

2018

# Determining the Factors that Impact Enrollment in Cooperative Education at the Community College Level

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Lawrence Miller

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Walden University  
2018

Abstract

Determining the Factors that Impact Enrollment in Cooperative Education at the

Community College Level

by

Lawrence R. Miller Jr.

MLA, Auburn University, 2005

BS, Auburn University, 2003

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2018

## Abstract

The benefits of involvement in work-integrated learning programs, also known as cooperative education have been touted since inception in 1899. Unfortunately, little research has been published related to the factors that impact enrollment within these programs. The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that have influenced the historically low enrollment numbers within the cooperative education program at a public community college located in the southeastern United States. Guided by Kolb's experiential learning theory, the conceptual framework provides a direct link between classroom learning and work experience. A qualitative phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of 11 cooperative education program alumni. Data were collected via a semistructured interview process using open-ended questions during focus groups. The data collected were transcribed for coding and triangulated for validation by comparing the multiple data results. Through data analysis, 3 fundamental themes emerged: recruitment, communication, and experiences. A 4th theme, website development, was highlighted within the policy development as an essential part of the initial 3 themes. The results may allow administrators to gain insight into how cooperative education enrollment numbers are being influenced by specific variables within the classroom, college, industry, community, program marketing, and program experiences. The implications for social change reach far beyond the study site. Through the determination of factors that impact enrollment numbers within a specific program, other institutions may be provided guidance in how to address the enrollment issues within the institutions' programs.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this qualitative case study to everyone that inspired and helped me throughout my educational journey. Without all of you, I would not be where I am today. To my students, workers, and tutors within L.C.F., you guys are one of the main reasons I began and have continued this education endeavor. To my father, Lawrence Sr., thank you for making me the man I am today, and there is not a day that goes by that I do not miss you. To my mother, Joanne, thank you for always supporting me in all my endeavors. To my wife, Megan, thank you for pushing me to obtain this degree, and thank you for not letting me quit (even when I wanted to). Finally, to my daughter, Callie Ray, you are my true inspiration, and I hope that I can make you as proud of me as I am of you! Daddy loves you!!!

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	iv
Section 1: The Problem.....	1
Introduction.....	1
The Local Problem.....	2
Rationale .....	3
Definition of Terms.....	5
Significance of the Study .....	6
Research Questions.....	7
Review of the Literature .....	8
Implications.....	20
Summary .....	21
Section 2: The Methodology.....	23
Introduction.....	23
Overview of Study .....	23
Qualitative Research Design and Approach .....	24
Participants.....	25
Data Collection .....	29
Role of the Researcher .....	30
Data Analysis .....	30
Data Analysis Results .....	33
Theme Development.....	44
Program Recommendations .....	50



Conclusion .....	51
Section 3: The Project.....	53
Introduction.....	53
Rationale .....	54
Review of Literature .....	54
Project Description.....	62
Project Evaluation Plan.....	73
Project Implications .....	74
Section 4: The Reflection.....	76
Introduction.....	76
Project Strengths and Limitations .....	76
Recommendations for Alternative Approaches .....	78
Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change .....	79
Reflections on the Importance of Work.....	80
Implication, Applications, and Directions for Future Research .....	80
Conclusion .....	82
References.....	83
Appendix A: Policy Recommendations for Increasing Enrollment in Cooperative Education. ....	97
Appendix B: Letter of Intent Requesting Permission to Access of Participant for the Institutional IRB.....	109
Appendix C: Application for Approval to Use Human Subjects in Research.....	110
Appendix D: Letter of Invitation .....	111

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form.....	112
Appendix F: Interview Protocol.....	114
Appendix G: Transcriptionist Confidentiality Form.....	115

## List of Tables

Table 1: Interview Questions to Aid in Addressing RQ1, RQ2, and RQ.....	35
Table 2: Specific Terms That Appeared Three or More Times within Each Question of the Transcripts.....	45
Table 3: Implementation Timetable.....	70

## Section 1: The Problem

### **Introduction**

Herman Schneider, an engineering professor at Lehigh University, first developed the concept of cooperative education or *co-op* in 1899 (Cooperative Education and Internship Association, 2015). Historically focused within the science, technology, engineering, and math education (STEM) fields, cooperative education did not expand to include business, health, and liberal arts degree programs until the Federal government adopted Title VIII of the Higher Education Act in 1965 (Office of Legislative Counsel, 2015). In 1985, the Cooperative Education National Campaign increased public awareness of the benefits of cooperative education to all involved parties including students, institutions, and industries. During the national campaign the institutional participation in cooperative education increased nearly 500%. Today, there are approximately 1000 colleges and universities, 310,000 students, and 76,000 employers actively participating in cooperative education worldwide, and as awareness in cooperative education continue to expand, participant numbers are likely to continue to grow (Cooperative Education and Internship Association, 2015).

The study site, a community college located in the southeastern United States, is one of the institutions currently offering cooperative education to the student population. The college had an overall student population of 9,940 during the fall semester 2017 and has a predominately non-traditional student population by definition (T. E., personal communication, October 16, 2017; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). Out of the total institutional population, 4,382 students were eligible for participation in

cooperative education with 29 students enrolled in cooperative education during the fall semester of 2017 (T.E., personal communication, November 11, 2017).

This qualitative case study reviewed the current issue of low enrollment within the study site's cooperative education program through the exploration of specific topics that have the ability to influence low enrollment numbers within an institution's cooperative education. The following section laid the framework for the entirety of the qualitative case study through the presentation of the: (a) local problem, (b) rationale, (c) definition of terms, (d) significance of study, (e) research questions, and (f) implications. A literature review is also present and includes an overview of the suitable theoretical framework, and a review of topics significant to the study. Through this study, a greater understanding of the research topic and local problem may be achieved.

### **The Local Problem**

From 2008-2010, the United States saw an increase in unemployment rates due to a recession with a steady decline noted in young adult (ages 20-24) employment dropping from 77.4% in 2000 to 65.5% in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). With a smaller, more competitive job market, there is increasing pressure on higher education to provide students with an academically sound foundation that equips them with skills vital for successful employment (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010). Many institutions are shifting their focus to work-integrated learning (WIL) programs, such as cooperative education, internship, work-based learning, and work-related learning, because of their ability to increase student success and provide the student with relevant work experience in local, state, national, and international industry, thus increasing

employability upon graduation (Anderson et al., 2011; DuPre & Williams, 2011; Zegwaard & Coll, 2011).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine the factors that have impacted enrollment numbers within the cooperative education program at the study site through the perspective of program alumni. The majority of the alumni that were interviewed had been enrolled in the science, technology, engineering, and math education (STEM) degree fields. The study site's cooperative education program has a primary objective to provide on-site work experiences to the student participants by providing placements in local industry during the students' academic program at the college (College, 2016c). Since involvement in cooperative education is not required for degree completion, program enrollment numbers reflect students who are independently choosing to participate. The local problem is the low cooperative education enrollment percentages for students who were enrolled within the STEM, Business, and Computer Information Systems (CIS) degree fields.

## **Rationale**

### **Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level**

While much of the previous research has focused on the benefits of cooperative education, it is the factors that impact enrollment within a program that need further exploration within the study site (Anderson et al., 2011; DuPre & Williams, 2011; Eames & Cates, 2009; Gault et al. 2010; Grant et al., 2010; Jaekel et al., 2011; Jones, 2007; Nduna, 2012; Thakur, 2012; Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). For the purpose of this qualitative case study, a community college in the southeastern United States was selected as the

study site. Only cooperative education alumni who were enrolled in the Business, STEM, and CIS were utilized within this study. These degree programs were chosen based on the programs' past and current involvement in the college's cooperative education program (D. P., personal communication, March 11, 2016). Business, STEM, and CIS degree fields consist of 917 students and make up 10.84% of the study site's total student population. The Business, STEM, and CIS student population represents 15.2% of the total degree-seeking student population that is eligible for cooperative education. When comparing the total number of currently enrolled cooperative education students to that of the total number of students enrolled in the Business, STEM, and CIS; only 3.1% of enrolled students participated in cooperative education (T.E., personal communication, November 21, 2017). The low participation percentage represents how under-utilized the study site's cooperative education program has been in recent years.

### **Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature**

To gain a greater understanding of the local problem of low enrollment, the negative or neglected topics within higher education that focus specifically on cooperative education enrollment numbers were explored. According to the Director of Cooperative Education at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, "in co-op (and in many other educational areas), there is a tendency to publish good news rather than bad news" (K. Z., personal communication, February 7, 2016). A Professor Emerita at the University of Waterloo, Canada reiterated that perspective stating, "...many of those that publish work-integrated learning studies are employed in the field, and are looking to find advantages, not disadvantages, of their work" (P. R., personal communication, February

8, 2016). To provide insight into the low enrollment numbers, one can look to the published research of students' rationale for choosing to participate, or not participate in cooperative education. Director of Cooperative Education at the University of Waikato, New Zealand also suggested some factors to why cooperative education enrollment numbers may be low include added costs and extra work (K. Z., personal communication, February 7, 2016).

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms and definitions were used throughout this study:

*Cooperative education:* An organized method of integrating classroom-based learning with that of practical work experience; whereas, the students are placed within an industry that follows the same degree specialization in which they are enrolled, thus allowing the student to obtain a greater understanding of what will be expected of them within their respected degree focus (Cooperative Education and Internship Association, 2015).

*Non-traditional students:* Individuals who fall into, at minimum, one of the following categories: did not enroll in college the same calendar year as they graduated high school; part-time at least one semester; works a minimum of 35 hours per week; considered financially independent; have dependents; single parents; or does not have a high school diploma (The National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002)

*STEM:* An acronym for the academic fields within education that include science, technology, engineering and math (Study in the States, 2016).



*Work-integrated learning*: An umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum (Patrick et al., 2009).

### **Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to determine the factors that influence enrollment within the cooperative education program at a community college located in the southeastern United States through the perspective of cooperative education alumni. Previous studies have found a plethora of benefits related to work-integrated learning, but the gap in practice and knowledge is the under-reported problem of low enrollment (Anderson et al. 2011; K. Z., personal communication, February 7, 2016; P. R., personal communication, February 8, 2016; Rowe, 2015). With limited published research discussing the drawbacks of cooperative education, a general understanding of the problem is limited by little information of why the problem exists or how to increase enrollment. At the study site, the current issue is the 3.1 % enrollment in cooperative education compared to that of the eligible student population within Business, STEM, and CIS: 29 out of 917 students. The 3.1 % has caused previous and current administration within the local site to express critical concern with the current and future state of the program. Through the gathering information from cooperative education program alumni, the qualitative case study identified: how cooperative education impacted the program alumni's experiences at the local level; and, why program alumni chose to participate in cooperative education at the local level. Identifying the impact of participation and why participants' chose to enroll will gain

insight into how cooperative education enrollment numbers are being influenced by variables in the classroom, college, industry, community, program marketing, and program experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The importance of involvement in cooperative education on participants' academic and professional experience has been widely researched within the realm of higher education (Anderson et al., 2011; DuPre & Williams, 2011; Eames & Cates, 2009; Gault et al. 2010; Grant et al., 2010; Jaekel et al., 2011; Jones, 2007; Nduna, 2012; Thakur, 2012; Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). The problem of low enrollment within the study site's cooperative education program is a topic that is in need of increased exploration to gain a greater understanding of the study site and other similar institutions experiencing similar inadequate enrollment levels. In an effort to determine the potential influential factors of this local problem, the study answered three research questions related to the participants' overall experiences:

RQ1: What factors, as perceived by program alumni, led to their participation in the cooperative education program?

RQ2: What were program alumni's perceptions about the cooperative education program prior to making their decision to participate?

RQ3: What are program alumni's perceptions of the relationship between participation in the cooperative education program and their overall academic success and employability?

## **Review of the Literature**

In the following literature review, scholarly resources were explored using keywords and phrases such as *cooperative education, work-integrated learning, work-based learning, internships, cooperative learning, work related learning, higher education, community college, and technical college*. These words and phrases were searched using the Walden Library databases, Google Scholar, and full text of both the Journal of Cooperative Education and Internships and the Asian-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education to locate current, relevant, scholarly articles related to the research focus. Through the use of these resources, a suitable theoretical framework emerged. Three viable themes were developed in relation to the impact of cooperative education: academic benefits, personal benefits, and career/employment benefits. All of these themes are directly linked based on their ability to transfer specific learned knowledge and skill sets between an individual's personal, academic, and professional experiences. Student rationale and institutional responsibility also surfaced as additional themes that directly impact the local problem of low enrollment. The hope is that through the use of these themes, a greater understanding of the benefits and why students chose to participate in cooperative education aid in addressing the local problem of low enrollment within the study site.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Cooperative education combines traditional classroom learning with that of real-world experience, allowing students to reflect on, integrates, and conceptualizes work experiences into classroom learning. Cooperative education is founded in the core

ideology of experiential learning, and seeks to increase the student's level of learning through actual experience (Chan, 2012; Richard, Walter, & Yoder, 2013; Weisz & Smith, 2005). Originally established by John Dewey in 1938, the experiential learning theory was derived as a means of unifying theory and practice within higher education, and was founded on the core belief that an individual's knowledge is based on a combination of teaching and experience rather than teaching alone (Dewey, 1938). It was not until the development of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (KELT) that higher education, specifically cooperative education, truly began to develop interest.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (KELT) emerges as the key framework to the concept of learning through experience. KELT is the process of creating knowledge through observation and practice, whereby comprehending and manipulating experiences. KELT provides a direct link between classroom learning and work experience, thus increasing the relevance of higher education as a whole (Kolb, 1984). Kolb (1984) developed a learning cycle outlining the entire process in four distinct phases: (a) abstract conceptualization, (b) active experimentation, (c) concrete experience, and (d) reflective experience. *Concrete experience* is the physical action of experiencing and learning by the participant. *Reflective experience* is the ability of the learner to self-reflect and draws conclusions on the concrete experience. The learner then makes generalizations and develops a hypothesis based on the concrete and reflective experience, called *abstract conceptualization*. *Active experimentation* is the final stage of applying the developed theory in different scenarios. KELT argued that learning was an on-going, circular process in which the learner must complete and continue the learning cycle until mastery

is achieved (Donohue, 2012; Richard et al., 2013). KELT provides an ideal theoretical framework in which the cooperative education program within the study site can be explored. Using KELT, specific themes emerged as factors that have the ability to impact enrollment numbers within the cooperative education program at the study site.

