

LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES GRADUATES' REFLECTIONS ON THEIR
COOPERATIVE EDUCATION EXPERIENCES AND
CAREER SELF-EFFICACY

by

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B.S., Fort Hays State University, 1993
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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs
College of Education

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Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide insight into Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) graduates' reflections on their cooperative education (co-op) experiences and resulting career self-efficacy. Wichita State University houses a cooperative education program, the only one of its kind in the state of Kansas. This program helps students in all academic disciplines find work experiences related to their major for which they can earn academic credit, and sometimes even get paid. Engineering and business students typically identify immediate benefits of participating in cooperative education; however, LAS administrators, faculty, and students have been slower to accept and include this experience in their academic programs.

The two research questions that guided this study were: (a) How do former LAS students describe their co-op experience? and (b) What did these students gain, with regard to career self-efficacy, through their co-op experience? Because LAS students may not learn skills specifically related to a career due to the general nature of an LAS degree program, the current study focuses more on the graduates' reflections of their own experiences within co-op as well as the skills that were developed.

Data analysis revealed the following nine themes: (a) resume-building and interview preparation were essential skills learned to aid in their co-op search; (b) the ability to "try out" various settings and areas of interest was experienced; (c) participants' initial anxiety was gradually replaced with greater comfort and confidence; (d) participants were able to learn from positive as well as negative characteristics of their co-workers; (e) positive feedback, support, and networking opportunities were received from co-workers and clients; (f) interviewing confidence as well as increased resume-building skills were useful in obtaining a full-time job; (g) an increased sense of professionalism was gained, along with job-specific skills, and

communication skills; (h) positive attitudes were experienced, along with a perceived ability to handle success and challenges in a new job; and (i) participants gained leadership and supervisory skills, enabling them to take on responsibility in their current full-time work after receiving their degree.

It was determined that participating in cooperative education is beneficial to students and that the graduates still consider it an integral part of their college experience. The students also shared that they were able to use the skills and knowledge learned from their co-op in the job search as well as in their current full-time job. Therefore, it is determined that the study supports the idea that career self-efficacy is in fact developed by recent LAS graduates while participating in co-op.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	xi
Acknowledgments.....	xii
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
Cooperative Education Defined	4
Wichita State University Cooperative Education Program.....	6
Career Self-Efficacy Defined.....	10
Statement of the Problem.....	11
Purpose of Study.....	12
Research Questions.....	13
Definitions of Terms.....	13
Summary.....	14
Chapter 2 - Review of Literature.....	16
Theoretical Framework.....	16
Self-Efficacy and Social Learning Theory	17
Career Self-Efficacy.....	19
Research in Cooperative Education.....	21
The Impact on Student Learning.....	22
Success after Graduation	23
Benefits of Cooperative Education to LAS Students.....	24
The Impact of Cooperative Education in Higher Education.....	25
Summary.....	26

Chapter 3 - Methodology.....	28
Research Design.....	28
Research Sample.....	29
Data Collection.....	32
Analysis and Synthesis of Data.....	33
Trustworthiness.....	36
Reflexivity.....	37
Ethical Considerations.....	38
Summary.....	39
Chapter 4 – Findings.....	40
Demographic Information.....	40
Jaron.....	40
Brenda.....	43
Blake.....	45
Amanda.....	48
Jillian.....	50
Participant Description Summary.....	53
Thematic Categories and Invariant Constituents.....	54
Structural Composite Descriptions.....	79
Summary.....	81
Chapter 5 - Review, Discussion, and Implications.....	83
Restatement of Research Questions and Findings.....	83
Discussions of Findings.....	83

Limitations of Study	97
Recommendations for Practice	99
Recommendations for Future Study	101
Summary	102
References.....	104
Appendix A: Demographic Form.....	111
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form.....	112
Appendix C: Interview Guide – First Interview.....	114
Appendix D: Interview Guide – Second Interview.....	116
Appendix E: Participant Profile Summary.....	118
Appendix F: Skills and Qualities Sought by Employers.....	119

List of Tables

Table 1.1 Five-Year Student Evaluation Summary.....	13
Table 4.1 Thematic Categories and Invariant Constituent Distribution for Interviews.....	54
Table 4.2 Work Experience Prior to Co-op Experience.....	56
Table 4.3 Co-op Office Contribution to Individual Skills and Self-Efficacy.....	57
Table 4.4 Development of Knowledge, Skills, and Behaviors Resulting from Co-op Experience.....	59
Table 4.5 Influence of Co-op Experiences on Career Goals.....	61
Table 4.6 Mastery Experiences.....	64
Table 4.7 Co-op Mastery Experience on Current Job and Career Choice.....	65
Table 4.8 Emotional Experiences from Co-op Work Opportunity.....	66
Table 4.9 Influences of Emotive Experiences.....	68
Table 4.10 Vicarious Learning through Co-op Experiences.....	70
Table 4.11 Experiences of Social Persuasion.....	74
Table 4.12 Networking.....	76
Table 4.13 Recommendations of Participants.....	78

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.

- *Confucius*

Confusion and anxiety about post-graduate job preparation can be quite common among many college students today. Universities develop programs to help prepare students for the turbulent waters of the world of work by offering various opportunities to learn about the current workforce, workplace etiquette, expectations of employers, resume writing skills, and effective interviewing tips. Oftentimes, whether these services are utilized or not, college students may still have the feeling that they need further assistance in their career development process. This is especially true if students are not sure what to do after graduation and do not have the confidence to tackle the workforce to successfully begin their career.

To add to the confusion, there are continuous changes in employment trends. Recently many employers indicate they feel that today's graduates are not prepared for the workforce. Howard (2004) supported this idea by quoting the Business-Higher Education Forum (1994), "Business leaders agreed that recent graduates were deficient in communication skills, the ability to work in teams, flexibility, the ability to accept ambiguity comfortably, the ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds, understanding of globalization and its implications, and ethics training" (p. 3). Therefore, it can be assumed that many employers believe the students are not obtaining the necessary foundational skills needed to succeed in the workplace from the traditional college coursework.

How can higher education help students respond to the requests of employers, yet not jeopardize the standards of the college curricula and, ultimately, add to students' sense of career

self-efficacy? Cooperative education (co-op) may be a useful experience to answer the call and be an effective way to help college students become more comfortable, confident, and successful in the workforce. According to Howard (2004), cooperative education provides students with unique learning outcomes and learning processes that prepare them for the workforce outside of the classroom. A feeling of confidence can come from practice and reflection that is encouraged by participating in supplemental programs in higher education such as cooperative education. Co-op is where qualified students can be introduced to opportunities to gain exposure and experience necessary to succeed in the workplace.

Students who participate in co-op are exposed to the world of work and its culture early; therefore, they may be more confident in their career development and positively respond to the sometimes anxiety-provoking demands of employers. In fact, employers have higher expectations of today's college graduates, more so than previous generations, because they are searching for employees who can begin work at a higher level to fill the void left by experienced baby-boomer retirees. Gardner and Hanneman (2010) reinforced this idea:

Prior to the disruption within the U.S. economy, a result of the combined collapse of the housing and financial sectors in the fall of 2008, demand pressures were building within the college labor market in response to companies desperately seeking talent to replace their aging Boomer workforce. One strategy in knowledge management is to recruit young professionals, directly from college campuses, to help partially alleviate the problem. These young adults must come prepared to demonstrate higher levels of proficiencies and abilities than those who graduated five years ago. (p. 1)

Employers are looking for graduates who can begin work at a more advanced level with less training and support from their supervisors. Co-op can help students gain the insight and experience needed to help them start at a higher level as well as assist them with their career development, both of which can enhance their ability to evolve as the world of work changes over time (Linn, 2004). Linn (2004) added:

Cooperative education provides students with unique learning outcomes and learning processes that prepare them for the world beyond the confines of educational institutions.

When students can build experiences in varied work environments as part of their undergraduate preparation, they learn to adapt to change; they build a set of marketable skills, and develop the self-confidence they need to manage their own careers. (p. 4)

Students can learn about the workplace and adapt to the culture and changes that occur within it, as well as develop skills, experience, and self-confidence that will help them be successful as they continue their careers beyond college. Hughey and Hughey (1999) reiterated how students should be consciously prepared for the constantly evolving workforce by acquiring a variety of skills before graduation. They stated, “[W]ith the changes taking place in the workplace, it is important that prospective workers develop the skills needed to be successful and required in the workplace” (p. 205). To that end, they stressed the importance of encouraging students to develop the “skills, knowledge, and attitudes” (p. 207) that will enhance their opportunities for success. These skills, knowledge and attitudes will help them gain confidence and career self-efficacy as their career paths may evolve and even change over time. For these reasons, helping students obtain professional experience and an understanding of workplace culture are ways that higher education personnel can effectively assist in students’ career development, which can possibly lead to positive career self-efficacy. Co-op programs may be essential to this process.

Cooperative Education Defined

Cooperative education (co-op) is one type of experiential/work-integrated learning and is commonly associated with internships on college campuses. The National Commission for Cooperative Education (NCCE, 2011) defines cooperative education as “a structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive experiences in a field related to a student’s academic or career goals.” Co-ops provide an opportunity to integrate practice from coursework and work in a partnership between an employer, the student, and the educational institution. NCCE (2011) goes on to explain that there are essential characteristics of a successful co-op program including formal recognition by institution, the receipt of academic credit, and the provision of a learning environment facilitative of productive work.

Because co-ops and internships share similar characteristics, employers and students often confuse the two. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) 2009 Experiential Education Survey, internships differ from co-ops in that internships are typically opportunities that last one semester only, where students gain experience relevant to their major. They may be paid or unpaid, depending on the industry offering the experience, and students who participate in internships might not receive academic credit for their work. Co-ops, on the other hand, are opportunities that can last for multiple semesters and are characterized by work that is related to students’ majors and career goals. Co-ops are typically paid in some form (e.g., wage, stipend, scholarship), and the majority of students who choose to complete a co-op receive academic credit. Grubb and Villeneuve (1995) further classified co-ops into two types, alternating and parallel. In an alternating co-op, students exchange a semester of academic coursework with full-time paid employment, repeating this cycle several times until graduation. In the parallel method, students attend classes and work part-time during the same semester;

parallel co-ops are structured to accommodate students' class schedules and other commitments. Parallel and alternating co-ops help students explicitly connect work and learning and are typically supported by co-op programs in higher education which effectively allows students to earn academic credit for their experience.

Co-ops are not a new fad on college campuses. First introduced by Dean Herman Schneider at the University of Cincinnati in 1906, they have a long history of providing opportunities for students to gain skills, experience, and college credit in higher education (Linn, 2004). According to the University of Cincinnati's co-op website, Dean Schneider's first co-op class had 27 students who worked in 13 companies; in the second year, there were more than 400 inquiries from prospective students. E. Sam Sovilla, Associate Provost and Director of the Division of Professional Practice at the University of Cincinnati, wrote in the forward for Cates' (1999) book:

Many schools implemented Schneider's innovation because faculty and administrators felt that co-op's collection of attributes, objectives and method of their combination provided a better plan for practical, discipline-related learning than internships, apprenticeships and the traditional summer employment programs. From the outset, Schneider's primary purpose for cooperative education was to enhance student learning.

(p. 5)

Though co-ops originated over 100 years ago, it has taken more than half a century for many higher education institutions to see the benefits of them for students and be implemented into the mainstream curriculum. As a result of Dean Schneider's vision, there are currently about 600 cooperative education programs nationwide with more than 241,000 students participating in them each year (Cates & Jones, 1999). There is one such program at Wichita State University.

Wichita State University's Cooperative Education Program

According to the Wichita State University (Wichita State) view book used by the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, Wichita State is an urban-serving research university with a diverse student body with students from more than 110 countries. Yet, 87% of the students who attend WSU are from Kansas and represent nearly every county in the state. The campus houses six colleges, with the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) as the largest of the colleges. LAS hosts 15 departments and three schools. Wichita State can be found in the heart of Wichita, Kansas, which has an estimated population of 361,000. Wichita is home to many large industries but is best known for the aviation industry.

Because Wichita State is an urban-serving university, it houses Kansas' largest cooperative education (co-op) program, Cooperative Education and Work-Based Learning (WSU Co-op employer brochure, 2009). The personnel therein are responsible for coordinating an academic program for students to link classroom learning with real-world work experiences not only within the city, but also nationwide and even worldwide. At the beginning of the program, administrators in the office provide students with resume tips and interviewing insights to effectively seek opportunities for a co-op in order to gain skills and knowledge in their field, to earn money (usually), and to obtain academic credit. Depending on a student's major, he/she can enroll in one to four credit hours per semester.

Throughout the program and work term, students participate in a structured academic process. First, an initial session is scheduled during which the student and the co-op college coordinator discuss the career goals of the student. Also, the student informs the coordinator what he/she would like to learn and how he/she would like to participate in the co-op program.

Once a student is hired to participate in a co-op, the work supervisor assists the student in completing a learning objective agreement to identify skills and knowledge that the student would like to develop while participating in the program. The supervisor/mentor makes a commitment to facilitate the learning experience and skill development of the student by signing the agreement form. Next, a faculty co-op advisor looks over the objectives to approve them and to assign a final project that the student will need to submit at the end of the semester. This final project focuses on the student's career interests as well as to what he/she is doing in co-op during the semester. This final project may be in the form of a reflection paper, research article, journal, or a portfolio of the student's work. Then, in the middle of the semester, a mid-term visit is performed by a co-op coordinator to make sure the student is working in a quality setting, gaining knowledge about the industry, and consciously working on the learning objectives developed at the beginning of the semester. There are also evaluation components. The student evaluation collects input from the students pertaining to the opportunities gained at the work site, whether his/her objectives were accomplished, and the extent to which new skills were developed and learned. There is also an employer evaluation where work site supervisors/mentors are asked for input about the student's skills and work ethic during the co-op. This is helpful feedback as the student continues to try to identify strengths and weaknesses to prepare for the full-time job search. Finally, at the end of the semester, the student completes the final project, which typically helps the student to reflect on the work experience and the co-op program in general. The student gives the project directly to the faculty co-op advisor. The required paperwork for the semester helps the student to be proactive in skill development as he or she is required to document the co-op and how experience is gained in the student's field.

Additionally, the reflective component is unique to co-ops and is important for the student to determine the amount of learning that took place during the work experience.

According to the Professional Practice Workshop (PPW) handbook (2011) created by the co-op office staff, which is given to students, who participate in a PPW and who are qualified to become co-op students, the benefits to students who gain work experience while taking classes are quite numerous. By having the opportunity to work outside of the classroom, students will understand what aptitudes are needed to be successful in the workforce. They can develop transferable skills that will be helpful in any work situation. By taking time to gain experience, students will also obtain knowledge in their industry of choice and attain certainty that they will (or will not) be happy working in the industry upon graduation. The money earned through these experiences is an added bonus. According to recent statistics from Wichita State's Cooperative Education and Work-Based Learning office (2010), many co-ops are paid with the average wage ranging from more than \$10.00 per hour in the health and social science professions to approximately \$14.00 per hour in the engineering industry. Additionally, many companies offer housing, a living stipend, or will at least assist the students in finding temporary housing if students choose to do their co-op away from the Wichita area.

Students often inquire about which companies offer co-ops and how common they are in the workforce outside of the college campus. According to the NACE (2009) Experiential Education Survey, 92.6% of the employers surveyed planned to hire for internship/co-op positions for the upcoming year. With those statistics in mind, students can be encouraged that they will be able to find companies in their fields that offer a form of pre-graduation training. It may also be encouraging for students to know that 71.9% of the responding employers in the survey use their co-op program as a recruiting tool and reported that 28% of the full-time hires

were directly from their co-op program (NACE, 2009). With the possibility of companies eventually offering full-time positions with higher starting salaries to graduates with experience, students should be able to understand that participating in co-op is beneficial in helping them become marketable in today's fluid and ever-changing workforce and can potentially introduce them to their first full-time career position. These statistics seem to reflect the experiences of the employers of WSU students as well. Co-op programs are becoming more important to Wichita-area employers as well as they look for differences between two equally qualified applicants. It is the relevant experience that will likely set one candidate ahead of the other. Employers can appreciate the comprehensive services of the co-op office where they are coached on the policies and processes along with connecting to students who match their organization's needs. As described in the 2011 Wichita State University's co-op employer brochure, the benefits to employers include being able to:

- Select from pre-qualified students to fill work needs;
- Evaluate candidates in real work situations before offering a permanent position;
- Work with a professional staff member assigned to each college;
- Enhance the image of a company at Wichita State University;
- Receive assistance in promoting opportunities.

Employers can use the services of the co-op office at no cost to their organization. They are able to hire a qualified individual who is willing to learn about their company and perform the required work. The employer might keep the student as a full-time employee when he or she graduates. The results of the NACE (2009) survey indicated that more than half of employers believed that the value of such programs in the recruitment process was helpful as they are effective tools for identifying productive full-time hires.

Colleges and universities can be effective resources for employers when looking for new talent. They can connect employers to students who are ready to gain career-relevant experience and can provide fresh ideas and knowledge of the newest processes from their coursework. Additionally, students who use the services offered by the co-op office on their college campus can be better prepared for the workplace. One of the focal points of this research is to identify the extent to which students can obtain career self-efficacy by participating in the co-op program.

