

Aligning with Employer Expectations: The Role of GPA in Co-op Candidate Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

The University of Cincinnati (UC) began cooperative education in 1906, integrating experience with academics. UC's College of Engineering & Applied Science (CEAS) sustains this practice, requiring students to alternate academic semesters with full-time co-op positions. While co-op is a key factor in students' decision to attend UC, the job search process for a first co-op experience can be a significant source of stress for students. Many students, particularly those with lower grade point averages (GPAs), worry about their competitiveness in the job market.

This case study explores the impact of GPA on securing a first co-op position and identifies actionable strategies to support students in their job search. Utilizing institutional data, employer surveys, and roundtable discussions with electrical and chemical engineering employer partners, we found that while GPA plays a role, employers also prioritize personal qualities, extracurricular involvement, and professional communication skills. Employers emphasized the importance of human connection in hiring decisions.

These insights offer valuable guidance for co-op faculty for advising and instruction. By leveraging both quantitative and qualitative data, career education practitioners can better prepare students—especially those with lower GPAs—for a successful job search. Future research should expand this study to other engineering disciplines and industries.

Keywords: Cooperative education, GPA impact, job search, employer perspective, student support

ALIGNING WITH EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS: THE ROLE OF GPA IN CO-OP CANDIDATE EVALUATION

Cooperative education (co-op) was pioneered at the University of Cincinnati (UC) by Herman Schneider in 1906 (Reilly, 2006). Co-op is designed to give students hands-on, professional experience while they are still in college. Students in the College of Engineering & Applied Science (CEAS) alternate semesters of school with semesters of full-time, paid employment in their field, and graduate with almost two years of engineering work experience in a professional environment.

CEAS students complete their co-op experiences through the UC College of Cooperative Education and Professional Studies (CCPS), where faculty co-op advisors introduce students to experiential learning and support them as they

develop professionally through experience and reflection, both on the job and in the classroom. One of the key facets of the faculty co-op advisor role is to support and prepare students for their first co-op job search. Faculty co-op advisors also teach professional development courses, including a one credit-hour Introduction to Co-op course, designed to introduce students to the intricacies of the job search and professionalism for the workplace.

The integration of practice and theory is so successful that students choose to attend UC's College of Engineering and Applied Science specifically to engage in co-op. According to an internal 2020 survey of 877 graduating CEAS seniors (253 respondents), 91% of respondents said they decided to attend UC because of the co-op program. According to the survey, the next most cited factor for choosing

UC—campus aesthetics—was selected by 47% of respondents. Comments from this survey support the importance of co-op for CEAS students: “The co-op program is 100% your biggest asset. I would refer any potential engineering student to UC just for the co-op program” and “I came to UC for the co-op program, and my co-ops were by far the most rewarding part of the program” (Retrieved from the CEAS Class of 2020 Senior Class Survey shared by Dean John Weidner, December 2020).

However, despite all the enthusiasm around the program, our experience indicates that there is also anxiety in the search for a co-op position. Students put a lot of pressure on themselves to find a co-op role. From maintaining a high GPA to perfecting their elevator pitch at the career fair, we notice students feel like they must excel in every category to land their first co-op role. In our experience, students are often nervous because they have no previous engineering experience. As faculty co-op advisors, we see the stress that students go through finding a co-op, all while maintaining a rigorous academic load.

As faculty co-op advisors, we support students by preparing them for seeking and participating in professional engineering experiences, including actions they need to take for a successful first job search. Faculty co-op advisors often guide students using informal insights—drawing from anecdotal evidence, casual conversations with employers, and observation of characteristics of the first students to accept jobs. While these provide a solid foundation for helping students prepare for finding their first co-op, we were curious if there were gaps in our knowledge base. This moved us to take a closer look at the factors that impact a student’s first co-op job search, specifically their GPA, as it reflects student performance in the CEAS program thus far. Multiple studies explore the importance of various resume attributes for recent graduates obtaining employment, but none explore how GPA impacts co-op/intern hiring decisions (Velasco, 2012; Randazzo, 2020). Another reference explores the effect of GPA on post-graduation salaries in China (Zou, et al., 2022). One study showed that medical school interns have better GPA gains than those who do not participate in experiential learning (Filiberto, et al., 2021). After reviewing available data, we determined that GPA was a readily available data point that reflects the current level of student academic achievement.