### **Student Rationale for Low Enrollment**

Sattler and Peters (2013) recently attempted to identify student issues and concerns regarding work-integrated learning to address low enrollment with financial costs cited as the major challenge to participation in cooperative education. Sattler (2011) determined that out-of-pocket costs for students can be a burden for those participating in cooperative education. These costs can include: (a) employer-required paperwork, (b) background checks, (c) work-appropriate clothing, (d) commuting costs, and (e) housing/relocation costs (Sattler, 2011). Unlike the student participants within the study site, Anderson et al. (2011) found that many students are required to pay a fee to participate in cooperative education, and students stated that they were more likely to participate if the fees were reduced. The cooperative education fee is used to cover student resources and operating costs of the program that are not covered by the traditional institutional budget. These operating costs can include: (a) organizing interviews, (b) recruitment of potential employers, and (c) institutional monitoring of cooperative education students work-terms (Anderson et. al, 2011).

Compounding the out-of-pocket costs, students also cited a loss of income as reasons for not participating in work-integrated learning programs (Anderson et al. 2011; Moore, Ferns, & Peach, 2012; Sattler, 2011). Many students who participate in

cooperative education are not eligible for financial aid during the time they are actively employed in cooperative education, as financial aid is only awarded when a student is enrolled in at least 6 credit hours (Federal Student Aid, 2016). Within many institutions, cooperative education courses often do not count as credit hours; therefore, even though the student is still enrolled at an institution, many cooperative education students fall below this credit requirement (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institution, 2016). Moore, Ferns, and Peach (2012) determined that 72% of students reported that loss of income was their greatest concern because they would have to discontinue their current paid positions to participate in their work-based learning experience, while 59% of students felt that the cost associated with travel to and from their placement created a financial burden.

Sattler and Peters (2013) found that time management factors were also a major challenge to participation in work-integrated learning programs. Students cited that they were less likely to participate in WIL if it was not required for their academic degree program (Anderson et al., 2011). Anderson et al. (2011) also found that 40% of students felt the experience was difficult when required to complete academic studies concurrently with a WIL experience. For this reason, many programs either do not allow participants to be enrolled in traditional coursework or limit the credit hours in which a student can be enrolled during their work placement. Since the study site is wholly a commuter school, it is also worth noting that research has shown that commuter students are less likely to take advantage of non-academic activities, including internships, as they have less contact with teachers and the campus as a whole (Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer 2001).

## **Institutional Responsibility**

Institutional responsibility can be broken down into two levels of management: institutional and cooperative education-specific. When looking at the factors of low enrollment in regards to institutional responsibility, research looks at the institutional obstacles each group faces to develop and manage a successful cooperative education program. Previous research cited that both levels acknowledge the widely-known benefits to student success from participating in work-based learning programs, and agree that decreased enrollment is an issue of high importance with administration at the institutional and program levels (Anderson et al., 2011; Emslie, 2011; Rowe, 2015; Sattler, 2011).

At the institutional level, challenges to enrollment in work-integrated learning programs include financial support and faculty and staff workload (Dickson & Kaider, 2012). Developing, marketing, implementing, and maintaining a successful work-integrated learning program requires substantial financial investments from the institution. Enrollment is directly challenged by the link between students enrolled in WIL programs and the quality of work placements provided by the institution (Peters, 2012; Sattler, 2011). Anderson et al. (2011) determined that rather than placing blame for low enrollment on the participating industry sites; institutions should take a closer look at themselves, and their inability to adequately advertise the program and the related benefits. According to Sattler (2011), when asked how involved students heard about cooperative education, only 8.4% declared it was a result of institutional marketing.

Sattler (2011) also found the main reason these participants discovered cooperative education was word-of-mouth from friends

Unfortunately, the challenges to increase student enrollment are often the responsibility of the cooperative education program alone. The cooperative education coordinator is often tasked with the greatest challenges because they are responsible for the day-to-day on-going management and interaction within the program. Some of these responsibilities include: (a) coordinating interviews, (b) maintaining paperwork, (c) marketing to students and industry, (d) securing placements for students, and (e) supervising students (Sattler, 2011). If a greater balance and understanding for the well-being of the student and their educational experience is not provided by the institution as it relates to work-based learning programs, student enrollment within these programs may continue to decline.

### **Academic Benefits of Cooperative Education**

Research has shown that the academic benefits of cooperative education extend to the involved students, not only in the classroom, but throughout their degree program as well. Cooperative education has had a noticeable positive impact on the participants' overall academic performance and is touted as one of the best methods for a student to gain hands-on experience, increase job searching skills, and establish a strong foundation of technical and social skills (Donohue & Skolnik, 2012; Blicblau, Nelson & Dini, 2016; Tanaka & Carlson, 2012). Raelin et al. (2011) determined that in comparison to non-cooperative education students, students who participated in cooperative education had a noticeably higher Grade point average (GPA). However, Raelin et al. (2011) also



revealed that cooperative education student perceived disparities between expectations of course material and instruction versus that of which was actually presented. This discrepancy created a disinterest among cooperative education students; and, research results illustrated their overall GPAs decreased from the year prior to their involvement. Anderson, Johnston, Iles, McRae, Reed, and Walchli (2011) found that 71% of their participants stated that the potential for increased GPA was unimportant or the least important factor. Out of nine emergent themes related to cooperative education's appeal, GPA ranked last. Drysdale, Ward, Johansson, Zaitseva, and Sheri (2012) established that involvement in WIL programs had no significant impact on the participants' GPA.

Cooperative education's impact on the students' development of technical skills was one of the greatest benefits found within previous research (Donohue, 2010; Donohue & Skolnik, 2012; DuPre & Williams, 2011; Grant, Malloy, Murphy, Forman, & Robinson, 2010; Hughes, Mylonas, & Benckendorff, 2013). Technical skills, often referred to as *hard skills*, are defined as job-specific skills connected to observation and knowledge (Accreditation Board for Engineering & Technology, 2016). Hughes, et al. (2013) discovered that on-site observation and interaction with industry experts resulted in a greater knowledge of the technical skills required than what a classroom setting could offer. Donohue (2010) determined that participants' felt that their experiences in cooperative education positively impacted their foundational knowledge in the classroom; specifically, their communication and technical skills. A later study by Donohue and Skolnik (2012) confirmed Donohue (2010) findings, but expanded on them by exploring the effects of different cooperative education settings. Donohue and Skolnik

(2012) also determined that all cooperative education students were able to use their learned technical skills, but some jobs demanded more of a skill-focused environment, while others required more breadth of skills. Benefits were seen from both work environments regardless of student learning styles. Grant, et al (2010) performed a study to determine the effectiveness of real-world projects and found that the majority of the participant pool was positively influenced, as the students were able to practice, develop, and reinforce their technical skills. DuPre and Williams (2011) learned that work-integrated learning students perceived technical abilities were far less than what employers were seeking in new hires. The development of technical skills is view by both students and future employers are one of the most impactful benefits of involvement in cooperative education.

Study participants in Hughes et al. (2013) found that experiencing ‘classroom examples’ in a real-world setting gave significance to their class work and value to their studies. Yap (2012) stated that students reported increased confidence in both using classroom skills in the workplace and transferring knowledge from one classroom to another. The participants reported increased knowledge in their areas of discipline and increased awareness of gaps in academic comprehension after completing a workplace project. Anderson et al. (2011) surveyed cooperative education participants and determined that student’s felt that cooperative education helped students engage in their academic studies once they returned to campus, specifically in: (a) analyzing theories, (b) applying classroom teachings, (c) assessing the importance of classroom information, and (d) learning to solve practical problems. Students noticed that the workplace experience

provided context to the theories and ideas they were learning in the classroom while also establishing real-world skills not available in a classroom setting. However, Anderson et al. (2011) also determined that 44% of co-op students felt that the classroom instruction inadequately taught real-world skills. While the academic benefits of involvement in cooperative education are important, it is often the personal benefits that are of the highest impact among student participants.

### **Personal Benefits of Cooperative Education**

One of the important themes noted throughout cooperative education literature is the frequency in which the term *communication* is mentioned. There is a strong link noted between involvement in cooperative education and improved communication skills for participants, both within the classroom and in the workplace environment (Cullen 2005; Donohue, 2010; Grant et al., 2010; Jaekel, Hector, Northwood, Benzinger, Salinitri, Johrendt, & Watters, 2011; Yap, 2012). Student confidence was positively related to participation in a cooperative education program (Cullen, 2005; Drysdale & McBeath 2012; Moore & Workman, 2011; Yap, 2012). In a study on self-concept, an individual's self-perception, Drysdale and McBeath (2012) determined that cooperative education students had significantly higher scores in regards to math and academic self-concept. In a further study, Drysdale and McBeath (2014) found that cooperative education students excelled in areas deemed essential by employers. In comparison to non-cooperative education students, cooperative education students felt less anxious, used study aids more frequently, and demonstrated better time management. Grant et al. (2010) performed a pilot study to determine the effectiveness of real-world projects in on

the student's ability to develop *soft skills*. Soft skills are defined as non-job specific skills and can include: ethics, project management, teamwork, presentation, and communication (Accreditation Board for Engineering & Technology, 2016). Grant, et al. (2010) found key benefits to students included: gaining confidence, building resumes with relevant work experience, and motivating students by working with potential employers.

### **Career/Employment Benefits of Cooperative Education**

Career clarification has been viewed by many within higher education as an indispensable asset within cooperative education (Anderson et al., 2011; Esters & Retallick, 2013; Grant et al., 2010; Yap, 2012). Grant et al. (2010) found that the exposure cooperative education provided allowed the participant to gain a greater understanding of career opportunities. Cooperative education's also aided the participant in determining whether degree focus truly aligned with their skills and interests. Anderson et al. (2011) found that a participants' experience with cooperative education greatly influenced potential career paths. Nearly 63% also felt the participants' cooperative education experience confirmed their selected career path, thus greatly increasing overall confidence. It was also found that cooperative education aided participants' in clarifying degree selection and increasing career maturity (Esters & Retallick, 2013; Yap, 2012). On the contrary, a study by Drysdale, Frost, and McBeath (2015) discovered no significant difference in career certainty between cooperative education and non-cooperative education student participants.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2016), 76.3% of employers are looking for new hires that have previous work experience within the appointed career path. Work-integrated learning programs have the ability to increase the participants' employability and career success (Holzer & Lerman, 2014). Richard, Walter, and Yoder (2013) explored how involvement in cooperative education aided in the participants' understanding related to the National Occupancy Testing Institute Job Ready Assessment, an exam testing a student's ability to comprehend industry standards within a specific field through the students learning within the classroom. Richard et al. (2013) determined that students that participated in cooperative education scored significantly higher than non-cooperative education students on the assessment, thus making cooperative education students better prepared and more appealing to future employers. Based on the current industry trend of employers wanting to hire new graduates that have relevant work experience within the field of study, work-integrated learning programs have the ability to expand a student's career prospect and employability (Anderson et al. 2011; Chan, 2012; Reddan, 2015; Richard et al., 2013). Reddan (2015) determined that participation in WIL made students self-aware of their strengths and weakness in regards to personal employability.

With today's aging workforce, new hires must have the ability to quickly and effectively grasp workplace operations because employers are looking to employ individuals that articulate high levels of work-place competency early on in the new hires career (Gault et al., 2010; Hammeman & Gardner, 2011; Ramson, 2014). Work-place competency, often referred to as work self-efficacy, consists of multiple behaviors and

practices viewed by employers as essential. These behaviors and activities include: (a) displaying a positive attitude, (b) managing politics, (c) managing stress, (d) prioritization, (e) professionalism, (f) teamwork, and (g) understanding the work environment (Eden, 2014; Gault et al., 2010; Hanneman & Gardner, 2011; Raelin et al., 2011; Ramson, 2014). Eden (2014) found that participants felt cooperative education experience pushed the participants beyond their *comfort zone* and forced them to become more hands-on, thus increasing their overall work self-efficacy. Gault et al. (2010) found that while employers' consistency, timelessness, initiative, and commitment to quality were deemed significant; reliability, eagerness to learn, prioritization, ethical behavior, and professionalism were not significantly impactful. Raelin et al. (2011) sought to determine which of the three studied self-efficacies were most highly influenced by involvement in cooperative education. The three self-efficacies within the study were: (a) academic, (b) career, and (c) work. Raelin et al. (2011) determined that while all three positively impacted the participant, work self-efficacy was the most influential. On the contrary, Thompson, Bates, and Bates (2016) discovered that there was no significant difference between WIL students and non-WIL students in relation to work self-efficacy.

Previous research has shown that involvement in cooperative education has the ability to provide the participants with improved career advancement and increased wages over that of non-cooperative education hires (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000; Gault et al., 2010, Holzer & Lerman, 2014; Hughes et al., 2013). Gault et al. (2000) performed the first empirical study on career success, and results showed students' that participated in cooperative education were considered a more successful in employment

than that of non-cooperative education students. Gault et al. (2000) also found that the cooperative education students had an initial starting wages that was 10% higher than that of their non-cooperative education counterparts, and cooperative education students' ability to be promoted was also significantly increased. Hughes et al. (2010) found that students perceived that the skill sets learned within cooperative education were highly valuable in relation to their career advancement. Gault et al. (2010) determined that while cooperative education participants were offered higher compensation than that of non-cooperative education, it was solely performance-based. Employers had a greater willingness to offer higher compensation to students that had the highest performance level during the cooperative education experience.

### **Implications**

This qualitative case study identified the factors that influence enrollment within the study site's cooperative education program. The potential factors will provide insight as to the need for curriculum or policy changes. This insight will aid in a seamless integration of cooperative education learning into current courses. The results also have the potential to outline changes to the current curriculum with recommendations for the cooperative education program and the institution on how to expand the programs' institutional reach, thus increasing enrollment. The white paper plan will first be presented to the Workforce Solutions Project Coordinator, Dean of Workforce Development, and the institution's administration for discussion and approval. Once approved, the plan will be presented to the remaining administration, faculty, and staff for further discussion. The final written analysis may be submitted for publication and/or

presentation to other professionals as a method of address the current lack of published research regarding cooperative education enrollment numbers.

