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ABSTRACT

The study evaluates the Interdisciplinary Cooperative Education (ICE) approach to cooperative education in 54 schools in Indiana. Data for the study were obtained by means of two mailed instruments: one administered to 1,032 cooperative program graduates in May 1974, and the other to 677 employers in June 1973. The respective returns were 59.1% and 75.9%. Graduate information was calculated and tabulated with respect to employment status, mobility and migration, employment profile, wages, preparation for employment, most beneficial contribution of the program, teacher coordinator characteristics, and recommendability of the program to others for the program areas of agribusiness, office, distribution, health, home economics, trade and industry, and interdisciplinary. Employer information was likewise calculated and tabulated with respect to employment setting, assessment of student trainee, preparedness of student trainee, cooperative education processes, employer's views of coordinator's expertise, and employer's assessment of programs. The data emphasize the important role of the coordinator in the cooperative program and the exceptionally high level of acceptance of the cooperative education method. (JR)

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ASSESSMENT OF COOPERATIVE EDUCATION BY FORMER STUDENTS AND PARTICIPATING EMPLOYERS

A RESEARCH REPORT

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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AMERICAN VOCATIONAL ASSOCIATION CONVENTION
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA 1974

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ASSESSMENT OF COOPERATIVE EDUCATION BY FORMER
STUDENTS AND PARTICIPATING EMPLOYERS

AMERICAN VOCATIONAL ASSOCIATION CONVENTION

New Orleans, Louisiana 1974

In 1971 the State of Indiana expanded its traditional array of cooperative education programs to include the Interdisciplinary Cooperative Education (ICE) approach. This approach was designed to serve smaller, more rural communities where school offerings were limited, student needs and interests diverse, and community resources limited but varied.

Since accountability is a high priority and evaluation essential, it was appropriate to review the ICE program and determine its role among cooperative vocational education programs in the State of Indiana. It was upon this basis that the Indiana State Board of Vocational Technical Education funded a project to evaluate cooperative education, particularly the ICE program.

Data obtained from two phases of the study are summarized: a cooperative employer follow-up and a one year graduate follow-up. Other phases of the study will be available in the final report. The discussion of data will cover comments regarding findings, specific data by program area and conclusions. The discussion will focus on the cooperative employer's information obtained immediately following participation in the program and the program graduates' profile and assessment one year after graduation.

PROCEDURES

Population

The Indiana Cooperative Education Study investigated schools located in rural or suburban communities within the state. Programs in fifty-four schools were included in the sample. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of the 1156 cooperative students were in their senior year.

Indicated on the Indiana map are the major population and economic regions. Commuting factors are indicated by the radiating circles. The sample cooperative programs are depicted by dots. The majority of programs are located outside of the regional center. Approximately half of the programs are located in cities of less than 5,000 population and only five programs were located in cities of more than 20,000.

Instruments

Two instruments were developed to obtain data for employers and graduates. The instruments were designed to be forced response, easy to mark and score, brief to read, colorful, published quality and inexpensive to mail. Confidentiality was designed into the instrument.

The graduate instrument's purpose was to obtain factual employment information and opinion of the cooperative program. Factors for assessing the cooperative program were identified and translated into items. A careful review of other follow-up studies contributed considerably to the instrument's design and battery of items. The final instrument contained twenty items. To simplify the reading process, key words in the stem of each item were italicized. After pilot testing, the instrument was printed.

Employer reactions were obtained by a mailed instrument. The instrument focused on: 1) facts about the firm, 2) assessment of the student trainee, 3) assessments of the program, and 4) implementation of processes viewed by authors of cooperative material and consultants as important to program operation. The six processes were identified by the Delphi technique as most important from a base of 66 factors. The items consisted primarily of forced choice with a modest number of open-ended options. The instrument included the name and career objective of the trainee employed by the responding firm. The instrument was pilot tested and printed.

Administration of Instruments

Both instruments were administered by mail. The time schedule was similar for each mailing sequence. The primary mailing was followed in two weeks by a second mailing. The data collection phase was concluded five weeks after the initial mailing.