Career Self-Efficacy Defined

When discussing confidence and success in career development, the concept of self-efficacy comes to mind. Bandura (1977a) first introduced the construct of self-efficacy and defined it as an individual's level of confidence in and beliefs about his/her capabilities to successfully carry out courses of action, to manage situations, and to attain desired performance outcomes. Self-efficacy can ultimately determine whether an individual will choose to perform or refrain from attempting to complete a task (Bandura, 1977a). Therefore, self-efficacy is an important factor in understanding how people develop confidence in a variety of tasks on the job and how they are motivated to move to new challenges in their careers.

Bandura's original theory of self-efficacy was introduced in 1977. Since then, self-efficacy has been the focal point for a variety of studies about specific populations of people and for specific domains. Betz and Hackett (2006) explained self-efficacy and how it "must be linked to a specific behavioral domain to have meaning" (p. 3) and Bandura (1997a) added that self-efficacy must be measured against some type of behavior as it is a cognitive appraisal or judgment of future performance and, if the interest is not defined, assessment is impossible. Betz and Hackett (2006) added:

We often receive requests for a measure of "self-efficacy," clearly indicating the

inquirer's lack of understanding of the concept. The question is, self-efficacy for what? There is not an entity called "career self-efficacy" except as an umbrella term for self-efficacy beliefs with respect to possible career-related domains of behavior that could be postulated. (p. 6)

The current research focuses on career self-efficacy and to clearly define career self-efficacy is to understand self-efficacy in general and then apply it to career behaviors. Wood (2008) defines career behaviors as "actions exhibited as a result of career development interventions" (p. 55). Examples of career behaviors include educational and career planning, skill development, performance in resume writing and interviewing, motivation of career preparation, and networking (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998). For the purposes of this dissertation, career self-efficacy will be defined as the belief that an individual gains confidence in his/her ability to obtain the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in a career. Therefore, to investigate career self-efficacy of recent LAS graduates who participated in co-op, the current research will use the construct of self-efficacy and apply it toward the idea of confidence and success in the graduates' career behaviors.

Statement of the Problem

Co-ops for LAS students are not common. While engineering and business students commonly enjoy structured co-op programs on college campuses where the experiences that are offered are clearly related to their career plans, LAS students might or might not be able to gain specific experience and knowledge related to their major and career interests while participating in a co-op program. However, co-ops might assist LAS students in the development of more generalized skills, which could lead to higher career self-efficacy for those students.

While there is much research about self-efficacy, few research studies have investigated the perceptions of LAS students about their co-op experiences and their perceptions of career self-efficacy. More specifically, are LAS students who had co-op experience able to learn about an industry and gain experience that is necessary to do well in their jobs after graduation and throughout their lifetime? Additionally, there is virtually no research that seeks input from recent graduates who participated in co-ops and asks them to reflect on their experiences to determine whether they had the opportunity to develop career self-efficacy. Greater understanding of the co-op experience and the career self-efficacy of LAS graduates is needed to better serve college students in this area. To that end, this qualitative study sought to collect the voices of recent LAS graduates who participated in a co-op program and to learn more about their co-op experiences and perceptions of career self-efficacy.

Purpose of Study

The primary challenge is to get past the idea that the “more broadly educated student is unprepared for employment” (Dawson, 1980, p. 9). To be sure that employers are doing a better job of considering LAS students for co-op positions, Gardner (1996) noted that employers appear to be seeking talent across all majors while avoiding recruiting from the specific concentrations they have during the past few years. Therefore, LAS students need to understand that they need work experience to compete with their engineering and business counterparts. Participation in co-ops can help LAS students gain experience and understanding of the workplace to be competitive in the job market.

This study was designed to get perceptions of LAS graduates of their co-op experiences. It is also important to know whether recent alumni of a co-op program could reflect upon their level of career self-efficacy in relation to their co-op experiences. Answers to these questions

would be helpful in determining whether co-op is a program which is truly beneficial to LAS students with regard to obtaining career self-efficacy and whether it should be further supported by administrators in all LAS departments at Wichita State University.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to answer these overarching questions:

1. How do former LAS students describe their co-op experience?
2. What did these students gain, with regard to career self-efficacy, through their co-op experience?

Definitions of Terms

Below are some of the key terms used in this research study.

Cooperative education (co-op): Co-op provides students with multiple periods of work where the experience is related to the student's major or career goal. Since program participation involves multiple work terms, the typical participant may work up to three or four work terms, thus gaining a year or more of career-related work experience before graduation. Virtually all co-op positions are paid and the vast majority involves some form of academic credit (NACE, 2010).

Alternating co-op: This is a type of co-op during which a student alternates terms of full-time classroom study with terms of full-time, discipline-related employment. The majority of alternating positions are typically out-of-state (Wichita State PPW workbook, 2011).

Parallel co-op: Many Wichita State students choose to do a parallel co-op. This is a position where a student can attend class and work at same time. A student can be enrolled in a minimum of six credit hours and working at least 15 hours per week (Wichita State Cooperative Education PPW workbook, 2011).

Internship: These are typically one-time work or service experiences related to a student's major or career goal. The internship plan generally involves a student working in a professional setting under the supervision and monitoring of practicing professionals. Internships can be paid or unpaid and the student might or might not receive academic credit for performing the internship (Wichita State Cooperative Education PPW workbook, 2011).

Co-op coordinator: This person helps students learn about career interests and skills, provides information about available positions, outlines the interviewing process, and facilitates academic process for enrolled students (Wichita State Cooperative Education PPW workbook, 2011).

Liberal arts and sciences (LAS): For the purpose of this study, the majors that are considered part of LAS are communication, criminal justice, English, psychology, social work, and sociology. This is because the majority of LAS students who use the co-op office's services come are pursuing these majors.

Career development: This concept involves the total constellation of psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic, and chance factors that combine to influence the nature and significance of work in the total lifespan of any given individual (NCDA, 2003).

Summary

Cooperative education (co-op) is a type of experiential learning, which can be helpful for the career development of college students. While it has a long history and many universities and colleges embrace the idea of students getting relevant experience before graduation, support for co-ops seems to vary greatly from campus to campus. Wichita State University houses a co-op program, the only one of its kind in the state of Kansas that helps students in all programs find work experience related to their major, get credit, and often even get paid. Engineering and

business students typically identify immediate benefits of participating in co-op; however, LAS administrators, faculty, and students have been slower to accept and include this experience in their academic programs. Because LAS students might not learn skills specifically related to a career due to lack of specific opportunities in that field or the idea that their degrees are not professionally focused, the current study focuses more on the graduates' reflections of the co-op experience as well as their career self-efficacy. It has been unclear as to whether LAS students find that participating in co-op is a beneficial opportunity, especially once they are working full-time as a college graduate. The purpose of this research was to provide insight into the co-op experiences and perceptions of career self-efficacy of former LAS students. Such information will help administrators and faculty to understand co-ops and how they might enhance career self-efficacy among college undergraduate students.

Chapter 2 – Review of Literature

This literature review guides the current research with regard to LAS graduates' reflections of their cooperative education (co-op) experiences and career self-efficacy. Following the presentation of the theoretical framework, this chapter highlights previous research on the impact of co-ops in higher education, including the areas where the relevant research is sparse.

Theoretical Framework

Since the days of Dean Schneider, the creator of co-op, the process of students obtaining relevant experience related to their major has evolved. While few theories have been developed specifically to help practitioners build from a common foundational element within co-ops, the theoretical underpinnings originated when John Dewey (1938) challenged the traditional educational system in the early 1900s. He did so by encouraging primary and secondary schools as well as higher education institutions to be more progressive and to offer experiences in addition to the coursework provided in the classroom. It is through the ideas that have ties to those of John Dewey which modern educators have been encouraged to rethink ways where students are taught and how they learn. While this holds true for all levels of education, higher education is especially challenged to offer opportunities to students that will help them understand what is taught in the classroom, what to expect in the workplace, and how the knowledge can be tied together. Theory can help guide practitioners through this process. Specifically, through the process of combining components about self-efficacy, career self-efficacy and additional research pertaining to the importance of work-integrated learning, student affairs professionals are able to better prepare students for the ever-changing world of work (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Self-Efficacy and Social Learning Theory

The process of creating goals is an essential task to help plan a career path, whether it is for the next day or the next career move. However, many people face challenges determining what needs to be done to reach those goals. Additionally, putting a plan into action once a goal is identified is not that simple. A person's level of self-efficacy can ultimately determine whether an individual will choose to perform or refrain from performing a task to attain a goal (Bandura, 1977a).

Bandura (1995) defined self-efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (p. 2). With this definition in mind, Bandura (1994) separated people into two categories when considering how goals, tasks, and challenges are approached. First, people with a strong sense of self-efficacy view challenging problems as tasks to be mastered, develop deeper interest in the activities where they participate, form a stronger sense of commitment to their interests and activities, and recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments. On the other hand, people with a weak sense of self-efficacy avoid challenging tasks, believe that difficult tasks and situations are beyond their capabilities, focus on personal failings and negative outcomes, and quickly lose confidence in personal abilities.

Self-efficacy lies at the center of Bandura’s social learning theory which explains how people learn through observation and imitation. Bandura’s (1977a) social learning theory suggests:

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one

forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (p. 22)

It is this frame of thinking that has allowed Bandura's social learning theory to become one of the most influential theories in education and learning (Cherry, 2011).

Social learning theory and the idea of self-efficacy can be applied to co-ops and other experiences gained when working before graduation. People who have high self-efficacy are more likely to attempt and successfully execute tasks than whom?, whereas those with low self-efficacy find it difficult to experience accomplishments because they are often fighting self-doubt (Bandura, 1993, 1997). So how can one develop high self-efficacy? The development of self-efficacy is a lifelong process and evolves as new skills, experiences, and understandings are introduced (Bandura, 1992). Bandura (1995) believed that there were several options to create and strengthen positive self-beliefs. He further explained this by introducing four facilitators of self-efficacy: (a) mastery experiences, (b) vicarious learning through observing the performance of role models and modeling them, (c) social persuasion through encouragement from others, and (d) psychological responses or emotional arousal such as anxiety (Bandura, 1994).

Bandura (1994) considered mastery experiences as the most effective way to develop self-efficacy. Performing a task successfully can strengthen self-efficacy, although having challenges when dealing with a task can negatively affect it. He also explained that social modeling can be helpful for people to gain self-efficacy as they see others master tasks successfully. This process of watching and learning from others is called vicarious learning. Vicarious learning can be accomplished through observation, imitation, and modeling other's behaviors. Another component of Bandura's theory where the interaction with others is crucial is positive social persuasion. Positive social persuasion from a respected friend or colleague can

help a person overcome self-doubt and achieve a goal, which in turn can increase self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). The fourth facilitator of self-efficacy is the psychological response to an experience. Oftentimes a person's emotions and physical responses can play an important role in how a person feels about her/his abilities (Bandura, 1994) and affect how he/she approaches a task throughout a lifetime. Therefore, people who learn how to approach challenges with confidence can minimize stress and anxiety while experiencing increased self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is a foundation for human motivation as people are challenged to determine their true capabilities and to find success (Pajares, 1997). This may be relevant in many aspects of people's lives including those experiences related to career development. Therefore, developing positive career self-efficacy is beneficial and necessary to succeed in today's workplace.

Career Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is considered to be a key concept of career development. Hackett and Betz (1981) introduced the idea of career self-efficacy by applying Bandura's concepts of self-efficacy and social learning theory to career-related behaviors. Betz (2009) added that the "career self-efficacy theory is used for understanding, assessing, and designing interventions focusing on career behavior" (p. 72). Therefore, Bandura's (1994) four facilitators of self-efficacy (mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and psychological responses) are still the focal point, while the theory looks at people's judgments of their personal abilities to perform tasks related to career development (Anderson & Betz, 2001; Niles & Sowa, 1992).

According to Hackett and Betz's (1981) theory, students' beliefs about their educational and career capabilities are related to the nature and range of career options they consider. One's

level of career self-efficacy can lead to avoidance of or motivation toward career behaviors (Betz & Taylor, 2001). Low career self-efficacy can cause people to make career decisions at a slower rate and once a decision is made, it might slow them from following through (Betz, 1992). Even if a low career self-efficacy belief is based on an accurate assessment of an individual's capabilities, it often leads to a lack of awareness of his or her potential to successfully pursue certain careers (Betz & Hackett, 1981) and the person might have challenges visualizing ambitious career plans. Yet, those who have high career self-efficacy tend to plan for and seek out success for themselves and identify positive support and outcomes for their career ambitions (Bandura, 1993). The higher the career self-efficacy a person has, the greater likelihood he or she will have to set high goals and have a strong commitment to achieve them (Bandura, 1993).

Niles and Sowa (1992) also found that career self-efficacy is a good predictor of a person's success, not only in the job search process and career exploration, but also in employment outcomes. Career self-efficacy can be considered essential to effective job performance and can greatly influence workplace behaviors regardless of one's initial knowledge and skill (Bandura, 1977b; Niles & Sowa, 1992).

As mentioned earlier, there are four major facilitators (Bandura, 1994) that help to strengthen self-efficacy. Therefore, when an individual accomplishes each facilitator without challenges, one's self-efficacy or belief in future continued success will be enhanced. The students will be able to develop self-efficacy on their own as well as with help from others, and Cates and Jones (1999) agree: "while co-op students will learn from their own successes and failures, they can also learn from the success or failures of others" (p. 19). Co-workers, supervisors, or mentors might be able to share their own stories of previous successes and failures with a co-op student and the student can use that information in the future once the same

situation is introduced to them (Cates & Jones, 1999). Co-op students have the opportunity to effectively learn tasks and skills that are related to their career interests, and learn vicariously through others' actions and experiences while participating in their work experience. This theoretical framework, focusing upon the concepts of career self-efficacy and how it can be applied to cooperative education, serve as the foundation of this study.

Research in Cooperative Education

The development and implementation of co-ops seems to be inconsistent throughout college campuses in the United States (Cates & Jones, 1999). Therefore, one can assume that co-ops have yet to be fully integrated into academic programs in many higher education institutions. Cates and Jones (1999) suggest a possible reason for this is the fact that many co-op professionals cannot provide evidence that co-op can be an essential component of education through assessment:

Some academicians remain skeptical about including the program as a component of the mainstream curriculum. One reason for their skepticism is the lack of a substantial body of research to document student learning from cooperative experiences. The message conveyed by co-op offices is another. Since many practitioners have found it difficult to credibly assess student learning, out of necessity they promote their program with a focus on the non-educational benefits for students. (p. 5)

Therefore, it seems that research about co-ops needs to be a conscious effort to highlight the benefits that are relatively unique to the program. Because of the various levels of perceived importance at each college and university, as well as within different departments at each institution, funding and administrative support for co-ops has fluctuated. This ever-changing

relationship offers inconsistent communication and support pertaining to best practices, expectations, and needs in the field. Nonetheless, after reviewing various research articles pertaining to co-ops and LAS students, four areas have been identified where cooperative education has been studied: the impact on student learning, success after graduation in the workplace, benefits of co-ops to LAS students, and the impact of co-ops on higher education. All four of those areas are introduced below to further explain the context of the current research.

Impact on Student Learning

Some research has been conducted that focused on what can be added to co-op programs to maximize the learning process for students. One research study looked at the need for reflection of the student's co-op experience, what was learned and how that can be applied to their career development (Hayward, Blackmer, & Raelin, 2007). This study supported the idea that reflection on learned experiences while participating in a co-op is beneficial and can lead to a higher level of career self-efficacy. A study was identified that highlight reflection of the skills developed by science and technology majors while doing co-ops (Coll, Zegwaard & Lay, 2001). Coll et al. (2001) addressed the idea that, while students' communication of scientific information proved to be of little concern, they were quite confident in their ability to write reports and that the placement reinforced the idea that they could communicate effectively. Coll et al. (2001) documented that the "students held very low self-efficacy toward suggesting new ideas at the beginning of their placements, but felt their self-efficacy increased significantly as a result of their placement experiences due to increased content knowledge and positive employer feedback" (p. 70).

With the information presented, one might conclude that co-ops are beneficial while students are in college. Yet, there is also an interest to seek information about the benefits of co-ops after college and when the students are in full-time positions.

Success after Graduation

Researchers have investigated how participating in co-op helps students succeed after graduation. First, research has suggested that participating in co-op helps students make sound career choices (Brooks, Cornelius, Greenfield, & Joseph, 1995) and led to their having greater job satisfaction (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). Additionally, students who completed co-ops had increased job stability in their first job out of college (Richards, 1984) as well as possibly a higher starting salary (Blair & Millea, 2004) than students who did not participate in co-ops. Gardner and Koslowski (1993) also discovered that co-op graduates reported using learning techniques that are more immediately effective in the workplace. This was evidenced in co-op students' reports of greater knowledge and adjustment, while graduates who did not participate in co-op relied on organizationally sanctioned sources and reported the need for more support from supervisors and co-workers. The co-op experience was able to better prepare students to assume a functional role more quickly in their new organizations, whereas non co-op graduates entered their new positions relatively more naïve and less experienced. Finally, with the workforce focusing more on globalization, there is a demand for better understanding of a variety of cultures and diversity; participating in co-ops can introduce college students to such settings. Gardner and Tyson (1994) concluded in their study that participating in co-ops helps students gain experience to include the "diversity dimensions that encompass the total work environment" (p. 24). As a whole, the research indicates that students who participated in co-op

while in college benefitted from that experience by starting their full-time positions at a higher level and, oftentimes, an increased pay.

