University Administrators: Experiences and Beliefs about Cooperative Education Programs in the United States

A thesis presented
by
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to
The School of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the field of Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
November 2015
Dedication

This doctoral thesis is dedicated to Zaneta Rando, my wife, inspiration, best friend, and the mother of my amazing son, Stephen P. (Stevie) Rando.
Abstract

This comprehensive research study takes an in-depth look at university administrator experiences and beliefs about their cooperative education programs. It also explores the intersections of their experiences with their beliefs about the program. According to Dr. David Kolb, an American educational theorist (1984), cooperative education is a constructive and progressive process in which students learn from previous life experiences. These experiences are then combined with learned methods and skills and implemented into their daily lives in an effort to guide future decisions (Kolb, 1984). From an administrative identity point of view, this research relies on Richard Winter’s concept of academic identity schisms in higher education.

Keywords: experiential learning, cooperative education, internships, acculturation, assimilation, international students, higher education and administration
Acknowledgements

This journey has been one of the most challenging and enriching experience of my life. I could not have completed this endeavor without the support of many wonderful, brilliant and inspirational people. First and foremost, Mrs. Kathi Mullin, you were the very first person who believed that I had the ability to complete this degree. I believe when you admitted me to the program you stated, “make us both proud”. Dr. Brian Murphy Clinton who has always been a mentor and someone who I admire immensely. Dr. Murphy Clinton taught me to always push through difficulties and to never lose faith. Dr. John LaBrie, who was my very first professor in this program, taught me to stretch my thinking and to “stand on the shoulders of scholars”. Dr. LaBrie’s passion for education has continuously inspired me from that very first class 6 years ago to this very day.

My adviser, Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed has challenged me at every step of this process to develop a product that I didn’t always think I had the capacity or ability to advance. Thank you for never giving up on me even when times were hardest. My second reader, Dr. Jane Lohmann and my third reader, Dr. Gabriel Repassy, have both provided additional guidance through careful reading and posing of excellent questions.

To my dear parents, Stephen and Barbara Rando, I could never properly express my gratitude for always supporting my endeavors and education, no matter how outlandish they may be. I love you both very much. My siblings, Philip, Andrea and Julie. Julie, thank you for both challenging, and at times, pushing me. Your competitive skepticism inspired me to earn that “third piece of paper”. Ms. Virginija Cepulyte, your consistent support and encouragement, in all areas of my life, will never ever be forgotten. Mr. Michael Tomidy who has been beyond a loyal friend
to me throughout this process. Mike, you continually offered me support in immeasurable ways, and I will be forever grateful to you. Ms. Erin Riley, a sincere thank you for your all your assistance in reviewing my work through the years and sticking by my side. Ms. Mary Sheridan, thank you for being a supportive scholar. Ralph, my Goldendoodle, you truly are man’s best friend. Thank you for keeping my company through the epic 3am writing sessions.

I am especially grateful for the camaraderie and support provided by my fellow friends and classmates Dr. Sean Gallagher, Dr. Arthur LaMan, Dr. Kristen Costa, Dr. Elizabeth Shaffer-Velluto, Dr. Kevin Bell, Mr. Phillip Page, Mr. Neff Casaburri, Mr. Craig Stevens, Ms. Jaclyn Anderson, Mr. Seth Robertson, Mr. Michal Boudreau and Mr. R. Kelly Cameron. You have all played an integral part in my development throughout this pursuit.

My wife, Zaneta Rando and my son “Stevie” get the final and most heartfelt acknowledgements. Zaneta, you have always been my number one fan, forever believing in my ability, supporting my work, and being the best partner that one could imagine for over 10 years. Lastly, while my son Stephen may be too young to realize it, he has provided me with the inspiration to never doubt that in the end, I would not only prevail, but that this process would be a defining event in my life. The immense pleasure and fulfilment that come with the completion of this pursuit, I owe to all of you.
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I: Introduction

This comprehensive research study takes an in-depth look at university administrator experiences and beliefs about their cooperative education programs. It also examines the intersectionality of roles, beliefs, values, and understandings of the administrators involved in these programs. Perceptions of university leaders as to the importance of experiential learning can have a direct influence on resources afforded to these programs, the way in which they are implemented, and the focus or foci of each program.

Research Problem

In the literature review section, readers will find that while previous research studies have focused on more limited aspects of cooperative education programs, none have taken a broader picture look at the beliefs and experiences of co-op administrators. While this study lead to some discussion of international student enrollment, it was as a byproduct of the attempt to understand the larger picture of cooperative education programs from the viewpoint of university administrators. It is these key characteristics that differentiate this research endeavor from prior research studies. During the course of this study, university administrators were interviewed in an effort to identify their beliefs about, and experiences with, their cooperative education programs. The literature review of this study provides a clear review of varied literature and views on experiential learning. This part of the review aims to increase comprehension of the fundamental aspects of experiential learning that plays a role in the lives of various members of the university community. This helped in identifying the major factors that affect implementation of effective experiential learning practices that could lead to attainment of financial prosperity and personal fulfillment.
Theoretical Framework

Winter’s concept of academic identity schisms in higher education serves as the basis of this research study. At the heart of Winter’s theory is the belief that, due to conflicting viewpoints, goals, understanding of the roles of individuals, and understanding of the role of the academic institution, individuals employed in the academic arena fall into two opposing categories. The first category is an academic manager, which often opposes the second category, the managed academic.

The difference between these two categories of academic contributors is notable, as, “An academic manager defines themselves primarily in terms of the corporate managerialism discourse represented by the larger university system.” (Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2008). The academic manager is much more aligned with corporate values, viewing the academic institution as a business that needs to be managed in a way that moves education into a commodity market, while seeking to streamline organizational efficiency and maximize status indicators. More generally speaking, the academic manager views his/her role as necessary for the continued financial viability of the institution.