The student follow-up was conducted in May 1974. Materials were sent to a census of graduates (1032). The total return was 610 (59.1%). The level of return ranged from 47.5 (Home Economics) to 73.1 (Office).

A sample of employers (677) was surveyed in June 1973. The returned totalled 514 (75.9%). The level of return ranged from 56.1 (Agribusiness) to 87.6 (ICE).

The rather substantial number of graduate and modest number of employer non-respondants dictates a cautious interpretation of the data. However, the employer returns a higher than most mailed investigation of the business and industrial communities.

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GRADUATE INFORMATION

Employment Status - Table 1

Employment status one year after program completion was examined. Department of Labor classifications were used. These classifications are employed full time: 35 or more hours per week, employed part-time: less than 35 hours per week, unemployed and looking for work, and unemployed and not looking for work.

The unemployment figure is slightly higher than National and State averages for that time, but less than National and State averages for the same age group. Slightly under three quarters of the population had entered full-time employment with slightly more than one in ten employed part-time or a total of 84% working.

Employment status differs significantly by program area. A notable contribution to the difference is the area of health where only slightly more than four of ten trainees entered the labor market. This occupational group had both the highest level entry into education programs (not looking for employment) and the highest level of current unemployment. The lowest level of unemployment occurred in home economics occupations. High-levels of full time employment were reported in agribusiness and home economics.

Cooperative programs are designed to provide occupational preparation for high school students. Approximately 90% of the Indiana sample were in the labor force, indicating a high level of agreement with the program objective.

Mobility and Migration - Table 2

Two types of information were obtained relative to mobility in each program area. "Changed Address" defines any type of move, and migration results if the change is beyond county lines.

Forty-three percent of those surveyed had changed address since high school. The remaining percent continued to live at the same residence. Approximately seventeen percent of all address changing was the result of an "out-of-county" move.

Health and home economics were the areas experiencing the highest incidence of mobility. Again, the concentration of health people furthering their training may be associated with the high percent of address changing, although most moves occurred within county boundaries. In home economics, only about 15% made a major move outside the county. It is suspected that the predominance of women in these two areas may be associated with the high mobility level.

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The lowest percent change of address occurred among the interdisciplinary and agribusiness students. However, these groups experienced the highest percentage of out-of-county moves. Two areas where a high level of migration occurred were in the distributive and office occupations.

In view of the geographic location of the training schools, essentially rural and small town, a large percentage of students had not made a major move to an economic center one year after the program was completed.

Employment Profile Table 3

Two profiles are presented: length of unemployment before securing first job and number of different employers within the year following graduation. It should be recognized that a relationship may exist among these factors.

Over three-fourths of the trainees have had only one or two employers, with 44 percent having remained at their cooperative training facility after graduation with the first employer. About five percent have had four or more employers indicating a limited level of instability. Approximately four percent have not worked. These persons may be in educational programs, married and not working as well as those who have not held a job since graduation due to unemployment.

Besides those who stayed with their cooperative employer, an additional one quarter found employment in less than two weeks after graduation. For over 70%, the frustration of unemployment was not severe. However, up to one-third secured employment two weeks to a month after graduation. Six percent took from five weeks to four months. An additional 2.6 percent have taken longer than four months.

It appears that slightly over eight percent of the trainees may have experienced considerable unemployment. However, cautioning against such a conclusion is the influence of summer vacation.

Wages - Table 4

An analysis of beginning full-time employment wages and wages one year after graduation provides some interesting information. However, it should be noted that the minimum wage had increased during the course of this investigation.

Almost 30 percent of the graduates moved from less than \$2.00 per hour to a higher wage during the first year of employment. Almost forty percent of the employees were making \$3.00 per hour or more one year after graduation.

While initial wages of health and home economics graduates were low, they made extensive changes during the first year of employment, although the peak levels of these programs along with office education are not competitive to other occupational fields.

Preparation for Employment - Table 5

Former students' assessment of the program one year after graduation provides information on their preparation for employment.

First, almost seventy percent rated the quality of their preparation for their first job as good to excellent. Only about ten percent indicated it was poor to very poor.