Among UC faculty co-op advisors, it is commonly understood that students with low grade point averages (GPA), typically below 3.0 on a 4-point scale, tend to leave their

GPA off their resume. We are not certain why this occurs, but one guess is general resume advice received from various sources, such as employers, classmates, or family members, as well as professional development instructors unfamiliar with specific CEAS majors. Because engineering students tend to be receptive to hard data and employer feedback, we surveyed selected employer partners (chemical and electrical engineering employers) and engaged them in a roundtable discussion. The objective for this study was to identify data-driven, specific actions that these students can take to increase the probability of receiving their first job offer.

METHODOLOGY/LOGISTICS

Student Data

To obtain the most objective data, we wanted to focus our study on students searching for their first co-op experience. This eliminates the advantage of students with previous co-op/engineering experience and focuses on a baseline group: students who have similar education and work experience levels. Based on faculty co-op advisor observation, this is also the group of students who need the most advice, as the first-time job search tends to produce the most anxiety of all of their job searches. We decided to simplify the study to understand how students are selected for the interview, which eliminates the complexities of the interview process. We wanted to understand from employers what made them decide to interview one student over another. Since many students are nervous about their GPA, we focused on the topic: How does GPA influence your decision to interview a student for their first co-op experience? Students in their first job search have typically completed only one or two academic semesters on which their GPA is based.

We looked at existing hard data from our internal database, Professional Assessment & Learning (PAL), where UC co-ops provide information about each co-op experience as well as upload their resume. We explored the PAL data to try to determine whether GPA is correlated with success in the job search. Students are expected to record their job acceptance at the time they verbally accept an offer from an employer. Unfortunately, the “acceptance date” was not necessarily correlated to interview timing because students sometimes delay recording their co-op hiring in PAL. Some students record their position immediately; some wait days and some wait weeks. It is not a perfect data set, but we can

still gather data to see if there is a correlation between GPA and “acceptance date” because students who accept a position for the spring search in September typically record it in PAL much earlier than those who accept a position in December.

We collected PAL data regarding students searching for their first co-op for three separate semesters: Spring 2023, Fall 2023, and Spring 2024. We examined the date that students recorded their co-op hiring and collected the GPA from the resume that the students used for interviews for that co-op experience. PAL keeps a history of every resume a student uploads. In the case where a student did not include their GPA on the resume, we did not include that data, acknowledging that these were likely GPA’s below 3.0. The grade point average versus co-op acceptance date data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel and put into a linear graph. The R² value was calculated using Excel from the linear graph, and the correlation coefficient (R) was found by taking the square root. The correlation coefficient shows the strength of the relationship between GPA and acceptance date. A correlation coefficient or R value of 1 shows the strongest relationship, and an R value close to 0 shows a weak or no correlation.

Employer Perspectives: Small Group Discussion

To gather this information from the employer perspective, we, as co-op faculty advising CEAS students, reached out to and enlisted targeted UC co-op employers to gather insights about their methods for selecting students to interview for their co-op programs. We used qualitative data because it allows for more nuanced data when exploring complex topics, such as resume and candidate reviews. It allows for a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences than just utilizing numbers alone (Sutton, 2015; Oranga, 2023). In addition, a case study format was determined to be useful here to help answer the “how” and “why” questions about student selection for interviews from the employer perspective (Starman, 2013). Hoping for a high rate of participation, we reached out to specific chemical and electrical engineering employers based on the strong relationships we have developed with them. Additionally, these employers have been partners for 15+ years, demonstrating the value in the views they shared when it comes to hiring co-op students. One company for example, Shepherd Chemical, has been hiring UC students for 100 years. A summary of those participants and their companies is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

UC co-op employers from chemical and electrical engineering programs

NAME	COMPANY	MAJOR HIRED	WRITTEN RESPONSE	ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION
Scott Brody	Trew Automation	EE	X	X
Matt Bowser	Givaudan	ChemE	X	X
Gordon Samuels	Pole Zero	EE	X	X
Roland Kuebler	Valco Melton	EE	X	X
Maddy Merk	KLH Engineers	EE		X
Mike Radick	Thermo Fisher Scientific	ChemE	X	X
John Stueve	Shepherd Chemical	ChemE	X	X
Amanda Tavernelli	KLH Engineers	EE	X	

