient space, budgets and equipment to carry out the plan should be negotiated and, ideally, secured up front.

In addition, strong personal, professional and organizational supports, such as management consultants, regular briefings with campus executives and opportunities for dialogue for everyone in the organization including the director, must be in place if both manager and staff are to survive the transition. All the parties involved should recognize that reorganizations are dynamic and plans may need to be revised over time in response to environmental factors. A management style that encourages discussion, recognizes a variety of professional perspectives and discourages divisiveness is essential for guiding the unit over the rough spots. Staff retreats, mission statements, planning meetings and activities that enhance communication and promote teamwork, such as task groups, newsletters and social gatherings, can help staff come together around new goals. Directors must also exhibit the kind of leadership that recognizes and seizes opportunity and maintains strong relationships with administrators and faculty through regular communication about programs and activities.

This project clearly demonstrates that directors need to be practical, keep their eyes open and identify all the critical success factors very carefully before initiating a reorganization of this kind. With proper planning, consultation and tough negotiation around key issues, campuses can develop comprehensive career service programs that positively impact both student use and postgraduation employment outcomes. Those considering consolidation would do well to remember the adage, "Be careful what you wish for — you just might get it."