In contrast, the managed academic sees him/herself as an autonomous contributor who provides value to the institution in ways that would not be sought out in a corporate, profit-focused environment, but instead contribute to the intellectual knowledge of their chosen field and true student growth. Importantly, the managed academic can be defined by their willingness to challenge, “…the managerialism orthodoxy by suggesting alternative non-economic oriented visions of the institution and its importance.” (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Randle & Brady, 1997). These definitions put the academic manager and managed academic in direct conflict with each other.
Winter’s work posits that as the role and views of universities have shifted over time, employees within these institutions have had difficulty changing their self-identities to a blended model that incorporates the need for financial viability with the integrity of academic freedom and a rigorous curriculum. From this, we can extrapolate that individual contributors must satisfy multiple constituencies at the same time. Instead of seeking a black and white, winner take all solution, for an, “…institution to move forward it must somehow reconcile these competing identity claims and acknowledge that in a hybrid professional structure neither one identity can change effectively without recognizing the values of the other.” (Winter 2009). In short, as many academic institutions teach their students to do, the professionals must view the problem from all possible viewpoints. Of course, this can be difficult when individuals, as is often the case, hold deeply entrenched values. The power dynamic between the two different categories of professionals also cannot be dismissed.

Winter proposes a process by which to overcome this barrier, starting with generative conversation. This concept involves bringing the two groups together for information producing conversations that encourage collaborative problem solving of issues that face the academic institution. Winter notes that, “As universities are characterized by multiple or hybrid identities, it makes sense for leaders to articulate several interpretations and understandings of organisational problems rather than construe all problems in terms of a unitary or corporate perspective” (Winter, 2009). By framing problems from multiple angles, it is more likely that all parties will feel that they’re a valued part of the university community, and not another commodity. One of Winter’s seminal statements in closing the gap between academic managers and managed academics is, “Importantly, university leaders need to be seen, through words and deeds, to understand the academic value system.” (Winter, 2009). This statement acknowledges
the necessary recognition of the perception of managed academics, while also using language that allows academic managers to make decisions that still serve the more corporate needs of the university.

Winter’s concept of hybrid identities particularly applies to this research study because cooperative education administrators are in a position where they must satisfy multiple constituencies at the same time. On the corporate side, these programs are often employed as a commodity used to increase enrollment from full-pay (ex: international) students, and potentially to increase student satisfaction and employability which could impact fundraising efforts in the future. On the academic side, experiential learning can be a complicated process that, when managed improperly, may hurry students into experiences that they are not equipped to manage successfully. This could hurt the student academically, professionally, and emotionally. Additionally, many academics may recognize a need to address multiple learning factors, such as acculturation, that decrease the efficiency of the program but allow the managed academic to hold tight to his/her educational beliefs and values.

This framework allowed the researcher to explore the viewpoints of multiple cooperative education administrators in regards to how they see themselves and prioritize their various goals, both those given from their managers and their personal value satisfying goals. Additionally, the researcher sought to understand if there is agreement on this prioritization across a single university, and, if so, if there is shared buy-in to the framework or shared dissatisfaction.

**Statement of the Problem**

A global workforce brings forth many challenges in bridging cultural differences in the workplace (Sahin & Troy, 2009). In attempts to identify innovative practices, many universities
have started to explore new instructional strategies and curricular offerings. The purpose of these strategies and offerings is to enhance real-life, hands-on experiences and eliminate shortcomings that can arise as a result of cultural differences. While the cooperative education model is implemented for both international and domestic students, it seems to be a large draw for international students coming to the United States. Unfortunately, systemic research on the nature and success of these approaches has been limited (Ruey, 2010). President Olof Blomqvist of the University of Trollha, states that “students today cross borders to work -- and they will tomorrow. We should give them every chance for exposure to other societies and cultures” (Franks, 1997). According to Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, international student enrollments have steadily risen over the last ten years.

In fact, international student enrollments in U.S. colleges and universities have increased a remarkable 40% in the past decade. According to the International Institute of Education, the top four states that have a significant international student population are: California, New York, Texas and Massachusetts. In addition, the top five universities hosting international students are: University of Illinois, Purdue University, University of New York, University of California and Northeastern University (Open Doors, 2013). All of the previously mentioned universities include co-op programs as part of their university curriculum. Therefore, it is fair to say that cooperative education programs are at least one source of attraction for many international students.

Due to the high influx of international students, the American workforce has become increasingly globalized. Not only has this influx significantly contributed to the American economy (approximately $24.2 billion dollars in 2013), the consistent increase in international student enrollment at U.S. universities has also directly affected recruitment efforts of higher
education institutions, curricular enhancements, and growth opportunities in American industries. Existing job opportunities and increased attention from employers towards international student recruitment and cooperative education programs support the implementation of experiential learning programs.

The World Association for Cooperative Education (WACE) has taken notice and conducted research on the growth of international students. This study focused on Fortune 500 companies that participate in experiential education. Results indicated that out of the “top 100 Fortune 500 companies, approximately 83% employed co-op students. The results suggested that an estimated 50,000 employers (i.e. public, private, and nonprofit), hire cooperative education students each year in the United States” (Franks, 1997). According to Franks (1997), it is clear that “companies are particularly eager to gain access to African Americans and other minorities, welcoming new ways to locate and cultivate talent.” With university job placement rates being increasingly scrutinized by multiple parties, it would behoove university administrators to ensure that they are able to supply sought-after candidates with the requisite skills for success to these employers. This research study leads to a better understanding of the experiences that cooperative education administrators have had with these programs, and if their beliefs are in line with the above-referenced studies.

**Limitations of the Study**

One limitation that may have hindered the efficacy of this study was the ability to obtain a statistically significant number of interviews with relevant university administrators. This can be partially attributed to the very busy schedules of potential participants, as well as other internal restrictions. To overcome these limitations, interviews were scheduled with university
administrators far into the future, and with the offer of setting an interview time based on the convenience of their schedule. Additionally, interview participants were assured of the confidentiality of the interviews, and individual identifying information was not used in the research outcomes.

