IPFW Unit Highlight

Co-op Office

The Office of Academic Internships, Cooperative Education, and Service Learning (OACS) facilitates community-based learning opportunities at IPFW.

Commonly referred to as the “Co-op office," the unit was re-named several years ago to reflect changes and additions to programs and services in the area of experiential education, but the old moniker persists!

Experiential education allows students to apply the theories and skills gained in the classroom to real-world projects and positions. The best-known examples of experiential education at IPFW are co-ops and internships.

What’s the difference? The primary difference between a co-op and an internship is the duration of the experience and often the level of planning that is required. While internships are often project-based and last the duration of only one semester, a co-op is a plan that generally lasts between two to five semesters.

In these curriculum-related co-op and intern positions, all students are paid a competitive wage. Students may receive college credit and their work experiences are monitored by faculty members from their department. The wages they earn are not counted on the FAFSA form when calculating financial need.

As students progress through their classes, they progress at work, too. Students are given a higher level of job duties and a greater level of responsibility the longer they are with a company. According to co-op director Deb Barrick, “The mentoring and professional development they receive through the co-op experience turns them into a young professional right before my eyes!”
The co-op program typically has around 100 students working each academic year, with the majority of student placements being from ETCS (College of Engineering, Technology and Computer Science) and the Doermer School of Business.

Barrick indicates, “Companies work with our students primarily for two reasons. They want to develop a pipeline for full-time hires and this provides them with an opportunity for a ‘long-term’ interview with the student”.

Barrick adds that the other reason for company involvement is that the manager is a former co-op student, wanting to give back, doing for a student what someone did for them.”

Another form of experiential education is service learning, a method of teaching that combines classroom instruction with meaningful community service. This form of learning emphasizes critical thinking and personal reflection while encouraging a heightened sense of community, civic engagement, and personal responsibility.

OACS provides support to faculty interested in incorporating this pedagogy into a course. Support may mean helping to develop a course-embedded project or it might involve finding a community partner, identifying available grants or workshops ... whatever it takes to make service learning happen! Barrick notes that service learning happens across all disciplines at IPFW.