### **Summary**

Section 1 of this qualitative case study sought to expand on previous research, while outlining the local problem of low enrollment within the study site's cooperative education program. The rationale for further exploration of the local issue is based on the published academic and professional benefits related to participation in cooperative education. The benefits of involvement in cooperative education have been widely researched within higher education. Unfortunately, the unforeseen factors that have the ability to influence the local problem of low enrollment that is of greatest concern. A literature review developed themes based on the benefits of involvement in cooperative education and the potential causes of low enrollment. These benefits included: (a) academic, (b) personal, and (c) career/employment; while the potential causes included: financial issues and time management at the student level; and, financial issues, faculty and staff buy-in, and program support at the institutional level. When looking at the causes that have traditionally had the greatest influence on a programs' enrollment numbers, it is unclear what predominantly caused the local problem of low enrollment. In contrast to the previous research, the local site has no additional out-of-pocket fee associated with participation in cooperative education. Additionally, the college also has designated courses for cooperative education, does not limit the amount of course hours a student can take during their cooperative education involvement, and allows financial aid as long as a student is eligible (D P., personal communication, March 11, 2016).



Within Section 2, an overview of the proposed qualitative research design and approach was discussed. Section 2 included: (a) participant criteria, (b) data collection methods, and (c) means of data analysis. Section 3 outlined the overall project genre. Section 3 included: (a) rationale, (b) review of literature, (c) project description, (d) project evaluation plan, and (e) project implications. Finally, Section 4 provided my personal reflection and conclusion related the overall project. Section 4 included: (a) project strengths and limitations, (b) recommendations for alternative approaches, (c) scholarship, (d) importance of work, and implications for future research. Through the development of these sections, a greater understanding of the local problem was developed.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Introduction**

Section 2 provides an overview of the proposed qualitative research design and approach. Section 2 includes participant criteria, data collection methods, and means of data analysis. Through the use of these research methods, a greater understanding of the local problem has been developed.

### **Overview of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study identified the factors that have impacted cooperative education program enrollment within a community college located in the southeastern United States. To address the research questions provided in Section 1, a qualitative approach was employed. The target participant pool was 15 cooperative education program alumni. The data were collected through a semistructured interview process using open-ended questions administered during focus groups. The collected data were transcribed and analyzed via keyword identification and theme development. The research design and approach, participant criteria, data collection methods, and means of data analysis were outlined within the subsequent section.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What factors, as perceived by program alumni, led to their participation in the cooperative education program?

RQ2: What were program alumni's perceptions about the cooperative education program prior to making their decision to participate?

RQ3: What are program alumni's perceptions of the relationship between participation in the cooperative education program and their overall academic success and employability?

### **Qualitative Research Design and Approach**

The qualitative research design method used was a case study research design. Qualitative research is defined as a social science approach to research that aids in the exploration and understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research emphasizes data collection process in the natural setting while employing inductive reasoning as a means of understanding the subjects' point of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Since the qualitative case study looked to obtain the alumni participants' perspectives, a phenomenological design was appropriate. Phenomenological research is defined as a qualitative research design that focuses on obtaining a greater understanding of everyday experiences through the perspective of the participant (Creswell, 2012). While a qualitative case study, specifically a phenomenological study was selected, other approaches and methodologies were also considered.

A quantitative approach was also considered for data collection and analysis. According to Creswell (2012), quantitative research is used to describe trends and relationships through the use of number analysis and statistics. Since the qualitative case study is looking to determine the experiences and perceptions of participants, a quantitative research design would have not been appropriate. Within the realm of qualitative research, a traditional case study and program evaluation were also considered because of their ability to provide in-depth exploration of a single variable (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012). Unfortunately, a traditional case study would have placed a focus on the program itself rather than that of the rich, in-depth personal knowledge and experiences required to determine the potential factors for the program's historically low enrollment numbers. A program evaluation was also not selected because the purpose of this study was to determine the factors that impact low enrollment within not only the study site, but also other programs and institutions that are facing a similar issue related to low enrollment.

### **Participants**

In order to gain in-depth knowledge of the current program, the qualitative case study participant pool included program alumni within the study site's cooperative education program. Participants had completed a minimum of one semester within the program so they have familiarity of the program, relevant experiences, and reasoning for participating.

### **Gaining Access to Participants**

Gaining access to participants required three levels of consent. The three levels included: (a) Walden University, (b) the study site, and (c) the participants. The first level of consent consisted of acquiring permission to conduct the study from the Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Permission from IRB was required to ensure that research meets the ethical standards of Walden University and adheres to U.S. Federal regulations (Walden University, 2015). Specifically, IRB assures that there is informed consent, equitable procedures, minimized and reasonable risks; and, the potential benefits of the research outweigh the potential risks (Walden University, 2015).

An application to Walden University's IRB outlined the research questions, data collection tools, data points to be determined, data source, plan for data analysis, and participants. The Walden University IRB approval date and number: #10-28-16-0452403. The Walden University IRB approval expiration date: 10-27-2017. The second level was getting permission from study site. A letter was drafted to the study site that outlined the intent of the study (see Appendix B). Additionally, the study site's Application for Approval to use Human Subjects in Research was submitted for approval (see Appendix C). The Application for Approval to use Human Subjects in Research is required to gain access to cooperative education program alumni information via the study sites' email database. The final level involved an email soliciting all cooperative education program alumni from the past five years. This will allow for an adequate sample size of participants (see Appendix D).

### **Protection of the Participants**

For the proposed study, I followed the ethical principles for conducting research involving human participants that takes into consideration the Belmont Report of 1979 and the Walden University Institution Review Board's (IRB) Guide for Archival Researchers and Research Ethics for Education Settings. The Belmont Report of 1979 outlines three basic ethical principles related to any research which involves human subjects: (a) autonomy, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (Portney & Watkins, 2009). Autonomy refers to my ability to not influence the participants' decision-making processes. Beneficence refers to my ability to maximize the benefits of the participant's interactions, while minimizing the potential for harm. Finally, justice refers the fairness

expressed by me to all potential participants during the entirety of the research process. All participants' identities and responses remained confidential and anonymous. Only individuals who were willing to participate were used, and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality. Walden University IRB has the responsibility that all research conducted under the guidance of Walden University complies with United States federal regulations and the University's ethical standards. Walden University IRB approval is required before any data can be collected (Walden University, 2015). I also completed the NIH Ethics Certificate of Training prior to the beginning of the focus groups. My NIH certificate number was on-file and verified prior to start of the research process.

### **Study Setting**

The study site was a public, two-year community college located in the southeastern United States. The college is the sixth largest institution of higher education and the largest two-year college in the state (College, 2016a). The college has three distinct campuses with a combined student population of 9,940 for the fall 2017 (T. E., personal communication, October 16, 2017). The parent campus was the study site as the other campuses do not offer cooperative education. The student population was made up of 57% female and 43% male with 60% of this demographic being part-time, while 40% were full-time (College, 2016a). The college offers 49 associate degrees and 52 certificate programs delivered through traditional, hybrid, and on-line course structures (Calhoun Community College, 2016a). The college is a member of the Southern Association of College and Schools (SACS) accreditation board. The college has a vision of success for every student and a mission to provide quality, innovative instruction

through a responsive environment while promoting cultural enrichment and community development (Calhoun Community College, 2016b).

### **Sampling Technique**

Purposeful sampling was used as the sampling technique within the qualitative case study. Creswell (2012) defined purposeful sampling as the selection of individuals based on their experience of the research focus. Using purposeful sampling assured that participants had appropriate understanding and provided rich, in-depth information for the study. Participation was open to individuals over 18 years of age, but was not specific to gender, race, or current level of education. Due to the low program enrollment numbers in previous years, program alumni were not required to be currently enrolled students, however, must have been enrolled within the last five years. The enrollment criteria provided a larger sample pool of students who had participated in cooperative education.

An email was sent to potential participants that summarized the research study and included: (a) intent of study, (b) description of study, (c) potential risks, and (d) strategies for keeping the participants' personal information and research responses confidential (see Appendix D). Only individuals who were willing to participate were used, with a target sample population of 15. According to Creswell (1998), the ideal population size for a phenomenological study is 3-15 participants. Eleven respondents were selected to participate in two separate focus groups. Selected participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix E) before being allowed to partake in the focus groups.

## Data Collection

Data for this study were collected via two semistructured focus groups lasting 45-60 minutes in length. The focus groups contained four participants within the first and seven participants within the second. A focus group is a social interview process that involves individuals that have similar knowledge and experiences with the research focus (Creswell, 2012). Focus groups allowed individuals the opportunity to expand upon their responses based on other responses within the group (Merriam, 2009). Participants were assigned generic research designations such as Participant A, B... to ensure anonymity of the individual and their responses. Open-ended research questions were used as the means of data collection. Creswell (2012) defined open-ended research questions as inquiries that allow the participant to provide his or her own responses. Open-ended research questions also allowed for a more guided interview approach with increased response flexibility and exploration (Merriam, 2009).

As the focus group leader, I spent 45-60 minutes with all the participants openly discussing the interview questions (see Appendix F). Two digital voice recorders were used during the discussion portion of the focus group to ensure that no response was overlooked. Observation notes were taken throughout the entirety of the focus group that provided a general understanding on specific keywords that occurred during the focus group. As a timesaving method, all collected data were digitally transcribed through the use of a paid transcriptionist. The paid transcriptionist was required to sign a confidentiality agreement prior to accessing recordings (see Appendix G). Once all responses were digitally transcribed, I checked all the transcriptions by listening to the



digital recordings while following along with the transcription to ensure all information was transcribed accurately. All transcribed data and notes were kept confidential based on the participants' research designation. All research related data were kept both digitally and in printed form and was secure at all times in a locked file cabinet located in my office, with only myself having access. All research-related data will be kept for a minimum of five years, and once the timeframe expires, all data will be destroyed via secured document shredding. This data includes any paper copies, thumb drives, and memory cards.

### **Role of the Researcher**

While I am currently employed at the study site, I am not directly involved with the campus in which the Cooperative Education Program is housed. I also did not have any past or current professional relationship with anyone in the co-op department nor any of the selected participants. I have an ethical responsibility to all involved to be fair, honest, and truthful throughout the entire research process (Creswell, 2012). Personal bias is something that is however inevitable within all types of research. According to Portney and Watkins (2009) researcher bias is impossible to eliminate because it is engrained within an individual's human nature, but I recognized and controlled any bias as much as possible. I separated my personal biases and asked quality, probing questions that facilitated thought and discussion among the participants (Creswell, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described data analysis as the systematic process of searching and arranging the provided data to develop research results. Since the data were

documented via audio recording, I had the responsibility of having the data accurately transcribed before analysis could commence. Once the transcription process was completed, the provided transcriptions were sub-divided into two groups: individual participant responses (Participant A, B...) and individual question responses (Question one, two...). Dividing responses by participant allowed me to gain insight into each participant's perspective, while dividing by question allowed for larger themes to emerge from the group discussion of each question. Division by participant provided insight to discrepant cases from an individual participant that could have been overlooked in the original transcription. The digital transcriptions were analyzed by keyword research software (Atlas.ti 8) that tracked the number of times each word was used to aid in the drawing out possible themes to begin a coding system. The transcriptions were examined looking for patterns, keywords and phrases to create coding categories. Coding categories allowed for organization of descriptive data into physical categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The coding and keyword analysis was documented via spreadsheet and word document.

### **Accuracy and Creditability**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) accuracy refers to the consistency between the data that is collected with that of how it is reported. For the qualitative case study, the data was collected, including discrepant cases, without personal bias. Additionally, I instructed the hired transcriptionist to report all data accurately and without bias.

According to Creswell (2012), credibility is the ability to validate findings through multiple methods of data collection. For the purpose of this qualitative case study, two methods of data collection were employed: (a) audio recordings via two digital voice recorders and (b) researcher observation notes.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Discrepant cases are always a possibility within any qualitative research approach. Creswell (2012) discussed that discrepant cases develop information that is contradictory to that of the themes that emerged within the remaining responses. There was no presence of discrepant cases that developed throughout the research process.

There were two assumptions related to the qualitative case study. The first was that all requested information related to the qualitative case study would be easily accessed from the study site. This information included general institutional data, enrollment numbers, and potential participant contact information. The second assumption is that the study participants were honest and forthcoming in their interview responses.

### **Limitations**

Limitations within qualitative research are inevitable because of the inability to generalize results. Creswell (2012) defines limitations as potential faults or difficulties within the qualitative case study that may be identified. Since the desired population was only 15 participants and only 11 agreed to participate, the research was limited due to this small sample size. Another limitation was the availability of participants to meet for the

focus group at a specific time and place with 2 willing participants unable to attend one of the two focus groups.

### **Scope**

The scope of this qualitative case study focused on determining the factors that impact enrollment within the study site's cooperative education program. The data were obtained via cooperative education alumni within a community college located in the southeastern United States.

### **Delimitations**

This qualitative case study focused on the factors that impact enrollment within the cooperative education program at a community college located within the southeastern United States. The qualitative case study involved cooperative education program alumni within the past five years. The qualitative case study did not involve the perceptions of non-cooperative education students enrolled within cooperative education-eligible degree programs. The qualitative case study also did not include faculty, staff, or administration that were directly associated with the cooperative education program.

### **Data Analysis Results**

The data analysis process began by downloading the digitally transcribed data audio files to a secure thumb drive. Once the hired transcriptionist signed the provided transcriptionist confidentiality form, the focus group files were given for transcription. The same transcriptionist was used for the entirety of the transcription process to increase confidentiality and reliability. The transcribed data were then checked and rechecked by myself to ensure accuracy of the transcription files. I then categorized the transcribed data

by question and individual participant response. The categorized transcribed data were then uploaded into the Atlas.ti 8.0 coding software. The data were analyzed using the word count frequency feature of the Atlas.ti 8.0 software. This feature created a list of terms used within each file and the frequency in which the term was used within each document.