**Justification of the Problem**

Cooperative education can be defined as “experiential learning,” wherein classroom-based knowledge is implemented into the workplace. Research in the field of experiential education is well-grounded in the educational philosophies of John Dewey, a theorist who defined experiential education as the following equation: experience plus reflection equals teaching (Dewey, 1938).

There are numerous reasons why international students choose the United States as their top destination to obtain higher education (Anderson, 2014). A variety of factors can influence which university, cooperative education program, or work-integrated learning program an international student selects (Onink, 2012). The establishment of co-op programs within the experiential learning scheme helps bridge the cultural gaps amongst international students by attempting to add a sound understanding of the domestic work culture to their base of knowledge. According to Gibson (1998), “The successful completion of co-ops presents acclimatization, whereas failure or incomplete co-op reflects the shortcomings, either in the designed curriculum or inadequate preparation of students for a professional environment.”

An increase in international student enrollments encourages American industries to integrate a globalized, diverse, and competitive workforce. Employers thirst for candidates who can communicate and collaborate effectively, not only internally with each other, but also with
constituents of external partners and markets. The ability to collaborate stems, in part, from proper experiential learning that allows the student to recognize cultural and workplace norms. Many industries lack a pool of competent and productive employees, which may be remedied by hiring culturally competent employees, who are educated and skilled in their area of work. The growth of many specific industries largely depends on the hiring of talented employees who graduated from industry-oriented training programs. In fact, many companies partner with universities to develop professional, educated, talented, competent, and skilled employees that will fit well within their own corporate culture. It is safe to say that these qualities of cooperative education programs are also attractive to domestic students as well.

Issues occur when universities fail to provide competent job candidates. The inability to provide qualified potential candidates reflects an inadequate “experiential learning methodology” that is commonly integrated into the cooperative education program curriculum. For instance, Northeastern University is one institution that offers numerous employment opportunities through its cooperative education program. The main objective of the Northeastern University co-op program is not only to prepare students for the professional world, but also bridge the gap between theory and real-world practices. It is this thorough preparation, in part, that prompts employers to hire Northeastern University students.

In addition, this university provides a pool of talented and prepared potential employees (i.e. interns) to partner companies. As a result, many interns and co-op students are able to turn their experiential learning opportunities into full-time positions. From an industry perspective, the employer is expected to measure an intern’s or co-op student’s capabilities (i.e. his/her ability to be productive in a professional environment), before hiring the student full-time. It can be anticipated that the performance of the co-op student reflects the university curriculum’s
strengths, and enriches the university-industry relationship. In theory, the chance of being hired full-time from an internship is highest when the student performs well during his/her internship.

As this study examined the beliefs and experiences that university administrators hold about their experiential learning and co-operative education programs, it also looked for administrative thoughts on the role that these programs have in the overall plan to help students become successful in life after school. The co-operative educational model allows students to put their classroom theory into practice in the high stakes environment of the American workplace. Their success or failure affects not only the employment prospect of the individual student, but also reflects directly on the university and its officials. The impact of the co-operative education program is highly visible, both internal and external to the university, and can have far-reaching effects both financially and on a reputational level for the university in question.

The cooperative education program involves a series of activities such as internships/co-ops, part-time jobs, group projects and intercultural events, all of which can be used to effectively bridge cultural gaps. This study examined the beliefs of U.S. cooperative education program administrators, in order to reveal their understanding of their place in the overall university framework. The study revealed these beliefs and experiences of these programs by carrying out one-on-one interviews with the administrators. It was important that these interviews be carried out on a personal level in order to; a) enhance confidentiality and, b) help in obtaining different views from individuals. From this study, the researcher was able to identify numerous viewpoints held by university officials which can then be used to enhance future, more narrow, studies.

A student’s overall development is not confined to classroom learning. New workplaces can be difficult to navigate for the most culturally aware and politically astute students. Students
face the barriers of cultural assimilation, learning the varying proprieties of workplace and personal interactions, and the potential need to overcome language barriers (even as narrow as learning different commonly used acronyms), among other possible issues. These difficulties can lead an employer to establish negative views about the student, while the student also grows more frustrated by his/her inability to fulfill their potential. The end result is lost productivity for the company and stunted growth for the employee, both which can be avoided with the successful implementation of a sound experiential learning and/or cooperative education program.

**Audience**

The primary audience of this study consists of different members of the university family, particularly the workforce and top university administrators who are examining and considering cooperative education implementation or reform. This research will also be beneficial to universities, career service centers and human resource representatives who hire students who participated in cooperative education programs. Since today’s students are the leaders of the future, universities must recognize that the personal and career development of students is paramount. Cooperative education programs bridge the gap between the scholastic environment and the real world. The more confident and comfortable the administrators help students become while crossing over this bridge, the more they will add to and obtain from this experience. The information gathered in this study can be used as a resource by those administrators considering cooperative education reform or program addition.
Central Research Question

“What experiences and beliefs do university administrators hold about cooperative education programs?”

This study examined beliefs about, and experiences with, cooperative education programs from the vantage point of university administrators. Experiential education not only focuses on the pragmatic form of learning, but also encourages learning how to implement knowledge, rather than simply learning about a subject. Thus, experiential education bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. According to Sibthorp Schumann Gookin, Baynes, Paisley, and Rathunde (2010), “the propensity for college students to experience optimal engagement appears to be more prevalent through experiential learning.”

Sub-Question

“In what ways do cooperative education administrators see their programs being different for international students, as opposed to domestic students?”

