

2-5-03 OSU INTERNSHIP PROGRAM THRIVING DESPITE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

By Gregg Kleiner

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CORVALLIS - Twenty-five years ago a handful of Oregon companies forged a unique alliance to bring the state's brightest engineering students to their workplaces for extended hands-on experiences that would benefit the companies as well as the students - and in the process keep Oregon's top new engineering talent from leaving the state for employment elsewhere.

Today, even in the midst of the worst economic downturn in decades, the Multiple Engineering Cooperative Program (MECOP), housed at Oregon State University but funded entirely by participating companies, is thriving.

Although the sluggish economy and the events of September 11th forced the program to slightly reduce the number of students it placed with participating companies in 2002, the numbers are climbing again, according to Gary Petersen, director of MECOP and its sister program for civil engineering students, CECOP, which was added in 1998.

"We have new companies joining and are on target this year to place every student we've committed to," Petersen said. "This is good news for the Oregon economy."

During a February 7th placement event to be held on the OSU campus, the internship program will place almost 225 engineering students from OSU, Portland State University, and Oregon Institute of Technology in internships at some 70 local companies - including 11 companies that joined the program this year. OSU has graduated more than 2000 MECOP/CECOP interns since the program was founded.

The vast majority of these internships will become fulltime job offers for the students upon graduation, which is welcome news for graduates facing a bleak job market.

And because the two, 6-month internships are paid, students earn an average of \$35,000 during their internships, which is welcome news for parents facing rising college tuition costs.

But what distinguishes MECOP/CECOP from other internship programs is the key role that participating companies play, said Petersen.

"This is the only program of its kind in the country that I know of," Petersen said. "And the thing that's unique is that it's all externally driven, financed and guided by member companies that participate fully - from serving on the board to helping place interns during our placement events. We have tremendous commitment and loyalty from companies."

Larry Martin, Business Development Manager at Wah Chang and chair of the MECOP/CECOP executive board, said that although some companies couldn't take an intern last year due to economic conditions, they stayed in the program and paid the annual dues of \$2,500.

“Even during down times, we don’t lose our MECOPers,” Martin said. “Because they get so much out of it. Some companies have discontinued their other internship programs, but they’ve kept the MECOP connection.”

What impresses companies, according to Petersen, is that through MECOP they can access 12 engineering disciplines at three different engineering institutions using a single company representative. “That cuts recruiting costs significantly,” Petersen said.

Upon graduation, historically more than 75 percent of the interns take permanent jobs at the companies where they worked as students.

Almost all of the companies are located in Oregon and include large firms like Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Boeing, Freightliner, and CH2M HILL, but also small- and medium-sized businesses like Oregon Freeze Dry, A-dec, and Warn Industries, as well as the city governments of Portland, Eugene, and Salem and W & H Pacific and WRG Design that hire CECOP interns.

John Vandecoevering, a vice president at Warn Industries said, “MECOP/CECOP is the best coop program in the U.S. It has brought many new ideas to our company, and given us top engineers that were ready to work in a professional manner right out of school. We currently have 6 MECOP alumni on staff.”

Martin said MECOP/CECOP gives these lesser known businesses access to the state’s best and brightest engineers and introduces students to companies that might not be on their radar.

“It’s very clear that this program is keeping top engineering talent here in Oregon,” Martin said. “Which is good for the economy.”

And because the program isn’t funded with tax dollars, it is a good example of Oregon industry collaborating with higher education to benefit all Oregonians, Martin said.

“This is as efficient an internship program as you’re going to see anywhere,” Martin said. “It’s a real gem that local companies, engineering students, and parents of college students should all know about.”

Parents of high school students should also know about MECOP/CECOP. The program offers a “pre-selection” process to outstanding high school students who intend to major in engineering, guaranteeing them internships before they even enroll in college.

“This is better than a \$5,000 scholarship,” Martin said. “We offer a \$35,000 work experience. If you’re a parent, you’re impressed.”

For more information about the MECOP/CECOP program, go to: <http://mecop.orst.edu>