

## Co-operative Education opening doors to the workplace

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Co-operative Education provides a unique experience to students studying at post-secondary institutions: the chance to develop tangible skills, access to a network of industry professionals, and hands-on, paid workplace experience while completing their education.

This type of experiential learning is becoming more sought after by students every day, so it comes as no surprise that Acadia's [Co-op Program](#) is becoming increasingly popular, growing 92 per cent over the past ten years. The program is home to more than 350 students, spanning 24 distinct disciplines in Sciences, Arts, Community Development and Business.

### Opening doors

According to Michelle Larsen ('99), Manager of Co-operative Education at Acadia, there are two major advantages for students in the Co-op program: the ability to test drive careers in a low risk environment and opening workplace doors that might otherwise be closed. "Students have a wide range of opportunities

available to them, but to figure out what you really want to do is difficult,” says Larsen. “Co-op is a reflection of the job market. Students get to try out new things and explore different careers to find their path. They’re doing it when the risk is low -- when they still have the opportunity to make decisions about their education and where they might be headed with their degree. It helps them make well informed decisions about their future.”

Five co-op coordinators, each assigned to specific faculties and departments, are available to help students find work terms that fit their needs and match their skill levels. “Acadia’s Co-op program really exemplifies the Acadia brand of a personalized education. We really do know our students individually,” says Larsen.

Fourth year Business student Jacob Watson, from Owen Sound, ON, joined the Co-op program at the beginning of his third year to gain workplace experience that would benefit his future career in Employment Relations. He says the guidance the program has provided him is invaluable. “Co-op to me has been a very personal and specialized approach. Every coordinator, not just specific to your department, has an interest in getting to know you. They seek to understand what you are looking for in the program and what you want to do after graduation and make every effort to accommodate us.”

Jason Power ('12) a Biology Co-op alumnus agrees. “My co-op coordinator was great at identifying roles that fit my skill-set but also jobs in which I’d be interested,” he says.

Every coop student participates in a series of professional development workshops to ensure they are ready for the work place. The workshops cover topics such as resumé and cover letter writing, how to secure your own work term, interview preparation, and workplace etiquette. Before students can begin applying for work terms, their resumé and cover letters are reviewed and critiqued by upper year students and must be approved by their co-op coordinator. “The workshops taught us how to be clear and concise when writing our cover letters and resúms. Those skills are incredibly valuable and something that most students don’t get the opportunity to learn,” says Power.

### **Some of the best**

A survey conducted in May of 2017, polling 2016 Acadia Co-op graduates, found that 100 per cent of respondents who graduated and chose not to pursue further education were currently employed; 93 per cent of those employed were able to secure full-time employment within six months after graduation; and 63 per cent of graduates who responded had finished paying their student loans at the time of graduation. “When we meet with employers, we hear time and time again that Acadia students are amongst the best students the employers have ever seen,” says Larsen. “These numbers demonstrate that.”

Apple Valley Foods hires a number of Acadia co-op students in their Quality Assurance and Research and Development departments. “We’ve had great success with Acadia co-op students,” says Shelley Johnson, Quality Assurance Manager. “One of our first Acadia students was just hired into our R&D department full time.” Students come to Apple Valley Foods with a number of skills in place that allow for their success in the workplace. They are provided with as many experiences as possible -- interacting with people on the floor, working with management teams, and speaking with suppliers – to learn how different departments work. “It’s important that students understand what the real world is like,” says Johnson. With two children of her own, Johnson understands the value of co-op. “We want to provide students with an opportunity to determine what aspects of business they might want to pursue in the future.”

### **Expanding possibilities**

Larsen and her team believe strongly in the instrumental role co-op plays in developing students’ full potential. Acadia’s Co-op Office, in collaboration with other Nova Scotian universities, helped organize

the first ever Nova Scotia Co-operative Education Summit. Held on October 27, 2017, the summit brought more than 200 students, employers, and post-secondary education stakeholders together to discuss the impact of co-op education on the future of the professional workforce and economy. “Everyone is aware of the value of co-op, but what we wanted to do was build upon the momentum co-op has had in the province, and try to imagine what role it could play in economic transformation,” says Larsen. “By bringing all of those minds into one place, the buzz was so positive. We all have to work together to figure out how to capitalize on this educational model because it can be part of the solution.”

For more information on Acadia’s co-op program, or if you are interested in hiring a co-op student for the summer term, email [co-op@acadiau.ca](mailto:co-op@acadiau.ca).

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## Contact

University Communications  
Emmerson Hall, Suite 108  
31 University Ave  
Wolfville, Nova Scotia, B4P 2R6  
[newsroom@acadiau.ca](mailto:newsroom@acadiau.ca)

[902-585-1705](tel:902-585-1705)