This process was done for all seven interview questions. It was also done independently for each individual participant. The analyzed data were then uploaded to an excel spreadsheet for further analysis. The provided interview questions sought to answer the previously discussed research questions:

- RQ1: What factors, as perceived by program alumni, led to their participation in the cooperative education program?
- RQ2: What were program alumni's perceptions about the cooperative education program prior to making their decision to participate?
- RQ3: What are program alumni's perceptions of the relationship between participation in the cooperative education program and their overall academic success and employability?

Table 1 displays which interview questions corresponded with which research question. The seven interview questions and the participants' responses were carefully analyzed in an effort to determine major themes that may develop through the entire interview process.

Table 1

*Interview Questions to Aid in Addressing RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3*

Research Question (RQ)	Interview Question
RQ1	Question one: What factors led to your enrollment in this particular institution?
	Question two: How did you hear about the Cooperative Education program?
	Question three: What drew you to participate in the Cooperative Education program?
RQ2	Question four: What were your expectations for your involvement in cooperative education?
	Question six: What aspects of your involvement in cooperative education met your expectations and what aspects did not meet your expectations?
	Question seven: What potential barriers may have caused you to not be involved in cooperative education?
RQ3	Question five: How did your cooperative education experience influence your academic and professional career?
	Question six: What aspects of your involvement in cooperative education met your expectations and what aspects did not meet your expectations?

**Interview question one: what factors led to your enrollment in this particular institution?**

When interview question one was asked to the participants during both focus groups, the responses focused on convenience, cost, and quality of institutional instruction. Being a commuter institution, the study site's location was listed as one of the most influential factors. Many of the students were enrolled in the Industrial Maintenance degree program during their time within the cooperative education program, so quality of

academics and degree were also highly persuasive in their decision to attend the study site. Participant 'A' outlined what many described as most important factors when they stated:

I would say definitely location, most. I heard good things about school and job placement from getting a maintenance degree from there that a lot of companies around here looked at it [the study site] as a better school to go to..."

Participant 'I' reiterated this thought when stating:

Mainly the cost and the type of classes that they offered. A lot of places do not offer the stuff that they do like Industrial Maintenance, which is what I am going into. A lot of places don't have good programs and the study site has the best.

Based on the responses from the focus groups, three major factors led to the participants attending the study site. These factors were, in order of importance:

- (1) degree programs offered
- (2) location
- (3) cost of classes.

**Interview question two: how did you hear about the cooperative education program?**

While there was a range of responses to interview question one, the responses to question two were predominately two replies: friends/family and instructors. Out of the 11 total participants, eight heard about the cooperative education program from a friend or family member, and the remaining three from their Aerospace Technology instructor.

Out of the 11 participants, only one saw a posting for the study site's cooperative education program at the plant in which they were already employed. Out of the participants that heard about the cooperative education program from friends or family, it was determined that many of the friends and family had either previously participated in cooperative education or worked within a company that had previously employed cooperative education students. Participant 'C' stated they "learned about the co-op program through friends and word of mouth, through family friends". Participant 'I' stated that their "brother was in co-op and he recommended it". Participant 'A' stated they "learned about it from my uncle. I did a bunch of research on it and from other people that were already in the maintenance field they told me about it and they had co-ops work at their plant before". When I asked a follow-up question as to whether anyone had heard about the cooperative education program "through [the study sites'] website, e-mails, or anything along those aspects", only one participant, Participant 'A', stated they "did see a couple of job postings before I went to [the study site] that actually had stuff talking about co-op from [the study site] for that specific plant". While, Participant 'E' stated that they "actually heard about it through a student that was enrolled in it. Other than that, I did not hear anything from the school about it". Through the interview process, communication between the study site and potential students developed as a prevalent theme among many of the participants, but the most successful avenue of communication was word of mouth.



**Interview question three: what drew you to participate in the cooperative education program?**

The responses to question three focused on one major factor: experience. Participants were looking for experience to validate their career choice and to enhance their skill set for future employment opportunities. All participants felt that the experience provided during their time within the cooperative education program was vital to their future employment success. According to Participant 'H', the cooperative education program allowed them to "get hands-on experience that I would not have gotten otherwise". Participant 'A' reiterated this philosophy:

My idea was for me to see if I was going to like it [maintenance]... if I was going to enjoy doing this for the rest of my life. I knew that to do any of these jobs in a big plant, you have to have some kind of experience. Whether you have 16 degrees, they still want two or three years' experience. It helped me get in the company; and, once I put that company on my resume, it opened up interview after interview.

While experience was important to all participants, scheduling and monetary compensation was also mentioned as a contributing factor. Participant 'C' stated that "it was scheduling for me. My particular co-op program – it's new to [the study site] and they scheduled all my classes for me and I get to work day shift at the plant I am associated with. So it helps with me to study and have a regular sleeping schedule". Participant 'I' stated that the "big thing for me was getting paid while I was going to school. I did not want to work a 2<sup>nd</sup> shift job or 3<sup>rd</sup> and come to school during the

morning. It was nice to work for company that would work around my schedule so I would not have to work a night shift”. While other contributing factors were mentioned, this was the only research question in which all the responses were very similar as it related to the experience obtained from the cooperative education program.

**Interview question four: what were your expectations for your involvement in cooperative education?**

Similar to interview question three, question four also focused on the experience portion of the cooperative education program. Many participants voiced their initial responses as they truly did not have any expectations, except the ability to obtain experience in their degree field. Participant ‘I’ stated:

I really didn’t know what to expect except what my brother told me. I was just looking for hands-on experience; a lot of places won’t hire you with just a degree. You got to have the experience. You get a lot of experience in a co-op.

While Participant ‘D’ stated “my expectations with the co-op program, really I didn’t have too many expectations. It [the degree program] was something I wanted to learn and as far as working in the plants seeing if it was something I would like. That’s about it”.

Other participants felt that the experience alone was reason enough to participate.

Participant ‘C’ stated their “expectation was just to gain experience in the field of maintenance to hopefully find a good job one day and provide for my family”; while,

Participant ‘A’ stated that their expectation was to “see if I enjoyed it and to jump start my career. Coming from military, I needed something on my resume besides that to hopefully help me to get into a good paying job”. When asked if the participants felt their

expectations were fulfilled, many agreed that their initial overall expectations were met. Participant 'G' stated that while the program did meet their expectations, they were "expecting some more work experience..."; while, Participant 'F' felt "it was good hands-on experience, but the limitations were in-house [study site] limitations". Through my observation, the participants seem to agree that if they had any expectations, they were related to the work experience and not the program as a whole.

**Interview question five: how did your cooperative education experience influence your academic and professional career?**

Interview question five developed two distinct areas of influence: academic and professional. All participants felt their cooperative education involvement influenced their overall academic and professional careers. Participant 'A' felt their cooperative education experience was positive influence because it made them "continue on and I got every degree [and certification] that [the study site] offers in maintenance and I'm working on my last one in Air Conditioning and actually it's making me want to try and open my own contracting business hopefully in a few years". Participant 'C' stated they "had a positive influence on my academic career...", and "influenced me and taught me about what I was doing [within my specific degree]".

The second focus group had similar responses. Participant 'G' responded that "academically it helped me kind of put stuff together from what I was learning in a classroom at work. Professionally, I felt like it gave me a pretty good base of knowledge in the field, you know, to get started". Participant 'I' discussed how the hands-on portion

of their experience helped gain a greater understanding of the subject matter, both within the classroom and in the field:

You know you read out of a book, you know, you don't understand it, but if you do it with your hands, me personally, I learn it a lot better. I guess the influence it had on me, I probably wasn't going to go to college but since I could co-op and work too, it kind of helped out. I'm not very good at just reading a book and knowing what to do. I've got to actually do it.

Out of all the questions administered during the focus group, question five seemed to elevate the positive aspects of the cooperative education experience within the study site.

**Interview question six: what aspects of your involvement in cooperative education met your expectations and what aspects did not meet your expectations?**

To obtain a greater understanding of what areas both met and did not meet the participants' expectations of their cooperative education experience, interview question six was divided into two subcategories: (a) met; and (b) did not meet. The first portion of the question focused on what areas met the participants' expectations. Many participants felt they did not have any expectations other than employment during their enrollment in the cooperative education program, so this program met their expectations. Participant 'A' response was typical of many of the participants within the first focus group, "it met definitely my expectations and helped me get the job that I'm at now. I don't believe if it had been for co-op, I would never probably have gotten hooked up for I did not have the experience even though I had the degrees". The second focus group had similar responses, with only one, Participant 'E', verbally conveying what I could consider a

negative experience. Participant 'E' stated "as far as my experience with it: I didn't really have a good experience with it to be honest with you. I kind of thought it was bad management, on the, whoever was running it". Through my observation, many of the others within the second focus group non-verbally agreed with Participant 'E' comments related to their own personal experience.

The second part of the question revealed potential concerns within the cooperative education program. All participants agreed that they felt the previous administration did not do an adequate job obtaining industry partnerships, with some stating they did not receive placements in a timely fashion. One participant was placed at a site that was not the focus of their degree path, and others felt they were not given a quality site meeting their expectations. Participant 'C' stated they felt the study site may have higher enrollment if they tried "to reach out and contact more companies and try to help persuade them to look into this discounted rate and have no obligations to hire the student. Let them work there and get the experience or just give them a chance". The participants were also given a false sense of security that they would be guaranteed employment within their site upon graduation. Participant 'F' stated, "they [the study site] give you the false sense of hope of a job and they played it up a lot". Through my observations, once again many of the other participants non-verbally agreed with the insight of both Participant 'C' and Participant 'F'. Interview question six provided a much needed insight into both the positive and negative aspects of the participants' cooperative education experience.

**Interview question seven: what potential barriers may have caused you to not be involved in cooperative education?**

The final interview question sought to explore the potential barriers that may have caused the participants to not have enrolled within the study sites' cooperative education program. Out of the list of potential barriers, the industry's inability to pay adequate wages and the institutions' inability to promote the cooperative education, cap on hours allowed to work, and guaranteed employment upon completion were listed as major barriers. Participant 'G' voiced their concern with both aspects when they stated, "the barrier was not finding out about it. They [study site] don't advertised that much. Another thing was not getting paid. Taking a \$3 an hour pay cut and leaving a job, a Federal job, I had for 5 years just to go work 20 hrs. a week part-time and not knowing if going to have a job after it's over was the biggest barrier". Participant 'F' had a very strong opinion in which many others within the group agreed when they stated:

I could go all day the 19 hour thing. 19 hours for us- it was our cap back then.

You could not survive. That was my reason for dropping out of it. I was one of the drop outs; word got around there was no hiring- that was going to be done and 19 hours/week, you can't even feed your child for that. On top of that, I had two other jobs and a full course load at [the study site]. I was killing myself.

Participant 'I' had just graduated high school and still lived with parents, so found very limited personal barriers. Since Participant 'I' still lived with their parents, they found limited hours and reduced pay did not directly affect their current lifestyle. Participant 'I' was able to state the concerns of many of their friends/classmates, "I know a lot of my

friends that are really good electricians or whatever but they can't drop that \$17.00/hour or \$18.00/hour job to come down to \$13.00/hour and 28 hours a week. It's hard to do".

Through my observation and analysis of the responses to question seven, communication, both positive and negative, was seen as highly influential to the study site's Cooperative Education program.

### **Theme Development**

Throughout the interview process, multiple keywords emerged within each interview question and response related to the three research questions. Table 2 displays the specific terms, listed in descending order, that appeared three or more times within each question transcript. These keywords were then grouped together based on their similarities. Out of this grouping, three major themes developed related to the research questions: participation, communication, and experience. Participation relates to how the students heard about the study site's Cooperative Education Program and why they chose to become involved. The experience obtained through cooperative education was seen as beneficial to all participants, while all the participants felt that communication between the study site and the participants, or lack thereof, was deemed as a key barrier.

Table 2

*Specific Terms That Appeared Three or More Times within Each Question of the Transcripts*

Interview Question	Specific Terms	
Question One	classes location good price	
Question Two	friends instructor leader student	
Question Three	work experience company resume	chance
Question Four	experience expectations school work	job hours working field
Question Five	degree time work class	career education experience
Question Six (a): Met expectations	expectations everything met	
Question Six (b): Did not meet expectations	company coop experience work	
Question Seven	time class work job program company experience hours	money pay degree academic learning schedule



## **Recruitment**

The first three study questions helped the participants discuss their involvement in the study site, how they heard of the co-op program, and why they participated in the Cooperative Education Program. Most participants agreed that location and price were the main factors that brought them to the study site, and a few brought up that certain technical degree programs came highly recommended. Participant 'G' stated "One of my buddies was in the field that I was wanting to go into and he had a pretty high recommendation for it."

Marketing is vital method to increase program awareness, draw interest from potential students, and ultimately increase enrollment as students buy in to the opportunity. Through the focus groups, word of mouth emerged as the primary vehicle for marketing of the program and lack of study site marketing was seen as a weakness. The focus groups listed classmates, friends, family and instructors as the main proponents of the Cooperative Education program, with potential participants then having to seek out information. Participant 'G' stated that the study site "[doesn't] advertise [the program] much". Participant 'E' brought up that a negative experience will impact word of mouth marketing, stating "I am at this point in my avenue, I would never recommend anybody going to [the study site] for that specific [program]...I would rather you go to another college". Not only does the site lose free advertisement, they may also receive the negative effects of poor reviews that extend to the entire institution.

Throughout the interview process, one term stood out predominately as the primary rationale for the participants involving themselves within the study site's

Cooperative Education program; *experience*. Participant 'H' felt their involvement in cooperative education:

Really allowed me to put two and two together and kind of see some of the things that I read in the books. I now see them in a more practical use. It really, for me, kind of motivated me to push on through school because I understood [the material] better.

Participant 'B' felt it was personally beneficial:

Because there was a format the co-op required that we [the participants] go through, it required us to sit down and actually plan a little bit better. I had more of a target goal on stuff to work on and stuff to improve and stuff along those lines.

This experience gained during their time in the Cooperative Education program was seen by many of the participants as highly influential to their overall professional growth and success.

### **Communication**

While obtaining enrollment in the Cooperative Education program is essential to the continuation of the program, communication between the study site and the current/future participants was seen by the participants as an influencing factor in not only maintaining, but also future program growth. Many felt communication was the most important factor to the growth and development of the cooperative education program, and that poor communication could be an obstacle to the program's enrollment.