However, when asked to describe the relationship of learned skills to their first job, the spread of comments is more evenly distributed. Some 48.3 percent indicated they used all or most of the learned skills on their first job. Alarmingly, some 34.2 percent used few or none of the learned skills applied on their first job. It should be noted that the area of agribusiness had a majority of graduates (54.3%) who indicated "all of the same skills" relating to their first job.

If the goal of cooperative education is to prepare individuals for their first job, then some reassessment is needed. While the quality of preparation was fairly high, the applicability of skill was quite low. This association is in need of more intensive study. Such investigations need to explore several factors: proper placement of students in areas of occupational interest, relationship of skills learned to apparent training, availability of positions in areas where training has been received, and clarification of cooperative education objectives.

Contribution to the Program - Table 6

Former students were asked to name the most important contributions of the program to them. The contribution most often cited was "developed confidence in my abilities." Least often cited was "decided whether to go to college." The program's contribution to students was diverse and would appear to indicate a variety of student needs were met.

Teacher Coordinator Characteristics - Table 7

In wording a question to obtain the graduate's view of his teacher-coordinator, it was decided to phrase positive options. Graduates were asked "what teacher-coordinator characteristic was of greatest help."

The responses, while significantly different, have substantial proportions in each category. The largest percentage (26.7) is the teacher-coordinator's understanding of my basic abilities. Almost 20 percent felt the teacher-coordinator's understanding of business and industry was the most important characteristic. Only 12 percent felt an understanding of students' personal problems was the greatest asset of the teacher-coordinator. The "other" category included additional positive characteristics exemplified by teacher-coordinators not provided in the questionnaire and a few negative comments indicating the teacher-coordinator had "no valued characteristics." However, these few comments do not distract from the generally positive view of the teacher-coordinator.

When the individual program areas are studied, some interesting clusters of comments become apparent. Almost 40 percent of the health occupations graduates felt the greatest help their teacher-coordinator provided was "technical knowledge of the job." Over 40 percent of the office occupations students and 35 percent of the home economics occupations students felt their teacher-coordinator's greatest value was the "understanding of the basic ability of the student." In agribusiness 34 percent felt an "understanding of the individual's career plans was primary." Over one quarter of the students in distributive and trade and industry programs felt the coordinator strength was "an understanding of business and industry."

In aggregate, slightly over 55% of the students stressed areas relating to the counseling function of the coordinators' role.

In summary, it appears teacher-coordinators provide different benefits to different students and served in a variety of ways in the learning setting.

Recommend Program to Others - Table 8

It was felt that asking former students if they would recommend the program to other students was a relevant question and provided inferences of students' feelings about the program.

Ninety-four percent would recommend the program to other students. This high percentage indicates a well received program by the graduates.

EMPLOYER INFORMATION

Employment Setting - Table 9

The employment setting was described as type of employment within the firm and firm's size.

With an N of 513 almost half the employment assignments were in distributive and trade, and industrial occupations. The smallest area was agribusiness. Approximately 2.7% of the positions were not indicated and could not be classified.

The proportion of employees distributed by size of the firm was unexpected in view of the geographic location of the schools, since the sample was drawn from predominately rural and small cities within Indiana.

Almost one-quarter of the employing firms employed 4-10 persons. However, fifteen percent of the firms had 201 or more employees. The distribution splits at about 50% for firms with 20 employees or less.

Student trainees were employed in a wide variety of occupational fields in diverse employment settings.

Assessment of Student Trainee - Table 10

As a concluding assessment of the cooperative student's performance, employers were asked to state the nature of a hypothetical letter of recommendation. Slightly more than three-quarters of the cooperative employers indicated they would write a favorable to exceptionally favorable letter. Only 5.5 percent opted for the two negative alternatives: "an unfavorable letter" or "would choose not to write."

Preparedness of Student Trainee - Table 11

The initial competency level of the student-trainee at the time he/she began the cooperative program was estimated by the employer. A distinction between technical skills and employee human relations skills was not made.

Only one percent of the employers responding indicated the students entered the cooperative training program unskilled. Less than 20 percent entered with limited or no skill.

A little over half were fairly skilled and approximately thirty percent of the students entered the program at a high skill level. Finally, almost five percent had exceptional skills as they began their program.

