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Tech companies unite to lure college intern

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The benefits of a well-designed internship program may seem obvious: Students get industry experience, and companies get extra labor at reduced rates.

What may be less obvious, at first glance, is that the most powerful internship programs in Oregon are also helping to keep talented people here in the state.

"If we are able to keep our best and our brightest in Oregon, they will serve as an asset to Oregon's economy," said Bruce Schafer, executive director of the Engineering Technology Industry Council.

Oregon's largest internship program, the Multiple Engineering Cooperation Program, has proved its worth since students were first admitted in 1980 from Oregon State University, where the program was launched. Since then, more than 2,000 interns have graduated from the program, including some well-known Oregon executives. Mark Christensen, director of mobile communications at Intel Capital, the semiconductor giant's investment arm, is one of the most prominent MECOP graduates.

Through MECOP, engineering students leave school for two consecutive quarters during their junior year -- typically spring and summer quarters, or summer and fall -- and again during their senior year to take paid, full-time internships.

MECOP now draws students from Portland State University and the Oregon Institute of Technology, as well as from OSU. The program has grown steadily, peaking with 290 interns during 2001.

During the past two years of economic downturn, the number of interns dropped off, but has recently rebounded. This year, 241 interns are working for MECOP member companies, up from 210 last year. The program now includes civil engineering students and this year, the first three graduate students were added.

MECOP is unique among internship programs, say businesspeople and academics who work with the program, because it is funded by industry and so is closely aligned with industry needs.

MECOP advisory board members, all from member companies, set the criteria for accepting students into the program, and they have also helped the participating universities fine-tune their curricula to better prepare students for work in the real world.

The result is a program that is both rigorous and prestigious, and serves as a draw for some of Oregon's best students.

"Having MECOP at PSU is an attractive option for students, and helps us with retention," said Marcia Fischer, assistant dean for enrollment and outreach at PSU's Maseeh College of Engineering and Computer Science.

Keeping talented students in Oregon is such an important goal of the program that a few years ago, MECOP added a "pre-select" feature to guarantee internships to high school students even before they enroll in college.

Out of more than 350 students who applied to MECOP for the 2004 internships, 260 were placed in a candidate pool on the basis of grades, courses completed and other indications of superior talent. Of these, 130 students entering their junior year were chosen by MECOP members after multiple interviews.

MECOP students take five years to earn their degrees, and graduate with a full year of work experience, a big advantage to them in a competitive job market.

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The process of selecting students "is so well-designed that it takes a tremendous amount of risk [to companies] out of taking interns," said Gary Petersen, director of MECOP. "With this type of screening process, companies can really challenge their interns, and they regularly see a 200 percent [return on investment] with these students."

Some say it is actually much better than that. "We get five to 10 times return on our investment," said Mark Noonan, director of engineering at RadiSys Corp. "They do more than you would anticipate."

Companies pay something less than \$1,000 per intern they take. They also pay their interns 70 percent of a starting engineer's salary, no less than \$16 per hour and often more.

Besides a job that can go a long way toward paying college expenses, MECOP students get an experience of industry that is unparalleled, say the companies that employ them and the academics who see them return to the classroom full of energy, enthusiasm and a deeper knowledge of how engineering skills are actually used in the workplace.

While MECOP counts among its 70 members large companies like Intel, Hewlett-Packard Co., Tektronix Inc., Mentor Graphics Corp., CH2MHill, Freightliner LLC and Boeing Co., it also counts plenty of small and medium-sized companies as members, including A-dec, Warn Industries, W&H Pacific, and several city and county government agencies.

While a large company like Intel takes on several hundred interns each year, small companies that need just one or two per year "could have been passed over by the engineering talent," said Larry Martin, business development manager at Albany's Wah Chang Corp.

"MECOP gives the students visibility to a set of Oregon companies they would not have been aware of otherwise," said Martin. "And these are excellent companies to work for."

The fact that MECOP was structured to allow six-month internships makes all the difference said Larry Farey, manager of LSI Logic Corp.'s industrial engineering department in Gresham. "We have very complex systems and processes here," he said. "Typically, it takes two months to break interns in. If it's just for the summer, then we just have them a few more weeks. With a six-month internship, we get them for four more months, and get real project work," a great payoff from the time that LSI mentors spend teaching the interns.

Companies often hire interns as full-time employees as soon as they graduate. "They can hit the ground running when they get into industry," said Norm Armour, general manager of LSI's Gresham operations. "You don't have to spend much time training them. That's huge."

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