When exploring the communication between the study site and current participants, many felt the study site did not do an adequate job with keeping open lines of communication. Participants seem to need to hear others concerns to express their personal concerns related to their placement; and they also had an expectation of timely responses to questions, comments, and concerns throughout their enrollment in the program. Participant 'E' felt there was "minimum involvement with the management mainly with [the study site]. Very minimum involvement. You had to pretty much beat the door to get anything done." Participant 'G' also stated they "really didn't hear a whole lot from [the study site] when I was in the co-op program". Participant 'K' reiterated this concern when they stated, "as far as co-op, I really didn't get to converse with the person that was in charge". Another concern with participants was the study site's creation of what Participant 'H' called a "false sense of security..." through "...building you up to think once you go into this [program], you have a job". Participant 'F' felt the study site gives "you the false sense of hope of a job and they played it up a lot". In these statements, participants are referring to a specific local industry site that frequently hires their co-op students upon graduation. This has previously been used as a marketing point to increase enrollment within the study site's Cooperative Education program, but the participants felt it to be more misleading than initially intended.

While many expressed that the cooperative education program was beneficial to their overall academic and professional careers, many felt that the experience could have been enhanced with timely communication of placements and course assignments, and prompt responses to issues that arose.

## Experience

Whether it was the work experience that aided in their employment upon graduation or the experience that led the participants to validate their selected career path, the participants' agreed that their cooperative education experience was the single most influential factor that aided in not only the participants' decision to become involved, but also the shaping of their educational and professional careers. Many participants discussed the importance of experience within their responses. Participant 'D' stated:

Trying to get my foot in the door with a bunch of big programs that are out there. It was a way to get my face out there and name- to experience something new, to learn something new. Something that looks good on, I guess you can say, something that looks good on a resume.

Participant 'A' reiterated the importance of experience:

My idea was for me to see if I was going to like maintenance. If I was going to enjoy doing this for the rest of my life, and I knew that to do any of these jobs in a big plant you have to have some kind of experience. Whether you have 16 degrees they [the employer] still want two or three years' [work] experience. It helped me get on the company and once I put that company on my resume it opened up interview after interview. Even though I was just an intern co-op out there.

Participant 'K' also discussed how the cooperative education program gave them insight into the inner-workings of a profession in which they had never previously been employed:

Hands-on experience. I had never worked inside the field. Because the field I was studying in, it is totally different from what I have been doing in the realm of experience and that excited me and getting paid and then being able to work around whatever I wanted to was the best part.

While the experience gained through involvement in cooperative education is vital to the continued success of the participant upon completion of their selected degree path, it can also be a motivating factor in the participants' decision to continue their education.

Participant 'C' felt that cooperative education was highly influential in their decision to continue their education, stating "I plan on moving on up in my education to maybe a 4 yr. degree and get into something engineering, mechanical, or industrial". Throughout the interview process, it was determined that all participants felt experience, in some capacity, was the most significant factor that led to their involvement within the cooperative education program. These cooperative education experiences were deemed by all as valuable in their professional success upon program completion.

### **Program Recommendations**

Based on the findings from the focus groups, three recommendations can be made that have the potential to impact the enrollment of students in the study site's Cooperative Education program. Following the first of the three themes, recruitment, the study site needs to expand its marketing efforts of the Cooperative Education program, with information being easily accessed by interested parties. This can be improved by

advertising to students during orientation, including fliers in course materials for instructors to use, developing a website with all information, and posting fliers at job fairs. The second recommendation is to streamline communication between participants and the Cooperative Education program administration. This can be done by administration posting open office hours, creating an online discussion group open to all participants, and implementing an efficient schedule so participants can expect a response to concerns in a timely manner. The final recommendation is to implement guidelines for industry to follow as it relates to hours worked, wages, duties assigned to ensure a more consistent experience for future participants.

### **Conclusion**

Section 2 of this project study outlined the research processes related to the qualitative case study of the cooperative education program at a community college located in the southeastern United States and its local problem of low enrollment. Through the development of this qualitative case study, multiple facets of the research processes were explored. These processes included: (a) research design and approach, (b) participant selection criteria, (c) data collection methods, and (d) means of data analysis. Based on the focus of the qualitative case study, it was determined a qualitative approach was appropriate. The participant pool included cooperative education program alumni from a community college located in the southeastern United States. Data were collected via focus groups, with participant responses being digitally recorded. Finally, data were analyzed using a hired transcriptionist and coding software. Out of this analysis, three major themes developed: recruitment, communication, and experience. Recruitment

developed as a means to why the students chose to get involved in the study site's Cooperative Education program. Communication was seen by a large percentage of participants as historically a major barrier in the expansion of the program; while, the final theme, experience, was deemed highly beneficial and the major contributing factor the participants' desire to enroll in the study site's Cooperative Education program.

### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

Historically low enrollment has plagued a Cooperative Education program at a public community college located within the southeastern United States. This has led to an underprepared student population upon completion of their degree program that infiltrates the local workforce. Cooperative Education has been a widely researched program that has documented benefits for students, their academic institution and industry, but there is a gap in research of cause and effect of low enrollment within these programs. This study looked to determine the possible factors that affect enrollment numbers at the local study site.

The proposed project developed policy recommendations for the study site's Cooperative Education Program through the examination and analysis of the lived experiences of 11 Cooperative Education Program alumni. Data were collected via a semistructured interview process using open-ended questions administered during two focus groups. The collected data were transcribed via a hired transcriptionist and analyzed using the Atlas.ti 8 coding software to establish keywords to develop themes. A list of keywords was then grouped based on similarity with three main themes emerging: recruitment, communication, and experience. These three themes were then researched and evaluated to guide policy recommendations for the local study site to address low enrollment numbers. Section three will outline the rationale, review of literature, project description, evaluation plan, and implications through examination of the lived experiences of 11 cooperative education program alumni.



### **Rationale**

Policy recommendation with details was the selected genre of this study to use the time and resources of this project to locate the problems and implement change that will directly improve the program and institution outcomes. An evaluation report was not selected as the individual program was not the focus of this study, but rather the factors that influence low enrollment within Cooperative Education. Curriculum was also not a focus of this study, as Cooperative Education alone is not within the mandatory curriculum within the institution, but is a hands-on learning experience to apply knowledge gained in their selected degree field. Professional Development is also not the focus of this study as not all degree programs are eligible to participate in the Cooperative Education Program.

### **Review of Literature**

In the following literature review, scholarly resources were explored using keywords and phrases such as *cooperative education*, *work-integrated learning*, *work-based learning*, *internships*, *cooperative learning*, *work related learning*, *recruitment*, *communication*, *experience*, *policy recommendations*, and *white paper*. These words and phrases were searched using the Walden Library databases, Google Scholar, and full text of both the Journal of Cooperative Education and Internships and the Asian-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education to locate current, relevant, scholarly articles. All articles, at minimum, had a focus on my selected project genre and at least one of the three major themes discussed in Section 2: recruitment, communication, and experience.

The literature was used to guide policy recommendations for the local study site to address low enrollment numbers.

### **Policy Recommendation**

When looking at the project and what focus would best fit my research project, I determined that policy recommendation; specifically, a direct structure approach was the most viable option for successful implementation. Doyle (2013) defines policy recommendation as a “simply written policy advice prepared for some group that has the authority to make decisions” (p. 1). Saarinen (2015) describes policy as a spatially layered ideology that is used to inform local processes necessary in theorizing higher education. Since the government turned their attention to educational reform in the early 1980’s, policy implementation and reform has been an evolving topic within the realm of education (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016). Current policy efforts have placed a focus on aligning policy standards with that of professional development practices; and, curriculum content has created a sense of accountability among institutions (Coburn, Hill, & Spillane, 2016).

As a means of developing a policy recommendation, Doyle (2013) stated that the researcher must first determine the appropriate structure. These structures include direct and indirect structure. Direct structure places the important information first; whereas, indirect allows the reader to follow the entire process from start to finish. Upon selection of the appropriate development structure, the researcher will then follow a specific development sequence. This development sequence includes: (a) identify the issue/concern; (b) investigate significant previous research; (c) locate additional options;

(d) interview involved parties; (e) determine best solution; and, (f) formulate policy recommendation document (Spillane, 2016). Doyle (2013) stated that once a structure has been determined, the research must be concise, legible, accurate, and challenging in their writing to produce a well-written policy recommendation. Unfortunately, during the writing process, many researchers have limited awareness of the population that they are affecting. It is because of this, that the notion of a policy brief emerged.

Before one can begin the process of policy implementation, the content of the policy must be combined into a form in which policymakers can easily comprehend (Adam, Moat, Ghaffar, & Lavis, 2014; Adams & Sandbrook, 2013). Balian, Druis, Eggermont, Livoreil, Vandewalle, Vandewoestjine, Wittmer, and Young (2016), suggested the best method of packaging a policy recommendation is in a policy brief. Policy brief is defined as an individual document that highlights certain policy concerns in a clear and concise manner in which the general population can comprehend. For successful implementation of a policy brief, the researcher must also be conscientious of the audience that said policy brief will be addressing (Beynon, Chapoy, Gaarder, & Masset, 2012). Balian et al. (2016) explored this notion when they stated that researchers must be clear and concise in their presentation outlining the policy recommendations in bullet form in the introduction. The researchers must also focus that their presented policy brief is no longer than 12 pages, with four pages being ideal for a generalized population (Beynon et al, 2016). The key message must always be the focus of the policy and it is extremely important to use terminology that is personalized to the language of the target population (Balian et al., 2016). Once the target population has been

determined, the researcher must investigate the method in which the policy shall be written. According to Herman (2013) you must next “structure the flow of your argument” (p. 1). The best method of delivery for my policy recommendation is through the use of a white paper presentation.

A white paper presentation is defined as a style of report that is representative in terms of ideology, viewership, and association (Sakamuro, Stolley, & Hyde, 2015). According to Herman (2013), there are eight steps that must be present to produce a successful white paper presentation: determine the issue; analyze the data; summarize the results of the data; evaluate the data; develop recommendations for change; address reservations related to recommendations; suggest steps in implementation; and, refine the conclusion that addresses the overall goals. Once each of these steps has been successfully addressed, the structure will be that of a well thought-out, easily understood policy recommendation that will benefit the study site’s local problem of low enrollment in their Cooperative Education Program.

### **Recruitment**

With an increasing need for a skilled workforce ready to work upon graduation from post-secondary education, institutions must continually recruit students or face poor enrollment within their cooperative education programs. The reasons why an individual participates in cooperative education is often a key component to the success of a program (Pennaforte, 2016). According to Anderson et al. (2011), “approximately 50%” of cooperative education students chose their post-secondary institution based on its ability to offer cooperative education in some capacity (p. 72). An institutions’ ability to

properly market their cooperative education program is essential to the success and longevity of a program.

Anderson et al., (2011) found that many of the students who participated in cooperative education did so base on the recommendation of family and friends. Research also found that family and friends were deemed the greatest influence in the recruitment of students to participate in cooperative education (Smith, Smith, Taylor-Smith, & Fotheringham, 2017). Smith et al. (2017) also found that institutional programs that focused on cooperative education and included program alumni were deemed highly influential with potential students, and only “3% of respondents” did not attend any programming related to cooperative education (p. 19). Unlike my findings, Anderson et al. (2011) found that digital outreach was highly influential in the recruitment and retention of cooperative education participants. It was determining that through the creation of a website focused on cooperative education would be beneficial in the recruitment of potential participants (Fern, Russell, & Kay, 2016).

Unfortunately, there is often a lack of faculty involvement in promoting the benefits of cooperative education to their students (Sovilla & Varty, 2011). Rowe (2015) reiterated this idea when she stated that “faculty are not engaged or even committed” to the concept of cooperative education (p. 103). It was also determined that getting faculty to become fully invested in the concept of cooperative education, collaboration between the institution and faculty was essential for success (Henderson and Trede, 2017). Ferns et al. (2016) found that cooperative education practices should be embedded in institutional curriculum design and student learning outcomes. Henderson and Trede

(2017) reiterated this concept when they found that institutions must integrate cooperative education learning concepts into their outcomes for successful recruitment to occur.

### **Communication**

Once an individual chooses to participate within a cooperative education program, communication between all the stakeholders is essential for successful implementation, completion, and continuation of an institution's cooperative education program (Pennaforde, 2016). There has been a recent push in post-secondary education in countries such as New Zealand and Australia to use the link between student academic and career readiness to determine institutional success (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Pennaforde (2016) also stressed the importance of creating partnerships between all involved parties, thus opening communication and problem-solving. Henderson and Trede (2017) found that open communication between all parties is the best method for developing trust and respect and that a clear communication plan must be in place.

Unfortunately, this lack of communication may be based on what Rowe (2015) determined was a difficulty of the cooperative education program coordinators' ability to balance the students' work and academic assignments. To alleviate this issue, feedback from all parties must be analyzed to determine areas within the program that are in need of attention (Henderson & Trede, 2017). Ferns et al. (2016) reiterated this point when they found that not only is it essential for students to provide feedback about their placement and the inner-workings of the program, but cooperative education staff must provide feedback to the students related to their interactions.

## **Experience**

The experiences established within cooperative education have been found to combat public pressures to properly prepare students for employment upon graduation (Anderson et al., 2011; Eden, 2014; Fifolt & Searby, 2010; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Institutions of higher education must embrace the concept of cooperative education as a means of increasing public perception (Rook & McManus, 2016). Wingrove and Turner (2015) found that within recent years the public sector of higher education has shown an increased focus on:

Performance metrics and quality indicators... Educators face many challenges including fostering student engagement, designing and teaching innovative student-centered curriculum and ensuring graduates are fully equipped with the skills and knowledge to work effectively in their chosen profession. Yet in order to ensure our students are prepared for their unknown futures, (their future lives and work) the acquisition of skills and knowledge is alone not sufficient (p. 220).

This pressure to create a well-rounded student population has begun to extend to the student population and their educational expectations.