Written Responses: Initial Employer Small Group

Questions about individual company interview selection process for co-ops were emailed to ten University of Cincinnati co-op Chemical and Electrical Engineering employer partners. Participants hired most CEAS majors at UC. Eight of the ten employer partners responded to these written prompts. Questions were:

1. What is your process for identifying candidates to interview?
2. How heavily does GPA affect your interview and hiring process?
3. What other factors impact your decision to interview a student?
4. What factors impact your decision to make an offer?
5. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about hiring UC students?

Participants were invited to attend a roundtable discussion on campus. Questions were developed from the written responses, intended to further explore the themes we noticed.

Polling Data: Small Group of Employers

The employer partners met with us in person and answered an anonymous poll collected via a web-based polling platform. Questions in the poll were designed to learn more about the factors employers use to grant an interview for a co-op position. This allowed us to collect quantitative data on resume content. Instructions and questions were as follows: Overall, we are thinking about **first time** co-op students (without prior engineering experience) and wondering how you decide **who to interview**. How important are the factors below? Options: 1. Not that important; 2. Somewhat important; 3. Very important

1. Having a part-time job (high school or college)
2. Involvement in an engineering/major-related student group
3. Other involvement (sports, band, religious, volunteerism)
4. Scholarships and awards
5. GPA (you've already answered this, but to have a comparison to other factors)
6. Quality of resume (format, consistency, grammar)
7. Career Fair/Info Session interaction
8. Referral from another employee/co-op

Roundtable Discussion: Small Group of Employers

After the participants answered the polling questions, we explored each question above in more detail during the discussion session. We took notes and recorded a transcript of this discussion. We then moved the discussion to the following open-ended questions:

1. Where do your eyes travel first on a resume?
2. What stands out to you on a resume?
3. Many of you mentioned "hands-on" experience. Can you give specific examples?
4. Work ethic was also an important factor to many of you. How do you determine that from a resume?

Employer Perspectives: Career Fair Survey

UC hosts a two-day career fair specific to engineering and technology students during the fall and spring semesters, at which approximately 250 employers attend the technical portion over two days. A mix of both human resources and engineering professionals attend the career fair. Due to the mandatory co-op requirement of the engineering program, students are highly engaged, and the career fair is an integral component of the co-op job search.

During the spring 2025 career fair, we asked all engineering employers to complete a short survey to understand the impact of GPA on their hiring practices, gaining perspectives from a broader range of engineering majors, not just chemical and electrical engineering employers. Survey questions included:

1. If a student does not list their GPA on a resume, it will be discarded. (True/False)
2. GPA is an important factor when deciding which students to interview. (True/False)
3. What is the minimum GPA your organization will consider when deciding to interview a student? (open answer)
4. Personal interaction with a student can overcome a low GPA if the student makes a good impression. (True/False)
5. What stands out to you on a resume? What makes you want to interview a student? (open ended)
6. Any additional feedback on how GPA affects a student's ability to secure a co-op position? Any additional feedback on what makes a student successful in the job search? (open ended)
7. Other comments on a student's job search? (open ended)

TABLE 2**Correlation of GPA to acceptance date**

Semester	Correlation coefficient (r ²) ChemE	% GPAs available	Correlation coefficient (r ²) EE	% GPAs available
SPRING 2023	0.184	(33/44) 75%	0.449	(22/25) 88%
FALL 2023	0.323	(27/37) 73%	0.105	(26/30) 87%
SPRING 2024	0.117	(17/22) 77%	0.115	(20/27) 74%

RESULTS*Student Data*

The self-reported PAL data did not show a strong correlation between GPA and job “acceptance date.” because the correlation coefficients were far from 1. (Montgomery, 2021) Data is summarized in Table 2.