This profile of student preparedness seems to indicate that employers felt students were ready to benefit from the program and contribute to the firm. However, the nature of the skill and training contribution made by the firms needs to be clarified.

Cooperative Education Processes - Table 12

Certain processes were identified as critical to the operation of the program: training agreements, training plans, employer evaluations of students, and coordinator visitations to the firm. These processes were supported by state consultants as important to cooperative education program quality.

Training agreements were used in about three-quarters of all cooperative programs. It should be noted that agreements are mandatory by law even though it appears that total compliance is not adhered to. Training plans were developed in approximately two-thirds of the firms. Student evaluations were made by nearly 95% of the employers.

While variation appears to exist in the application of the processes among program areas, only employer visitations were significantly different among program areas. The information provided represents a collapsed table for employer visitations. The percent of firms visited more than once a month for a four month period is indicated by the figure. The only program area with more than 50% exceeding the criterion level was health occupations. Several figures not presented are interesting: 47% of firms not visited at all; 28% no more than twice, and 11% with 9 or more visits. If the criterion is valid, concern is expressed for the low proportion of visitation.

In summary we have listed the percentage of visits made on an average of once a month by program areas. An exceptionally high percentage of health and home economics employer visitations were made. Two lower visitation areas were interdisciplinary and agribusiness.

Employer's View of Coordinator's Expertise - Table 13

Often, cooperative teachers are criticized for their lack of knowledge of the student and of the cooperative firm with whom he must associate. How do employers view the coordinator on these factors?

The employer's view of the teacher-coordinator is most positive. More than nine out of ten employers were impressed by the coordinator's knowledge of the firm's product or service and his ability to relate effectively. Consistency existed across program areas.

While rated only slightly lower, the coordinator's knowledge of the students was held in high respect by employers.

Employers' Assessment of Programs Table 14

An employers' assessment of the cooperative program was attained by the factors: 1) is the program an effective means of providing vocational education? 2) did the firm benefit by participating in the program?, and 3) is the employer interested in continued participation.

What are reasonable criteria levels for judging these factors?

In no program area did the employers' view drop below 90 percent level in their belief of the effectiveness of the program. In no program did the desire to continue participation dip below the 90 percent level. Four of seven program areas had expressions of 100 percent desire to continue. In only two program areas did the benefit to the firm dip below 90 percent and in both areas continued participation was 100 percent.

Clearly, participating employers, with few exceptions, are strong advocates of the cooperative education approach.

Cooperative Processes and Employer Assessments

Finally, select factors or processes are associated with the three employer assessments. Statistical tests were conducted to explore potential relationships. The tests related eight factors or processes: 1) size of firm, 2) initial competency level of the student, 3) training agreement, 4) training plans, 5) employer evaluation of students, 6) number of visitations, 7) teacher knowledge of the student, and 8) teacher's knowledge of the firm. These factors were related to "effective means of providing vocational education" and "benefit to the firm."

Significant relationships did not exist among any factors and the criterion "effective means of providing vocational education." However, four significant positive associations existed among the factors and the criterion "firm benefited." These factors include initial competency level, number of visits by the coordinator, coordinators knowledge of student and firm. The important role the coordinator possesses in the cooperative program is clearly indicated by the data.

Implications

Data provided by the graduate and employer follow-up phases of the Indiana Cooperative Education Study are generally consistent in support of the cooperative education method. Graduates of programs in predominately small communities have been provided a breath of educational opportunity through the cooperative method.

With few exceptions, there is similarity of ratings on most factors across program areas. While limited instances of variation would normally occur due to a number of factors such as preparation and experience of the teacher-coordinator, location of the school, and preparedness of the students for the program, major deviations among programs simply do not exist.

This investigation touched on several processes thought to be important to the cooperative education method. Clearly, several of the factors appear to be associated critically with benefit derived by the firm from its participation in the cooperative program. These factors indicate the key role of the teacher-coordinator. Investigations need to be undertaken in more controlled settings to assess the effectiveness of the cooperative processes to the attainment of other program objectives.

