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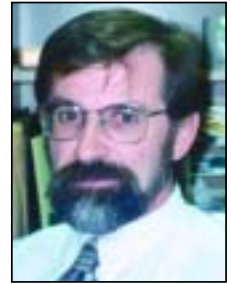
REFLECTIONS ON THE HINF CO-OP EDUCATION PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

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Editor's Note: This is the second of a three part series on the School of Health Information Science.

The School of Health Information Science (HINF) at the University of Victoria is well known for its baccalaureate program in health informatics (HI). Now in its 20th year of delivery, the School continues to turn out highly sought-after graduates with the unique ability to communicate and bridge the gap between three important areas of healthcare: the technology side, the management side and clinical side. One of the key reasons for the success of HINF alumni in the health field is the co-op education program, which has been an integral part of the School since its inception 20 years ago. Every HINF student graduates with 16 months* of relevant paid work experience, which in turn enriches not only the student's own academic pursuits but also the School's curriculum and the employers they work for.

There are numerous ways in which a co-operative education strengthens a program such as HINF, and perhaps no one knows better than *Larry Scott*, a 1987 HINF graduate who has participated in the co-op program from every angle. Not only was Scott a co-op student, but he has also been a co-op employer and a HINF co-op coordinator. Given his varied perspectives, and having done a previous degree without a co-op, he is in a unique position to understand firsthand the benefits of experiential learning. He believes that the most important skill that HINF students can take with them upon graduation is the ability to see the world from a pedagogical viewpoint. "What co-op should do is try to help students develop a learning perspective needed to transform the workplace into a classroom," says Scott. "One way to achieve this is to use people as a resource and to be a resource for other people." This idea is the essence of HINF's concept of co-operative education



Larry Scott

According to *David Hutchinson*, current Acting Co-op Coordinator, co-operative education not only benefits the students but the School as a whole. He is speaking of what he calls the "two-way flow" that occurs when former students, who are now working in the field, feed a flow of information back into the School. "It makes the School less 'ivory tower' and more connected to what the professional world is doing," says Hutchinson. However, it is not only alumni that feed back information into the School. According to *Crystal Janicki*, who will be graduating this year, work terms interspersed with academic terms allow students to become another resource for professors who are outside of the daily practical side of the field. In classes with a student body comprised of people with diverse work experiences, professors can turn to the students for a constantly updated source of information and knowledge gained during their work terms. Also, as Scott has suggested, students can use each other as resources as well - "A good class is one that learns more from each other than they do from the instructor."



Crystal Janicki

Even more obvious are the benefits that students accrue from their co-op work terms. Not only do students get the practical knowledge which comes with the opportunity to observe firsthand how information systems fit into different sectors of the healthcare field, but also insight into policy development and how different organizational structures of hospitals function. As *James Ayles*, a Health Information Consultant for the Medicare New Brunswick's Prescription Drug Program, observes, "You can't begin to

* Effective September 2002 the fourth work term will be optional.

understand the different roles and responsibilities of front line hospital staff to policy people and everyone in between until you are actually there. Then you realize how everyone is only one part of a bigger picture. You can't get this from class."

Of course one of co-op's biggest benefits is that it allows students to learn more about possible opportunities, discovering what jobs they are interested in and learning what jobs they do not want to pursue. "I would have hated to have put in four years at school only to find out that I didn't like the field. It's a lot less risky to try a co-op job for four months than to jump into the workforce - at least you know that if you don't like the job, it's only for a limited time and you can exit at the end gracefully," says *Donna Turner*, a 1988 graduate who is now a Cancer Epidemiologist with the Department of Preventive Oncology and Epidemiology at CancerCare Manitoba.

The co-op experience also enables students a chance to observe and participate in events that a normal employee would not have access to. *Janicki*, who had a co-op term with Cancer Care Ontario, was mentored by senior management and allowed to sit in on meetings with the CEO and Chief Financial Officer. Other students are given the opportunity to observe surgical operations, something a normal employee would not have access to or the time to do. *Jennifer Zelmer*, a 1993 graduate and now the Director of Health Reports and Analysis at the Canadian Institute for Health Information, recalls a co-op term with the Queensland Treasury Department in Australia. She was involved in a program evaluation of dental care but was given the chance to watch the budget being delivered, an experience that she knows she would have missed as a regular employee.



Jennifer Zelmer

Mentorship and the opportunity to build relationships with professionals is another important aspect of co-op. *Sylvia Robinson*, part of the first HINF graduating class of 1987 and now the Manager of Diabetes Registry and Outcome Measurements for the Vancouver Island Health Authority in Victoria, BC, cites "amazing mentorship" as the greatest advantage of co-op programs. She still remembers the advice of early mentors and applies them to situations she encounters at work. *Robinson* also credits mentors for their help in providing her with the skills to build professional relationships. "Information systems are often about change and helping people work through change, from implementing systems to analyzing them. We are always working in an environment of change and in co-op we learn how to build working relationships to help people adjust to changes." She says that the relationships that she cultivated in co-op have followed her not just through her co-op terms, but also throughout her career. In much the same way, *Scott* built on relationships with people that began during his co-op terms to grow the network of co-op employers when he was coordinator of the program. "When the opportunity presents itself you have to be receptive to forming relationships with people and willing to open up communication with them," says *Scott*.

Another strength of the HINF co-op program is the professionalism that can only be learned on the job, which lends itself to confidence in pursuing full time work upon graduation. With graduation time drawing closer *Janicki* has been busy seeking full-time work. *Janicki* notes that having already completed four work terms gives her an invaluable edge over students without co-op experience. The interview process is not new to her and she is able to exude a level of confidence that is backed up by the knowledge that she has experience in the field and references from a list of notable professionals. *Janicki* is also confident that any one of her co-op

jobs could lead to a permanent full-time position an assurance that is not unfounded when you consider that graduates like *Zelmer* and *Ayles* got their present jobs through co-op connections. In *Zelmer's* case, after graduation one of her co-op employers was hired by CIHI and recommended her for a position within the organization. *Ayles* was hired into a permanent position by his co-op employer even before he graduated.

However, co-operative education does not only benefit the HINF program and their students, but also adds a dynamic element to organizations that employ students. *Cathy Hull* was another graduate that found employment with her last co-op job and now acts as a co-op employer for HINF. *Hull* is a good example of the network of relationships that HINF is famous for. "We've benefited from their ideas, their enthusiasm and their opportunity to focus on projects that might not otherwise have been done," says *Hull*, another alumna that became an employer. *Scott* observes that overall, HINF students are well prepared, well-rounded and very good at what they do and this is the reason that so many employers are eager to work with them and why so many co-op work terms turn into regular employment. *Miyo Yamashita*, Corporate Privacy Officer for the University Health Network, has been mentoring HINF students for several years. "All of the students have been fabulous," says *Yamashita*. She especially appreciates their knowledge of the most current research and studies done in the university community and how they provide a fresh, critical edge to the projects that they work on. Having graduated from a program without a co-op *Yamashita* says that she could have benefited from a clinical background that so many HINF students have the opportunity to experience during their co-op work terms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The School would like to thank all of the HINF alumni, co-op employers, co-op staff and those who have helped build the HINF co-op program into a success story over the years. In particular, sincere gratitude is due to the work of Dr. Edward Sheaff, the co-op coordinator who is currently on leave from the School.

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