

Positive Benefits of the Agronomy Cooperative Education Program

S. E. FOWLER, C. L. RHYKERD, B. O. BLAIR

A. D. GOECKER AND A. R. HILST

Department of Agronomy and School of Agriculture Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana 47907

Introduction

In 1975, the Purdue University School of Agriculture initiated a Cooperative Education Program. This program was developed to meet the demands of the large increase in agriculture students with non-rural backgrounds. Presently, about 60 percent of the agricultural students nationally have urban and suburban backgrounds (Goecker, 1982)(2). Frequently employers or potential employers express concern that agricultural graduates are well prepared academically but fall far short in their ability to apply classroom material to solving practical agricultural problems. Employers stress the importance of students gaining as much practical experience as possible before graduation. The objective of Purdue University's School of Agriculture Cooperative Education Program is to provide this "hands on" experience for the undergraduate agricultural students (Fowler, *et al.* and Rhykerd, *et al.*, 1980)(1, 3).

How the Program Operates

The Cooperative Education Program requires 5 years, with four thirteen-week work periods, to complete the B.S. degree. Usually students become involved in the program during their sophomore year. The only criteria for entering the program is a "C" average and a desire for "hands on" experience. The prospective interns complete an application form for the program and then proceed to interview with participating employers. After accepting an offer, which may be for one or two school terms, the intern enrolls in Agronomy 390. This non-credit course is entitled "Professional Cooperative Programs in Agronomy" and currently requires the student to pay a fee of \$189 per school term.

During each off-campus school term there is visitation by the Departmental Coordinator, providing an opportunity for discussion of the intern's progress. Near the end of each off-campus school term an evaluation form is completed by the immediate supervisor to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the intern's overall performance.

Positive Benefits of the Program

Based on our experience with the intern program, we have observed positive benefits to the student and to the employers.

Positive benefits to the students:

1. *Evaluation of career goals*—Students have the opportunity to explore a variety of professional careers as well as considering permanent employment with a participating employer. Assignments in work areas involving sales, production, and research provide the rare opportunity for the student to determine the type of career he prefers while still in college. Consequently, the student makes better selections of coursework and is more highly motivated in studies after returning to campus.
2. *Financial assistance*—In addition to helping make career decisions, the internship is a means of financing an undergraduate education. Salaries may

vary depending on the student's background and experience as well as type of assignment. Most salaries fall within the range of \$600 to \$1300 per month.

3. *Interviewing skills*—As a rule the B.S. graduate has had limited experience with the interviewing process. On the contrary, graduating seniors that have participated in the Cooperative Education Program approach interviews with confidence since they have spent time preparing resumes and interviewing for internships. This results in more employment opportunities and usually commands a higher starting salary.
4. *Improvements in attitude, confidence and maturity*—From a counseling viewpoint, exciting personal changes occur in the intern's attitude, confidence, and maturity. During the internship, the student is exposed to the "real world" before graduation and thus knows more about what to expect in a professional career. These attitudinal changes are particularly evident as exhibited through enthusiasm and confidence when interviewing for further internships and upon graduation.

Positive benefits to the employer:

1. *Responsible and intelligent seasonal employees*—Many agri-businesses require additional employees during certain seasons of the year. Dependable temporary employees may not be available locally. Consequently, many farmers, seed companies, agricultural chemical companies and other agriculturally related agencies are anxious to offer students "hands on" experience for a three to six month period.
2. *Method of screening for permanent employment*—Many companies become involved in the Cooperative Education Program as a means for selecting permanent employees. The internship gives the company an opportunity to observe interns for the desired capabilities.
3. *Maintain contact with the University*—Most employers appreciate the opportunity to interact directly with the University. They become acquainted with the professors and learn of the latest research information in their area of specialty.

Summary

The Agronomy Cooperative Education Program, established in 1975, is the practical phase of the undergraduate education which brings the employer and student together for a professional experience. Our Agronomy "hands on" program motivates students toward career goals, teaches responsibility, prepares them for job interviews, builds confidence, and they "earn while they learn". Benefits to employer include "quality" seasonal employees, screen potential full-time employees, and strengthens ties with the University.

Literature Cited

1. Fowler, S. E., C. L. Rhykerd, B. O. Blair, A. D. Goecker, and A. R. Hilst. An Undergraduate Agronomy Professional Experience Program. *Journal Agron. Ed.* (In Press).
2. Goecker, A. D. 1982. The USDA and American Colleges of Agriculture in Setting Agricultural Education Trends in America. *NACTA Jour.* 26(3); 19-22.
3. Rhykerd, C. L., B. O. Blair, A. R. Hilst, R. C. Keen, and A. D. Goecker. 1980. Agronomic Coop Intern Program for Undergraduate Students. *Proc. Ind. Acad. Sci.* 89: 382-833.