The sensitivity of the cooperative education method to labor market needs will continue to be both a boon and a bane to the program. While the market was beginning to decline slightly in Indiana in 1973 a high percentage of cooperative graduates entered the labor market with relative ease.

Most information indicates an exceptionally high level of acceptance of the cooperative education method. Acceptance at or near the ninety percent level was consistent among students and employers. This provides the cooperative educator with a unique opportunity. The task of bringing most of the final ten percent into the fold would not appear to be a major undertaking.

Table 1

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

PROGRAM AREA	FULL TIME EMPLOYEE		PART TIME EMPLOYEE		NOT EMPL LOOKING		NOT EMPL NOT LKNG	
	YES	%	YES	%	YES	%	YES	%
TOTAL	732	10.9	6.3	9.6				
AGRIBUSINESS	85.7	5.7	5.7	2.9				
OFFICE	73.6	10.4	5.6	10.4				
DISTRIBUTIVE	70.5	14.1	7.7	7.7				
HEALTH	42.9	6.1	12.2	38.8				
HOME ECONOMICS	85.2	7.8	3.7	3.7				
TRADE & INDUSTRY	80.0	7.4	5.3	7.4				
INTERDISCIPLINARY	74.6	14.7	5.6	5.1				

N=586

Table 2

MIGRATION & MOBILITY

PROGRAM AREA	Changed Address		Out-of-County	
	YES	%	YES	%
TOTAL	43	16.6		
AGRIBUSINESS	35	16.2		
OFFICE	46	21.6		
DISTRIBUTION	41	23.1		
HEALTH	57	18.8		
HOME ECONOMICS	66	14.8		
TRADE & INDUSTRY	146	10.3		
INTERDISCIPLINARY	33	13.5		

N=605

N=590

Table 3

EMPLOYMENT PROFILES

EMPLOYMENT LONGEVITY		LENGTH OF UNEMPLOYMENT	
NUMBER OF EMPLOYERS:	%	TIME	%
ONE	50.4	STAYED ON COOP JOB	44.7
TWO	28.7	LESS THAN TWO WEEKS	26.4
THREE	11.7	TWO TO FOUR WEEKS	7.6
FOUR OR MORE	5.4	FIVE WEEKS TO FOUR Mos	5.9
HAVE NOT WORKED	3.7	MORE THAN FOUR MONTHS	2.6

N=589

N=472

Table 4

EMPLOYEE WAGES

PROGRAM AREA	BEGINNING WAGE			WAGE AT ONE YEAR		
	%	%	%	%	%	%
AGRIBUSINESS	23	66	11	6	48	46
OFFICE	46	51	3	10	76	14
DISTRIBUTION	30	50	20	11	43	46
HEALTH	66	32	2	19	81	0
HOME ECONOMICS	64	36	0	4	74	22
TRADE & INDUSTRY	22	47	31	5	29	66
INTERDISCIPLINARY	40	38	22	12	42	46
TOTAL	39	45	16	10	51	39

Table 5

STUDENT ASSESSMENT OF PROGRAM

QUALITY OF PREPARATION FOR FIRST JOB (N=549)

EXCELLENT	279	
GOOD	408	
FAIR	209	
POOR	44	
VERY	60	

RELATIONSHIP OF LEARNED SKILLS TO FIRST JOB. (N=546)

ALL OF THE SAME SKILLS	31.5	
MOST	16.8	
SOME	17.4	
FEW	12.6	
NE	21.6	

Table 6

CONTRIBUTION OF PROGRAM TO STUDENTS

CONTRIBUTION	%
DEVELOPED CONFIDENCE IN MY ABILITIES	32.0
LEARNED TO GET ALONG WITH OTHER PEOPLE	29.7
LEARNED TO BE AN EFFECTIVE WORKER	28.2
IDENTIFIED PERSONAL STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES	24.3
DEVELOPED OCCUPATIONAL SKILLS	21.3
FIRMED UP CAREER PLANS	21.0
DECIDED ON COLLEGE PLANS	13.0

N=609

* TRAINEES COULD NAME ONE OR TWO FACTORS

Table 7

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TEACHER-COORDINATOR

MOST VALUED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TEACHER-COORDINATOR

