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# Our Changing World

**A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT LOOKS BACK—AND WEIGHS IN ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION.**

by Joseph E. Aoun

Students across the United States are looking for opportunities to get “real world” experience while in college. Just like you, they are signing up for paid internships or cooperative education jobs, clinics, study abroad, community service, and student research projects—to name just a few examples. These opportunities, which I will refer to as experiential education, are part of a student movement that greatly enriches a college education. It’s an idea whose time has come.

I’m intrigued when I hear students and graduates talk about how experiential learning has shaped their lives. Back when I was in college, most of us stuck pretty close to campus. Things are different now. The world today is a dynamic place and our lives are being propelled by technological innovation and rapid change. You will compete on a global stage and pursue many different careers over your lifetime—perhaps in fields that don’t even exist today. To succeed and thrive in coming decades, you will need to be an active and engaged learner and able to adapt midstream.

If students at my institution are any indication, all of this means that you will want to try out different options when you’re in college. You will be comfortable being “undecided” (at least for a while). You will create your own intellectual adventures and explore different subjects. You will want to see the world, and try to get as comfortable in Johannesburg, Shanghai, or Mexico City as you are on your college campus. At the same time, you’ll want to be ready to hit the ground running when you graduate.

Experiential education — especially cooperative education, or “co-op,” where students alternate semesters of study with semesters in the field — offers you one of the best opportunities to achieve your aspirations. It is a dimension that transforms your education into a journey that positions you for life. It is — first of all — a way to pursue your passion. Emily White wanted to explore as many different angles of the music industry as possible. After several behind-the-scenes stints in the industry, she landed a co-op assignment with MTV in its Times Square studio. Then, wanting to get an international perspective, she went on to another co-op at MTV’s Europe headquarters in London. She went on to manage the Dresden Dolls.

Experiential education is a way to create knowledge. Tanya Cashorali, who is pursuing a dual major in biology and computer science, has been on co-op assignments at Harvard Partners, Children’s Hospital Boston, and the Dana Farber Cancer Institute. She has worked on a grant-funded study on tumor development and made presentations to world-renowned doctors. She has done all this as an undergraduate. Her next goal: a graduate degree in bioinformatics.

Experiential education is also a way to engage the world and to be able to give something back. Jason Turgeon grew interested in improving water quality during a co-op at the EPA while doing academic work on water cycles. That interest then carried him to Sri Lanka, where he helped build water testing units, test installed units, and train a Sri Lankan to manage the program after he left.

However you see it, experiential education is a powerful addition to your

college career. At a co-op placement or internship, you put your knowledge to the test and develop new knowledge and insights at the same time. You experience workplace culture, feel the weight of professional responsibility, try out different jobs, and maybe find out what it is you *don’t* want to do for the rest of your life.

Northeastern University adopted experiential education nearly a century ago, when we launched our first cooperative education program. Today, most students complete three co-ops by the time they graduate—typically 18 months of paid employment. The success of our program stems from our efforts to help students integrate what they study with what they practice in the field. More than 90 percent of our undergraduates participate in our cooperative education program by the time they graduate, gaining experience at 1 of our 2,298 co-op employer locations worldwide. More than 98 percent of our graduates tell us they would recommend cooperative education to a friend.

I believe experiential learning will define the future of higher education because it fits so many of you so well. Your generation is much more nimble and engaged than mine was at your age, and I admire you for it. I urge you to think carefully about the kind of program that would work best for you. It’s one thing for a college to send you off campus in the hopes that you will pick up some helpful tidbits about life. It’s another thing altogether to develop a program that fully integrates study and practice. That is where the true power of experiential education is realized. Make the most of it!

**Joseph E. Aoun** is the president of Northeastern University in Boston.