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# **Gain The Competitive Edge— Hire A Co-op**

## **A Guide For Managers And Supervisors**



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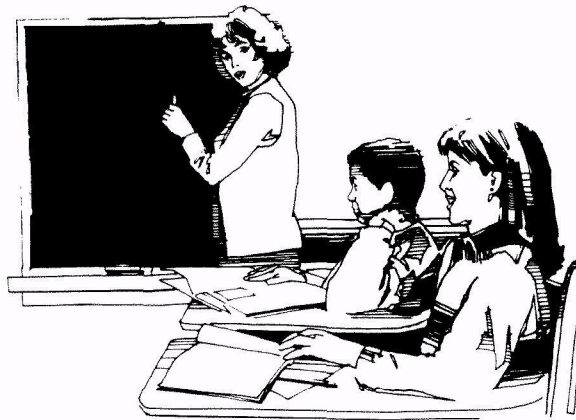
## Introduction

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Would you, as a manager or supervisor, like to gain an edge in finding and hiring top quality candidates in a tight labor market? More importantly, would you like an opportunity to be able to observe and evaluate your potential employees before making a hiring commitment, *and* without using your FTE ceiling? Would you like to recruit new employees without the fear of wondering if you made the right choice?

This probably sounds too good to be true, but the Cooperative Education Program (more commonly referred to as Co-op) will allow you to do *all* of the above. The purpose of this Guide is to introduce you to Co-op and its many benefits, as well as provide helpful information to those of you who are *innovative* enough to try this excellent program to meet some of your workforce needs.

Be *Bold and Gain the Competitive Edge* by using a hiring method which has a proven success rate! Hire a Co-op student and begin your investment toward a vibrant, well-trained workforce to help enhance the Agency's future.



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## What Is Co-op?

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Co-op is a program that provides on-the-job training to students at the high school through graduate levels in occupations related to their fields of study. Students may work either on an alternating (a semester on—a semester off) or part-time basis.

Co-op students get an opportunity to apply what they have learned in classroom theory to a real job experience. A partnership is formed between the Agency, the student and the school, through a working agreement.

Through Co-op, EPA can attract some of the nation's most intelligent, creative and motivated students and help them become the **environmental leaders of tomorrow.**





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## Benefits Of Co-op

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Although the Co-op program has been primarily used to hire students in administrative, engineering and scientific fields, it can be equally as effective in clerical and other support positions for high school and associate degree students. Some of the many benefits that Co-op can offer you and the Agency are:

- ◆ Maximizes your ability to hire “the best and the brightest” performers through your observation and evaluation of potential employees prior to making a decision to hire them permanently.
- ◆ Provides you the flexibility to recruit and select from a broad spectrum of students from any career field and at all levels of study.
- ◆ Streamlined and flexible hiring procedures which will allow you to offer a permanent position to students immediately after graduation, based on their proven performance.
- ◆ Is an excellent source for attracting talented minority, female and disabled candidates.
- ◆ Generates a higher retention rate because students who have already worked in the Agency are more likely to commit to permanent positions.
- ◆ Provides gratification to you in knowing that you are making a contribution to the educational process and to America’s future.
- ◆ Builds stronger ties between the Agency and the educational community which helps to improve the Agency’s overall recruitment posture.
- ◆ Provides a pool of pre-screened, eager, entry-level employees who can free up your current staff for more challenging assignments.
- ◆ Improves your ability to delegate job responsibilities to individuals with the proper talents, thus increasing the overall efficiency of your organization.
- ◆ Brings new perspectives and viewpoints to the Agency as the students integrate new techniques learned in the classroom with what they find on the job.

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## Hiring Co-op Students

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### Co-op Coordinator Responsibilities

It is relatively easy to hire Co-op students. Your servicing HRO has designated a Co-op Coordinator to work with various educational institutions to find students that will meet your needs. In addition, the Co-op Coordinator will:

- ◆ Ensure that students referred to you meet the criteria/requirements for the Co-op Program;
- ◆ Ensure that there is a signed working agreement between the educational institution and EPA; and
- ◆ Keep you informed on the program's requirements and operation.

### Your Responsibility in the Hiring Process

While your local Co-op Coordinator will have the primary responsibility for working with school officials to refer the right students, you play a key role in creating a positive working environment and setting the stage for the student's arrival at the workplace.

Careful planning is a must if you are to provide a positive and challenging experience for your student. First, you should examine your organization and determine where Co-op students can be best utilized. Develop proposed projects and draft a list of assignments that would be challenging and interesting. Next, contact your local Co-op Coordinator and inform him/her of the type(s) of students you would be interested in hiring. Your Co-op Coordinator will advise you on required paperwork and next steps.