In order to help the research study hone in on how different student populations can be, or are, affected by their experience with cooperative education programs, the researcher added a sub-question. This question helped the study gain more direction, and ensure that the interviews included a discussion about the beliefs and experiences of administrators regarding the impact of their programs on different segments of students. As will be discussed in the literature review, international students and cooperative education programs are strongly intertwined.
**Positionality**

The researcher, having worked in higher education for a number of years, coupled with his experience with student job placement, understands that a study focused on attitudes towards experiential learning is a vital topic in academia today. The World Association for Cooperative Education (WACE), is a group that focuses on investigating international cooperative education, and has conducted research regarding the growth of international students in Fortune 500 companies participating in experiential education. This research posits that top American companies are searching to diversify their workforce, and are interested in working with universities through cooperative education programs to identify potential future employees. Thus it is the position of the researcher that more information needs to be uncovered to illuminate the significance of these experiences for the student and universities.
II. Literature Review

This literature review examines the experiences with, and beliefs about, cooperative education programs from the viewpoint of university administrators, while also exploring the intersections of their experiences with the beliefs within the program. The review also explores Richard Winter’s theory of academic identity schisms within higher education. The literature based on this theory helps inform the perceptions of university administrators regarding the importance of incorporating experiential learning engagement techniques (cooperative education programs) into the learning process, while also parceling out their competing priorities and coinciding self-identities. Throughout the literature review, Winter’s work is supported with information examining the multiple identities and intersectionalities that exist for academic partners concurrently. Additionally, the literature review explores the foundations of experiential learning in order to inform the reader’s understanding of the administrative topic.

Ultimately, the objective of this literature review is to show the effectiveness of experiential learning programs on student success and examine the often competing roles, self-identities, and values of academic colleagues within an institution. As the importance of experiential learning is verified, this information can have a direct influence on resources afforded to these programs, and the ways in which they are implemented. It was the researcher’s aim that this study would also generate information regarding how one’s self-identity can change their perspective, and actions, regarding their work. Therefore, the literature examines the impact of experiential learning on recruitment and success, acculturation, and educational benefits for students, along with administrative identities.
The literature also analyzes this impact through the lens of Kolb's model of experiential learning. This is done to examine the experiences and beliefs held by university administrators regarding the role of cooperative education programs in shaping the future of their students. The researcher believes he would have been remiss if this literature review did not incorporate the unique circumstances facing international students in cooperative education programs, as the large increase in this population is directly related to experiential learning opportunities, which will be shown below. This also fits in with Winter’s concept of the academic manager and the managed academic, as international enrollees are often full pay students who need more resources in a cooperative education program. This is a microcosm of a potential point of contention between the corporate values of profit increase and maximized efficiency against the academic value of ensuring maximized student learning. The overall goal of this research paper is to better understand the views on cooperative education across administrators, and to better understand how their beliefs and experiences affects how they administer their programs.

**Section I: Kolb’s model of Experiential Learning**

This section will allow the reader to better understand the concept of experiential learning, which makes the research findings easier to understand. In research conducted by Kolb (1984), the author explains his model as a process of learning by which students have transformative experiences in addition to grasping experiences. Kolb proposes that experiential learning for students is based on two continuums, processing and perception. The processing continuum is used by administrators in implementing learning programs that focus on the
approach students take to a task (i.e. observing or interacting); whereas the perception continuum involves the emotional response students take to a task (i.e. thinking and feeling) (Kolb, 1984). The author also stated that these continuums comprise the four sub-stages of the Learning Styles Inventory, which include concrete experience (CE), abstract conceptualization (AC), reflective observation (RO), and active experimentation (AE). Integration of these sub-stages from the Kolb model will help administrators find a balance in helping all students better learn new workplace norms (Kolb, 1984).

In a related research article by Chen and Shaurette (2012), Kolb's model of experiential learning is strongly supported by the authors’ statement that this type of learning needs to be an integral part of undergraduate construction programs. In this case study, experiential learning, which was analyzed with reference to Kolb’s learning cycle theory, had a positive effect on the outcome of the student’s work. The authors subsequently concluded that there is a need for experiential learning experiences for student in construction programs, and, if extrapolated, one can expect similar findings with respect to similar academic programs.

Dewey argued that cooperative education programs provide students with the most well-rounded educational experience. It is this marriage of theory and practice that offers students an opportunity to apply the theoretical concepts they learn in a classroom to a real world setting. University administrators believe that the benefits of such programs could be even more beneficial to students who may struggle with making the theoretical connections solely on abstract level.
Section II: Educational Benefits of Experiential Learning

In a research study by Dressler and Keeling (2004), the authors' findings suggest that student benefits have to be evaluated in the context of the objectives of student learning, the cooperative learning experience which can be used to achieve these objectives, and the extent of the students’ achievement. The authors state that experiential learning increases disciplined thinking, retention of knowledge, a sense of responsibility for learning, problem-solving, analytical thinking, and academic performance in the classroom (as evaluated by GPA as well as commitment to educational goals) (Dressler and Keeling, 2004).

In a research study by Van Gyn et al (1996), the authors studied the characteristics of students in cooperative and traditional education programs. The results of the study indicate that cooperative education students had a significantly higher percentage of successful students than the traditionally educated students. Additionally, the cooperative education students had significantly higher grades in the arts and sciences than those enrolled in traditional education programs. The authors explained that these results support a correlation between cooperative education programs and higher achieving students (Van Gyn et al., 1996). However, in order to demonstrate effectiveness of experiential learning programs within Kolb's framework, reflection is necessary to identify administrator perceptions of the benefits from the educational and financial sides.
Section III: University Perceptions of Co-Op

In a research article by Sheehy (2004), the author examined successful cooperative learning programs, as well as the challenges they encountered. The author found that it was important to understand students’ social, emotional and educational experiences in cooperative learning models. Despite the fact that students are tested and required to learn, their cultural experiences were left out of the experiential learning literature. By leaving out their cultural experiences, teachers were not able to account for differences in learning styles, group cohesion, and group learning styles. The author found a prominent theme of group tension amongst the cohort, which hindered overall learning. Ultimately, the author concluded that cooperative learning is a firmly established pedagogy, but is most effective when it accounts for group cultural norms. (Sheehy, 2004)