Benefits of Cooperative Education to LAS Students

Since this research project specifically addressed LAS students, research focusing on the benefits of students in specific majors was sought. There have been some studies that included both engineering and business students and the job-related skills they developed by participating in co-op (Garavan & Murphy, 2001; Gardner & Motschenbacher, 1997), but there is only a small amount of research focusing on LAS students participating in co-ops. Martello and Shelton (1980) looked at career maturity, career choice, and major certainty between co-op and non co-op LAS students. They found that co-op students seemed to be more mature in career attitudes and career knowledge, whereas co-op and non co-op students “did not differ on their self-rated career or major choice certainty, although both groups increased in career certainty across time” (p. 13). Linn and Ferguson (1999) studied LAS graduates’ career histories 50 years after graduation and participation in co-op. The authors asked the study participants to reflect back over their work experiences – work period, job descriptions, and employer ratings.

Even though this study addressed participation in co-ops, and singled out LAS students and graduates, no research was found that specifically pertained to LAS graduates’ co-op experiences and their perceptions of career self-efficacy. This lack of research is a challenge as LAS students seek evidence that this is a worthwhile opportunity as they think about post-graduation jobs. They need to understand that prior experience in their field as well as knowledge of transferable skills is quite important to the employers who hire them. Faculty and administrators also need to be aware of the importance of students’ understanding of the workplace early and gaining out-of-classroom knowledge is important for students and can be

developed while the students participate in a co-op. Highlighting the evidence that corporate executives truly value a liberal arts education is essential. It is these general skills and experiences that better prepare students for the changing economy (Knotts, 2002), something employers come to appreciate after hiring college graduates. Perhaps it is also important to highlight the impact that cooperative education might have when developing curricula to meet expectations of national certification board and accreditation committees.

The Impact of Cooperative Education on Higher Education

Colleges and universities undoubtedly offer many opportunities for student learning, especially in this time of increased sensitivity to learning outcomes and assessment. Due to increasing expectations from the public, higher education might be held to a higher standard of accountability in terms of demonstrating its value relative to student learning (Schuh, 2009). To be sure, Dungey, Evans, Fried, Komives, McDonald and Salvador (2004) discussed learning outcomes within higher education and stated: “The focus of education must shift from information transfer to identity development (transformation). Transformative education places the student’s reflective process at the core of the learning experience” (pp. 10-11). Co-ops offer students the opportunity to gain experience and reflect on the learning that took place. Reflection adds another dimension to their education and will help students to determine the steps that need to be taken to prepare for the workplace.

Identifying the essence of co-op programs might help college students, as well as faculty and administrators, understand their value to education as a whole. Although some researchers understand the importance of learning outside of the classroom through such opportunities as co-ops, there have been challenges related to co-ops becoming a stable component of the curriculum at many colleges. Howard (2004) stated, “In addition to establishing legitimacy in higher

education, co-op educators are under increased pressure, and have bigger incentives than in the past, to document the learning outcomes of students who participate in co-op” (p. 5). Research and evaluation is important for co-ops to have a legitimate place in higher education, validate outside-the-classroom learning, and help employers demonstrate that “these programs are economically beneficial to their company and will help to recruit talented new employees” (Howard, 2004, p. 6). Therefore, cooperative education programs nationwide must pay heed to the call of effective programming and marketing, as well as reliable research to the campus and community where it serves to validate their importance. They will be able to do this by sharing student success stories and highlighting the fact that knowledge, opportunities for reflection, and career self-efficacy might be gained.

Summary

This chapter presented a review of literature that examines co-ops and specifically how LAS students utilize them. Although Dewey (1938) laid a foundation of how experiential learning can help in the career development process, Bandura (1995) offered insight into how self-efficacy can be developed. Bandura (1995) suggested four sources: mastery experience, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and psychological responses to develop self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is beneficial for students and, when related to their work, might enable them to take risks in their careers. Career self-efficacy has been found to be a key factor in determining a student’s success or lack of success in career development. It is also an effective way to experience successes, and gain additional knowledge about a career in the workplace.

While it has been determined that participation in co-ops is beneficial for students in other fields, it is unclear about the co-op experiences of LAS students. The current research investigates the co-op experiences and career self-efficacy of LAS graduates. The researcher

will use rich descriptions and explanations of the graduates' co-op experiences to help with this investigation. The next chapter addresses the methodology of the research that was conducted to help investigate this important topic.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

In this research, the researcher used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to investigate Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) graduates' cooperative education (co-op) experiences and career self-efficacy by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do former LAS students describe their co-op experience?
2. What did these students gain, with regard to career self-efficacy, through their co-op experience?

This chapter included a discussion of the research methodology employed throughout the study. The following topics are addressed in this chapter: (a) rationale for qualitative research design, (b) the research sample, (c) data collection, (d) analysis and synthesis of data, (e) limitations of the proposed study, and (f) conclusion and timeline.

Research Design

A qualitative study was chosen over a quantitative study because qualitative research “typically orients to cases or phenomena, seeking patterns of unanticipated as well as expected relationships” (Stake, 1995, p. 3) and considers the uniqueness of a participant, case, or event as an important part of the research. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) noted that “qualitative methodologies referred to research procedures, which produced descriptive data: people’s own written or spoken works and observable behavior” (p. 4) and provide personal perspectives which allow the participants to speak for themselves.

The researcher chose to use a phenomenological approach to discover information, which is directly related to the individuals’ experiences. Creswell (1998) stated that phenomenological research seeks to describe “the meaning of the lived experiences” (p. 51) of each individual

involved with a phenomenon. To further explain, the purpose of a phenomenological approach is to understand the perspectives of the lived experiences of those involved with the research. The following sections describe the methodological process used in this study and how the researcher is able to collect the perspectives of the recent graduates.

Research Sample

For the study to yield useful results, purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was used as this study is concerned with only LAS students who participated in Wichita State University's co-op program and who graduated from the university in December 2010 or May 2011 in a bachelors or masters program. LAS graduates were selected for this study because of the lack of research about their experiences in co-ops. For the purpose of this study, LAS majors included in the initial participant selection were communications, criminal justice, English, psychology, social work, and sociology because these are the majors of the students who commonly participate in the co-op program at Wichita State. The reason for looking at recent graduates was because they are able to provide more information-rich data due to how recently they have experienced their co-ops. Those who graduated from Wichita State with an LAS degree, currently hold a full-time position, and participated in the full co-op process were included in the population to select the final sample.

To provide context, it is important to share details related to the complete co-op experience at WSU. That experience involves the following:

1. Registration –Students submit their college information and co-op office staff determine that they are current Wichita State students, in a degree program, have completed 24 hours of coursework, and have at least a 2.0 GPA before they can participate in the program.

2. Attend a Professional Practice Workshop (PPW) – Once their registration is accepted, students are invited to attend a PPW to learn more about the co-op program as well as about resume writing guidelines and interview tips.
3. Resume critique – After attending a PPW, students meet with a coordinator to have a resume draft critiqued and to discuss the job search process.
4. Job database system – After the resume critique, students each submit a final draft of their resume onto an online job database system, PlacePro, to view and apply for jobs.
5. Interview – If an employer determines that a student is a good fit for his or her company after an interview, and if the student accepts the offer, the student enrolls in the co-op program.

It was anticipated that the group of students who met the criteria for selection would be able to provide accurate information about their co-op experiences and career self-efficacy. Students who already had a job and received co-op credit for it, also known as student-developed jobs, were not able to participate in this study since they did not go through the co-op program in the traditional manner. Typically, those who already have jobs and then enroll in co-op, forego all of the preliminary steps. The researcher felt that students who already had jobs did not get the full co-op experience and should be excluded from the study.

The sample was identified through criterion sampling (Yin, 2009). A small representation of LAS alumni who graduated from Wichita State in either December 2010 or in May 2011 and who participated in co-op for at least one semester of their final year of college were queried from the co-op database. These participants represented a few major fields within LAS. Maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990) was utilized to purposefully identify participants to represent majors within the College. Gender, race, and level in school (e.g., undergraduate vs.

graduate) were also considered to capture a variety of experiences to document for the purpose of this research. This information was provided in the database system used by the co-op office and was readily available for this research. Those selected were contacted directly and invited to participate in a two-interview process so that the researcher could learn about each individual's co-op experience and career self-efficacy.

Patton (2002) stated, "Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (p. 244). Guba and Lincoln (1985) also suggested that the number of participants should be such that a point of redundancy can be achieved; this redundancy occurs when adding another participant to the study would not present any new insights from what has already been discovered. With that in mind, Yin (2009) addressed the need to look at rival explanations. If the evidence is showing strong similarity within a couple of participants, the researcher might consider looking deeper into the study to identify any rival explanation as well. Therefore, considering the need to achieve a point of redundancy as well as to rule out rival explanations, a number should be identified for the sample size. It was determined that five participants was a sufficient minimum number to provide information-rich data for this phenomenological study. With this in mind, the sample size was set at five to attempt to get a variety of stories while also reaching useful conclusions relevant to each of the research questions.

Two interviews with each participant were performed so that the researcher could get a clear picture of the participants' thoughts about their co-op experiences and career self-efficacy while allowing time between interviews for the participants to engage in further reflection. Each

participant received \$20 for each interview completed. Additional details about the interviews are described in the sections below.

Data Collection

Creswell (1998) explained that the process of a phenomenological study to get the stories of the lived experiences is to conduct in-depth interviews. The interviews are not used to explain the causes of events but attempt instead to describe how they are experienced first-hand by those people involved in the event (Denscombe, 2004). Patton (2002) adds the researcher should have rapport established with the participants because of the process of obtaining information about personal experiences. It is through this relationship between the researcher and the participants which honest and accurate information might be obtained (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

A semi-structured interview process was used to gather the data. Esterberg (2002) explained the goal of a semi-structured interview is to “explore a topic more openly and to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words” (p. 87). In semi-structured interviews, “interviewers are also free to probe the research participants for more information on particular points, to explore the topics more discursively than in structured approaches, and even to explore topics that might emerge which were not included in the interview schedule” (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 88). According to Esterberg (2002), in this interviewing process, “two individuals come together to try to create meaning about a particular topic” and can “draw on established social conventions” (p. 85). It was important for the researcher to ask questions, learn from the participants, and see the world through the eyes of the participants in order to get adequate data for this phenomenological study. More specifically, as Gibson and Brown (2009) discussed, the goal of interviewing is to “create analytically focused discourse that provides

insights into specified research questions” (p. 86) which enabled the researcher to collect specific details of each graduate’s experience and to combine all stories to answer the research questions.

Most of the interview sessions took place at the researcher’s Cooperative Education office because of ease of accessibility as well as the opportunity for comfort and a quiet, uninterrupted atmosphere. The researcher’s office was a familiar setting to all participants since they participated in the co-op program and met with the researcher at some point during their college years while in the program. However, a few of the interviews were conducted at places that were convenient for the participants. For example, one was completed at Starbucks, and the researcher conducted interviews at one participant’s office. Once a meeting place was established, two semi-structured interviews with each graduate were performed to gain knowledge about their previous experience, co-op experience, and the perception of how their co-op influenced their career self-efficacy.

Upon meeting the participants for the first interview, each was asked to complete a demographic form (Appendix A) so that the researcher could gather initial information from the participant. The informed consent form (Appendix B) was also discussed and signed at the beginning of the first interview. The interview guides were developed to help the researcher gain insight on the past co-op experiences of each participant and to understand their perceptions of their career self-efficacy. The questions in the interview guides were developed using the processes of the co-op program as well as the facilitators of self-efficacy. These guides are presented in Appendices C and D. Each of the interviews lasted from 25 to 65 minutes and was recorded by digital recorder. The researcher also took notes throughout the interview.

Analysis and Synthesis of Data

Even though the interviews were recorded, Stake (1995) suggests a good interviewer should listen, take a few notes, ask for clarification often, and then reconstruct the account immediately after the interview to capture the message as well as observations of the participant. To that end, the researcher took written notes of the participants' responses as well as non-verbal cues from the interviews and reflected on them immediately after the meeting. All interviews were professionally transcribed. To enhance trustworthiness and authenticity, the transcriptions were sent to each of the participants for verification that the information was correct and complete. All participants responded and verified the accuracy of the transcripts. Prior to organizing the data, the researcher read all transcriptions and notes.

Van Kaam (1966) introduced a four-stage, 12-step phenomenological method that is a scientific and rigorous method for analyzing phenomenological interviews from large data samples (Anderson & Eppard, 1998; Omery, 1993). Data analysis that the current research followed was the seven-step modified van Kaam method for phenomenological research, as proposed by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas (1994) described the seven data analysis steps as including the following: (a) Listing and preliminary groupings; (b) Reduction and elimination; (c) Clustering and categorization; (d) Checking the invariant constituents and their related themes against participants' information; (e) Conducting an individual textual description of the experience; (f) Conducting an individual structural description of the experience; and (g) For each participant of the study, construct a textual-structural description of the meaning and essence of the individual textual-structural descriptions. Furthermore, the identification of emergent themes and patterns was facilitated using NVivo qualitative analysis software as it is an

effective software program designed to examine data and to provide output to suggest patterns at an increased level of understanding.

The first step of the modified van Kaam method is a subjective process where the researcher assesses the relevance of each statement made by participants to the research questions and topic of investigation (Moustakas, 1994). This step included the listing and preliminary grouping, also termed horizontalization, of relevant statements or expressions made by the study participants and was accomplished by coding the relevant text occurrences (invariant constituents) of the interviews, noting the location and frequency.

The second step in the analysis process was reduction and elimination, where the researcher reduced and eliminated the coded content or invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). To determine the ideal invariant constituents, Moustakas (1994) outlined two requirements:

- a. Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?
- b. Is it possible to abstract and label it? (p. 121)

During this step in the analysis, each invariant constituent was re-evaluated in terms of relevance to the phenomenon under investigation. In addition, each invariant constituent was then evaluated against the other invariant constituents to identify and to prevent overlapping, repetitiveness, and vague expressions.

The third step in the analysis process, following the recommendations of Moustakas (1994), included the clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents into thematic labels (thematic categories). To accomplish this step, invariant constituents, which were related, were grouped together into thematic categories, which together represented a common theme in the data related to the research questions. In addition, frequency percentages for each of the

invariant constituents within the thematic categories were generated. The thematic categories which emerged from the data represent the common experiences among the study participants.

As the fourth step in the analysis, the invariant constituents and thematic categories were validated. How did you accomplish this task? Validation was confirmed if the invariant constituents were either explicitly expressed in the transcription or compatible, if not explicitly stated. Compatible constituents are defined as responses which clearly indicate a reference to an explicit invariant constituent (Moustakas, 1994).

Individual textural descriptions of the participants' experiences were generated as the fifth step, following the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). Specific invariant constituents within the interview text for each participant were used in the development of these descriptions. Imaginative variation was employed for each description as the sixth step in the process in order to more clearly express the relevant experiences of the participants. Finally, the seventh step in the process involved the development of composite textural-structural descriptions, which served to present the experiences of the group of participants as a whole and therefore effectively answer the research questions of the study.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness pertains to the reliability and validity of the research results. In this study, there were three methods used to increase the trustworthiness of the research. Peer-debriefing was one method used. Peer-debriefing is "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 308). Sessions between the researcher and the peer-debriefer help to identify emerging themes and other developing issues in the data collection process. In

this particular project, the peer-debriefer was the Director of the Cooperative Education and Work-Based Learning Office. The Director understands co-ops and the program; therefore she is able to challenge the findings to see if there were any loopholes or biases on the part of the researcher.

An audit trail was also kept as a method to increase the trustworthiness of the study. An audit trail is documentation of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings. These are records which are kept regarding what was completed in an investigation. For this research, the interviews in digitally recorded audio form were saved on the researcher's personal recorder as well as in files on the computer. Other relevant documents such as notes from the interviews, copies of the transcriptions, and completed forms were kept for each participant as well. This audit trail will help lead to confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) which is defined as "the extent to which the findings of the study are shaped by the respondents and not by researcher bias, motivation or interest" (p. 84). This process is important to make sure that the data collected truly highlight the respondents' voices and lend to a trustworthy conclusion.

Member checking was also performed to increase the trustworthiness of the study. This allowed participants to critically analyze the transcriptions and to comment on them (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). For these purposes, the researcher provided a copy of the written summary of the interview to each participant so that each could look over the documentation and offer suggestions for changes to ensure credibility and reliability. This participant validation provided extra quality assurance as it provides participants with the opportunity to affirm the documentation before conclusions are developed.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process of self-reflection and awareness by the researcher in contributing to the construction and meaning of data (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The researcher understood that her identity and viewpoints certainly play a significant role in this study and acknowledges that remaining objective was challenging. The researcher has been employed as a career development specialist for over nine years and believes that the information gathered in this study is not only relevant, but also has the potential to be developed into additional research projects in the future. Because of her passion of career development and the fact that the researcher believes experiential learning is a very important component of a student's college career, it would be easy to rely upon pre-conceived ideas about the co-op experiences. It was important to be aware of areas where objectivity could have been compromised because of researcher bias. Therefore, before the interviews were performed, the researcher made a conscious effort to recognize that this is a learning process and to be open to any result, which the research might reveal. Because of this, throughout the interviews and data analysis, the researcher attempted to identify any way to provide an alternative comment or theme. The researcher also viewed this dissertation as an opportunity to learn from the participants and listen rather than teach.