The Co-op Coordinator will help you search for students whose career fields match your needs. High school students can be used in clerical and administrative positions, while college Co-op students typically require work that is related to specific courses of study. All students that are referred to you for consideration will have at least a 2.5 or higher grade point average (GPA). If you would like to consider students with higher GPA's, you may inform your local Co-op Coordinator. But remember, you may not always be able to attract students with the highest GPA's. Therefore, be willing to try students with lower GPA's whose records exhibit a high degree of potential for success. Do not automatically weed out these students.....they can become excellent employees. Also, remember that the Co-op students will not count against your FTE personnel ceiling.

When you have selected a Co-op student to meet your needs, notify your staff and assign a senior specialist to work with and train the student. This individual should have an interest in and empathy for developing people and should be able to build the student's confidence. Work with your Co-op Coordinator to ensure all administrative processes have been completed to bring the student on-board and to establish a reporting date. Then **wait for your Co-op student to arrive.**

### **Setting Work Schedules**

Students may work up to a maximum of 2600 work hours within a 2-year period. They may work on a full-time alternating schedule (i.e. working at EPA a semester or quarter and attending school a semester or quarter) or on a part-time basis (i.e. working between 16 and 32 hours per week while attending school). Since the student cannot exceed the maximum of 2600 hours within a 2-year period, the number of hours the student works should be closely monitored. The determination as to whether the student will work on an alternating or part-time schedule should be made early in the negotiation process to allow appropriate time for the student to make any necessary arrangements, e.g., housing, transportation. Work with your Co-op Coordinator to establish a work schedule which will be mutually acceptable to you and the student.





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## Successful Performance On The Job

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### Evaluating Performance

Co-op students will be appraised in accordance with EPA's performance appraisal system for GS employees. However, evaluation of the student's progress should be an ongoing process. Schedule periodic (bi-weekly or monthly) reviews with the student to provide continuous feedback and reinforcement on his/her progress. At no time should the student's performance fall below fully successful. The performance evaluation may be used as a basis to make determinations on retaining the student, strengthening performance, correcting deficiencies, or recommending conversion to a permanent position.

Many of the academic institutions require written evaluations of the students' performance at the conclusion of the assignment. When these forms are received, fill them out immediately because the student's academic grade for the Co-op Program is often based on these evaluations.

### Promoting and Recognizing Students

Promotion to higher grade levels in the program is contingent upon the student meeting the qualification standards and satisfactory work performance. Delayed promotions may decrease motivation and threaten the positive relationship between the academic institution and EPA. Therefore, promotions should be given in a timely and equitable manner.

You may also recognize deserving students for their performance, contributions and accomplishments through the Agency's formal award system or through other informal awards given out in your organization.

### Mentoring

To help the student make a smooth transition to the work place, you may want to take on the role of being a mentor, or assign the role to a senior staff person. As mentor, you could serve as the communications link for any concerns or problems the student may have; discuss career opportunities, career preparation and career paths; assist the student in building a professional network; and involve the student in as many appropriate activities as reasonable.





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## Dealing With Problems

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The student's first year of employment usually determines whether he/she will be successful on the job. During this period, work assignments should be closely monitored. In addition, you should make every effort to overcome any difficulties that may arise. Your special attention to any problem situation will help the student meet the demands of the job.

While most Co-op assignments will be extremely successful for you and the student, problems may arise at some point. If the student is not meeting your expectations or fails to meet performance or conduct standards, offer specific and timely advice for correction. Advise the student of areas needing improvement. Attempt to handle the situation as you would any other employee. Sometimes a meeting between you, the student, the Co-op Coordinator and a school official can solve the problem—especially if the student is getting academic credit and might fail if the work assignment is not completed. If the problem persists, do not hesitate to contact your local Co-op Coordinator, who will work with school officials to recommend the appropriate action for you to take.

Students may be terminated from the program if their performance or conduct fails to improve and they have less than 1 year of current continuous employment in the same or similar positions. These students may not be reassigned to other positions under such conditions. However, students who have been on the Agency's roll for one year or more, are veterans with at least a year of service, or previously worked in the Federal Service are afforded all the legal rights and protection afforded to a permanent employee.

Students who discontinue their education or are disqualified from continuing in the Co-op Program *must* be terminated.

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## Converting Students To Permanent Appointments

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Students are eligible for noncompetitive conversion to a career or career-conditional appointment anytime during the 120-calendar day period following completion of their educational and Co-op Program requirements. Students must complete a minimum number of work hours under the Co-op Program before they can be converted to permanent appointments (i.e., 1040 hours for baccalaureate and associate degree students and 640 hours for all others).

You should communicate your intent to convert the student as early as possible to ensure that he/she has a basis upon which to make a career decision during critical periods of graduate placement/recruiting cycles at the academic institution. To accomplish this, you must forward a written statement of your intent to convert the student to your servicing HRO or local Co-op Coordinator at the beginning of the last work assignment prior to the student's graduation, or the first semester of the student's senior year, whichever is earliest.

Since the Co-op Program is designed to provide a source of well-trained employees for entry-level career positions, every effort should be made to convert students into permanent positions in the same occupations for which they were trained. If students are not eligible for noncompetitive conversion, they should be advised of procedures for competitive appointment or terminated from the program.

