

Co-Op Final Project

The themes of my recent co-op for the N.U.*in* program seemed to be learning important professional lessons and gaining self-awareness. The second day I was in Greece, my boss pulled out every staff member's self-selected top five strengths from the landmark 33 strengths indicator (we didn't get the budget approved to actually take the test, hence the self-selection). Mine were communication, futuristic, intelligence, harmony, and significance. At the time, this seemed like a key element of experiential learning: quantifying skills and strengths and looking for relevant applications. This was my second co-op, and I feel that I learned in a completely different way than I did on the first. Personally, I have reaped the benefits of experiential learning by getting to try out occupations and tasks which I expect I am interested in, although I've never tried them. Enter my pre-first co-op self, a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed engineering student excited to cut her teeth in the industry and gain some experience in infrastructure design. Just a month in, I realized that I had latched onto engineering for a number of reasons relating to its prestige rather than my own interests. I had no idea what I actually wanted to do, and so I soon switched my major to cultural anthropology, because at least I was interested in that.



Now I know that my futuristic "strength" had an unfortunate component in that it caused me to look at opportunities, like civil engineering, and see only the aspects I was interested in, the potential, rather than being real with myself about whether that was actually a good choice for me. Luckily, working for N.U.*in* helped me hone in on a few things that I really *am* interested in. Looking for co-op number two a year ago, I put a significant amount of pressure on myself. The major switch messed up my academic plan, understandably, and it was only through some serious negotiations with my parents that I was able to take a second co-op at all. That meant I had to think long and hard about what co-op I would take and make sure it checked all of my boxes. Scrolling through neuCOOL, I found a trillion different things, alighting on some global co-ops as I have always loved to travel. The ISA position really excited me because it was a paid global co-op with a totally varied set of daily tasks and a fast-paced environment.

After wavering for a little while and pursuing another co-op, I accepted the job and was thrilled to get to work on event-planning, student affairs, communication proficiency, and curriculum-building. Although I feel that the job description on neuCOOL was fairly detailed, this is a position which cannot fully be explained, especially in writing. The job is insulated, demanding, unpredictable, and requiring a wide set of skills (interpersonal, emergency response, teamwork, completing regularly-scheduled tasks while mitigating crises, just to name a few). Until I was handing off responsibilities from the spirit day I was missing to take students to the emergency room on a day our Boston staff was visiting the site to see how we were getting along, I didn't fully comprehend the position and level of multitasking it could entail. An interesting dichotomy seemed to exist between the fact that N.U.*in* participants and staff tended to keep to themselves and each other rather than socialize with many locals and the complete reliance we had on Greek doctors, bus drivers, and program assistants when we really needed something. Indeed, the program was by no means self-sufficient, and the dependency we developed on our liaison to the

American College of Thessaloniki was staggering. At times, this was challenging; at others, the feeling of powerlessness to help the students due to the language barrier was quite anxiety-inducing.

Ultimately, being pushed to my limits for ingenuity in this regard helped me attain a level of confidence in my work that I had rarely if ever achieved before. It never got worse than that second week of October with the Boston staff, Husky Hunt, and raging stomach flu, but moving forward I felt competent and able to take on anything that the job threw at me. My coworkers and I devised a set of guidelines for how we as a staff should respond to emergencies, having the ability to make these more specific given the experiences we already had. Developing professional confidence and the skill of emergency response were crucial to this position, although that's not initially what I was looking for. Having had a negative team experience on my previous co-op, I had hoped to be a productive member of a team and hone my collaboration skills. This was something I discussed with my supervisor from the very beginning, as I discussed my struggle with asking for help when I needed it. Luckily for me, this was a skill I got to work on, as I spent a huge chunk of time collaborating with the other ISAs, whether it was planning programs together, improving on my lesson plans, or deciding which picture should go on the N.U.*in* program's official Instagram. At our lengthy staff meetings each week, the ISAs and our two bosses would get together and try to optimize programs and problem-solve together, and everyone was a critical part of this team-driven environment. Getting things done in this format was rewarding because the whole staff would feel confident in the projects and we could all enjoy the success, or be able to effectively analyze what didn't go as planned.

A great deal of my time was also spent working with, or just talking with, my students. This was the most rewarding portion of the position for me, which has been a great learning experience. I valued getting to know and support the students, as well as challenge them when I felt they might not be doing their best. In the remaining hours, I wrote a bi-weekly newsletter to the parents and families, ran the social media accounts, worked as an RA, and graded projects and papers submitted as part of the Global Experience class.

In fact, Global Experience was the aspect of the position which I surprisingly enjoyed most of all. Here, I was able to impart some of the knowledge which I believe I have acquired throughout my own college career. During the first weeks of training, I found the idea of planning and customizing lessons to be appealing, but as time went on I asked to have more and more input on these aspects. As I took on more responsibility for the class, I felt even more rewarded by the results. It was exciting to challenge the students to think about new topics and their impact in daily life, including privilege, the bystander effect, and cultural differences. This is where I felt my anthropology background guided me most, as I was able to provide context for these issues and even use a classic anthropological article to make a point about ethnocentrism and the tendency to "other" unfamiliar cultures. I was at first excited at the prospect of facilitating discussion, but as the classes went on I grew more confident and enjoyed the students taking the reins and debating these important issues. That's not to say, of course, that this work was without setbacks. Right at the end of the semester, a discussion about empathy revealed that the students were not as far along in their awareness of privilege as I had hoped. This was understandable, considering that many of them came from very privileged families with an abundance of disposable income.

Surely an important purpose of co-op is to gain relevant work experience in a chosen discipline. On the other hand, my tenure with the N.U.*in* program taught me more about myself than any other singular experience has. For example, I tested and strengthened some skills I had identified, finding that some were not as developed as I had thought, for example my time-management skills. Meanwhile, I was able to learn more about my patterns of motivation, and preferred decision-making techniques. I worked on my communication skills as well, especially verbal ones, which were vital since I was part of such an

active team structure. I learned to be a resource and stay abreast of ongoing projects to effectively disseminate information to the students. I balanced long-term and short-term assignments simultaneously, which is something I have always struggled with and will admittedly need some more work on, and I got some practice in following through on projects started by others.

One of my favorite assignments from the semester was collecting short videos from each student's family, which I edited together and played at our Thanksgiving dinner event. By late November, our students had almost universally started to feel homesick, and I was so happy to have been a part of bringing their families closer to them for such an important, family-oriented holiday. Although I didn't have a lot of skills in the area of video editing, and I accidentally asked the parents to send me the wrong kind of file, I was motivated to work through the challenge by the knowledge that the assignment was a very special surprise for the students. Additionally, I managed the entire project myself, making the call as to how we would get the parents involved, when we would do so, etc. I was very excited that it went well.

Over the course of the semester, I found myself challenged by a significant language barrier, not being able to befriend the students, and having to balance emergency situations and scheduled tasks like newsletters. I developed my interpersonal skills in talking to and verifying the safety of our students, communicated with their parents, and planned and facilitated important discussions in a one-credit course. I learned that I was not as interested in event-planning as I had anticipated, but that I love working on a team and being a mentor and resource to younger people. I pushed myself and learned about how I work as a professional.