Ethical Considerations

Audiotapes were used to record the interviews. Specific information about the participants will not be shared with anyone other than the researcher as pseudo-names were used in the audiotapes as well as in the transcriptions, summaries, and final draft of the dissertation.

The findings might be presented to the administrators at Wichita State University, particularly the Deans of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, as well as at various

conferences for career development professionals in higher education throughout the country. The participants were informed that any information obtained in this study which could identify them would remain confidential and would be disclosed only with written permission.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the research methodology used in this study. A qualitative approach was chosen to help provide the framework for getting the perceptions of five recent Wichita State LAS graduates who participated in co-op at least one semester of their senior year of college. Once the graduates were selected to participate in this study, two semi-structured interviews with each were conducted to collect each graduate's experiences with co-op and perceptions pertaining to their career self-efficacy. Text data was entered into the NVivo software to facilitate theme identification and the data analysis was guided by Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method.

Chapter 4 - Findings

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the cooperative education (co-op) experiences and career self-efficacy of former LAS students at Wichita State. Chapter 4 begins with a brief description of the demographic data obtained from the study participants, followed by detailed descriptions of each participant. This information is followed by the findings of the data analysis, which include a presentation of the invariant constituents and thematic categories identified as relevant to the research. Finally, the structural composite descriptions are presented, which provide the overarching themes revealed through the data analysis and which represent the perceptions and experiences of the group as a whole. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Demographic Information

Five LAS graduates who had previously participated in the cooperative program at Wichita State and are now working full-time in their chosen field participated in the study. The demographic data collected included age, gender, and level of education. In addition, information on the type of degree earned/ major of study, co-op employer(s), and number of co-ops participated in was collected. All participants in the study were between the ages of 22 and 26. The sample included three females and two males, three of whom are Caucasian, one is African American, and one is Hispanic. Two participants held a Master's degree as their highest earned degree, and three earned a Bachelor's degree. The participant descriptions which follow provide insight into each participant's individual experiences and perceptions.

Jaron

Jaron is a 22-year-old African American male who received his BA in English in May 2011 with a 2.96 cumulative GPA. Jaron's previous work experiences before participating in co-

op revolved around retail and fast food to make money, not necessarily to gain experience in a specific field. He admitted that while his work was not related to his English major, customer service skills were gained. He said, “Customer service was important in retail, and the [other] jobs. Working with different kinds of people, and learning about people and how to deal with people is what helped me [prepare for my co-op].”

It was the marketing attempts of the cooperative education office which helped Jaron realize that there was an office on campus that offered services to help students in their career development process. He stated:

This is when I first heard about co-op. I don't think I was necessarily looking for a job, because I had a job; I have always had a job. Then, I remember, on the day you had the outdoor patio event, it enticed me with the hotdog and root beer. I think that is what got me. So I went in and checked it out. I felt that it was worth a shot. I wanted to create a resume because I knew I was going to want that, to get a real job.

Once Jaron decided that participating in a co-op would be beneficial to him, he signed up to attend the Professional Practice Workshop. He described his experience in this workshop in the following way:

The workshop...definitely helped a lot, it gave me a foundation because I never had any formal training with resumes. My resume was awful. It was really bad. They definitely gave me a foundation of where to begin and I know many friends that it has helped a lot too. It gave me a good start.

After attending the workshop, Jaron was scheduled to meet with a coordinator to critique his new resume draft. Jaron stated, “The critique gave me further assistance, and I was able to see what I was doing wrong, if I was on the right track.” As far as practice with interviewing, Jaron felt that

he had some experience from past jobs. He commented, “I have to give myself credit because I think I am okay with most interviews, [the interviews I had for co-op positions] went very smoothly, I got the jobs, and they gave me confidence.” In addition, Jaron said that because he already had a job to pay the bills, he said, “I didn’t have the pressure to find a job. I was able to be myself and it went smoothly.”

He found his co-op in fall 2009 through the PlacePro database system at the co-op office. He worked as a Coordinator’s Assistant for an organization at a local middle school and worked for four consecutive semesters in the same school with the same supervisor throughout his co-op tenure.

I did a lot of outreach with kids. We provided them with services and basic goods such as a coat or school supplies if they needed them. The students were referred to us by their teachers. I also put together some small groups. We had a group that was made for strictly outcast children, kids who were just different, [we also had] high school transition group with eighth graders and then whatever else my coordinator needed, so I did all the assistant duties too.

Doing this co-op helped Jaron get experience in the area which he had an interest, he wanted to get his degree in education. Although, he realized that if he changed his major, it would initially require him to continue coursework and not graduate until 2013. He had his heart set on being a teacher, but the transition from majoring in English to education would add two more years’ worth of coursework to Jaron’s degree requirements. He shared, “I decided to get my [English] degree at that point and just see where it went.” Yet, he admitted, “Still, today, teaching is what I feel I truly want to do at least for now. I tried it out and [now] it went full circle. My co-op definitely helped with that.” Jaron believes that he was able to apply what he

learned in the classroom while working on his English degree to what he was doing as a co-op student. He said, “Writing is very important and it has been a passion of mine. I was able to use it whether it was tutoring with kids...or writing letters to parents or faculty. I also created the newsletters every month.” Jaron is currently employed with a local museum where he works as a writer and researcher for artifacts within the exhibits.

Brenda

Brenda is currently a 25-year-old Hispanic female currently working a media company. She received an undergraduate degree in Integrated Marketing Communication with a minor in Graphic Design in December of 2008 and an MA in Communications in December 2010. She obtained co-op credit for a combined six semesters as both an undergraduate and a graduate student. Within those six semesters, she worked for a total of three organizations as a marketing co-op. Her overall graduate GPA upon receiving her MA degree was 3.62.

Brenda began gaining experience and earning money working as a teller at a bank, then as a customer services representative at a different financial institution, and finally as a hostess at a small local bar. Earning a steady income was important, but once she declared a major and had an idea of what she wanted to do for a career, she started to look for relevant experience. She said, “I think that before co-op the work that I did, didn’t really shape my experiences because I was so young at the time and it was about getting a job and getting some source of income.” When discussing specific skills which she was able to develop before participating in her co-ops, she felt that she had a foundational understanding of workplace culture and basic skills:

I think that best skills I gained were communication skills. I learned great customer service – I learned to work with people. I learned how to work my way around certain situations, you know, that I wouldn’t have done without having previous work, such as

how to deal with negative aspects of the work environment, how to deal with negative customers, and negative employees/co-workers.

Brenda decided to participate in the co-op program because it was strongly encouraged by faculty in her major; therefore, she decided to register for the workshop. About the workshop, she stated:

The workshop really helped me figure out how to be more professional. How to dress better, how to make my resume you know top notch and not look like an idiot. It really helped me just focus in on how to change from having kind of an everyday 'fun job' to being a professional straight forward person in the work environment.

After attending the workshop, Brenda was able to meet with a coordinator to have her resume critiqued so that she could start applying for co-ops. She explained:

I was fairly confident with the advice that was given to me and a lot of the things that was pointed out, I had no idea. For example, changing paragraphs into bullet points, I never knew that would be something that employers would look for. Especially the importance of the wording of the objective, how important that was. I actually had [a longer objective], I never thought that having a shorter simpler objective would be more effective than having something a little more wordy.

Brenda also discussed going to interviews and feeling prepared for the questions which were asked. She explained, "I went on several interviews and before I finally got my first job [through the co-op office], I understood that the interviewing process would help me for other interviews later in the future." Although she had several interviews before the co-op program, she said that her interviews for her co-op positions required her to be more "professional" and to "show up in a suit or dress up nicer" than with her previous "teenager jobs."

Brenda discussed her experiences more in depth:

At my first co-op position, I was kind of like an assistant to [my boss]. I would help do calls and promote events when she had them. We also had some sort of sponsored golf event where I went there and helped with that – helped put it together, helped kind of reign people in, and keep people involved in the process. At my second placement, it was more graphic design based – communications and graphic design. At my final co-op placement, it was more communications- based which consisted of social media; event planning and [they] also had a television station so I ran their television station.

Although she earned co-op credit for all three positions, she actually found her first and third positions through the co-op office's database system, PlacePro.

Blake

Blake is a 26-year-old Caucasian male who received his BS in Criminal Justice in December 2009 and MA in Criminal Justice in May 2011. His cumulative graduate GPA was 3.85. He received co-op credit for three semesters of his graduate degree working as an Assistant and Legal Runner.

Before receiving co-op credit for this position, Blake worked retail and at a landscape company as an irrigation maintenance technician to earn money. He used money earned from those positions as well as his baseball scholarship to pay for expenses, but only considered his part-time jobs instrumental in understanding what he did not want to do:

I realized that I did not want to work manual labor for the rest of my life and I knew retail wasn't for me either. I sort of just fell into the whole criminal justice thing by chance actually. I came and talked to an advisor when I transferred to Wichita State and he actually told me I had so many hours left to declare a major and I needed to do so soon. I

then talked with another woman to get a second opinion and to help me figure out a major for me. She looked at my transcripts and saw that I did well in my criminal justice courses. She asked if I would like to try that. I tried it and liked it, so I stuck with it. But I don't believe that [my previous experiences] had anything to do with preparing me for it.

Blake shared that getting into the master's program was a similar situation where he was ready to graduate in December and decided to apply to graduate school, since he did not have plans. He said, "I figured the further I went [in school], the better the chances I would have in getting a better job and I didn't want to go to law school at the time, but I was hoping that experience would boost my application when I did apply." As far as gaining a perception of his ability to be successful in criminal justice, his previous jobs added only a few skills. He shared the following:

I learned how to put things together. I guess we had to do a lot of trouble shooting, so you sort of had to start from one place and work your way back or start from here and work your way forward and that can sort of relate to working through something which could be helpful in criminal justice.

Blake first learned about the co-op program when he received a bookmark which the office staff members were handing out at an event. He explained, "I was laid off at my other jobs...I just figured that I would have a better shot at finding a job or just getting a co-op or something that would kind of put me ahead of others so I went for it." Blake admitted that he could not remember much about the workshop, only bits and pieces of information. He also shared that he received help from his business writing course as well as insight from the career

services office to make a draft of his resume before coming to the co-op office for a critique.

Blake was invited to one interview and got one job offer.

They did not offer me the job right then, but I felt good about it. Before then, I had only been to two other interviews, one was at my first job and that was kind of a given. A friend of mine was the boss and he kind of set me up with his boss. They needed somebody at the time. We came in and had a kind of a sit down chat and they hired me then. For my second job, I participated in a group interview which I did not like and it was [held] at a local restaurant which was even worse.

Even with experience in interviewing for a position and an understanding of work ethic in general, Blake said, "I was really nervous because it was a professional job." Blake shared that the interviewer was easy to talk to; she walked him around and introduced him to the other staff members and then said that she would call him the next day. She did that and asked him to start the next week. He described his work in the following way:

I was just basically a runner which is all you do is take whatever court documents they need over to the courthouse and have them signed by judges, I also filed, and then did any kind of miscellaneous errands around the city. They said that was all I needed to do was come in the morning and do that and then come in the afternoon and do other general work. Just make sure that stuff got done. That is all I had to do but I stuck around longer most days because I just didn't want to be there for two hours throughout the day. [Then I] became in charge of all the filing and that went real fast. Once they realized that I wasn't a high school child just there to fill time, they started giving me more and more responsibility. I started working with social security cases, opening files, talking to clients, and sending out letters. Then they had me monitor our detention advocate

service, juvenile cases. It is like a pretrial probation type of thing in between the arrest and either their sentencing or their first trial. I did their school monitoring, made sure they went to class, didn't get into trouble, and then I reported back to our detention advocate.

Blake shared that the number of cases depended on how many "bad kids" were involved with the program at his co-op position. He figured that he would have anywhere between 40 and 115 cases at any given time. United Way volunteers and high school interns would help with the caseloads, but supervising them was challenging. He also supervised high school students in the summer as well. He said:

We do a grow-your-own-lawyer program where we get two high school students from around Wichita and they actually get paid for a two-month long summer internship.

They do office work, go on little field trips and stuff with the Bar Association. I was their direct supervisor.

Blake was able to work his way up from being a basic runner to supervising other interns in the office. He is still working at his original co-op employer and plans to apply to the Army and then to law school.

Amanda

Amanda is a 22-year-old Caucasian female. She received her BA in Integrated Marketing Communication in May 2011 with a cumulative GPA of 3.63. With regard to her work experiences before participating in co-op, Amanda shared that she had done babysitting since she was twelve and worked in a flower shop for "exactly one month" before she started co-op. When asked about gaining work experiences in her previous jobs, Amanda shared,

“Working in a flower shop taught me [that] I could bullshit well, but otherwise they really did not shape my skills at all.”

While Amanda has worked in several co-ops and internships throughout her college career, she received co-op credit for two semesters working as a marketing co-op in spring 2009 and spring 2011. She explained how she found her first co-op opportunity.

[The way I got my] first co-op position I had was an interesting story. I was actually working in the flower shop and one day a man came in and we started talking. He asked me what I wanted to do. I told him that I wanted to go into advertising and that was my major. He said that he happened to own an ad agency and he gave me his card. I didn't put much stock in it because men came in and gave me their cards a lot. At the flower shop I learned that a lot of married men in town had two different accounts, one for their wives and one for their mistresses and I thought he was just hitting on me. But I took it home and my mom confirmed that this was the owner of an ad agency. She said I think you should call him. I did and he offered me an internship and then I went through the co-op office to get credit; therefore, I kind of fell into my internship.

Amanda felt that with the information shared during the resume critique and the interviewing process she would be more successful in her job search in the future. She also admitted that participating in the co-op helped her feel ready for the job search. She said, “It confirmed that I could hold my own in the business world and be successful in the position I was applying for.”

Amanda co-oped at four organizations. She commented, “They were all pretty similar positions, public relations was my main task, distributing and writing press releases, very light html coding, tagging and website upkeep. Let's see, I also gained experience in copywriting,

client interaction and followed up with media.” Amanda is currently employed as a Marketing Specialist at one of her co-op employers.

Jillian

Jillian is a 23-year-old Caucasian female who received a BA in Strategic Communications in May 2011. Her cumulative GPA upon graduation was 3.77. Jillian’s first job was working as an assistant at a copy center. She described her job by stating, “I helped make copies, stapled, collated and did random projects for the small copy center and graphic design artist.” She also worked as a server and cashier at a local deli when she went home during her freshman and sophomore years in college. As far as those opportunities that helped her shape her career before participating in co-op, she believes she was able to develop foundational transferable skills:

In high school I didn’t exactly know what I wanted to do. I knew that I really liked speaking and I really liked music. I was very involved with 4-H, so some of those skills translated a little bit into my major and what I am doing now. But in terms of my jobs I just had them for [general] work experience and to gain to people skills. At the deli, I dealt with a lot of difficult customers and clients and in the graphic design job; it helped me to think creatively as well as made me appreciate manual labor and very tedious and boring tasks.

Previous experiences helped Jillian to develop the idea that she could be successful in a career, but she also credited her parents. She said, “A lot of positive feedback helped me to build my confidence early in life both from my employers as well as my parents. I really never had a question in terms of *if* I would be successful, it just mainly of *where* I will be successful.” Even with her support from her parents and insight from her previous work experiences, Jillian

admitted that she wanted more valid work experience which would be related to her career interests.

Jillian was in a couple of majors early in her college career that did not require students to do co-ops, but when she chose to be a Communications major, the faculty strongly suggested to all students to get experience. She said, "I decided that [co-op] was the best way to see where I would like to work, why I chose to do it, and to see what kind of company I would enjoy working for." She was also hoping to add relevant experience to her resume. Jillian felt that participating in the workshop was helpful:

I had created a resume before; however I had a challenge in fitting everything on the resume that I have done. Also [it was a challenge] figuring out what was most important to convey to an employer. So in terms of being successful I [now] think back to how do I market myself for them to place me in this job. So it was kind of nerve racking going through the resume and trying to figure out what was most important. I had a lot of anxiety in terms of taking things off. I was told to take things off, I was like no I did that and it is important and they are going to want to know I was first-chair piccolo player. It was great for me to realize that you have to tailor it to the job and that is the first time I had really thought about that. It has helped even now that I am looking to redo my resume after graduation.

Jillian continued to talk about her job search preparation process by discussing her interviewing experiences:

I was really nervous at my first interview I got through the co-op program; although I wasn't selected. The second organization I interviewed with was a pretty natural fit in terms of the lady who interviewed me. The great thing about that organization is that I

chose to interview with them because I have a personal story that ties to their mission statement. I had a physical disability as a child so being able to convey that to them and to help them realize that I am more deeply connected to the job beyond the skills – I also have the heart for it too, which is really important for those non-profits to hear.