In a study by Van der Worm (1988), this point was supported, but the author stated that despite the obvious growth and success of cooperative education programs, experiential learning programs still remain outside of many mainstream academic institutions. The author claims that there are several reasons why administrators perceived experiential learning programs as alternative methods, including, most notably, that administrators do not recognize work as a vehicle for learning and feel it is counterintuitive to education. The research also showed that administrators were concerned that cooperative education programs are more logistics oriented, and less focused on education. Finally, the author concluded that the perception of university administrators is that the methods involved in cooperative education are largely vague and undirected (Van der Worm, 1988).
In a related study conducted by Sovilla and Varty (2004), the authors attempted to analyze student perceptions of learning in both experiential learning assignments outside the classroom and of learning inside the classroom environment. The authors' findings support the claims that administrator perceptions showed fundamental disagreement with the objective of experiential learning and felt that it did not improve the student educational experience. The authors' research examined how, despite the fact administrators understand the goal of cooperative education, these programs and their effectiveness were not factored into administrative decisions. This perception was directly linked to a failure to prioritize experiential learning, making it difficult to implement top-down cooperative learning models (Sovilla and Varty, 2004).

In a research study by Trice (2003), the author examined the view of university administrators on the progress and treatment of international students. This study was conducted through a series of interviews with graduate students to gauge the challenges that occur on daily and long-term basis. The author found that the administrators felt that there were several challenges faced by international students, including having a functional control of the English language, their hope of achieving unique academic goals, cultural adjustment, and integrating with American students (Trice, 2003). These administrators also perceived that, due to these challenges, it was more difficult for international students to become research assistants, establish a diverse network, and adequately communicate their life experiences to their fellow students and faculty. The author concluded that administrators perceived international students as having more difficulty adjusting due to a preference from faculty to gravitate more toward
U.S. students. The author concluded that this preference was due to their similar backgrounds and language proficiencies (Trice, 2003).

Section IV: International Students / Recruitment / Success

With a recent spike in international student recruitment due to record highs in enrollment at U.S. higher education institutions, university administrators have come to view experiential learning as a selling point to recruit the best and brightest students from around the world. Not only does the influx of international students lead to higher tuition revenue, understanding this trend also helps administrators make informed decisions and effectively set priorities for the long-term future of these institutions. In fact, in the 2008 to 2009 academic year, the number of international students increased by eight percent, the largest percentage increase in international enrollments since 1980 (Open Doors, 2009). Ultimately, as these enrollment numbers increase, and international students become more of a significant and highly sought-after component of student bodies, administrators have used experiential learning to attract them to the concept of the "global campus."

This trend was examined in a research article by Martin (1997), which studied the impact of cooperative learning programs and their impact on international student recruitment. The results of the study show that cooperative education was the most influential factor for students choosing to join the institution studied. In addition, the author surveyed 230 prospective students, asking them to choose between a four year degree program without a cooperative education program and a five year degree program with a cooperative education program. The
author reports that, of all given possibilities, “eighty-nine percent of the total sample of prospective students preferred a five-year Bachelor of Science Engineering program that included one year of cooperative education” (Martin, 1997). What is clear from this article is that when students become aware of the benefits of cooperative education, their choice of which post-secondary institution to join is affected.

In a research article by Weisz and Chapman (2004), the authors examined the impact of student recruitment in relation to the promotion and existence of co-operative learning programs, and found a positive correlation. In the authors' research, administrator perceptions regarding cooperative learning programs were positive as the felt these programs resulted in improved relationships with industry, improved curriculum development, and greater staff development (Weisz and Chapman, 2004). The authors concluded that although experiential learning programs are costly to institutions, there are financial gains to be had from the implementation of co-operative educational experiences (Weisz and Chapman, 2004). There were also found to be broader economic advantages from experiential learning programs, as the outcomes of these programs improved their negotiating leverage with the government in obtaining additional institutional grants (Weisz and Chapman, 2004). This, of course, influences a positive perception by university administrators as well. However, as administrator perception is generally positive and there is a clear motivation to recruit international students, there are also acculturation issues that arise.

In a related research article by Bollaig and Field (2006), the authors studied a State Department paper regarding a group of college leaders analyzing the misconception that foreign
students are not recruited in the U.S. The authors found that international recruitment is growing slowly, but that the effects of emerging international recruitment processes will not be seen for a number of years. Among the strategic plans for the future, administrators are encouraged to remove off-campus employment restrictions on foreign scholars and their spouses, thereby making it easier for them to obtain Social Security cards and driver's licenses (Bollag and Field, 2006).

Although universities have seen double digit growth in international student matriculation, there have been concerns raised about this population’s ability to acculturate into a domestic work environment. While domestic students can have difficulties adjusting to a workplace culture, there are additional barriers for international students. These issues include, most notably, a lack of interaction between domestic students and international students, which could ease their transition into the workplace by allowing them to learn cultural norms from peers in a less pressurized environment. There are also acculturative stressors involving language barriers, educational difficulties, loneliness, discrimination, and practical problems associated with dynamic environments.

**Conclusion**

As universities in the United States face increased competition from each other and new, for-profit institutions, they continue to search for ways to attract a target group of students, which is usually university specific. However, common among this target group of students is that universities would ideally attract top academic performers with the willingness and ability to
pay full tuition. Students now have many more options when it comes to choosing their higher education experience, and many will “shop” for their college, making their choices based on their own values. This puts pressure on the universities to cater to student wants and desires (academic managers) while also making sure the students don’t necessarily get what they want, but instead get what they need (managed academics).
III. Research Design and Methodology

Methodology

This study intended to answer the following research question, “What experiences and beliefs do university administrators hold about their cooperative education programs”. Qualitative research based on interactive sessions was identified as the best mode to conduct this research. While many studies have been undertaken to measure various aspects of cooperative education programs, none have asked the administrators themselves about their experiences with, and beliefs about, these academic programs. The conceptual framework and research questions of this study lent themselves to an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA research examines how individuals make sense of their major life experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and how these experiences take on meaning. This approach is the most suitable research methodology for this study because it generates information, which will be valuable in understanding the beliefs and experiences of the administrators.