Previous research has shown that there is an expectation among students that higher education will properly prepare them for employment through placing an emphasis on the link between student learning and their selected degree/career path, while also preparing them to adapt to the ever-changing global economy (Peach & Gamble, 2011; Wingrove & Turner, 2015). Students often select a career path based on personal interest and typically do not have a true understanding of what their selected

degree involves; therefore, involvement in cooperative education greatly expands their career aspirations (Wingrove & Turner, 2015; Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). Drysdale et al. (2015) echoed this belief when stating that the experience gained within cooperative education is highly influential on a participants' career clarification. Henderson and Trede (2017) discussed the ability of cooperative education to increase understanding and insight into personal and professional aspects of the involved individual's degree path and future career choice. Bowen (2016) found that cooperative education provided "students with a context to experiment and test who they are at the moment and explore who they want to become as professionals" (p. 410); while, also greatly increasing cultural intelligence (McRae, Ramji, Lingong, & Lesperance, 2016).

When looking at methods in which an institution can improve student engagement and understanding, it was determined that cooperative education principles need to be integrated into daily coursework (Rook, 2017). Wingrove and Turner (2015) discussed the importance of creating a course focused on the student's cooperative education experience. These courses should be structured to contain lectures that focus on the students' ability to analyze, assess, and reflect on related professional knowledge and their experiences (Wilson, 2015). Reinhard, Pogrzeba, Townsend, and Pop (2016) found that through the employment of industry professionals as guest speakers within a cooperative education course, there has been a high level of "academic as well as practice-oriented teaching" (p. 258). Through course integration and development, the potential for a better prepared student population greatly increases.



## **Project Description**

The purpose of this study was to address the historically low enrollment numbers within the cooperative education program at a public community college located within the southeastern United States. After reviewing the literature pertaining to the three emerging themes, recommendations have been developed to address the needs of each theme to build enrollment numbers.

### **Recruitment**

The literature shows that external marketing is the first step in increasing cooperative education enrollment, as students reported selecting their institution based off the availability of a Cooperative Education Program. It is recommended to the study site to develop an external marketing handout or flyer that can be included in external marketing strategies for the institution as a whole. This would include mail outs, high school visits, job fairs, institutional website, and any other community outreach events. The local study site also has a television broadcast station and frequently uses commercials and billboards around the community that could include a snapshot of statistics relating to cooperative education's effect on job readiness.

Internal marketing for cooperative education begins with the new student population. This initial marketing process starts with new student Orientation and new student information packets. The Cooperative Education Program should be present at these orientations by setting up a booth during registration and break times with informational handouts for freshmen, and more detailed handouts for transfer students who have a selected degree field. This also allows students to sign interest cards for

further contact by the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator to begin student enrollment into the program. These handouts can also be included in new student mail outs with contact information and website address that can direct students to gain more awareness of the program.

Once the first semester begins, all incoming students are required to take Orientation 105: Freshman Orientation (ORI 105). According to the study site's 2016/2017 catalog and student handbook, ORI 105 is:

designed to orient students to the college experience by providing them with tools needed for academic and personal success. Topics include: developing an internal focus of control, time management and organizational skills, critical and creative thinking strategies, personal and professional maturity, and effective study skills for college and beyond (p. 140).

It is recommended that within this course, all students will be given an overview of career services and will further explore the benefits of cooperative education as it pertains to their selected degree field. Students may not have a selected degree field at this time, but literature has shown that cooperative education is beneficial in helping students clarify a potential career path based on interests. The class also has an open forum where any questions are answered by career services staff and it is recommended that a Cooperative Education Program representative be present throughout the course. It is also recommended that a Cooperative Education Program alumnus give a presentation during a session to give students insight to what the program has to offer and allow open discussion for potential program enrollees. It is through this process that students gain a

greater understanding of not only their desired major, but also the benefits of involvement in the study site's Cooperative Education Program.

Past a student's first year, the greatest influence of enrollment numbers is the recommendations from friends, family and faculty. The literature review corresponded with the findings of this project in that most faculty are unsupportive and uninterested in promoting cooperative education as a benefit to a student's academic experience. My recommendation is to expand the awareness of cooperative education to all faculty, staff and administration within the study site. This can be accomplished through presentations at institutional professional development, departmental meetings, and in-class presentations in the eligible courses.

### **Communication**

While recruitment of students is crucial for a successful Cooperative Education Program, internal communication between the Cooperative Education Program staff and currently enrolled students is vital to program success and sustainability. One of the major complaints among the study's participants was the lack of communication between themselves and the previous Cooperative Education Program Coordinator. This can be alleviated through the hiring of additional staff thus greatly increasing staff availability to students. Since the hiring of the new Cooperative Education Program Coordinator, the program staff has increased from one full-time employee located on the study site's main campus to three full-time and two part-time employees spanning two campuses.

An online educational portal is another communication method between the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator and the enrolled student. It is through this

portal that students can email program staff directly, ask and answer questions to staff and other enrolled students via classroom discussion, and submit weekly timesheets. Program staff should also create an online meeting schedule that provides times in which they are available to meet with students. This increased online presence should greatly improve the communication between co-op staff and enrolled students.

I recommend creating a Cooperative Education advisory committee that will be made up of Cooperative Education Program alumni, involved industry, and community leaders. This advisory committee would be used as a means of educating the students and staff about industry trends within the study site's service area. This would create a sense of accountability for all parties within the program. Another recommendation for the program is to include mandatory monthly meetings for enrolled students to interact with each other and program staff in an open forum to discuss their internal interactions within the program. These meetings could facilitate an open forum for industry representatives, study site faculty and former program alumni to provide personal experiences, advice and open discussions to give students a personal, in-depth connection to the program.

### **Experience**

The experience gained while enrolled in cooperative education is considered the factor that is most influential to the student population. I would recommend that the study site increase industry sites by 25% to allow the program to prepare for potential enrollment growth and provide increased opportunities in various fields. The Cooperative Education Program Coordinator or staff should schedule yearly evaluations of each participating industry site to verify compliance with program guidelines and create open

communication to determine changes needed to course work for student preparedness. I also recommend implementing student evaluations by the industry site and placement evaluations by the student at the middle and end of each placement as a method of quantitatively tracking satisfaction with experiences from both perspectives and address issues as they arise.

An issue that was discussed during the focus groups was the regulation of hours worked and pay scale across industry placements. I recommend the Cooperative Education Coordinator and Cooperative Education Advisory Committee meet to discuss and develop program guidelines to be implemented by the industry placements. These guidelines will allow less room for discrepancy by the industry sites and potentially increase industry involvement by creating a standard pay scale and established requirements by student and site. Any additional industry site benefits should be approved by the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator prior to implementation to create accountability and fairness for the students.

It is also recommended that the Cooperative Education Program consider implementing a curriculum addition by developing short-term placements. These short-term placements could be seen as a job shadowing experience where the student would be able to observe in an industry site for 20-40 hours over a 4 to 6-week span to aide in degree and career clarification before committing to a full semester co-op placement. To relieve industry requirements, the program will only require a signature of completed hours by the participating student and their industry supervisor. These short-term placements could also be developed into a one to two credit "Cooperative Education 101

(Co-op 101)” course to be required before all placements in industry sites. This course will include: (a) three weeks in-class learning on work-place etiquette; (b) soft skill development, (c) description of different career placements; and, (d) student course work to develop a deeper understanding of the degree fields. Students would then complete three, 4-week industry rotations in their top three career fields. The rotation would occur in one to two day observations per week, allowing interested students an opportunity to learn more about the study site’s Cooperative Education Program and industry placements. The “Co-op 101” course has the potential to increase enrollment numbers and more successful placements, along with a better prepared student to represent the study site.

### **Website Development**

An integral part of all three themes: recruitment, communication, and experience is the development of a website. It will serve as the main marketing tool for interested students and industry to gain all information needed with easy access to the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator and staff for any further questions. The website can also have the capability to send bi-weekly newsletters or emails focused toward faculty, staff and potential enrollees to aide in the recruitment process. This website will be the central communication hub between the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator, staff, potential students, enrolled students, and industry participants. With permission from participating industry, a list of potential placements will be included with community events advertised for potential and current enrollees.

I recommend the program review their current website and research new platforms that would allow the integration of open discussion forums, downloadable forms and calendars, and email capabilities. Information to be included will be Frequently Asked Questions, cooperative education benefits, links to current cooperative education journals and research, alumni testimonials, inquiry forms, and program guidelines. The “Cooperative Education 101” course and active cooperative education placements can be run through the website with a page for assignment submissions and a message board with weekly required discussions and self-reflections that would be accessible through existing student log-ins. The website would also include online forms for mid-term and end of term student and industry evaluations to create a user-friendly course environment.

### **Resources**

The local study site is full of potential resources that will aid in the implementation of the addresses changes for the Cooperative Education Program. The site has a strong Information Technology Department that will assist in website development and maintenance; an established marketing system that can be easily accessed; and a well-funded Cooperative Education Program that will be able to lead in the implementation and continued evaluation process.

### **Existing Supports**

Local support for the proposed project evaluation plan is essential for success. Through not only institution, but also community buy-in, the Cooperative Education Program has the ability to greatly increase enrollment numbers within the program.

Support may include: the administration, the Cooperative Education Program staff, faculty, the Information Technology Department, and the Marketing Department. Support will also be drawn from study site faculty, local industry and Cooperative Education Program alumni to build the Advisory Committee.

### **Potential Barriers**

Barriers are to be expected when implementing change within an established Cooperative Education Program. Possible barriers upon implementation include: difficulty recruiting members of the Advisory Committee, lack of support from faculty, lack of presenters for the ORI 105 course, and unforeseen barriers due to the lack of diversity among the participant sample.

### **Project Implementation and Timetable**

The timetable for implementation of the above policy recommendations was developed based on a 12 month academic year starting Summer Semester 2018 (See Table 3). This will allow for time for the administrative and technical efforts to be addressed before the beginning of the Fall Semester 2018.



Table 3  
*Implementation Timetable*

Timeline	Objectives
Summer 2018 May- July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White paper report to the study site’s administration, Cooperative Education Program staff, and faculty</li> <li>• Review and redesign printed marketing materials to implement at orientations during the summer</li> <li>• Co-op Advisory committee created before Fall term <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Schedule quarterly meetings with co-op staff</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Calendar presentations to be given during faculty development</li> <li>• Schedule and develop one 5-10 min presentation to be given in each relevant course during the Fall semester</li> </ul>
Fall 2018 August-Dec.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design and implement digital marketing materials</li> <li>• ORI 105- beginning of semester <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Schedule Co-op staff to be present at each class</li> <li>○ Schedule a co-op alumnus to present at one class</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Launch Online educational portal and website</li> <li>• Calendar a monthly one-hour meeting for all student participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Schedule guest speakers for 2 meetings/semester</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Spring/Summer 2019 Jan-July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the number of available industry placements</li> <li>• Schedule yearly industry site evaluations</li> <li>• Implement mid-term and end of term student evaluations</li> <li>• Develop “Co-op 101” or short-term observation placements</li> </ul>
Fall 2019 August-Dec.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch “Co-op 101”</li> </ul>

**Roles and Responsibilities of Stakeholders**

My role in this project is to present the white paper report to the study site's administration, Co-op program staff, and faculty through meetings and a brief presentation during faculty development. This will help bring awareness to the faculty while providing deeper knowledge and understanding of the issues and research for the administration and program staff. I will also assist in implementation of the timeline and serve as an adviser to the Program Coordinator and staff as they implement the recommendations given. My research will be used to assist in the development of marketing materials and presentations, along with the website to give all stakeholders access to the current research. I also hope to serve on the Co-op Advisory committee for the first year to assist in developing a strong foundation and providing support and encouragement as the committee oversees possible course developments.

**Cooperative Education Program Coordinator**

The Cooperative Education Program Coordinator will be seen as the leader of implementation of recommendations following the provided timeline. All changes and new program developments will be driven and approved by the Coordinator, with all feedback and questions falling under her responsibility. The Program Coordinator will meet weekly with program staff to delegate and monitor responsibilities, while also meeting monthly with administration to maintain open communication and continue to drive importance of the program and its institutional support. The Program Coordinator is the overall representative of the program, and will be expected to be present for all industry site evaluations, new student orientations, and faculty development

presentations, while also taking responsibility for an equal portion of in-class presentations, ORI 105 presentations, and monthly co-op student meetings with staff. Along with the Advisory Committee, the program coordinator will develop and launch the proposed “Co-op 101” course and review mid-term and end of term evaluations by students and industry.

### **Cooperative Education Program Staff**

The Cooperative Education Program staff will be expected to attend weekly meetings with the Coordinator, and ORI 105 presentations. Staff should be well versed in knowledge of the program and research to give sound information during ORI 105 classes and the 5-10 minute presentations during each relevant course during each semester. Staff will also be the representatives of the program at new student orientations, job fairs and school visits. The Cooperative Education Program staff will serve as the immediate point of contact for all students and industry, and will implement the mid-term and end of term evaluations while overseeing the continued success of the online portal through weekly assignments and discussion boards. Overall, program staff will be present to oversee and implement the day-to-day activities of the Cooperative Education Program and assist the Coordinator as needed.

### **Cooperative Education Program Advisory Committee**

The Cooperative Education Advisory Committee (the Committee) will be created by the Program Coordinator to include program alumni, industry, faculty, administration and community representatives. The Committee will be in charge of presenting the benefits of cooperative education within ORI 105. The Committee will also oversee the

development and implementation of the “Co-op 101” course and any further policy changes. They will serve as a source of knowledge and recommendations for the Program Coordinator based on current community and industry needs, and bring insight to the overall views of the program within the local community. They will be expected to attend quarterly meetings in order to maintain open lines of communication and reach the goals set out by this project.

### **Information Technology Department**

The study site’s print shop will be needed to assist program staff in the design and production of all printed marketing materials. The Information Technology Department will be used to assist in design and launching of the Cooperative Education Program website and online education portal. They will also be the main contact for any software issues and updates, such as student login and email access. The Digital Media Department will produce the 30-60 commercial and site television digital flyer under the direction of the Co-op Program Coordinator.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

The evaluation of each recommendation will be goals-based as they have been provided as objective, measurable goals. This allows for a simple yes or no answer to the question “Did we meet our goal?” and provides clear objectives and reasoning for each recommendation. The goal-based evaluation is that the study site implements marketing changes, including printed and digital materials, and provides presentations on a consistent basis. The overall evaluation of the project will be outcomes-based in the

overall change in student enrollment within the study site's Cooperative Education program.