Jillian participated in co-op for four semesters working with three different organizations:

At my first co-op, I worked for the communications and event manager. I helped with social media as well as design and write a monthly newsletter and helped with a lot of their mailings and also event planning. I was really their idea person - I had a lot of ideas that I brought to the table. We would just sit and brainstorm ideas for hours at a time; it was one of my favorite things to do. My second co-op was actually an extremely disappointing internship experience for me. That is an organization that I dreamed of working for upon graduation and what happened when I got there was that they didn't have much work for me to do and I was working for a boss who didn't really care to have her job. So being somebody who really cares about the mission statement, which is saving lives, saving children that is their main mission and overall brand, it was hard working in an environment where there would be a lot of ice cream runs or we would just go and waste the organization's money, so that was really hard for me. Previously I was a volunteer for their organization both with my sorority and also donated my own personal money to an organization and they wasted it the summer I was there. In spite of the negative experiences, I did design a couple of things for them, for example, a program for an event. It was a Hispanic gala in Arizona where there is a large Hispanic population. I did all the prize descriptions for their silent auction

where I called 150 companies to see if they would donate purses for an event. That was my first experience of cold calling in terms of asking for donations. It was not a fun experience but I did it. Then she would ask me to do a lot of researching and learning about organizations but I really did not have a lot of formal job responsibilities just whatever I was handed on a certain day. For my third co-op, I did a lot of things for them. I helped with campus visits, and coordinated an event which is a program for high school juniors. We would bring them to campus as well as showcase things in Wichita. I did a lot of design work in terms of small brochures that only went out to a small audience. Also, I ghost wrote letters for my supervisor. To ghost write a letter, you try to write in his words and then it is approved by him. The letters went in the visitor's guide which had 17,000 copies printed. It is the very first page that students read so that was really cool. Other than that we went to lots of press conferences, we just did a lot of little random admissions training, a lot of recruitment events and anything and everything that you can think recruitment, we did it.

Jillian was hired full-time at her third co-op after graduation and continues to work there.

Participant Description Summary

It is evident that each of the participants had different work experiences before participating in co-op, but all five of them shared that they did go through the initial co-op workshop and resume critique before starting their co-op search. All of them are currently employed full-time in a position which is related to their degree (Appendix E).

Thematic Categories and Invariant Constituents

Findings from the analysis of the transcribed interview data revealed common relevant responses which represent elements essential to the experience/perceptions of the individuals (invariant constituents). The invariant constituents represent the experiences and perceptions of the participants relevant to the research questions (Moustakas, 1994). These coded responses were then categorized into relevant thematic categories to reveal initial themes related to the research questions for the group of participants as a whole. This process generated key invariant constituents, which were separated into nine thematic categories (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1

Thematic Categories and Invariant Constituent Distribution for Interviews

Thematic categories	# of invariant constituents
Work experience prior to co-op experience	7
Initial contributions of co-op office and self-efficacy gained	5
Overall perceived influence of co-op experience on knowledge, skills, and behaviors	22
Overall perceived influence of co-op experience on career goals	14
Specific mastery experiences and associated influence on career development	26
Psychological development and emotive experiences	23
Vicarious learning through cooperative experiences	25
Experiences of social persuasion	18
Recommendations of participants	7

The analysis provides detailed textual data along with the response and frequency of each response related to the themes so that an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of interview participants can be achieved. Perceptions of the participants are therefore discussed according to these categories.

Work experience prior to co-op. The first thematic category provided some background information from which to assess the impact of the co-operative experience among the participants. By knowing the experiences of the participants prior to their co-ops, the impact of the co-ops becomes clear. This thematic category reveals the participants to have worked in non-career types of jobs prior to their co-op experience, expressing no true effect on their career knowledge or path other than offering growth in customer service type skills, with growth in interpersonal skills.

This thematic category was formed from combining invariant constituents related to prior work experience, the connection of that work experience to their career development, and the impact of participating in that experience on their perceived ability to work in chosen career. Invariant constituents central to this theme include (a) prior work in a non-career type of job such as food service, odd jobs, or retail work; (b) customer service connection to career, but otherwise no real connection to career development; and (c) an impact on the perceived ability to work in chosen career through gaining practice working and dealing with other people. Invariant constituents related to work experience prior to co-ops are presented in Table 4.2 with the associated frequency among the five participants.

Table 4.2

Work Experience Prior to Co-op Experience

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Various non-career jobs	5
Connection to career	
Customer service aspect in working with different kinds of people	2
No real career connection	2
Impact on perceived ability to work in career	
Practice working, and how to deal with people; communication skills	3

Examples of the three key invariant constituents offer insight into this thematic category. Participants noted having prior work in a non-career type of job such as food service, odd jobs, or retail work, but stated that these experiences offered little connection to their career development other than their gaining interpersonal and customer service skills or their increased ability to work with different people. For example, Jillian said:

In terms of my jobs, I just had them for work experience and to gain some people skills.

At [the] deli [I worked] with a lot of difficult customers and clients. Now in admissions, I deal with a lot of difficult students and parents, and [in] some situations that [has] probably helped me.

However, most often, participants described these prior jobs as non-career jobs. Jaron described his previous work experience compared to the co-op experience:

Before my co-op, what was my work experience? I would consider [it] just a job and, you know, just [to] have some money to support myself, and the co-op was, I would consider, my first real job in a field career, the rest were jobs.

Initial contributions of the co-op office and self-efficacy gained. The second thematic category revealed participants’ perceptions of the benefits from the workshop and initial co-op office contact toward individual development and career self-efficacy. The two key invariant constituents highlight the perceived benefits of the workshop interview skills and resume critique, which helped to provide experience, confidence, and resume writing skills. Table 4.3 illustrates the invariant constituents and the associated frequencies of occurrence among the participants.

Table 4.3

Co-op Office Contribution to Individual Skills and Self-Efficacy

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Coop interview gave experience and confidence that can interview well	5
Resume critique; built resume skills	5

Participants described the advantage of having gone through the interview process for a career-related job and the confidence which resulted. For example, Jaron stated:

They [co-op interviews] went very smoothly and um you know, I have to give myself some credit because I think I am ok with most interviews but uh they went very smoothly and I got the jobs, you know, no problem and they gave me confidence, I would definitely say, for the next one [interview]. So the co-op first [interview], that one went very well and I got more confidence and I think, you know, for me, I don’t work well

under pressure. So, I think once I had the confidence from the first to take that to the next, and I already had a job too, so I didn't have the pressure and I was just more, more myself and it just went smoothly.

Similarly, when asked about the interviews given through the co-op, Amanda noted:

I felt like I would be successful in future. They [the interviews] made me kind of ready for the job; they made me geared up for the jobs that I would be doing and they confirmed that I could hold my own in the business and um be successful in the position that I was applying for.

The other common invariant constituent was the assistance with resume critique. This assistance was noted by all the five participants. For example, Jillian described:

Resume critique was helpful. I had created a resume before; however, I had a very good challenge in fitting everything on the resume that I have done, and also figuring out what was most important to convey to an employer.

This was also noted by Brenda:

I was fairly confident with the advice that they had given me and a lot of the things that they had pointed out, I had no idea. For example, changing paragraphs into bullet points, I never knew that would be something that employers would look for. Especially the importance of the wording of the objective, how important that was and I actually had it a little bit in my resume previously, [but] I had a longer [objective statement]. I never thought that having a shorter simpler objective would be more effective than having something a little more wordy.

Finally, Jaron described not only the resume assistance, but the overall assistance and how that provided foundational skills necessary for success. He stated:

The workshop, I remember, it has been over two years, but it definitely helped a lot. It gave me a foundation, because I never had any formal training with resumes. My resume, actually, before that was awful. It was really bad. They definitely gave me a foundation of where to begin and I know many friends that it has helped a lot and so that is as far as it goes it gave me a good start.

Overall perceived influence of co-op experience on knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

The third thematic category was developed from participant responses to the overall influence or impact of the co-op experience on the development of knowledge, skills, and behaviors supporting the process of understanding what is needed to be successful in their career development. Key invariant constituents reveal the perceived gain of professionalism (learning how to be more professional), skills and knowledge related directly to aspects of the job and specific to the job. In addition, participants described the benefits of communication skills and confidence gained. Table 4.4 shows the variety of responses and the associated frequencies. These themes focus on three key elements of enhanced professionalism, job- or career-specific competencies, and communication skills.

Table 4.4

Development of Knowledge, Skills, and Behaviors Resulting from Co-op Experience

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Professionalism	5
Aspects of the job itself, specific to the job, elements critical to field	4
Communication skills to deal with different people and authority figures and to relay the important information	3
Confidence	2

Participants described overall benefits of the co-op program in terms of skills, knowledge, and behaviors learned. One of the most common mentioned was that of professionalism. This concept of greater professionalism was demonstrated by Brenda as follows:

When I first started before I did co-op, you don't really know how, like again, how to dress, how to interview, how to be professional in your field, how to talk to people, how to sell someone, how to work through difficult situations in a job environment, how to work with you know presenting to people and I think that each one of those things each one of the programs that I have done it has really helped me exponentially here at my job now I don't think that if I wouldn't have had that experience in the past I wouldn't be thriving as well as I am right now and as confident as I am right now and I don't know.

Blake also commented on professionalism:

It helped me grow up [and] kind of learn how to act in an office setting, [to] be more responsible, and more professional. I am kind of learning how to take criticism and turn around and then do the opposite, you know, constructive criticism.

Participants also commonly cited gaining job-specific skills. These included field-specific skills, what is needed to be successful in a particular job, as well as instilling confidence in their skills. Brenda stated:

I learned so many different things, from physical things to emotional things to whatever, that have helped me now and especially with my confidence. I think the co-op positions definitely helped me with my confidence and being, I guess, more assertive with presenting and that kind of thing. I guess the designing definitely [was a skill learned].

The designing, the mimicking, and they had me do some brochures and things like that and I had to mimic, almost exactly or similar to what they had done [with] them before and nowadays, a lot of times we have to mimic and do exactly what the client [wants]. Like I say, [we] have an ad for them and they just give us some information and they give us ads that they have done in the past or just their website to look off of. So we have to mimic almost exactly what they have done in the past, so specifically, I guess my design skills.

Overall perceived influence of co-op experience on career goals. The fourth thematic category describes participant responses in terms of the perceived influence of the co-op experience on their personal career goals. Key invariant constituents reveal the perceived benefit in helping to provide career direction, knowing what they do not want to do as well as what they want to do, and being able to try different aspects and settings within the industry. Two participants also noted a positive impact of the experiences based on positive feedback and enjoyment of the job. Table 4.5 displays the invariant constituents and the related frequencies from the analysis.

Table 4.5

Influence of Co-op Experiences on Career Goals

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Helps with determining direction of career; helps you figure out what you don't want to do as well as what you do	2
Able to try different aspects, areas, and settings within the industry or field	2
Impacted because of the positive feedback and enjoyment	2

Critical to the fourth thematic category is the influence of the co-op experience in terms of providing career direction, whether it be what they do want, do not want, or a particular focus on certain aspects or settings within the field. These notions were expressed by participants, such as Blake, who described the insight gained into the career field from the experience:

It really gave me some more insight on what lawyers do. You know, it is tough to tell unless you are actually in that situation. A lot of paperwork, a lot of time, arguments with other people, I mean, like represent things that you don't necessarily believe in, but it is part of what you have to do. Besides that, before I started, I had no idea of what my vision was. I think like everybody's vision is [that] you are going to be an attorney, you are going to be in court all day, and you are just going to be making a ton of money and driving a nice car and have a huge house. Then you go out there and it is not it at all, like the complete opposite. When I talk to people, they are, like, what do you want to do? I am about to go to law school. You are going to be so rich when you get out. It's not true. I think like the average salary in Wichita for lawyers is like 50 to 60 something; that it's nothing and you see a lot in these interns that come in our office and they come in and want to be lawyers and they see what really happens. I mean, not everything, but kind of the day to day stuff and they are like, oh, I don't think I want to do this anymore. I think it is kind of the same as police officers. I learned that when I did like some ride a longs during school and a lot of people think it's all gun battles and car chases all day. Well, I was in a 10-hour shift, we had three calls. We were in the car eight hours of the day and an hour of that we sat at a Wendy's. I guess it is just perception.

As another example, Amanda offered the following description:

I really did not know what I wanted to do when I started off. I thought I wanted to do copy writing and then learning more about the industry, you know, it kind of gave me direction on what I wanted to do and how I wanted to push my career. You know, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do and then being able to do things and talk with people, it really just shaped, you know, my perception of how I saw myself in my career. I started out in copy writing and I was like, this is really fun, I really like this, but I want to try out PR. Then I went to PR, and I thought, you know, this is really great, I like PR agency, but I want to experience it client side now. Then RSA called me and I was, like you know, PR client side is really great, so that was really the evolution there.

Finally, positive feedback and enjoyment of the job also influenced the participants. Jaron stated:

I think [my supervisor] was able to, she gave me advice. She frequently told me...this is going to be a career path for you. She would tell me that, and she would give me that positive feedback, but I mean like today's group was very good or you know this lesson was very good, I am going to use that next year and I definitely got positive feedback and I just feel like definitely it was the path. Because of feedback, because of, you know, I enjoyed it.

Specific mastery experiences and associated influence on career development. The fifth thematic category was related to mastery experiences gained from the co-op job and was developed from participant descriptions of these mastery experiences. Participants offered a variety of mastery experiences related to their different professions, although only one invariant constituent was mentioned by more than one participant (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6

Mastery Experiences

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Leadership and supervisory skills; being the person in charge	2

The only common invariant constituent related to mastery experiences was that of leadership and supervisory skills. For example, Blake described his personal mastery experiences, including leadership skills:

I really learned how to communicate through writing and verbally a lot better. You know supervising those kids I never done anything like that before. Specific to the job you know I still I didn't start doing what I am doing now until a week after I graduated and so by the time I finished, Emily had started I'd trained her on everything that she needed to take over from me and you know I kind of kept some of that for myself just to have side work if I needed it and honestly I didn't want to hand it over, cause I had a feeling I could have done it better and I didn't want everything that I had worked on for a year and half to get screwed up or get unorganized or messy and I was a little reluctant to let it all go but I had to walk away from it.

In addition, participants also described how these mastery experiences influenced their current job or career choice. Table 4.7 provides the invariant constituents and associated frequencies of the influential elements which were noted for more than one participant. The key themes in this category highlight the importance of mastery experiences on the perceived ability to take on responsibilities in an autonomous way and in taking a leadership role at the organization.

Table 4.7

Co-op Mastery Experience on Current Job and Career Choice

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Able to take on responsibilities on my own	4
Able to take on a leadership role	2

Key invariant constituents in terms of the perceived impact of mastery experience on the current job or career choice of participants seemed to flow from the common mastery experience of leadership and supervisory skills. These responses highlighted the ability to take on responsibility and to take on a leadership role. For example, Brenda stated, “So being actually in that work environment really, really, helped me to be self-reliant.” Jaron also described this type of autonomy and the ability to take on a leadership role as a result. He stated:

I will go with leadership I mean um because with the museum, I started off as that lonely intern and then when I got, well, gradually they gave me more responsibility and more duties and I was able to just take on more projects on my own. So being able to do things on my own, you know, to be a leader, take on responsibilities on my own, which is something I took from the co-op. I see what ability I have, more ability than I thought.

Lastly, Jillian described her new job and the preparation given by the co-op experience:

Well in my current job I have to create my own project, my own deadline, and hold myself accountable, and sometimes, occasionally, I give myself a motivating pep talk...I don't see my boss that often; I have a lot of one on one meetings with him once a month and that is it. I had a one on one meeting once a day in the co-op...So my internship in admissions specifically influenced a lot of what I do now, I am doing other jobs...but, it was building upon the skills I have learned.

Psychological development and emotive experiences. The sixth thematic category related to the psychological impacts of emotive experiences related to the co-op experiences of participants. This thematic category includes invariant constituents related to the emotional experiences described by participants, as well as the perceived influence of these experiences on their success in the field and their career path. These invariant constituents are presented separately, but combine to form the sixth thematic category.

Common invariant constituents related to the emotional experiences revealed key themes of feelings of initial fear or anxiety upon entering a new or unknown environment, a sadness upon leaving coworkers when the co-op had ended, and in between those times, feelings of less anxiety and increased confidence and comfort as their time at the co-op progressed. Table 4.8 illustrates the variety of participant responses with associated frequencies.

Table 4.8

Emotional Experiences from Co-op Work Opportunity

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Initial fear, anxiety, nervous, unknown or new environment	5
Sadness at end, leaving co-workers and supervisors at end	5
Less anxiety as went on, as became more confident and comfortable	4
Frustrated	2
Mixed feelings leaving some clients and supervisors; some sad, others relief	2

All five participants responded during the interview expressing initial fear or anxiety upon beginning the co-op job, which seemed to reveal individuals' sense of anxiety over the

unknown or simply a new environment. For example, Amanda stated, “Nervousness, anxiety, you know, it is a new environment and it is always stressful.” Jaron offered an in-depth explanation of his emotions by stating:

I remember the first day in the beginning. I would probably say it was, a lot of it was fear. I mean, I don't know if people would say that it's the unknown. I didn't know how it was going to go. I never met my boss or supervisor and I never worked in a school before, so it was just all new. So it was a little bit, and then some curiosity is not a bad emotion, with curiosity too. So like no matter what that is, what I had, so we will see how it goes.

Another participant, Brenda, described similar emotions of anxiety and excitement:

I would say that at the beginning, I was very nervous because I never worked in the public sector before. I was very hopeful; I had a lot of new and interesting ideas and I liked the fact that [my supervisor] would listen to me. So I would start off, um, with a lot of very innovated ideas, very, I guess just, I guess the best word would be, like gung ho like really ready to go on everything.