Research Design

This research study focused on the beliefs and experiences of administrators about their cooperative education programs. The study aimed to uncover information about how administrators view the role of their programs, as well as some of the barriers they may see between their programs and what they have defined as programmatic success. Qualitative research is a major component of this theoretical study, and provides a lens to understand the beliefs and experiences of cooperative education administrators.
According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research uses the framework of theoretical studies in order to more deeply explore the sought after information of this study. The reason why a qualitative approach was ideal for this study is because it collects data in a natural setting, while aiming to establish patterns and themes. Here, the researcher was more focused on the study involving the collection of data in the natural and non-habitual setting to investigate the beliefs about, and experiences with, cooperative education programs. By aggregating the information derived from various administrator interviews, the researcher was able to search for common threads among cooperative education administrator viewpoints if they existed. The framework was outlined to be a one-on-one interaction pattern between the researcher and university administrators whose students undertake cooperative education programs in the U.S. The researcher took descriptive notes on the opinions, beliefs and experiences of other co-op administrators. The study was conducted within the confines of a single institution, Northeastern University. The researcher chose this approach in an effort to understand varying experiences and beliefs that may exist even within a single institution, where one could hope that each administrator has the same understanding of the program.

**Research Tradition**

The present research on the beliefs about, and experiences with, cooperative education programs by administrators involves a subjective review of the work lives of the participants in the study. It captured their experiences, concerns and events that are gathered from various situations. Moreover, it allowed a wide-spectrum for the researcher to develop insight about the present environment of administrator beliefs and experiences with cooperative education.
Therefore, the researcher found IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) to be the best research methodology to conduct this qualitative research.

This research also involved a discussion with administrators and then combined their answers to find, where they existed, common themes among their experiences and beliefs. The study aimed to provide qualitative feedback to administrators and the university. Basing its theoretical origin in phenomenology and hermeneutics coined by Hurssel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty in attempting to formulate a philosophical science of consciousness (Smith, 2007); IPA was useful in this study since it is comparatively distinct from other approaches. This distinction is derived from its ability to combine psychological, idiographic and interpretative aspects.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) holds importance in this research due to the following reasons:

1. It allows for detailed, subjective research of an individual’s experience, his or her previous state and change in perceptions with time and the factors surrounding him/her. The factors to study involve the individual’s participation in co-operative education, difficulties faced, the degree of programmatic adaptability, and extent to which the programs have excelled.

2. Although the researcher and other co-op administrators have been involved in cooperative education programs for a long period of time, this research is an indirect study where “insider perspective” is required. This study will create an impact only if experiences of individuals are interpretative.

3. As stated, this research is a two-staged, deeply rooted study involving double hermeneutics. It involves input of the individuals’ real-life experiences, interpretation of
their information, and their developed senses. It encapsulates asking critical questions about their own experiences with university outcomes from these programs, and their involvement in administrating experiential learning programs. In the other stage, it deeply involves the researcher to provide an insider’s perspective to make sense of the participants’ real-world experiences.

4. Wide Spectrum of Research: The probability of growing research spectra is also another parameter in selecting IPA as the qualitative research methodology, which helps in understanding a particular phenomenon from different perspectives and relating their circumstances with the developed senses of the individuals.

Participants

As this study focused on learning about the experiences and beliefs of cooperative education program administrators, the participants of this particular research project were university administrators and instructors who have developed, and/or administered, cooperative education programs at Northeastern University, and who are involved with organizations taking part in cooperative education programs.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, Northeastern University is one of the universities that host the most international students in the United States (Opendoors 2013 "Fast Facts", 2013) and one of the top universities that offers a cooperative education program. This makes Northeastern University an ideal site for conducting a research study on the impact of administrator experiences and beliefs about cooperative education programs.
Recruitment and Access

The research study was conducted at the Northeastern University campus (due to its location, reach and accessibility for participants.) The study was also conducted on a confidential basis, and at confidential sites. The purpose of doing this was to obtain unfiltered experiences of university administrators, without any fear or concern of repercussions from their employers.

The sample population was not limited by ethnic, gender, economic, or educational standing, but rather only by the participant’s experience in administering cooperative education programs in a university setting. Participants were randomly selected from the Northeastern University Co-op coordinator database, and the study subjects were stratified on the basis of the experience and contacts that they have concerning this particular program.

The data collected was not molded into any form of answers. All the questions were asked directly and direct answers were requested, mostly case specific. The main purpose and focus of this study was to gain insight on experiences and perspectives of the study participants, which remained the case throughout the research study.

Data Collection:

In order to answer the overarching research question, “What experiences and beliefs do university administrators hold about their cooperative education programs”, data was collected in the form of several techniques which will be outlined below. The data is believed to build a strong background and provided the researcher with findings that fundamentally colligated the entire study. The data for the research study was collected in the form of: digital/audio recordings, personal interviews, short notes, observational research, and conclusions. The data collection focused on capturing the individual experiences in their non-habitual environments
which defined the perceptions and links to university outcomes of administrators and instructors of cooperative educational programs.

*Interviews, audio recordings and transcripts:* Standardized, open-ended interviews were conducted wherein all participants were probed with the same set of open-ended questions. This approach enabled efficient interviews that could be easily analyzed and compared. After the interviews took place they were recorded and thoroughly transcribed. Each participant was given the opportunity to review and return their transcript with any modifications or explanations. Thus, the data collected, i.e. interview requests, consent forms and interview questions, were well documented for further analysis.