Each semester will see the mid-term and end-of-term student and industry evaluations for on-going subjective and objective assessment of the overall program, student goals and industry needs. This will allow modifications to be made as industry technology improves and student requirements evolve. The evaluations can also provide the Program Coordinator insight into adjustments that may need to be implemented institutionally, within a degree field or within courses. Faculty will be given information and proper training in emerging technologies to better prepare students for co-op placement and job readiness upon graduation.

The overall success of the project will be based on the outcome evaluation of program enrollment numbers by 50 percent after two years. Quantity is not the sole objective of this project, but overall quality of education and student preparedness upon graduation. The use of current end of term evaluations, and on-going communication with program alumni and industry through the Advisory Committee will allow for continued assessment of the institutions' ability to develop and prepare students ready to enter the workforce upon graduation.

### **Project Implications**

This project looks to serve the individual stakeholders at the study site with improvements and change addressed for each group: students, program alumni, local workforce and the study site as a whole. The implications for social change within the study site have the potential to create a positive, lasting impression among the student

population giving an optimistic outlook beyond graduation by increasing student confidence and soft skills to propel them into a career, instead of a job. Future program alumni can affect a positive change in how the community views the study site and how employers view potential employees by representing a strong foundation of knowledge and professionalism that provides quality employees that are adaptable and require less hands-on training to be work-ready. A success for this study site's Cooperative Education Program is to see the progression to become a destination educational program that draws in students to the region and properly equips them to become successful members within the local workforce and beyond.

## Section 4: The Reflection

### **Introduction**

Throughout the research process, factors contributed to the overall success of the project; and, reflecting on those factors allows for personal development, and recommendations for further study. It is within this reflection that personal growth, research limitations, and future recommendations will be presented. Finally, I will also present recommendations for future studies within the realm of not only the study site's Cooperative Education Program, but also any program that is experiencing low enrollment numbers.

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

Throughout my research, I found strengths and limitations related to the overall process, and some factors could be seen as having both. These factors included: Cooperative Education Program staff, participant recruitment, and data collection timeframe. It was through this process that a greater understanding was developed into the factors required to create a successful cooperative education program.

#### **Strengths**

A strength that developed during my research included the hiring of the new Cooperative Education Program Coordinator at the study site and the utilization of experts within the field of Cooperative Education research. In regards to the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator, she was an asset because of her willingness to help the project, including providing potential participant contact information and being open to

discussion during program recommendations. This allowed the recruitment process to become more streamlined.

The local study site has been supportive of this project from the beginning and is looking for any options to expand and increase the program numbers. It is also a well-funded program that should have no road blocks in implementing quick change with paper and digital marketing. The study site also has faculty and staff designated to assist with marketing tasks, and an efficient IT department who is willing and ready to assist in changing the current online educational portal and website. Faculty presentations occur on a scheduled basis and will be readily available with the Cooperative Education Program staff only needed to tweak current presentations to include the new information gathered by this project.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are to be expected when implementing change within an established Cooperative Education Program. A concern for this project is the recruitment and consistent involvement of members of the Advisory Committee. This is a commitment of time from program alumni, faculty members and local industry that may not be seen as immediately beneficial to their prospective areas. There is also the possibility of limited presenters for the ORI 105 course with the burden falling on the Cooperative Education Program staff. This limits the amount of information and insight that could benefit the recruitment of potential participants, and narrows the scope of viewpoint to staff members who have not directly experienced a Cooperative Education experience at this



study site. This is again a commitment of time and resources that may take away from their daily activities.

The support of faculty and staff will be seen as a potential limitation as buy-in is needed from the site as a whole in order to effectively see increased enrollment numbers. The benefits of having faculty and staff involved in the recruitment process have been stated repeatedly throughout this project. The limitations that emerged during the research process included participant recruitment. Within the sampling process, the lack of educational, racial, and gender diversity was also a limiting factor in my research. With only one non-Caucasian, one female, and one non-STEM participant, the ability to obtain an accurate cross-section of the study site population was unachievable. This can create unforeseen limitations, as recruitment techniques may not reach all potential Cooperative Education enrollees, and the changes may not address students from different backgrounds.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

The challenge for the study site is the large percentage of commuter and part-time students enrolled, as well as the percentage of students that transfer out to 4-year colleges and universities. The Cooperative Education Program may need to look into the expansion of industry placements to coincide with Associate's degree programs, or certificate programs that the school offers in the fields of Business, STEM, and CIS.

When looking at other colleges and universities within the community, Cooperative Education enrollment numbers exceed what is seen at the study site. This can likely be accredited to the requirement that each student complete a Cooperative

Education experience in order to complete their degree. Enrollment numbers would immediately and drastically increase if Cooperative Education became a requirement for graduation. Within the study site, this is implemented within the healthcare degree programs and is a potential approach that the site could discuss should the implementation of this project does not yield the numbers expected.

### **Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change**

At the beginning of this research process, I knew little of the intricate requirements required to execute a successful qualitative study from proposal development through full completion of focus groups and data analysis. From the start, I found it difficult to separate the focus of my qualitative study from that of a program evaluation. While on the surface, my study seems to be a prime candidate for a program evaluation, the purpose of my research was not to evaluate the program itself, rather attempt to expand the programs educational reach and address the local problem of historically low enrollment. This was often an arduous process that inevitably resulted in an evolution of my personal mindset and focus and developed a deeper understanding of the qualitative research process.

Before my research began, I had limited knowledge and experience with cooperative education, and was overwhelmed with the amount of previous research available explaining the benefits of involvement. I was also concerned and frustrated by the limited amount of research articles exploring the negative aspects, specifically causes of low enrollment numbers. I was shocked to learn of the true statistics of my study site after having read through the overwhelming positives that had been previously

documented in articles, journals, and publications that were widely distributed amongst specifically post-secondary education. These positives are a direct result of the researcher often utilizing their methodologies to obtain additional funding and to publish the negative aspects would be counter-productive to the intended process. The overall research process has taught me to view education through a lens in which I had previous not experienced. I now question how and why modifications occur within current educational strategies. I also have a greater understanding of the processes involved. The lessons learned throughout my research have allowed me to evolve as not only a researcher, but also an educator.

### **Reflections on the Importance of Work**

Looking back, I am pleased with the overall process and results. I feel that through my research, the study site has the ability to modify the current Cooperative Education Program to not only increase enrollment, but also create a model program in which other institutions of higher education model their programs. The data provided can also be modified to encompass a wide range of educational programs where low enrollment numbers have been identified. I feel that my research can also expand into the public sector to include non-educational programs that are in need of further evaluation. It is through this research that a greater understanding of what makes a program successful emerged.

### **Implication, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

The implications for social change within the study site have the potential to create a positive, lasting impression among the student population giving an optimistic

outlook beyond graduation by increasing student confidence and soft skills to propel them into a career, instead of a job. Future program alumni can affect a positive change in how the community views the study site and how employers view potential employees by representing a strong foundation of knowledge and professionalism that provides quality employees that are adaptable and require less hands-on training to be work-ready. A success for this study site's Cooperative Education Program is to see the progression to become a destination educational program that draws in students to the region and properly equips them to become successful members within the local workforce and beyond.

While my initial research obtained quality results related to the local problem, I would recommend additional research related to the study site's Cooperative Education Program based on the study site's hiring of a new Cooperative Education Program Coordinator. I feel two additional studies would be beneficial to the program. The same research questions could be used. The first follow-up study should occur two years from the completion of this study. This will allow new cooperative education experience. The second follow-up should occur an additional two years beyond the completion of the first. The additional research will show whether the programs enrollment growth is based on the new program initiatives and their ability to evolve as the student population and the degree paths change or whether it is based on unrelated factors. Through the addition of these two follow-ups, the study site should have enough data to determine which processes are successful and which will need to be altered or removed.

## **Conclusion**

This process has been a learning experience not only for the study site's Cooperative Education program, but also me as a researcher. The policy recommendations I suggested have given me an insight into the inner-workings of a program I would have otherwise not been a part of. Through continued program reflection and evolution, the study site's Cooperative Education Program has the ability to expand and become a model program for other institutions that are looking to implement or revitalize their own Cooperative Education Programs. I also feel that the framework laid through my research can encompass more than just cooperative education, but any program that is struggling to obtain and/or maintain sufficient enrollment.

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Appendix A: Policy Recommendations for Increasing Enrollment in Cooperative  
Education.

Effective Date: Summer 2018

Revised: Spring 2018

Increasing Enrollment in Cooperative Education

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to address the historically low enrollment numbers within the cooperative education program at a public community college located within the southeastern United States.

Scope:

Institutional Faculty, Staff, and Students; Local Industry, Local Community Leaders

Responsible Party:

Cooperative Education Program Coordinator and staff, Advisory Committee, Information Technology Department, Digital Media Department, Institutional Print Shop, Vice President for Student Affairs, and Office of President.

Timetable:

The timetable for implementation of the following policy recommendations was developed based on a 12 month academic year starting Summer Semester 2018 (See Section IV).

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POLICY

I. Policy Statement

This policy was developed to advise procedural for the study site's Cooperative Education Program.

II. Procedure

The proposed project developed policy recommendations for the study site's Cooperative Education Program through the examination and analysis of the lived experiences of 11 Cooperative Education Program alumni from the study site.

- A. Data were collected via a semistructured interview process using open-ended questions administered during two focus groups.
- B. The collected data were transcribed via a hired transcriptionist and analyzed using the Atlas.ti 8 coding software to establish keywords to develop themes.

- C. A list of keywords was then grouped based on similarity with three main themes emerging.
  - 1. Recruitment
  - 2. Communication
  - 3. Experience.
  
- D. These three themes were then researched and evaluated to guide policy recommendations for the local study site's Cooperative Education Program to address low enrollment numbers.

### III. Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on previous research and the finding from the above listed study.

#### A. Recruitment

- 1. It is recommended that the study site develop an external marketing handout or flyer that can be included in external marketing strategies for the institution as a whole.
  - a. This would include mail outs, high school visits, job fairs, institutional website, and any other community outreach events.
  - b. The local study site also has a television broadcast station and frequently uses commercials and billboards around the community that could include a snapshot of statistics relating to cooperative education's effect on job readiness.
- 2. It is recommended to the study site uses internal marketing as a means of reaching the new and current student population.
  - a. New Student Orientation
    - i. It is recommended that the Cooperative Education Program staff be present at these orientations by setting up a booth during registration and break times with informational handouts for freshmen, and more detailed handouts for transfer students who have a selected degree field. This also allows

students to sign interest cards for further contact by the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator to begin student enrollment into the program. These handouts can also be included in new student mail outs with contact information and website address that can direct students to gain more awareness of the program.

b. Orientation 105: Freshman Orientation

- i. It is recommended that within this course, all students will be given an overview of career services and will further explore the benefits of cooperative education as it pertains to their selected degree field. Students may not have a selected degree field at this time, but literature has shown that cooperative education is beneficial in helping students clarify a potential career path based on interests. The class also has an open forum where any questions are answered by Cooperative Education Program staff.
- ii. It is recommended that Cooperative Education Program staff be present throughout the course.
- iii. It is recommended that a Cooperative Education Program alumnus give a presentation during a session to give students insight to what the program has to offer and allow open discussion for potential program enrollees. It is through this process that students will gain a greater understanding of not only their desired major, but also the benefits of involvement in the study site's Cooperative Education Program.

c. Currently Enrolled Students

- i. Past a student's first year, the greatest influence of enrollment numbers is the recommendations from friends, family and faculty. My recommendation is to expand the awareness of cooperative education to all faculty, staff and administration within the study site. This can be accomplished through presentations at institutional professional

development, departmental meetings, and in-class presentations in the eligible courses.

## B. Communication

1. While recruitment of students is crucial for a successful Cooperative Education Program, internal communication between the Cooperative Education Program staff and currently enrolled students is vital to program success and sustainability. One of the major complaints among the study's participants was the lack of communication between themselves and the previous Cooperative Education Program Coordinator.
  - a. Since the hiring of the new Cooperative Education Program Coordinator, the program staff has increased from one full-time employee located on the study site's main campus to three full-time and two part-time employees spanning two campuses.
    - i. It is recommended that the study site hire additional Cooperative Education Program staff thus greatly increasing staff availability to students.
  - b. It is recommended that the Cooperative Education Program expand its current online educational portal
    - i. It is through this portal that students can email program staff directly, ask and answer questions to staff and other enrolled students via classroom discussion, and submit weekly timesheets.
    - ii. Program staff should also create an online meeting schedule that provides times in which they are available to meet with students.
  - c. It is recommended that the study site create a Cooperative Education Advisory Committee.
    - i. This Advisory Committee will be made up of Cooperative Education Program alumni, involved industry, and community leaders. This advisory committee would be used as a means of educating the students and staff about industry trends within the study site's service area. This would create a

sense of accountability for all parties within the program.

- d. It is recommended that the Cooperative Education Program facilitate mandatory monthly meetings for enrolled students.
  - i. These meetings would allow enrolled students the ability to interact with each other and program staff in an open forum to discuss their internal interactions within the program.
  - ii. These meetings could facilitate an open forum for industry representatives, study site faculty and former program alumni to provide personal experiences, advice and open discussions to give students a personal, in-depth connection to the program.

### C. Experience

1. Based on the result of my research, experience gained while enrolled in cooperative education is considered the factor that is most influential to the student population.
  - a. It is recommended the Cooperative Education Program expand its available industry placement sites by 25% the first year to prepare for enrollment growth and provide increased opportunities in various fields.
    - i. The Cooperative Education Program Coordinator or staff should schedule yearly evaluations of each participating industry site to verify compliance with program guidelines and create open communication to determine changes needed to course work for student preparedness.
  - b. It is recommend implementing student evaluations by the industry site and placement evaluations by the student at the middle and end of each placement as a method of quantitatively tracking satisfaction with experiences from both perspectives and address issues as they arise.