THE TEACHER-COORDINATOR'S UNDERSTANDING OF:

PERSONAL PROBLEMS	12.1	
COOP JOB	16.0	
BASIC ABILITIES	26.7	
CAREER PLANS	16.5	
BUSINESS & INDUSTRY	19.9	
OTHER	8.8	

N=569

Table 8

FORMER STUDENT'S ASSESSMENT

RECOMMEND PROGRAM TO OTHER STUDENTS

PROGRAM AREA	%
TOTAL	942
AGRIBUSINESS	1000
OFFICE	960
DISTRIBUTIVE	910
HEALTH	1000
HOME ECONOMICS	963
TRADE & INDUSTRY	958
INTERDISCIPLINARY	904

N = 590

Table 9

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT-TRAINEE

NATURE OF LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

EXCEPTIONALLY FAVORABLE	16.3%	
VERY FAVORABLE	28.8%	
FAVORABLE	33.9%	
CAUTIOUSLY FAVORABLE	15.5%	
UNFAVORABLE	2.7%	
WOULDN'T WRITE	2.7%	

N=510

Table 10

EMPLOYMENT SETTING: PROFILES

Type of Employment	%	Firm's Size	%
OCCUPATIONAL FIELD	%	NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	%
AGRIBUSINESS	8.4	1-3	12.3
OFFICE	17.3	4-10	24.6
DISTRIBUTIVE	24.0	11-20	13.7
HEALTH	14.0	21-50	15.3
HOME ECONOMICS	12.9	51-100	10.7
TRADE & INDUSTRY	20.7	101-200	8.3
NON-CLASSIFIED	2.7	201 or MORE	15.1

N=513

N=496

Table 11

PREPAREDNESS OF THE STUDENT TRAINEE AT COOPERATIVE PROGRAM ENTRY

INITIAL COMPETENCY LEVEL: EMPLOYER'S ASSESSMENT

UNSKILLED	1.0	
LIMITED SKILL	17.1	
FAIRLY SKILLED	51.2	
HIGHLY SKILLED	26.2	
EXCEPTIONALLY SKILLED	4.5	

N=508

Table 12

COOPERATIVE EDUCATION PROCESS

PROGRAM AREA	Training Agreements		Industry Links		Labor Agreements		Employer Evaluations	
	YES	%	YES	%	YES	%	YES	%
TOTAL	77	67.6	94.8	26.4				
AGRIBUSINESS	826	78.3	100.0	8.6				
OFFICE	750	71.4	98.0	27.1				
DISTRIBUTION	825	67.5	93.2	27.3				
HEALTH	60.9	61.5	96.3	55.6				
HOME ECONOMICS	826	60.9	88.0	45.0				
TRADE & INDUSTRY	702	59.0	100.0	27.9				
INTERDISCIPLINARY	796	69.0	93.3	9.8				

N=479

N=490

N=500

N=494

Table 13

EMPLOYER'S VIEW OF COORDINATOR'S EXPERTISE

PROGRAM AREA	Knowledge of Firm		Knowledge of Student	
	YES	%	YES	%
TOTAL		92.4		90.6
AGRIBUSINESS		95.7		95.7
OFFICE		95.9		95.9
DISTRIBUTION		90.7		90.9
HEALTH		96.3		81.5
HOME ECONOMICS		91.7		87.0
TRADE & INDUSTRIAL		91.7		87.9
INTERDISCIPLINARY		91.5		91.1
	N = 466		N = 481	

Table 14

EMPLOYER'S ASSESSMENTS OF PROGRAM

PROGRAM AREA	EFFECTIVE PROGRAM	FIRM BENEFITTED	CONTINUED PARTICIPATION
	YES %	YES %	YES %
AGRIBUSINESS	91.3	95.7	100.0
OFFICE	98.0	95.7	100.0
DISTRIBUTIVE	93.0	94.9	97.7
HEALTH	100.0	78.0	100.0
HOME ECONOMICS	96.0	87.0	100.0
TRADE & INDUSTRIAL	93.7	93.2	90.3
INTERDISCIPLINARY	93.3	90.4	93.9
	N = 500	N = 465	N = 493