*Descriptive and Reflective Notes:* During the interview process, the researcher noted his perspective and analysis from the interview. These insightful notes are used in the reflective memos and analysis. Descriptive notes indicate the individual, location, and process, while reflective notes acted as the researcher’s personal thoughts and speculations. (Creswell, 2007)

*Memos:* Memos helped to have a reflective analysis on the highlights of each interview. These added to the reflective and descriptive notes that are based upon the researcher’s perspective and assumptions of other co-op administrators. This also helped the researcher to better understand the individual circumstances faced by each interviewee, and how this may have had an impact on their experiences and beliefs. The continued analysis on the research material and memo data provided a substantial foundation for the data interpretation and monitoring. The research findings were thus easily concluded and results drawn on the basis of these memorandums and other forms of data collected.
Interview Process

The interview process began with a brief statement of Kolb’s theory of learning styles and how he sees this relative to cooperative education programs, and that the goal of the interview was to understand the administrator’s beliefs about, and experiences with, their programs. Questions also included the opportunity for interviewees to expand on their beliefs about their identities within the program. Subsequently, the methodology of the interview was explained. This was done in order to provide an understanding of how the conversation would flow, and its intended direction with the research participant. The interview produced transcripts and audio recordings for the purpose of reflective and descriptive notes and memos. The researcher began the interview with a predefined set of questions, and as the interview progressed, the researcher added a few questions where clarification became necessary, and left some out where they seemed redundant or unnecessary based on the conversation.

At any given point, participants could have ended the interview or refused involvement in the research study. The participants were not pressured to answer any question if they indicated they were uncomfortable addressing the topic. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to provide a signed consent form in order to conduct follow-up queries, provide feedback and share the transcripts. At the end of each interview, interviewees were thanked for their participation in the study.

University administrators were asked questions based on their beliefs about, and experiences with, cooperative education programs. The questions were framed to gain knowledge about the administrator’s role with these programs, and then their beliefs and experiences. The interview sessions were semi-structured and conducted on a one-on-one basis, where the researcher performed the role of a listener. The participants were allowed,
uninterrupted, to present their viewpoints and answers, unless a response prompted the interviewer to ask another question or for clarification purposes. The “three types of listening” technique noted by Seidman (2005) was adopted by the author. This technique involves listening to the participant’s opinion, and to his or her “inner voice” (as opposed to outer voice, which points to whether he or she is embellishing or not), as well as listening for the process as well as the substance. The author believes that this technique was useful in obtaining the maximum outcome from this research study.

Data Storage

Since this research study incorporated audio recordings of interviews, the researcher took sound measures to ensure that the data collected was stored appropriately, to avert possible cases of distortion, loss of data, or breach of confidentiality. Digital data was stored in a password protected safe on private devices that could not be accessed by third parties. It is also essential to note that there was utmost confidentiality regarding all information that the participants provided, which was concealed.

To ensure that confidentiality and trust was enhanced, the recorded data was sent back to the respective interviewees in both a transcribed and audio form. This was done so that the interviewee could review and decide if he/she felt the information was accurate. The digital/audio recordings and any personal written communication (such as consents, mail, forms, electronic communications, etc.) were destroyed at the conclusion of the project.
Data Analysis

This research involved a variety of components to analyze the data collected during the study. The entire analysis involved making sense of the text and data collected through proper interpretation of study findings. According to the researcher’s analysis strategy, the data was organized to gain a deeper understanding of the administrator’s experiences and beliefs with their programs.

There have been various generic approaches to analyze data and draw out thoughts on a study topic. The information listed below is a combination of various qualitative data analysis steps explained by Creswell, 1998 and Strauss & Corbin, 1990 (systematic steps) that were involved in the study:

1. Data Organization
2. Data Reading
3. Taking “Chunks” out - also known as “Coding Technique”
4. Theme generation
5. Data description
6. Alignment of study findings
7. Interpretation

As per the research study plan, the researcher utilized a three-step study which was divided into phase-I, phase-II, and Phase-III with defined end points.
**Phase I:**

The first phase of the study involved a short interviewing segment of all the selected participants. This was accomplished through an interactive session with questions about cooperative education programs and the participant’s involvement with them at Northeastern University. Five administrators were chosen along with potential back up participants in case any of the original selected participants felt uncomfortable with, or were unable to participate in, the study.

**Phase II:**

In this phase of the study, interviews were conducted, properly transcribed and analyzed by utilizing qualitative coding methodologies. The interview material was optically scanned and the data arranged into different types of categories depending on the nature of the information source. The narrative information assisted in categorizing information and drawing out themes (Saldana, 2009).
Detailed analysis was initiated with the coding process, which involved organizing material in “Chunks” (Rossman & Rallis. 1998, p.171). In the first stage of coding, “Chunks”, defined as “a set of words or phrases used to categorize/organize the detailed information of study”, were used to organize the data. The data relating to a particular category was assembled and subjected to preliminary analysis. The second stage of coding yielded themes and theories (Saldana 2009). In conclusion, this phase of research included an analysis of significant statements to generate meaningful units and develop an “essence” as described by Moustasas, (1994)

**Phase III:**

This phase involved interpretation of Phase II results, to draw out meaningful themes. These themes inter-relate the higher level of analysis among the parameters with regard to administrator beliefs and experience surrounding their cooperative education programs.

**Research Timeline**

The research timeline is presented in Table 1. It was preferable to conduct the research interviews prior to the start of or during the first few weeks of the winter quarter at the College of Professional Studies (CPS), which was December, 2014. The participants were generally less busy during this timeframe since students were on a winter break, thus enabling the researcher to obtain the undivided attention of the participants. This was planned with consideration towards the more immediate matters that may require the participant’s attention at other times of the year.
Table 1 Research Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRB Approval</td>
<td>Interviews and coding (ongoing)</td>
<td>Finalize themes and findings</td>
<td>Finish edits and present findings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During this process the transcripts, memos, journaling, and audio recordings were beneficial as reflective and descriptive tools. This allowed the author to capture interpretations, themes, and connections among those themes.

Reliability, Validity and Credibility

The qualitative paradigm of a research study finds "reliability”, “credibility” and “validity” as the key parameters to strengthen any qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). In a qualitative construct, “credibility” is a measure of "trustworthiness and authenticity" for the data collected and its analysis. It increases the research application and directs it towards pragmatism (Emden and Sandelowski, 1999). A consistent approach was achieved through extensive documentation followed by generating a standard protocol for the research. The coding definitions required to pursue the study remained unchanged during the entire course of study (Creswell 2007).