- c. It is recommend the Cooperative Education Coordinator and Cooperative Education Advisory Committee meet to discuss and develop program guidelines to be implemented by the industry placements.
  - i. These guidelines will allow less room for discrepancy by the industry sites and potentially increase industry involvement by creating a standard pay scale and established requirements by student and site.
  - ii. Any additional industry site benefits should be approved by the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator prior to implementation to create accountability and fairness for the students.
- d. It is recommended that the Cooperative Education Program consider implementing a curriculum addition by developing short-term placements.
  - i. These short-term placements could be seen as a job shadowing experience where the student would be able to observe in an industry site for 20-40 hours over a 4 to 6-week span to aide in degree and career clarification before committing to a full semester co-op placement.
  - ii. To relieve industry requirements, these short-term placements will only require a signature of completed hours by the participating student and their industry supervisor.
- e. It is recommended that these short-term placements develop into a one to two credit “Cooperative Education 101 (Co-op 101)” course to be required before all placements in industry sites.
  - i. The “Co-op 101” course will include: (a) three weeks in-class learning on work-place etiquette; (b) soft skill development, (c) description of different career placements; and, (d) student course work to develop a deeper understanding of the degree fields.

- ii. A requirement of “Co-op 101” is that students would have to complete three, 4-week industry rotations in their top three career fields. The rotation would occur in one to two day observations per week, allowing interested students an opportunity to learn more about the study site’s Cooperative Education Program and industry placements.

#### D. Website Development

1. An integral part of all three themes: recruitment, communication, and experience, is the development of a digital platform.
  - a. It is recommended that the Cooperative Education Program develop a program/course specific website separate from that of the institutional website.
    - i. This website will serve as the main marketing tool for interested students and industry to gain all information needed with easy access to the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator and staff for any further questions.
    - ii. This website can also have the capability to send bi-weekly newsletters or emails focused toward faculty, staff and potential enrollees to aide in the recruitment process.
    - iii. This website will be the central communication hub between the Cooperative Education Program Coordinator, staff, potential students, enrolled students, and industry participants.
    - iv. With permission from participating industry, this website will include a list of potential placements with community events advertised for potential and current enrollees.
  - b. It is recommended the “Co-op 101” course and active cooperative education placements can be run through the website.
    - i. The website would include assignment submissions and a message board with weekly required

- discussions and self-reflections that would be accessible through existing student log-ins.
- ii. The website would also include online forms for mid-term and end of term student and industry evaluations to create a user-friendly course environment.
- c. It is recommended the program review their current institutional website and research new platforms that would allow the integration of open discussion forums, downloadable forms and calendars, and email capabilities.
- i. Information to be included will be Frequently Asked Questions, cooperative education benefits, links to current cooperative education journals and research, alumni testimonials, inquiry forms, and program guidelines.

## IV. Implementation Timetable

Timeline	Objectives
Summer 2018 May- July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White paper presentation to study site’s Cooperative Education staff and administration</li> <li>• Consult with each stakeholder and assign roles and responsibilities</li> <li>• Review and redesign printed marketing materials to implement at orientations during the summer</li> <li>• Co-op Advisory committee created before Fall term <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Schedule quarterly meetings with co-op staff</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Calendar presentations to be given during faculty development</li> <li>• Schedule and develop one 5-10 min presentation to be given in each relevant course during the Fall semester</li> </ul>
Fall 2018 August-Dec.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design and implement digital marketing materials</li> <li>• ORI 105- beginning of semester <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Schedule Co-op staff to be present at each class</li> <li>○ Schedule a co-op alumnus to present at one class</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Launch Online educational portal and website</li> <li>• Calendar a monthly one-hour meeting for all student participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Schedule guest speakers for 2 meetings/semester</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Spring/Summer 2019 Jan-July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the number of available industry placements</li> <li>• Schedule yearly industry site evaluations</li> <li>• Implement mid-term and end of term student evaluations</li> <li>• Develop “Co-op 101” or short-term observation placements</li> </ul>
Fall 2019 August-Dec.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch “Co-op 101”</li> </ul>

## V. Roles and Responsibilities

The following is a list of stakeholders and their responsibilities for the above policy recommendations.

### A. The Cooperative Education Program Coordinator (the Coordinator)

- a. The Coordinator will be seen as the leader of implementation of recommendations following the provided timeline.
- b. The Coordinator will drive and approve all changes and new program developments, with all feedback and questions falling under her responsibility.
- c. The Coordinator will meet weekly with program staff to delegate and monitor responsibilities, while also meeting monthly with administration to maintain open communication and continue to drive importance of the program and its institutional support.
- d. The Coordinator is the overall representative of the program, and will be expected to be present for all industry site evaluations, new student orientations, and faculty development presentations, while also taking responsibility for an equal portion of in-class presentations, ORI 105 presentations, and monthly co-op student meetings with staff.
- e. The Coordinator, along with the Advisory Committee, will develop and launch the proposed “Co-op 101” course and review mid-term and end of term evaluations by students and industry.

### B. The Cooperative Education Program staff (the staff)

- a. The staff will be expected to attend weekly meetings with the Coordinator, and ORI 105 presentations.
- b. The staff should be well versed in knowledge of the program and research to give sound information during ORI 105 classes and the 5-10 minute presentations during each relevant course during each semester.
- c. The staff will also be the representatives of the program at new student orientations, job fairs and school visits.

- d. The staff will serve as the immediate point of contact for all students and industry, and will implement the mid-term and end of term evaluations while overseeing the continued success of the online portal through weekly assignments and discussion boards.
- e. The staff will be present to oversee and implement the day-to-day activities of the Cooperative Education Program and assist the Coordinator as needed.

C. The Cooperative Education Program Advisory Committee (the Committee)

- a. The Committee will be created by the Program Coordinator to include program alumni, industry, faculty, administration and community representatives.
- b. The Committee will be in charge of presenting the benefits of cooperative education within ORI 105.
- c. The Committee will also oversee the development and implementation of the “Co-op 101” course and any further policy changes.
- d. The Committee will serve as a source of knowledge and recommendations for the Program Coordinator based on current community and industry needs, and bring insight to the overall views of the program within the local community.
- e. The Committee will be expected to attend quarterly meetings in order to maintain open lines of communication and reach the goals set out by this project.

D. The Information Technology Department

- a. The Information Technology Department will be used to assist in design and launching of the Cooperative Education Program website and online education portal.
- b. The Information Technology Department will also be the main contact for any software issues and updates, such as student login and email access.

E. The Digital Media Department

- a. The Digital Media Department will produce the 30-60 commercial and site television digital flyer under the direction of the Co-op Program Coordinator.

F. Institutional Print Shop

- a. The study site's print shop will be needed to assist program staff in the design and production of all printed marketing materials.

Appendix B: Letter of Intent Requesting Permission to Access of Participant for the  
Institutional IRB

Researcher's Name  
Researcher's Address  
City, State Zip

Dear Ma'am or Sir,

My name is Lawrence Miller Jr., a doctoral candidate in the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership at Walden University, and the [REDACTED]. I am interested in conducting a qualitative research study on the factors that impact enrollment in cooperative education at the community college level, and I am requesting permission to do so.

The purpose of this proposed study is to determine whether there are specific factors that impacted the students' experiences while participating in the cooperative education program at [REDACTED]. Ideal participants in this study will be cooperative education program alumni within the past five years that are 18 years or older. I respectfully request permission to use the institution's email database to solicit participation from these alumni. The participants will partake in focus groups using open-ended interview questions lasting approximately 60-90 minutes in length. This interview will be audiotaped. I will also be taking observation notes throughout the entirety of the interview process. All collected data will be secure at all times. The study poses no foreseeable risks to participants and there will be no compensation for participation.

The identities of all participants and the institution will be kept confidential in all materials submitted to Walden University. The results of this study will complete the requirements for my doctoral program and will also be shared with the administration here at [REDACTED].

Should you need any further information regarding this study, please feel free to contact me, Lawrence Miller Jr. at [REDACTED] or [lawrence.miller2@waldenu.edu](mailto:lawrence.miller2@waldenu.edu). If you agree to grant permission to conduct the above-described study, confirmation may be sent to the email address indicated above. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Lawrence Miller Jr.



## Appendix C: Application for Approval to Use Human Subjects in Research

**APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL TO USE HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH**

Please complete the following form and submit it for approval to the IRB Administrator.

1. Project Title:

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Principle Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Co- PI (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Status of Applicant (Check one)  Faculty  Community Member  Doctoral Student  
 Other (Please Explain) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Research Sponsor (if applicable)  Graduate School  Grants Project  
 Faculty Member  Other (please explain)

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Does your study involve collection of data from a vulnerable population?  
 Yes  No

If yes, please mark the category and explain below:

Minors  Prisoners  Fetuses  Pregnant Women  Cognitively Impaired  Others

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Does your study involve deception or research in which the subject is purposely led to have false beliefs or assumptions? If yes, please explain  
 Yes  No

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Letter of Invitation

## Invitation to Participate in a Qualitative Case Study on the Factors that Impact Enrollment in Cooperative Education at the Community College Level

Researcher's Name  
Researchers Address  
City, State Zip

You are cordially invited to participate in a qualitative case study on your participation in cooperative education. The researcher, Lawrence Miller Jr., will be conducting the study and is a doctoral candidate in the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership at Walden University and also the [REDACTED]. Please be assured that my employment status at [REDACTED] is separate from my research role.

The purpose of this study is to determine the factors that have impacted enrollment within [REDACTED] cooperative education program.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity and responses will remain anonymous. You will have the ability to withdraw at any time during the study. If you decide to participate, you will be involved in a focus group of your peers that will be led by me. The focus group will last approximately 60-90 minutes. You will be provided open-ended interview question prior to the focus group for review.

Before making your decision to participate, please read the attached consent form. If you agree to participate and freely consent, please type your name, initials, and date in the appropriate location on the informed consent form, save and return to [lawrence.miller2@waldenu.edu](mailto:lawrence.miller2@waldenu.edu). The first 15 individuals to respond will be invited to participate.

Should you have any further inquiries related to the qualitative case study, feel free to contact me, Lawrence Miller Jr. at [REDACTED] or [lawrence.miller2@waldenu.edu](mailto:lawrence.miller2@waldenu.edu).

Thank you in advance for your consideration and I look forward to your potential participation.

Lawrence Miller Jr.

## Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

### Consent to Participate in the Qualitative Case Study on the Factors that Impact Enrollment in Cooperative Education at the Community College Level

This form referred to as the “informed consent form” allows you to understand the entirety of the qualitative case study before deciding to participate.

#### **Background**

The purpose of this study is to determine the factors that impact the enrollment within the cooperative education program at [REDACTED].

#### **Procedures**

The study will be conducted via focus group, lasting 60-90 minutes, with no more than 4-6 participants in each group. A series of open-ended interview questions will be asked. Participants and their responses will remain anonymous. The interview processes will be audio taped for the purposes of transcription and verification only. All recording and transcriptions will be kept for three years in a securely locked file cabinet within my office. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you will be able to withdraw at any time during the study. If, for any reason, you chose to not continue with the study, all collected data will be destroyed.

#### **Risks and Benefits**

There are no foreseen risks directly associated with involvement in the study. Additionally, there will be no compensation for participation in this study. The benefits of your participation have the ability to improve not only enrollment in [REDACTED] cooperative education program, but also positively impact other programs and/or institutions that may be having enrollment issues.

#### **Confidentiality**

All provided information will be kept confidential and anonymous. The provided information will not be used for any other purposes other than that which has been described above. Additionally, you, as the participant may request a copy of your informed consent form for your record.

#### **Contact and Questions**

If, for any reason, you have any questions and/comments related to this study, please feel free to contact me, Lawrence Miller Jr., at [REDACTED] and/or [lawrence.miller2@waldenu.edu](mailto:lawrence.miller2@waldenu.edu).

#### **Statement of Consent**

I have fully read and understand the information provided above. I feel that I understand the intent of the study and by signing below; I agree to participate in the qualitative case study described above.

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Consent: \_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F: Interview Protocol

### Determining the Factors that Impact Enrollment in Cooperative Education at the Community College Level

**Welcome:** I would like to first welcome and thank everyone for taking time out of your busy schedules to volunteer to participate in my qualitative case study.

**Purpose Statement:** The purpose of this focus group is to determine the factors that impact enrollment at [REDACTED] through your personal perspective. You have all had a chance to review and sign the informed consent form. You have also all had a chance to review the questions that will be administered during this focus group. The questions will be open-ended in nature and please be as honest as possible. Your identities and related responses will be kept confidential. Please be aware that this session will be audio taped to ensure accuracy of your responses during the transcription process. If for any reason, you need to excuse yourself, please feel free to do so. If at any time you decide to discontinue your participation, your responses will be not used and will be destroyed.

**Guidelines:** There are no incorrect answers to the below questions, so please be honest. Please feel free to share your personal perspective, good or bad because my goal is to obtain the most in-depth perspective related to your experience in the cooperative education program. Please feel free to build upon others experiences/responses, but be courteous and wait until the other participants have completed their responses before you expand.

#### Questions:

1. What factors led to your enrollment in this particular institution?
2. How did you hear about the cooperative education program?
3. What drew you to participate in the cooperative education program?
4. What were your expectations for your involvement in cooperative education?
5. How did your cooperative education experience influence your academic and professional career?
6. What aspects of your involvement in cooperative education met your expectations and what aspects did not meet your expectations?
7. What potential barriers may have caused you to not be involved in cooperative education?

### Appendix G: Transcriptionist Confidentiality Form

#### Determining the Factors that Impact Enrollment in Cooperative Education at the Community College Level

I, the undersigned, recognize that the data collected as part of this study is confidential. I agree to respect the right to privacy and anonymity of all participants in this qualitative case study. I agree to maintain the confidentiality of all information related to this study. This means that I will not discuss this information with anyone other than the researcher and that I will ensure the secure storage of all tapes, transcripts and computer files and any other documentation associated with the study.

Specifically, when transcribing tapes, earphones will be used during playback of tapes to protect the interviewee's privacy. Typed data will be stored on a password-protected hard drive or memory stick, accessible only to me. If stored on a memory stick, it will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. At the completion of my work with the qualitative case study, the data will be deleted from the hard drive (if applicable) or memory stick will be given to the researcher. No paper or computer file copies of the data will be retained by me.

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant's Initials: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date of Consent: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_