Written Responses: Initial Employer Small Group

After discovering there was very little correlation between GPA and job acceptance date from the PAL data, we surveyed our employers via email. Below is a summary of initial employer written responses on the importance of GPA:

- We require a min 3.0 GPA (G. Samuels, personal communication, October 28, 2024).
- We have differing opinions, but usually above 2.8 (M. Bowser).
- It’s very important, we require a 2.5. It conveys work ethic (R. Kuebler, personal communication, October 28, 2024).
- GPA can be a factor, but not determinant (S. Brody, personal communication, October 28, 2024).
- Their GPA is not a top priority (private communication, October 31, 2024).
- GPA does not play a significant role (A. Tavernelli, personal communication, November 1, 2024).
- It’s important, but not the most important factor (J. Stueve, personal communication, October 31, 2024).

Employer Perspectives: Polling Data

Six of the seven employers at the roundtable participated in the electronic poll during the in-person employer round table; the results are summarized in Table 3.

We were genuinely surprised with the results of the roundtable, which challenged our assumptions. The table demonstrates the qualitative relative importance of co-op resume content.

Employer Perspectives: Small Group Discussion

The results were unexpected and led to fruitful discussions around the resume content topics listed above. We had assumed that involvement in an engineering club would be most significant and found the results surprising. The authors believed that students who participate in groups related to their field of study have a greater passion for their major and would therefore be more valuable to employers.

Part-Time Jobs

Since experience is one of the main components of a resume, we wanted to determine the significance of prior part-time employment in regard to a student’s first-time co-op search. Does a part-time or summer job in high school really help your chance of getting an interview in an engineering role? How does a job scooping ice cream or nannying children impact your search for a first co-op? The survey results suggest that part-time jobs are only somewhat important. “For me, it’s not a deciding factor if I’m going to interview this student or not” (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

TABLE 3

Poll Results: Importance of factors in granting an interview

Poll Question: how important to granting an interview is the following:	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Average Rating
Part Time Job*	1	3	1	2
Involvement – engineering clubs	1	3	2	2.17
Involvement – non-academic clubs/ volunteering/band/sports	0	2	4	2.67
Scholarships/awards	6	0	0	1
GPA	1	4	1	2
Quality of resume	0	0	6	3
Career fair interaction	1	2	3	2.3
Referral from colleague/co-op	1	3	2	2.17

**Due to technical difficulties, only five out of the six responses were recorded.*

According to participants, part-time employment gains importance when students can communicate the skills they gained from these experiences. Did you develop customer service skills? Did you learn the art of negotiation as a nanny? Professional and people skills are still really important in the engineering field, and many of these skills are practiced in those part-time roles. “The job itself isn’t that important, but it’s the diversification of a person to me is very important ... working in process engineering, it’s part technical and part people skills” (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Most of the participants echoed that showing what a student learned and showing growth on a part-time job is where the value is to the potential co-op employer. “That’s something that’s very important to me, they’ve been able to collaborate as a team, they’ve been able to learn from that experience and how that can apply to their co-op with us” (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

All is not lost if the student has no prior work experience. Showing an employer that you worked on something that mattered to the student could be equally as important. “And if they didn’t have a part-time job, did they do something else?” (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Involvement in an Organization Related to Their Major

As faculty co-op advisors, we often advise students to join student groups related to their major, such as Engineering Tribunal or American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE). We advise students that it shows interest in their chosen field and is a great way to meet potential employers. However, although it’s a great way to introduce yourself to employer speakers, in this case, our intuition was wrong! Employers were not as interested in whether students were merely members of an organization. Attending meetings and being a passive member of the group had little effect on the employer’s decision to interview a student. “Are you actually involved? Do you do stuff with the group? Or are you just a member?” (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024). And “If you’re involved and don’t have much to talk about, that means nothing to me” (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Instead, employers want to see leadership and active involvement in the club as well. “If they put it on their resume, they need to be prepared that somebody will say, ‘Hey, you’re in the car group [university automotive club], what are you doing in it?’” (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Involvement in a Non-academic Organization

