

“GO CO-OP!”

By Ellen R. Cohen

In Washington, D.C., Barbara Vissas designs charts, posters and pamphlets for the Treasury Department—which is not exactly startling news, except that Barbara has yet to graduate from college.

In Silver Spring, Maryland, Greg Behrman is doing research with a team of physicists and engineers. Michelle Jackson works with lobbyists in the nation's capital, writing about issues that affect cities. Other young people—all students—are operating a printing press on the Queen Elizabeth 2, working as designers for Liz Claiborne and helping to build equipment for the Spacelab at the Kennedy Space Center.

All of these students got their jobs by enrolling in cooperative education programs at their colleges or universities, alternating time on campus with periods of paid employment off campus. As a result, they are gaining valuable “hands on” experience, using their salaries to help pay college costs while they sample their chosen career.

Like thousands of other students in similar programs across the country, Vissas, a 22-year-old graphics design major at American University, has been assured of a permanent, full-time job with the government when she graduates.

“It really worked out well for me,” she says. “Everyone wants experience in the design field, yet companies are not anxious to train you. Co-op gives you a head start.”

Behrman, a senior at Drexel University, notes that all engineering students and most business majors at the Philadelphia school co-op, graduating in 5 years. Students work full time for six month intervals during their three “middle years.”

Cooperative education has come a long way since 1906, when it was first offered to a small group of engineering students at the University of Cincinnati. During the 1920s, Northeastern University in Boston and Drexel Institute (now Drexel University) joined Cincinnati as co-op pioneers. As college costs escalated, the program became more attractive and today co-op education is a popular way for students to earn tuition money. In 1970, 200 participating colleges served 35,000 co-op students. Now, over 900 schools offer various types of co-op to more than 200,000 students who earn more than \$1.5 billion annually.

Of the more than 50,000 participating employers, the federal government is the largest. In 1976, 4,126 students were involved



Getting in the door: Co-op student Lee Marovich at the White House

in federal co-op programs; currently, over 11,700 students participate—at undergraduate and graduate levels, working in every career field and in many different geographical areas. More than 75 percent of these students get good federal jobs after graduation.

College and university co-op education departments are staffed by professionals who contact employers and advise students. Carefully matching students' aptitudes and interests with available jobs, they coordinate the job/study experience, making assignments and helping students to evaluate their activities.

The statistics are impressive: 40 percent of co-op students get jobs with the same employer after graduation; 40 percent get jobs in fields related to their co-op work assignments and 15

percent go on to graduate or professional schools.

Co-op is available at many private colleges and universities as well as most major state-supported schools, but students at many of these institutions are not aware of all the benefits. At some schools, many students are not even aware of the program's existence.

From small community colleges to large, prestigious schools (i.e., American University, Columbia, Carnegie-Mellon, Cornell and the University of California Berkeley), co-op is a viable option. Many schools on Edward B. Fiske's list of “best buys” (see box) offer co-op in at least one department. Northeastern has the largest co-op program—9,600 participating students.

Originally open only to engineers, co-op is