Jillian also noted anxiety and fear, but also described how this fear abated given time with the job and organization:

My first co-op I was definitely really scared and nervous because I hadn't had a lot of professional experience prior to that. So there was a lot of anxiety and that was shortly changed into great joy because I really enjoyed my employer. She was just a really great mentor and so the fear quickly subsided within a couple of days. There was that sense of wanting to please and wanting to do my best in all three internships I had, so that never went away, but I became less anxious in each of those when time went on.

In addition, the participants reported perceived influences related to these emotional experiences. Participants suggested these emotional experiences contributed to their ability to handle success and challenges in their current jobs in different ways, and that these emotive experiences influenced their attitude toward the job or career and ultimately, their personal career goals. Table 4.9 presents the invariant constituents and associated frequencies of these responses.

Table 4.9

Influences of Emotive Experiences

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Emotional influence on ability to handle success and challenges in current job	4
Gained confidence in the work environment	2
Emotional influence on attitude and career goals	2

Four of the five participants noted the influence of the emotional aspects of the co-op experience in terms of enhancing their ability to handle success and challenges in their current job. This was noted in terms of increased confidence, learning about oneself, feeling a sense of reward, and being able to handle the stress and high expectations of the job. Some of these elements were described by Jillian:

I think a lot of it is built up; I started a lot of it with confidence I think. I didn't have a lot of confidence necessarily in my professional abilities when I started back at [the first co-op], [my supervisor] did a lot to build up that confidence, which lead into being confident enough to stay in Arizona cause that was, that was difficult and challenging, mentally and physically, [to] stay there and then stepping into a position with [new leadership], where

they were very complimentary. [It was] also critical that they provided a lot of good feedback, so that helped me to be successful. If you don't get feedback, it is hard to know what to change and how to continue to grow and be successful. So I really enjoyed the feedback portion of the [two co-operative organizations]. I think that is what has really lead most of my successes. They still give me feedback. [First supervisor] still gives me feedback even though she is not my boss and it is nice to have that outside perspective from her.

Brenda also commented on the influence of emotional aspects of the co-op experience, stating:

I guess a lot of the things is that now I work with, I am very comfortable with my current boss and like I said with pushing with the new ideas...The thing I liked about [co-op organization], it was a very small community so a lot of the things I would suggest were easily, um, what is the word I am looking for, easily attained, like easy to go for with these ideas. So, that gave me the confidence to bring in new ideas in this company. Like, if I thought, hey this might be a good idea, for example, specifically social media, I started the social media at the [co-op organization] and currently we started social media here at our company because I did so well with the event planning at the [co-op organization]. I have suggested to do event planning here as well but I think it is something he doesn't want to get into, but the whole idea thing of starting new things and trying to be more modern in the [organization] has also brought these ideas to meet my comfort level in suggesting them here now.

These emotional experiences also were perceived to influence the participants' attitudes and career path. Amanda felt the positive emotions and friendship bonds instilled a greater work ethic in her. She stated:

The emotions, I created friendships and happiness in my work environment, which inspired me to work harder, the people I work with and then for myself and so I enjoyed my position so I would work harder there.

Amanda also described a sense of purpose gained through these emotive experiences and working with other people: “It definitely reassured me that I wanted to go into integrated marketing and communications. It gave me a sense of purpose and I liked the people I worked with so it made me want to continue.”

Vicarious learning through cooperative experiences. The seventh thematic category was formed from grouping responses related to vicarious learning achieved through the co-op experiences of participants. Three main invariant constituents were central to this theme. Participants reported observing good characteristics or behaviors that they either have adopted or will adopt, the use of these learned observational experiences to contribute to their current job success, and learning what not to do through the observed mistakes of others. These responses (invariant constituents) are presented in detail in Table 4.10 with the associated frequencies of occurrence.

Table 4.10

Vicarious Learning through Co-op Experiences

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Observed good characteristics that will adopt	5
Observed what not to do; mistakes of others	3
Learned observational experiences from coop contributing to current job success	5
Best practices; use the good things and not to use the bad	2

Participants described numerous occasions where positive characteristics or behaviors were observed they felt they would adopt for their own career success. Jillian provided an example of observing and adopting professional characteristics to support increased professionalism on the job:

[My supervisor], she had a level of professionalism, which was just incredible. She was just always representing herself well in the community and one thing she taught me is when you represent an organization...you always have to be on, you cannot go out and misrepresent yourself because if you misrepresent yourself, you misrepresent the company you work for and in those two situations those companies are too important to misrepresent. You become [the organization], you become [second organization], and so that was something I really worked, really hard at just to always be a positive example for the organizations that I represented and I think that is really a great trait to carry on in a future career. Something I hope to teach other people as well.

Amanda mentioned learning best practices in the field from professional mentors, whom she was able to emulate. She stated:

Then I was able to mentor with very amazing professionals, who really taught me how to do the things that I would be doing in the future, best practices. When I first started out it was monkey see monkey do. I would kind of copy their actions until I learned my own groove and, you know, they really shaped me to be the professional that I am today.

Other participants offered experiences where they observed mistakes or negative characteristics, serving to teach them what *not* to do. For example, Amanda also noted:

I got to witness mistakes, which is the best way that you learn even if you are not the ones making them...Well there was a young lady, who was a public relations coordinator,

and she didn't proofread her materials and so I saw firsthand that she was discredited with the media because of her actions. It had happened multiple times apparently.

Similarly, Brenda shared:

I think a lot of learning I found from watching others was how to treat customers. I have had some negative experiences, not with me, but seeing how certain people would treat the customers, how they would talk to them, how they would treat and talk to the employees and I learned what not to do from that person.

Jaron also reported learning from others' mistakes. He described this in a teaching environment:

I learned from her initially you know that the passiveness is a huge weakness. When you are dealing with kids you can't be passive; you can't allow them to get the upper hand. So that is what I learned from her, that was hard for me to get over first because they saw me as a friend, like the big brother, the friend. But after a while they knew, they knew where the lines were. They took advantage of her. She let them for the most part, you know. It's hard to, if that is your nature, to be a passive or just a very, uh, non-confrontational person, it's hard to [change]. She needs to change that, but I am definitely not afraid to be confrontational. So, that is the difference I learned from her, I have to make sure who is boss and make sure who is in charge so I can take that with me hopefully, when I get to teach, but you know I learned a lot.

Finally, the participants offered insight into how these observational experiences served to affect their current job success, such as learning best practices, professionalism, work ethic, and interpersonal communication. Amanda noted all of these elements, stating:

I use it every single day. I mean, I think that school prepares you to learn, but you know, the job experience is what really teaches you how to do what you want to do and what

you will be doing, you know, best practices in your field, work ethic, skills to communicate, um you know, follow up daily practices everything. Customer service, very much customer service.

Brenda commented on using the good and avoiding the bad things she learned from her experiences in her co-op positions:

I think in all of the experiences that I had in co-op, I learned good and bad things that I use myself. I guess I don't use the bad things, but I learned not to use them. I guess in any work, in all of my co-op experiences, you know, they were all fantastic at one point and terrible at others. Just like any other job, but really just getting the chance to, I guess, work with those people, that was far more than I needed...I think that everything that I learned through co-op, you know, like I said, all the good and bad things, I implement them now, in my job now. I mean everything that I have learned in the past, it is basically similar to what I am doing currently.

Experiences of social persuasion. The eighth thematic category related to the perceptions of participants about the experiences and influence of social persuasion in their co-op experiences. In addition, included in this thematic category were participant experiences of networking, which served to expand their social persuasive experiences, offering another dynamic of social influence on their career decisions. Participants cited experiences of both social discouragement as well as encouragement which were felt to affect their career decision-making. As far as discouragement, three participants noted that they did not receive discouragement, and two others described receiving discouragement by others who did not understand the job the participants were doing. More commonly, participants reported experiences of encouragement, including general support and direction given toward career path,

and the existence of supportive client relationships. Table 4.11 offers the range of social persuasive experiences, both discouragement and encouragement experiences, reported by respondents.

Table 4.11

Experiences of Social Persuasion

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Discouragement	
No discouragement received	3
By others who didn't understand what was doing	2
Not given time or attention; ignored; not given enough to Do	2
Encouragement	
General encouragement and direction	3
Client support and long term relationships	2

In general, most participants described some kind of encouraging social persuasion, although a few instances of discouragement were noted. Most reported either not receiving discouragement at all or receiving discouragement from those who did not hold an understanding of their job and what they were doing at the organization. Brenda described her discouragement in her first two co-op experiences where she was either ignored, or others did not understand her job. She explained:

I was very discouraged because I really did want to have a good experience through co-op and I really did not have a good experience because I really did not get to do much and I wish that I could have gotten a lot further than I did. At [second co-op], I think that I was discouraged in the fact that because I was a designer there and doing communication, there were a lot of times people would think that I really did not do

anything, or kind of, I guess, in a personal way, I just maybe messed around or done something like that and that was really discouraging for me, especially when you worked so hard on something and you know you have negative reactions to it.

Encouragement was found to be a common experience among the participants. This encouragement served to support further advancement in the field, networking experiences, and further study. For example, Amanda described the general support and encouragement received through her co-op experiences:

All of them have encouraged me and helped me along. Lots of different ways, I think in all of my co-ops and internships, they have empowered me in some way or encouraged me. They have given me different ideas. I started out as copy writers associated, but [one person] encouraged me to get into PR, so I did and so he really shaped my career...[he] has really shaped my career, encouraged me to do and try different things...They all wanted me to push myself and go further. I have always been encouraged to go to grad school and continuing my education and get involved with networking and they, all of my supervisors, have introduced me to very great wonderful influential people as well.

Blake described his experiences with the advice and encouragement of judges in the legal profession:

Meeting some of the judges through the attorneys I have talked to, they are like, "Oh, what do you want to do? What have you been doing?" They are really helpful and kind of give me the insight on law school and working in a legal field and stuff like that or they will make suggestions on what to do on things. Those are kind of the people that I have talked to the most about stuff like that and then just the attorneys in our office too.

The judges, they kind of, they offer some encouragement here and there especially the ones that I have gotten to know over the past couple of years that I try to see more often than others, just because they are nice and we have things in common.

Participants also described social networking experiences, similar to the lawyer experiences described by Blake above, which can be classified as a form of social persuasion because of the opportunities to connect with others and gain insight as well as encouragement through conversation. These networking experiences were felt to contribute to social influences on the participants' career paths. Key to this part of the thematic category is that networking opportunities offered participants the ability to discuss the career with professionals in the field and professionals who served as role models and mentors, offering advice. Table 4.12 illustrates the invariant constituents related to social persuasion through networking opportunities.

Table 4.12

Networking

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Networking opportunities to discuss career and field with professionals	4
Role models and mentors; advice	3
Influence of networking on career plans	2

In terms of networking, Blake added, "I talked to probably every single attorney in the office at one point or another about their law school experiences and what they did up until then and why they choose to and like how they feel about it now. I talked to some judges about it and a few of the paralegals kind of just to see what they did." The participants, like Blake, described the use of networking to gather more information about the field and various people's career

tracks. Similarly, Brenda described opportunities for networking both inside and outside of the co-op organization:

I went to several rotary meetings [and] so in those meetings, I got to meet several different people and with the different people that I met, I have wanted to now develop relationships with them or have some sort of mentor with someone who would give me advice on career possibilities. Also, because I did networking in the past through them, I want to try to, I have talked to my boss about doing networking now through the same kind of venues, doing rotary club, or chamber of commerce, something that is involved in networking that way. If we are doing sales, you know, develop those relationships with those people kind of get into ‘the know’ and possibly sell to them if need be.

Brenda also described the mentor or role models who served as networks for her. She stated:

I guess one of the best examples that I can think of was with [co-op organization], the lady who was there did give me really good advice on schooling in general. She had told me that she got her degree in psychology and now she is working in media, so she said something like you know I am not sure what type of percentage of people start off with one degree and go into another one; so she really tried to boost the fact that because I am already in something that I love to do, move forward and push forward in what I love because a lot of the times people don’t get that opportunity to actually be in a field that they started going to school in and something that they love so.

Accordingly, the networking experiences were perceived to provide additional influence on career plans by allowing for opportunities to talk with people, listen to their stories, and then reflect on shaping their own career plans. As a great example of networking opportunities, Amanda shared the following:

Talking with people networking probably influenced me more than the work did because if I had just stuck with one type of work at an agency, I would have been content to do that, but talking to people and learning about their stories and you know the industry itself, it really helped shape what I wanted to do and how I wanted to push myself.

Recommendations of participants. The final thematic category provided insight into the recommendations of participants for future students interested in participating in a co-op experience. Four of the five participants recommended the co-op experience, especially for LAS students. This recommendation was made for different reasons but primarily because the co-op job provides the student with needed career-related experience to assist in getting a job after graduation and helping in the career decision-making process. Table 4.13 provides the most common responses given by participants and associated frequencies.

Table 4.13

Recommendations of Participants

Invariant constituent with participant frequency > 1	# participants who mentioned invariant constituent
Definitely recommend the co-op for LAS students	4
Can't get a job without experience; co-op offers the experience	2

Participants generally recommended the co-op program, especially for LAS students. Knowing of the quandary where students might find themselves, Amanda noted, "Of course, you don't get a job without experience, and you can't get experience without a job. So, co-op is a great way to you know kind of negotiate that." Jaron added, "I would still suggest for LAS

because it will just help you really decide where you want to go.” Finally, Brenda shared a similar notion, stating:

I would suggest it to every single person at the LAS, and every single person in any other field because I think it is extremely beneficial and again I would like to stress, I think that they need to do co-op for graduate students because it helps you so much just to learn from your general field, to just get the idea to put your foot in the door, especially gaining experience because nowadays people want three to five years of experience and if you have no experience, nobody wants to hire you. So, I think that it is extremely, extremely important. You learn so, so much from doing co-op, from, like I said, from interviewing with people to actually going through with a career in your field. I think it is extremely beneficial for anyone studying anything really.

Clearly, the majority of participants in this study felt they could unequivocally recommend participating in co-op to other students, including other LAS students.

Structural Composite Descriptions

Now that all the thematic categories have been described and presented, the thematic category results were revisited to note the high frequency data, taking into consideration the narratives (individual textural descriptions) of each individual participant. This was done because the narratives provide a strong sense of certain elements within the research that can be included in the final analysis. The high frequency data are grouped into overarching themes titled composite structural descriptions to describe the findings representative of the sentiments of the group as a whole. These findings were then related directly back to the research questions of the study. This section features the composite structural descriptions generated from further

analysis of the common invariant constituents within the thematic categories of the previous sections (Moustakas, 1994).

The data from the nine thematic categories, taken within context of the individual descriptions, are further clustered into overarching themes, or composite descriptions. These descriptions describe how the participants as a group perceived the essence of their experiences and the factors related to the co-op experience which influenced their career self-efficacy. Further analysis of these themes which emerged reveal answers to the overarching research questions that guided this study:

Research Question 1: How do former LAS students describe their co-op experience?

Theme 1.1: Participants noted initial activities provided by the co-op office such as resume-building and interview preparation essential skills to aid in their co-op search.

Theme 1.2: The co-op experiences served to help determine the students' career direction through offering opportunities to "try out" various settings and areas of a field of interest.

Theme 1.3: Participants' initial anxiety about working in a job that was relevant to their career interest was gradually replaced with greater comfort and confidence due to the ability to experience successes in their coops.

Theme 1.4: Co-op experiences offered opportunities for participants to learn and to emulate positive personal characteristics, which they adopted, as well as negative personal characteristics or mistakes, which they avoided, contributing to their understanding of best practices in the field.

Theme 1.5: Positive feedback, support, and networking opportunities received from co-workers and clients through the students' co-op experiences served to offer encouragement, enjoyment, and career direction.

Research Question 2: What did these students gain, with regard to career self-efficacy, through their co-op experience?

Theme 2.1: Participation in the co-op program provided increased interviewing confidence as well as increased resume-building skills which were useful in obtaining a full-time job in their chosen field.

Theme 2.2: Through the co-op experience, participants gained an increased sense of professionalism, and developed job-specific skills and communication skills.

Theme 2.3: Participants reported that after their co-op experience, they experienced a positive attitude, a career purpose, and a perceived ability to handle success and challenges in a new job.

Theme 2.4: Learning from supervisors, co-workers, and clients led to participants gaining leadership and supervisory skills, enabling them to take on responsibility and leadership in their current full-time position.

Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the five participants in this phenomenological study, who are former LAS students from Wichita State and who participated in the co-op program. Direct quotes from each of the participants provided information about their co-op experiences. Analysis of the quotes led to nine common invariant constituents and, ultimately, nine overarching themes which emerged in direct response of the research questions. While the nine overarching themes were briefly introduced in this chapter, the following chapter will

examine and draw conclusions on these themes as they relate to the literature and theories discussed earlier in this study. Chapter 5 will also present implications for practice in higher education as well as recommendations for future study.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

This final chapter of this phenomenological study includes a restatement of the research questions and a discussion of the findings in relation to the current literature about co-ops and career self-efficacy. The chapter will conclude with limitations of the results as well as implications for both research and practice.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that students found their co-op experiences to be beneficial and also helped them to be better prepared for their full-time career position after graduation. In this section, nine themes will be summarized which emerged in response to the two research questions and will relate each to relevant existing literature.

Research Question 1: How Do Former LAS Students Describe Their Co-op Experiences?