The result that surprised us the most was understanding how a student's involvement in something besides their major impacted the search. For all the roundtable participants, this type of involvement carried importance. Students sharing a hobby, sport, or volunteer service mattered to our employers. It mattered more than GPA and previous work experience, which felt counterintuitive to us. "It shows breadth and diversity, their own activities and priorities and so on. It is also an opportunity to connect with the interviewers" (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024). And "It shows they actually have a personality and not just an engineering brain all the time. That's important" (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024). Also, "Anything that will differentiate you or that you're heavily involved in and can speak a lot to. You can have some great conversations and see the depth of people's personalities in that short interview time" (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Scholarships and Awards

The employers all agreed that scholarships and awards were the least important factor when deciding whether or not to interview a student. Scholarships can be given for all kinds of things, and don't necessarily correlate to a student's character or ability. A general academic scholarship listed on a resume does not help give a student an edge in the quest to receive an interview.

There were two factors worth noting that impacted a student positively when it came to scholarships on a resume. If a student earned the scholarship through a competition of some sort, that would positively affect the participant's decision to interview the student. The other factor was the community service that is often associated with a scholarship. Some academic scholarships at the University of Cincinnati come with a community service requirement. If a student could speak about the impact of their scholarship volunteerism requirement, that would positively impact their resume.

Grade Point Average

We asked employers: "How important is a student's GPA when deciding who to interview?"

The consensus of most of the panelists was that GPA, after a baseline (which varied), did not matter; GPA was simply a filter to reduce the number of resumes they needed to

review. For some companies there was a minimum threshold below which they "rarely" hired. A participant mentioned that he would consider talking to a student who reached out personally. The student who reached out and showed through their conversation that they would work hard for him could overcome the low GPA. For example, there was a student with a 2.6 GPA who was considered for a position because they really liked his personality and experience in landscaping.

GPA is like a threshold; you know we very rarely hire a student with less than a 3.0, but once you've crossed that threshold, I don't really care whether it's a 3 or 3.8 or whatever ... I'm going to interview you and I'm going to probe into who you are and what you do and what you like and what's important to you and so on and then I'm going to decide who to hire (Roundtable participant, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Students who demonstrate an interest in the company, an acknowledgment of a low GPA, and a willingness to improve can make a good impression on an employer.

Several participants mentioned that perspectives on GPA had split opinions depending on the department. Some did not care at all about GPA, while others had a firm minimum GPA requirement. One participant agreed and said that the GPA just represented that the student would have the ability to graduate from their program and that's the only criterion they are really interested in. Another said that GPA is an indicator of time management and work ethic; students should try to dig out of the hole and catch up from that.

We asked a follow up question: "What would it take for a student to get in front of you (for an interview) if they had below a 3.0 GPA?"

A participant said that a student who can do this demonstrates a growth mindset and is what he is looking for. He would choose that person over those to whom a high GPA came very easily. Another participant said that he might ask questions such as "Is there a class that you have an issue with?" Two others agreed that personality is a huge factor. They ask, "Why is the GPA low?" and "What is this student doing to improve it?"

Panelists mentioned a couple of things they did not want to see. If a student does not include GPA on the resume, they will assume the worst: that their GPA is so low, it is not worth following up on. If they meet with the student in

person, they will ask about the GPA anyway. Students should include their GPA regardless of its value. A panelist commented that eventually GPA will drop in importance on the resume as the student gains experience.

Quality of Resume

We asked employers: “How important is the quality of a student’s resume when deciding who to interview?”

One panelist commented: “No errors. Period.” Panelists noted that the resumes are a “piece of paper that is the only thing that makes you stand out in the pile.” Attention to detail is critical. There is no excuse for not having a good resume, considering the technology today with word processing software, autocorrection, and other tools that make resumes easier. Students should adhere to a common structure including resume basics; consistency is important. Panelists agree that an “Objective” section is not needed on a resume of a college student seeking a co-op. To stand out, students should create multiple resumes, customizing each resume to a specific job application.

Career Fair Interaction

We asked employers: “How important is a student’s interaction with you at Career Fair when deciding who to interview?”

Perspectives on career fair interactions varied with the companies represented. Panelists noted that this is a huge opportunity for some students. Other panelists said that career fair interactions could be “hit or miss.” If students do attend, they should be very prepared for the career fair. Eye contact is important. Students should be prepared to state why they are interested in the company. Sending a follow up e-mail to the company is good practice—obtaining a business card is a test to see if the student is prepared to follow up!

One participant said when it comes to a career fair, he would be willing to work with individual students who contacted him ahead of time to let him know about class conflicts with career fair scheduling. A student could obtain contact information through their faculty co-op advisor or the event page on Handshake.

Referral From Colleague/Co-op

Panelists made the following comments regarding referrals:

- The “best way to hire is from referrals by A-players [strong employees with demonstrated success at the company]”;

- A referral almost serves as a pre-screen for the position—the candidate is interested, familiar with the work and the culture;
- A company can have success interviewing referred candidates because they have a good understanding of the company, and the candidates come prepared.

(Roundtable participants, personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Other Considerations

Panelists noted that students risk creating a negative impression if their intentions are perceived as being primarily focused on the pursuit of financial gain. They also do not positively differentiate themselves when they say they chose their major by saying they were “good at math and science.” Students should have another topic to talk about when it comes to why they chose their major.

Results of Larger Survey: Career Fair

The career fair survey was completed anonymously by 38 individuals, representing a variety of engineering disciplines and job roles. This anonymous survey may have included both human resource individuals and engineering professionals responsible for their organization’s co-op program.

Results for “What is the minimum GPA your organization will consider when deciding to interview a student?” are shown in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4

Survey Results: Employer required minimum GPA considered for interview

MIN. GPA	NO. OF RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
3.3	1	2.5%
3.0	15	39.5%
2–2.8	10	26%
Does not matter	12	32%

TABLE 5**Responses to “What stands out to you on a resume?”**

WORD	COUNT
Experience	16 (total)
Co-op or related	3
Any (if show translatable skills)	13
Projects (personal or related to major)	8
Interest (in major)	7
Involvement (in an organization)	6
Organization (of resume)	5
Personality	4
Skills	4
GPA	2
Leadership	1
Major	1

Less than half of the responding employers needed to see a GPA above a 3.0 and nearly a third reported that GPA does not even matter. Employers provided the following comments regarding GPA: “Honestly, I never look for GPA. Interest and engagement are much more important”; “Work ethic and ability to learn is more important”; and “GPA has a minimum impact as long as a student is not failing”. One career fair survey participant commented:

Overall interaction is what makes students stand out the most. A student who is well prepared, asks targeted questions, and is engaged throughout the conversation can overcome a lower GPA, and can stand out against students with higher GPAs who didn't come to the booth prepared. Interpersonal interaction is the best way to stand out against other students, as this is where most students are lacking (Anonymous survey data, personal communication, February 13, 2025).

When asked what else stands out on a resume, employers filled in short phrases and sentences. To summarize the data, we looked for word count of specific items. The results are given in Table 5. According to these responses experience remains the largest single factor. When grouping projects, interest and involvement into one group, indicative of a student’s interest and passion for industry, we can see that unified they become a significant factor, reinforcing the theme that there are other resume criteria more important than GPA.

CONCLUSION

The insights we learned have implications for helping hundreds of CEAS students successfully obtain interviews for their first co-op job and appropriately channel their energies in that process, ultimately reducing the unnecessary anxiety of a prolonged job search. Based on the survey data and employer roundtable discussion, we concluded that the students who receive interviews from their resumes do the following three things well:

1. Have a **clear, well-organized resume** that is one page, has an easy-to-read format, and is free from errors.
2. Showcase **meaningful experience and involvement** that includes relevant or unrelated work, personal projects, and extracurricular activities. The type of work was less important than the skills gained from that experience.
3. Demonstrate **genuine interest and personality through networking and personal outreach**. Employers look for students who demonstrate a passion for their field, curiosity, and eagerness to learn. What you have done is less important than who you are.

Deliverables

In addition to verbally sharing the outcomes of the employer roundtable during a meeting with faculty co-op advisor colleagues, the following slides (Figures 1, 2, and 3) were shared with all faculty co-op advisors advising CEAS students in CCPS. This information is intended for faculty co-op advisors to share directly with the students they are advising, and those students who are enrolled in the first-year Introduction to Co-op courses.