Participants noted initial activities provided by the co-op office such as resume-building and interview preparation as essential skills to aid in their co-op search. One of the ways to effectively aid in students' career development is to address the preparation needed to be successful in their co-op search through an organized program (Johnston, 2007). Co-op is considered to be a model of experiential education which complements more traditional forms of classroom studies by providing new learning opportunities through career development and ultimately, practice and reflection (Johnston, 2007). As part of the academic program at public education institutions, co-op has a responsibility to be more than a placement agency.

Since their inception, co-ops have been associated with providing students the opportunities to establish opportunities for students to gain job-specific knowledge as well as general skills to be successful in the workplace. Johnston (2007) stresses "the responsibility for supporting the development of self-directed, reflective, work integrated learning skills for all co-

op students, and for providing students with the tools and opportunities to practice these throughout their co-op career, lies squarely with the co-op program and its preparatory curriculum” (p. 131). Co-op programs found in many universities typically provide strategies on student job search preparation through a variety of methods such as workshops, seminars, or co-op courses. Although students are less enthusiastic about enrolling in a course or workshop to discuss career issues found in today’s society (Heppner, O’Brien, Hinkelman, & Flores, 1996), the goal of co-op preparatory programs is to inform students about the world of work and to help them understand the importance of developing skills, knowledge, and attitudes which will lead to their success in that world (Johnston, 2007). More specifically, these preparatory programs might provide additional employment support, such as resume building workshops, job interview preparation, and professional development tips (Doel, 2009) which will be helpful as students search for full-time employment. Additionally, to offer a successful program where students can effectively learn about resume-building and interviewing skills, the co-op coordinator needs to understand what employers are looking for in the current society. By expanding their career interventions and what is taught in the preparatory programs, co-op coordinators provide assistance and expertise which is relevant to the career concerns and needs that students experience as they seek experience through the co-op program (Niles & Bowsbey, 2005). Therefore, for students to successfully participate in many co-op programs it is a requirement for them to complete these initial courses or workshops. This is done so the students gain an understanding of an effective job search as well as how to be successful at work once they are hired from a knowledgeable co-op coordinator. The students will also learn about the policies of the co-op program which helps them understand what is needed to maximize their co-op experiences and how they can complete the program successfully.

The Wichita State co-op office professionals provide needed resources and assistance in helping students to understand the job search and how to navigate through the co-op program. Mentioned repeatedly throughout this research were the students' co-op workshop experiences at Wichita State. These workshops provided a foundation from which to begin a career path through provision of interview and resume skills. While the students still experienced anxiety in their first co-op positions, they felt better prepared due to the contributions from the professionals at the co-op office. The skills learned in the professional practice workshop and initial meetings with a co-op coordinator to discuss resumes and interviewing skills proved to be beneficial to the students.

The co-op experiences served to help determine the students' career direction through offering opportunities to “try out” various settings and areas of a field of interest.

While it is common to find that students change majors several times throughout college, once they identify a major which is a good fit for them, they need to take the process a step further to solidify their decision by experiencing jobs for that particular major. Students seek opportunities to solidify their majors and career choices throughout their college career and co-op allows the students to make connections between school and work and to aid in the process of identifying a career of interest. To do this most effectively is to participate in a co-op where the intent of the program is to gain work-related skills and train students for a specific career (Eames, 2003; Smits, 2006). Students can then search for a career field and ultimately an organization which has a culture similar to what they are seeking. One might question the most effective process to introduce students to career development interventions including co-op in their college years. Powell and Kirts (1980) propose a systems approach in higher education which helps to increase an awareness of students of career development programming: (a) description of complete

career development process, (b) self-assessment services, (c) exposure to career exploration, and (d) training in job search skills . It is in phase three where co-ops can be useful tools to help students understand the career development process. Powell and Kirts (1980) state this is the phase where career development and the world of work merge to form a beneficial co-op experience.

Cates and Jones (1999) state that co-op is a structured educational strategy which progressively connects academic study with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals. Many universities which have co-op programs similar to Wichita State's claim their co-op program allows students to try out a field and gain relevant work experience, as well as to gain college credit (Cates & Jones, 1999). The benefit of being able to try-out a field of interest is one which is discussed at many college orientations explaining to incoming students the co-op process at Wichita State. The benefits and processes of participating in co-op are also presented throughout a student's college career through classroom visits, co-op workshops and other promotional events. In the current study, the benefits of this concept are reinforced through the voices of the participants. The opportunities offered through the co-op program are helpful when students are making and solidifying decisions about their desired industry and career field.

Participants' initial anxiety about working in a job that was relevant to their career interests was gradually replaced with greater comfort and confidence due to the ability to experience successes in their coops. Confidence along with responsibility and professional competence are all desirable outcomes of participating in a co-op program. It is often discovered the personal value of co-op can truly be translated into increased self-esteem and confidence as well as increased professional skills (Carrell & Rowe, 1993; Coll & Chapman, 2000). Indeed,

Fletcher (1989) stated confidence is a “major personal growth benefit experienced by [co-op] participants” (p. 41). In fact, in Fletcher’s 1990 study, her model highlighted three points which co-op programs need to focus on when creating an environment which leads to increased learning and confidence-building skills:

1. The importance of program features which stimulate task success during co-op work terms
2. The importance of the stability, credibility and accepting nature of the student-advisor relationship
3. The importance of clearly articulated and appropriately enforced standards and guidelines

The three statements above successfully link program processes and enhance confidence, if done correctly. Her findings have strong implications for co-op “program design, implementation and philosophy” (1990, p. 41) to continue to focus on the development of self-esteem and confidence in students through the creation of opportunities to succeed in the workplace.

The current study revealed that each of the participants, in the beginning, felt nervous and anxious. The researcher explored the emotional responses of the participants, from the initial stages of participation in the co-op program, to the end stages. When considering the participants’ emotional responses (Bandura, 1994) such as anxiety, fear, happiness, while first participating in co-op, all five of them experienced the same initial feelings: nervousness and anxiety. As time went on and they understood their role within the workplace, their emotions became more positive. For the most part, most of them became comfortable, confident, and experienced less stress and more joy because they were beginning to feel like they understood the tasks which they needed to do and could complete them successfully. In the end, they were

able to take away a feeling of comfort and understanding of the workplace well before their graduation and full-time job. These emotive experiences supported a perceived more positive attitude, provided a career purpose, and the ability to eventually handle both various emotions of successes and challenges of a new job.

Co-op experiences offered opportunities for participants to learn and to emulate positive personal characteristics, which they adopted, as well as negative personal characteristics or mistakes, which they avoided, contributing to their understanding of best practices in the field. Although learning while watching others is a fairly passive learning activity, observing people performing tasks that are relevant to one's career interest and be successful at them raises observers' beliefs they too might possess the capabilities to master comparable activities required to succeed (Bandura, 1994). If students learn by observing other people in action, they engage cognitive factors because they need to pay attention, construct images, remember, analyze, synthesize and so on and so forth and this is especially true if they believe others have roughly the same abilities as we do (Betz & Hackett, 1981).

In 1978, Lev Vygotsky also presented ideas on the facilitation of learning through experiences mediated by other people. In his explanations, the learner cannot reach full potential without the aid of others and the process of guiding the learner to higher stages of cognitive functioning relies on effective interactive human relationships in the workplace (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky explained mentors or supervisors can raise the student's competence through the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peer” (p. 86). He also stated assistance is transitional, a scaffold

or plank which is removed when it is no longer needed and the student has internalized another's support (Vygotsky, 1978). The idea is after being able to observe a process and complete it jointly, the student is likely able to complete the same task at a later time. Therefore, the student's ZPD for that particular task will have been raised (Vygotsky, 1978).

Participants in the current study described learning and emulating positive characteristics of professionalism from co-workers, clients, and working with other individuals in their co-op positions. They also mentioned they were able to observe coworkers and ultimately continue to use those experiences in their current full time positions. Additionally, participants described negative characteristics, behaviors, and mistakes which also served an educational value in terms of defining best practices in the field for these participants. One particular participant mentioned how she was able to observe the resulting attitude toward a coworker because she performed poorly on the job. The knowledge gained through experiences in co-op positions, is perceived to support the recent graduates' has aided in the understanding of best practices in their field and current job success.

Positive feedback, support, and networking opportunities received from co-workers and clients through the students' co-op experiences served to offer encouragement, enjoyment, and career direction. While the level of mentoring varies greatly in each co-op placement, effective mentoring, whether it is by a supervisor or co-worker is essential in the co-op process. Only when a meaningful mentoring relationship is in place will there be evidence of the intellectual development over the acquisition of knowledge and inspired professional development (Daloz, 1986). Ricks and Van Gyn (1997) also stated "to foster such relationships, careful attentions needs to be placed on the selection of appropriate people [to be mentors], followed by training in relationship skills" (p. 13). A mentor cannot be just any person in an

organization, but one who can communicate with the co-op students and share experiences from their own careers to help the students learn. These people need to be cognizant of the necessity of having specific skills such as “active listening, communication, building rapport, managing conflict, collaboration, coaching, and counseling” (Ricks & Van Gyn, 1997, p.13) so the students will feel comfortable, connected, and challenged throughout their co-op experience.

Through this mentoring process, the student needs to have opportunities to succeed at the tasks required in his/her co-op. The mentor needs to provide ways for the co-op student to be successful as it will build “a robust belief” (Bandura, 1994, p. 2) in their abilities; failures can undermine that belief. Bandura (1994) stated:

Some setbacks and difficulties in human pursuits serve a useful purpose in teaching that success usually requires sustained effort. After people become convinced they have what it takes to succeed, they persevere in the face of adversity and quickly rebound from setbacks. By sticking it out through tough times, they emerge stronger from adversity. (p. 3)

Bandura (1994) describes this further:

In addition to raising people's beliefs in their capabilities, [strong mentors] structure situations for them in ways that bring success and avoid placing people in situations prematurely where they are likely to fail often. They measure success in terms of self-improvement rather than by triumphs over others. (p. 3)

Finally, mentoring requires the ability to convey positive appraisals. Providing feedback was essential to help the students understand their strengths and weaknesses while doing their co-op. When a student is told they do well at a certain task they will be more likely to succeed because of the positive encouragement. Likewise, on the other hand, if they experience

discouragement, the person might feel they can no longer continue the task at an effective level and ultimately chooses to do something different. The expressions from others help to sustain a sense of efficacy, especially when struggling with difficulties. More specifically, if significant others express faith in one's capabilities that person might be able to progress at a faster rate (Bandura, 1981).

Encouragement is always welcomed, especially when it is sincere and in a learning environment. Positive feedback was observed often and throughout the current study. All participants cited experiences where they heard encouragement from supervisors and/or co-workers in their co-ops. Thus, encouragement was perceived to influence their career path and further work and education in the field. Although the participants mentioned few discouraging and negative experiences while participating in co-op, they all seem to agree it was a learning moment and in the end they became better professionals and more confident because of the experience.

Exceptional co-ops coordinated my effective mentors often offer networking opportunities for the students. Networking might be with co-workers within the same organization, or perhaps with people from different organizations through conferences and other industry-related meetings. Networking opportunities, according to participants, also played a role in learning about their chosen career through contact and encouragement from various sources in the field. It is this kind of networking which can be valuable knowledge and insight in the job search.

Research Question 2: What Did These Students Gain, With Regard To Career Self-Efficacy, Through Their Co-op Experience?

Participation in the co-op program provided increased interviewing confidence as well as increased resume-building skills that were useful in obtaining a full-time job in their chosen field. As mentioned earlier in this section, resume skills and interview experience are offered in comprehensive co-op preparatory programs. Along with formal education, students might also gain valuable job search experience while looking for a co-op position through practicing interviewing skills and resume writing. Therefore, co-ops in general have been considered to serve as training opportunities for students to develop skills which are necessary to successfully transition into the workplace (Freudenberg, Brimbel, & Cameron, 2011). To increase the marketability of students, they are encouraged to seek opportunities which will equip them with the skills and experiences that are required in their focus industry (NACE, 2007). These opportunities primarily offered through co-op will help them understand the job search process as well as the world of work. Also, as students continue to practice the process of interviewing in the co-op search and understand what to expect, they will be more comfortable and confident in their full-time job search. In fact, as quoted in Niles and Bowsbey (2005), Hardesty (1991) conducted a meta-analysis focusing on career development courses which might be offered through co-op preparatory programs:

Students completing career courses were 40% more capable of making career decisions than students who did not complete these courses. For students completing career planning courses, Hardesty found that they were 48% more certain about their career choices at completion of the course than they were at the beginning. (p. 357)

The skills and experience developed through the co-op process will help students become more confident to knowledge gained about resumes, interviewing, and the overall job-search process. Because the participants in this study interviewed for several co-ops and other part-time jobs,

they were able to gain experience to understand what to expect in a professional interview as well as provide relevant information on their resume to highlight their employable skills.

Through the co-op experience, participants gained an increased sense of professionalism, developed job-specific skills and communication skills. Learning work-specific skills and having the knowledge to perform duties and tasks directly related to a specific job is important when doing a co-op. Cates and Jones (1999) stated that cooperative education provides students with the opportunity to develop skills which employers identify as crucial for success in the workplace. It also provides students with the opportunity to develop maturity and responsibility as they make the transition from the role of student to professional. Co-op provides students with the opportunity to develop specific competencies, professional skills and technical knowledge related to their academic majors. Students also learn from professionals in their field of interest in co-op settings (Cates & Jones, 1999). Not only professional and work-related skills are important, but also transferable skills which NACE (2012) defined as those skills which can be learned and used in a variety of work settings. According to the recent employer survey published in *Job Outlook 2012*, National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2012), hiring managers rate teamwork and communication at the top of skills/qualities they want in a candidate (Appendix F).

While classroom learning can help with foundational knowledge of a subject, the opportunity for workplace experience should allow students to apply the knowledge learned to real world situations and to develop interpersonal skills such as conflict resolution, communication, and networking (Gardner & Hanneman, 2010). A number of studies about successful cooperative programs have confirmed they assist students in learning the integral, tacit knowledge and work skills which cannot be easily learned in a traditional, classroom setting

(Williams, Sternberg, Rashotte, & Wagner, 1993; Gardner & Koslowski, 1993) and can focus on the skills employers look for in new employees. To promote how co-op can aid in skill development essential to full-time jobs, research has also illustrated many co-op programs promote their services as an avenue for students to prepare for the workplace by helping them develop transferable skills which employers value (Doel 2009; Gardner & Choi, 2007). Employers expect specific professional skills from the new graduates they hire, such as demonstrated ability to build working relationships, strong analytical reasoning, and being able to work effectively in a team (Gardner & Choi, 2007).

In this current study, participants noted skills which they were able to develop to help them be successful in their current positions. Many participants cited opportunities to continue with general office skills, communication skills, working in a team, and overall professionalism in their current full-time jobs. By learning these skills, the participants were able to confirm they acquired skills that have helped them in their current full-time positions.

Participants reported that after their co-op experience, they experienced a positive attitude, a career purpose, and a perceived ability to handle success and challenges in a new job. According to Bandura (1994), people motivate themselves by exercise of forethought. Through their past experiences, students can form beliefs about what they are able to do and because of this; they can become goal-oriented. People act on their beliefs about what they can do, as well as on their beliefs about how successful they can be in a given situation. Bandura (1994) goes on to explain that the motivating influence of outcome expectancies is thus partly governed by how well one believes they can overcome challenges in their careers.

What Vygotsky (1978) described as scaffolded relationships are most effective when the [mentor] provides enough support to stretch the student's problem-solving abilities far enough to

let the student achieve something new, which he or she could not have done alone, but not so far the student cannot comprehend or learn from the experience (Thornton, 1995). For the students to learn effectively they should be given tasks with meaningful purposes which they can relate to and co-ops certainly provide that opportunity. For this reason, it is important to ensure proper scaffolding techniques are present so the student can experience success when performing a task. As Thornton (1995) suggests, “success in solving problems and other people’s belief in our success makes us feel confident at any age” (p. 110). By combining Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development for support as well as Thornton’s thoughts on confidence, supervisors can understand the need for their co-op students to experience success through demanding activities in order to grow and to gain the self-confidence necessary to persevere in the full-time workplace.

In the current study, participants mentioned when a client or co-worker told them that they did well at a certain task, it was found that the participants will be more likely to succeed because of the positive encouragement. On the other hand, if they experienced discouragement, the student felt that h/she they can no longer continue the task at an effective level and ultimately chose to do something different. It is comforting to know that none of the participants reported discouragement during their co-op experiences. Therefore, because the participants in this study felt they experienced success in their co-ops, according to the literature, they should experience a higher level of success in their career positions than whom?. Their interviews, in fact, confirmed they felt more confident and comfortable in their full-time positions. Therefore, through participation in co-op, the students are able to determine their own successes and challenges to effectively picture their success in a career position.

Learning from supervisors, co-workers, and clients led to participants gaining leadership and supervisory skills, enabling them to take on responsibility and leadership in their current full-time position. Students cannot learn about leadership and supervision solely through classroom learning. To gain leadership skills, students need to be introduced to leadership opportunities and then have the opportunity to succeed, to fail, and to reflect (Guskin & Marcy, 2003). Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers' beliefs they too might possess the capabilities to master comparable activities required to succeed. This is especially true if it is believed that others have roughly the same abilities as we do (Betz & Hackett, 1981). Bandura (1994) describes this further:

Modeling influences do more than provide a social standard against which to judge one's own capabilities. People seek proficient models that possess the competencies to which they aspire. Through their behavior and expressed ways of thinking, competent models transmit knowledge and teach observers effective skills and strategies for managing environmental demands. (p. 3)

It is through effective modeling and mentoring which employers can help co-op students understand the qualities of a good leader and supervisor and can then use those skills gained in their career positions.