FIGURE 1

GPA and career fair strategies

GPA & Career Fair

If you have a Low GPA, Employers want to know:

- Are you working to pay for college?
- Was there one class that tripped you up?
- Did you have personal life circumstances?

A 10 second positive engagement with Employer can trump a low GPA:

- Describe a personal project
- Show your interest in their company (prepare ahead)
- Make eye contact, smile!

Data retrieved from 2024 UC co-op employer roundtable

FIGURE 2

GPA and importance of networking

GPA & Networking

Networking and taking initiative can OVERCOME a low GPA!
Employers often recognize and appreciate **individual effort to connect**.
Include GPA on your resume – otherwise they assume it's worse

If you have a Low GPA, Employers want to know:

- Are you working to pay for college?
- Was there one class that tripped you up?
- Did you have personal life circumstances?

A 10 second positive engagement with Employer can trump a Low GPA:

- Describe a personal project
- Show your interest in their company (prepare ahead)
- Make eye contact, smile!

Data retrieved from 2024 UC co-op employer roundtable

FIGURE 3

GPA and resume implications

GPA & Your Resume

- Always include your GPA even < 3.0
- 86% of employers would NOT interview student without GPA visible
- 10 second engaging personal interaction can overcome low GPA
 - Could be in-person or online outreach
- Online applications without GPA are rejected 100% of time
- Be ready to talk about what happened and how you are fixing it
- Employers acknowledge that:
 - Low GPA is not a reflection of intelligence
 - College is an adjustment
 - Only takes one class to get low GPA
 - GPA more meaningful further along in college

Data retrieved from 2024 UC co-op employer roundtable

Impact

The impact of this roundtable was felt immediately. The results of the study changed our advising and teaching practices as well as our first-semester survey courses (100+ students). We were able to more accurately and confidently speak to our students who were struggling to find a co-op position. This roundtable conveniently occurred over half-way through the semester, when there is often a lull in co-op

hiring. We notice that students begin to feel a bit of burnout from the job search process at that time, based on conversations and student job search activity. But with this new information in hand, we personally felt more energized and engaged in helping our students. We now had **data and numbers to share with our engineering students**. We believe this will result in a bigger impact on our teaching. We no longer have to say, “Trust us.” We can say, “Look at the data. Research shows that GPA is generally not a significant factor in the hiring process; you just need to work more strategically.”

Takeaways from our study were shared with colleagues in the form of a faculty presentation and slides. The Introduction to Co-op course is taken by nearly 1,200 CEAS students every year. This study has the potential to impact thousands of CEAS students as they search for their first co-op position, leading to subsequent co-op experiences, full-time roles, and ultimately positively impacting their career path.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE WORK

Employers showed empathy for students searching for their first co-op experience. They understand how GPA can be impacted by one difficult class very early in a student’s college career, or by a difficult personal situation. They understand that it is intimidating to approach an employer at the career fair and know how demanding it can be to manage a rigorous course load and a job search simultaneously.

Importantly, we learned that there is very much a “human connection” component to the job search. Employers want to know: Who is the applicant as a person? What are their other interests? What are they doing when they aren’t in classes or studying? Employers emphasized these points during the roundtable discussion. They are going to be working closely with the student and want to make sure they can have a good working relationship.

This study gave us valuable feedback with potential for high impact on our teaching practices. Engineers are driven by data, which we are now able to provide in both quantitative and qualitative formats. Personally, and professionally, it was energizing to meet with our employers in this targeted way and gain a broader understanding of the co-op job search from an employer perspective, so we can better teach and advise. Our intention is to invite employer partners to present at experiential education conferences to share these findings more broadly, ensuring students have the strategies needed for success in the job search.

While our findings offer valuable insights, several important limitations should be acknowledged to guide future research and strengthen the applicability of these results. Further understanding around student success in the job search could be gained by collecting data from co-op faculty advising other engineering majors. We did not collect student demographic data other than major. This could be a future area of exploration if we wanted to explore why some

students with a lower GPA were more successful. Another limitation of the study was that the size and geographical location of participating employers were not considered. Intentionally including large international organizations, and those in competitive industries like tech, defense, and space—that are known to have strict GPA requirements—would provide important perspectives to this study.



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