In the current research, participants noted opportunities to gain leadership skills through their interviews. All participants cited opportunities to lead cases, organizations, departments and projects in this study, which is a good indication their full-time employers had confidence they were able to understand the qualities of leaders and were capable to carry on leadership and supervisory opportunities.

Limitations of Study

One limitation of this study involves the type of students who commonly participate in the co-op program. These students are usually more involved with programs outside of the traditional classroom, which might lend to results which does not describe all LAS students' experiences at Wichita State because these students are naturally motivated to participate in more activities and to be introduced to more experiences which would help them to gain career self-efficacy. Linn et al. (2004) further discussed this phenomenon, believing typical students who choose to participate in the co-op program are more motivated than are typical regular students who do not. Linn theorizes those students who choose to co-op might do better not because of the program itself, but because of the general character of the student. What this means to the current research is students who participate in co-ops might already be high functioning students who possess career self-efficacy. These students might be successful in their post-graduation careers regardless of the experiences gained while in the co-op program due to their initiative and responsibility, not necessarily due to their participation in the cooperative education program.

A second limitation would be the students who agreed to participate in this study would be more likely to have a positive experience and would be willing to share their success stories with the researcher, an administrator within the cooperative education program. Those with negative experiences might not be as likely to express their challenges with the researcher.

A third limitation is understanding the definition of career self-efficacy. As mentioned earlier, for the purposes of this dissertation, career self-efficacy was defined as the belief that an individual gains confidence in his/her ability to obtain the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in a career. Career self-efficacy may be a good predictor of a person's success in the

development of skills to help graduates become more marketable and comfortable with the workplace. One can argue that career self-efficacy is essential for effective job performance and understanding of the workplace. Yet, there is not much research on career self-efficacy to further delve into the definition and career behaviors that may be affected by increased self-efficacy. Therefore, to continue to define and understand career self-efficacy might help to provide a more stable foundation for research in this area.

Finally, a third limitation is the economic turbulence the nation as well as Kansas has been facing in recent years. According to Mendy (2011), the economy has affected the unemployment numbers throughout the state in what way?.

The Great Recession, which started in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, originated from poor lending practices in the residential real estate market. The contraction of the economy during this period was more destructive than the prior recessions because credit availability diminished, the value of houses crashed, and household wealth declined. Subsequently, a large number of individuals lost their jobs. In July 2009, the unemployment rate of the United States, Kansas, and Wichita, respectively, reached 9.7, 8.2, and 10.7 percent because of the Great Recession. (p. 5)

This economic downturn undoubtedly affected cooperative education. The number of opportunities declined for both undergraduates as well as graduates, and of the positions which were available, a higher percentage of them were unpaid. At the same time, the office had a decreased number of students seeking work in the program. It is speculated that students chose to stay at their current jobs where they received pay, even if it was not related to their major, rather than risk getting a co-op and face the possibility of getting paid less or even deal with

layoffs in certain industries. Additionally, due to low opportunity in the area, recent graduates might not be employed in an industry which is relevant to the degree which was received. While unemployment is expected to recover, albeit at a modest pace, in Wichita (Mendy, 2011) recent graduates might not have had the best experiences in the job search and obtaining a fulfilling full-time job after graduation.

Recommendations for Practice

This research has shed light on the perceptions of five LAS graduates from Wichita State. It is confirmed the experiences of the participants were positive and helpful in their development of career self-efficacy. Therefore, this section will provide recommendations for practice as deduced from the current study.

First and foremost, administrators and faculty must recognize LAS students can benefit from participating in co-ops. There are basically two groups of majors and career paths in colleges today. First, there are the professional majors such as engineering, health professions, and business. The second group consists of broadly-educated disciplines found in LAS colleges such as biology, English, and history. It was discussed that other colleges seem to embrace the idea of including co-op in their curriculum, yet it is not as commonly found in LAS colleges. The LAS administrators as well as leaders in the departments and programs need to understand the benefits of cooperative education and rethink curricula to provide similar resources of getting experience which the professional departments offer. Although co-ops are commonly considered to be opportunities which lack academic content and do not contribute to the curriculum associated with LAS education, the results of the current research reveal this presumption is wrong. Cooperative education, when integrated into classroom study, can be beneficial to all students, including those majoring in LAS programs.

Second, once the administrators involved with LAS curriculum in higher education understand the benefits of co-op, students should be encouraged to register to participate in a structured career preparatory program. A centralized office with staff collectively dedicated to career development and cooperative education can effectively help with the process of preparing students for the workforce via courses or workshops to address career development issues. The topics to be addressed in these preparatory programs would include those mentioned to be beneficial in this research; therefore, a focus on resume writing and interviewing skills would be top priority. Also, sessions to address ethical work habits, harassment, diversity, proper dress, dining etiquette, and how to succeed in the workplace have been in place in several co-op programs and have been considered to be integral in preparing students for their co-op positions and ultimately, their career positions.

Additionally, employers need to understand the importance of their role in cooperative education. The current research revealed the students learned best through direct support and mentoring. When developing a co-op, employers need to think about some of the following processes as essential components of their program: (a) an orientation for the student to become acclimated to the organization to better understand the culture as well as expectations, (b) introduce student to key employees so he/she would have the opportunity to network, (c) provide a mentor with ample experience, patience, and time as this person will be the student's support throughout the process, (d) maintain communication with the co-op office to make sure the student will be able to receive credit for their experience, this is also important if there are any issues which need to be addressed, and (e) supervisor/mentor needs to have exceptional communication skills to articulate expectations, successes, and other experiences. These points were mentioned by the participants in the research and will be helpful to employers when

considering what they need to do to help the student be successful and to provide an effective learning environment.

Finally, it is important to educate LAS students of the opportunities and benefits of gaining experience by participating in at least one co-op placement before graduation. As mentioned in this study, the co-op students felt they were able to gain skills which helped them gain a slight advantage over their peers graduating from the same programs without co-op experience. Several participants mentioned they were able to handle success and challenges in their full-time positions due to their experiences in co-op. The current research has confirmed that co-op helps students gain career self-efficacy, which will help them be prepared for the job market upon graduation and can help them to be more employable when they begin the search for full-time jobs. Providing co-op as an option within all LAS program of studies and encouraging the students to participate throughout their college career would be ideal. Therefore, the students need to understand the importance of developing work ethic and understanding before graduation. If they are able to do that, professionalism and success will come easier after graduation.

Recommendations for Future Study

As mentioned earlier, cooperative education been around since 1906 and it has been in the process of evolving over time. It is also a program that is seeking an answer on how it can help college departments prepare students for life after college. With those ideas in mind, it is encouraging to continue to measure the effectiveness of co-op with the experiences of the students. To do this, there are two types of research, which could enhance the results of this particular study as well as our understanding of co-op and the benefits which students who participate in them receive. First, one should consider initiating research about students across

the disciplines and colleges to ascertain the connection of their experiences with their full-time career jobs. Secondly, in the current study, only recent graduates were interviewed. It would be interesting to go deeper into the alumni base (perhaps 10 – 20 years) in a longitudinal study to see if graduates still view cooperative education as a helpful opportunity to help them gain career self-efficacy as their careers continue to develop and perhaps change over time. Both of these recommendations should be considered for the Wichita State Co-op Office for future research.

It is important to continue research components of cooperative education. The benefits of the program need to be known and understood by all key stakeholders; students, faculty, administrators, and employers. Through the current research as well as others, we need to be encouraged that the educational endeavor we call co-op is effective and provides opportunities for students to experience positive and transformative life changing events through the co-op program.

Summary

It is the aim of this study to ask recent LAS graduates who participated in at least one co-op during their college career to discuss their experiences of being able to develop career self-efficacy. The themes which were identified in this study can be connected to the research questions and provide a lens to understand the perspectives of recent LAS graduates and how their co-op experiences might have contributed to their career self-efficacy.

Comments from the participants of this study indicate while the level of opportunity and types of experiences varied the themes which were developed led to the conclusion that the recent LAS graduates gained career self-efficacy through their participation in the co-op program. Co-op learning is beneficial to students; therefore, it is important to educate administrators and faculty involved with LAS colleges it is possible to incorporate it into their

curriculum and to assess the learning outcomes (Eyler, 2009). The initial ideas that students cannot effectively gain skills and knowledge in a specific field due to the nature of LAS being a college which might focus more on general skills have been minimized. The participants shared very specific situations where they were able to hone in on their own values and to determine the right career path for them through the development of career self-efficacy while participating in cooperative education.

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Appendix A



Demographic Form

What semester and year did you graduate? _____

What was your major? _____

How many semesters did you participate in co-op? _____

What was the organization's name where you were able to get co-op credit?

Did you go through the workshop and search for jobs on the PlacePro system? _____

Did you get your co-op job through PlacePro? _____

Are you currently employed? _____

If yes, is your job related to your most recent major from WSU? _____

What is your age? _____

What is your race? Black, Non-Hispanic _____ Hispanic _____
 White, Non-Hispanic _____ Asian or Pacific Islander _____
 American Indian/Eskimo _____ Other (please list) _____

International student?

What was your overall GPA? _____

You will receive a \$20 visa card at the end of each interview to reimburse you for your time and efforts.

Thank you for your time and input to help create a better program for LAS majors.

Appendix B

Cooperative Education Study Informed Consent Form

Project Title: Liberal Arts and Sciences Graduates' Experiences of Career Self-Efficacy through Cooperative Education

Approval Date of Project:

Expiration Date of Project:

Principal Investigator: Dr. Christy Craft, **Co-Investigator:** Jennifer Brantley

Contact information for any problems or questions: 321 Bluemont Hall, Kansas State University, 785-532-5490, ccraft@ksu.edu

IRB Chair Contact/Phone information: Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

Purpose: This research will be conducted by a Kansas State University doctoral student who works full time at WSU in the Cooperative Education and Work-Based Learning office. This is a study that encourages WSU alumni to reflect on the impact of participating in cooperative education. You will be asked to engage in two 60-minute interviews where questions will be asked about your experiences in the cooperative education program. You will receive a \$20 visa card after each interview is completed.

Participant Selection: You were selected from a list of May 2011 LAS graduates who participated in the co-op program for at least one semester during your senior year of your undergraduate college career.

Discomfort/Risks: There are not any anticipated situations of discomfort or risks.

Benefits: After the results of this research are compiled, the findings may be presented to WSU faculty, staff and administrators, about former students' perceptions of their co-op experiences. This information will help the office of cooperative education to analyze and identify any areas of challenge or success while working with LAS students.

Confidentiality: Any information obtained in this study where you can be identified will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. The study documents (e.g., interview transcripts) will be stored in a secure area in the Cooperative Education and Work-Based Learning office.

Terms of Participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I understand that both interviews will be audiotaped. The information gained from the interviews will be transcribed by a professional outside of WSU. Audiotapes and transcriptions will be stored in the Cooperative Education and Work-Based Learning Office for up to three years where only the researcher will have access to them. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop

participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Participant Name

Signature of Participant

Date

Witness Signature (project staff)

Date

Appendix C

Interview Guide - First Interview

Introductions

I am conducting a study on the extent to which participating in WSU's cooperative education program helps with career self-efficacy.

Our conversation will be audiotaped and I will transcribe our conversation at a later date. To ensure validity, I will have you look over a summary of our conversation to ensure that I have accurately conveyed your perspective on this subject.

Do you have any questions?

Now, let's begin:

Demographic form

Previous work experiences

1. Describe all part-time and full-time work experiences that you had before you participated in the co-op program.
 - a. How, if at all, did any or all of those work experiences shape your interest in the career that you are currently pursuing?
 - b. To what extent did any or all of those work experiences impact your perceptions of your ability to be successful in your chosen career? Please give examples.

Cooperative education preparation

2. Why did you decide to participate in co-op?
3. To what extent did each of the following WSU experiences influence your perceptions of your ability to be successful in your chosen career?
 - a. Professional Practice Workshop
 - b. Resume Critique
 - c. Job Interviews
4. With which organization(s) did you work to receive co-op credit?
5. Describe your job responsibilities at each of those organizations.

During the co-op experience:

Vicarious learning opportunities

6. Please describe situations, if any, where you learned what to do (or what not to do) by simply observing others at the work site?
7. To what extent did you observe others and then implement what you observed in tasks you completed while in your co-op position?
8. To what extent have you been able to use what you observed in your co-op experience in tasks you complete in your current job?

Mastery experiences

9. What work-related tasks did you initially have a vague understanding but was able to complete successfully on your own by the end of your co-op?
10. What new work-related tasks did you learn in your co-op and was able to complete successfully on your own by the end of the work-period?
11. To what extent did those experiences of completing tasks successfully during your co-op influence how you perform work-related tasks in your current job?

Social persuasion

12. Please describe situations where an employee at your work site encouraged you in terms of your ability to do this type of work.
13. Please describe situations where an employee at your work site discouraged you in terms of your ability to do this type of work.
14. Was there a situation where a person (not a co-worker, perhaps a client or customer) you met while doing your co-op encouraged you in terms of your ability to do this type of work? Please describe.
15. Was there a situation where a person (not a co-worker, perhaps a client or customer) you met while doing your co-op discouraged you in terms of your ability to do this type of work? Please describe.

Conclusion

Thank you for participating in the interview today. As I mentioned earlier, I will transcribe the tape and consider any other notes that I have written and put them together in a draft for you to read and make any suggestions when both interviews are complete for everyone.

I appreciate the time you took to talk about your experiences. Debriefing?

Let's schedule a time to meet for the second interview.

Appendix D

Interview Guide - Second Interview

Thank you for coming back to participate in the second interview for this research. Do you have any questions?

Let's begin

During the co-op experience (continued)

Psychological responses

1. What types of emotions did you experience in the beginning of your co-op?
 - a. Please describe how those emotions changed or did not change throughout your co-op.
2. Please describe the types of emotions you experienced during the end of your co-op.
 - a. With co-workers
 - b. With your supervisor
 - c. With others associated with your co-op (clients, customers, etc.)
3. To what extent did the emotions that you experienced during co-op influence your interest in and commitment to your current job? Please give examples.
 - a. To what extent did the emotions that you experienced during co-op influence your ability to handle successes in your current job? Please give examples.
 - b. To what extent did the emotions that you experienced during co-op influence your ability to handle challenging problems on the job? Please give examples.

Career choice

4. To what extent were you able to meet with other professionals to hear their stories about how their past career decisions helped them to get to their current job? Please discuss those experiences.
5. To what extent were you able to network with professionals in your chosen career to learn more about the profession because of your experiences in your co-op position?
6. To what extent were you able to determine that your major and chosen occupation were a good fit because of your experiences in your co-op position?
7. To what extent were you able to determine that the organization where you worked during your co-op was or was not a good fit for your career goals because of your experiences in your co-op position?

Career goals/ambitions

8. Did your co-op position help you understand your profession so that you were able to visualize and develop your career plans? Please discuss further.
9. To what extent did the interactions with professionals at your co-op influence your interest in and commitment to plan for your chosen career? Please discuss those interactions.
10. To what extent were you encouraged to set high goals for your own career plans? Please discuss.

Career competence

11. To what extent did your co-op experience help you develop behaviors and skills that were beneficial to you in your job search? Please explain.
12. To what extent did your co-op experience help you develop new knowledge that was helpful to you in your job search? Please explain.
13. To what extent did your co-op experience help you develop behaviors and skills that are beneficial to you now in your current position? Please explain.
14. To what extent did your co-op experience help you develop new knowledge that is helpful to you in your current position? Please explain.
15. To what extent did your co-op experience expose you to multicultural experiences and diverse cultures, beliefs and/or values? Please explain.

Wrap up questions

16. Would you recommend participating in cooperative education to current students in LAS majors? Why or why not?
17. Do you have anything else you would like to add to the discussion pertaining to your co-op experiences?

Conclusion

Thank you for participating in the interviews. As I mentioned earlier, the tape will be transcribed and I will consider any other notes that I have written and put them together in a draft for you to read and make suggestions.

I appreciate the time you took to talk about your experiences.

Appendix E

Name	Age	Race	Latest GPA	Highest degree received	Number of semesters for co-op credit	Current title
Jaron	22	Black	2.96	BA English	4	Writer
Brenda	25	Hispanic	3.62	MA Communications	6	Marketing Assistant
Blake	26	White	3.85	MA Criminal Justice	3	Marketing Specialist
Amanda	22	White	3.63	BA Integrated Marketing Communication	2	Recruiter
Jillian	23	White	3.77	BA Strategic Communication	4	University Representative

Appendix F

Employers rate the importance of candidate skills/qualities

Skill/Quality	Weighted average rating*
Ability to work in a team structure	4.60
Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization	4.59
Ability to make decisions and solve problems	4.49
Ability to obtain and process information	4.46
Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work	4.45
Ability to analyze quantitative data	4.23
Technical knowledge related to the job	4.23
Proficiency with computer software programs	4.04
Ability to create and/or edit written reports	3.65
Ability to sell or influence others	3.51

*5-point scale, where 1=Not important; 2=Not very important; 3=Somewhat important; 4=Very important; and 5=Extremely important

Source: *Job Outlook 2012*, National Association of Colleges and Employers