The consistency in the methodology enhanced the minimization of transcription mistakes, and promoted a high degree of reliability to the research. To ensure the reliability of the study and in order to mitigate human errors, the researcher captured the participants’ experiences (i.e. interviews) in the form of written notes and immediate transcription. The transcribed information was again verified by the interviewee by providing them with a copy of both the audio and
written transcript. The researcher gave the participants authority to make suitable corrections if there was any loss of information, or if there were statements that they wanted to highlight on a specific question’s response.

In this manner, a genuine attempt to analyze the findings from the standpoint of a participant was visualized and included as a credible source of information/data. The credibility was ensured by review of the exact information that the participant wanted to convey to the researcher in regard to perceptions on cooperative education.

Validity signifies truthfulness of the data and hence the above mentioned approach assisted in mitigating the impact of any human error on the research results. The researcher also requested feedback from the participants with regard to the questionnaire to develop an understanding of their sentiment on the questions. This feedback not only helped to improve this qualitative study, but also indirectly helped in identifying the major topics of concern related to administrator beliefs and experiences about cooperative education. This research is classified as “generalized knowledge,” which plays a crucial role in educating society. Therefore, it needed to be unbiased, accurate and credible enough to put forward a more robust model for cooperative education in academia.

Validity in this research was implemented by incorporating true, honest and rich information received from the participants. The data obtained from interviews were reported as facts, without any manipulation and with a sincere effort to minimize any errors (Silverman 2001). As argued by Creswell (2007), reporting feelings and perceptions of the participants was necessary to provide a broad spectrum of analysis. Therefore, the researcher included every statement as transcribed in the interview during the study. Above all, the richness of data gathered from a study on administrator perceptions about cooperative education and university
outcomes will allow readers to have the feeling that they are part of the study, affording them the opportunity to develop their own interpretations. (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985). As stated earlier, there are few areas which can limit the validity of the study. Maxwell (2005) recommends that, for a qualitative study such as this project, it is best to avoid a long-term relationship with the participants. Thus, the researcher contacted the participants infrequently, unless there were questions regarding their interview transcripts.

This approach embraced a detailed synopsis for the study to increase the degree of fairness in the project (Creswell 1994; Silverman 2001; Cohen et al 2005). The researcher adhered to proper and true text reporting from the questionnaire, developed open coding categories, conveyed adequate information on the research/interviews and provided existing literature to participants. Equipping the participants with existing literature is one of the best strategies to establish validity of the research findings (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Reliability of a qualitative study is based on degree of consistency. Consistent data reinforces the formation of coding categories and analysis of raw data. To comply with the consistency "content analysis," a uniform approach in management of qualitative data was utilized during this qualitative research study (Lutez et al 1992). This framework served the need of proper data management and systematic analysis.

Above all, this “content analysis” assisted in overcoming the contradictions put forward by various traditionalist researchers (Quantitative study researchers) on degrees of uniformity and consistency of results for a Qualitative study.
Protection of Research Subjects

This research study posed no harm to the participants, be it physical or psychological. Confidentiality, based on the identity of the university administrators involved in this research, was maintained, and formed an integral part of the research study. The administrators were assigned a special study code for their segregation and a unique coded identification number. Their identity was not compromised or decoded, even for institutional records and statistical purposes. The divisions where university administrators manage their students during their cooperative education engagements were categorized by the type of organization, in a generalized manner, so as to avoid revelation on the subjects’ identity. Any perceptible and recognizable information which may have been recorded during the interview process was not incorporated in the interview transcripts. The digital/audio recordings and any personal written communication (such as consents, mails, forms, electronic communications etc.) were destroyed at the conclusion of the project.

At the end of the study, the data was analyzed and presented to all the study participants in order to confirm interview findings. The participants were given an opportunity to review the interview transcripts, descriptive portion of the study results and the derived conclusions. Also, the participants were given a chance to modify or elaborate on their comments and responses.
IV: Data Analysis and Findings

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore the beliefs and experiences of higher education administrators with regard to cooperative education programs for both domestic and international students. To accomplish this goal, data was obtained from a purposeful sample of five participants who represent administrative personnel from Northeastern University involved in the cooperative education program. Using an interpretive phenomenological analysis technique, the data was coded, categorized into thematic categories, and interpreted for final conclusions to inform the research questions of this study.

Research Question

The central research question for this study asks: What experiences and beliefs do university administrators hold about cooperative education programs? As a way to answer this question, an additional sub-question was included, which asked: In what ways do cooperative education administrators see their programs being different for international students, as opposed to domestic students?

Data Coding and Analysis

Following the data analysis plan as described in Chapter 3, the analysis of the interview data obtained from the five interview participants involved a process of coding and aggregating the data into thematic categories. These categories were then further analyzed to reveal overarching themes in the data that represent the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of the group as a whole (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2009). There have been various approaches to
analyzing data and drawing out thoughts on this study topic. Phase I was completed as a result of conducting interviews with study participants. These interviews resulted in audio recorded answers and deeper discussions offered by participants in response to the designated interview questions. The recordings were then transcribed into Microsoft Word documents and uploaded into NVivo qualitative analysis software to conduct the coding process of Phase II. During Phase II, the textual data from the interviews was read and broken into chunks of data, which were then coded according to content (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The codes were then categorized, revealing commonality and critical information from the data to support theme development and conclusions of the study through the analysis of the narrative data (Saldana, 2009). This categorization generated meaningful data units that helped the researcher better understand the essence of the experiences, as viewed by the participants themselves (Moustakas, 1994). Phase III involved the final interpretation of the data, drawing out the overarching themes representing the experiences and perceptions of the group. These themes supported an understanding of the data’s relationship to the core research questions (Moustakas, 1994).

**Description of Sample**

Five administrative professionals participated in individual face-to-face interviews. The five participants were from a single institution of higher education, and all were directly involved with cooperative education programs. The positions held by these individuals varied by responsibilities, audiences they directly address, goals they are directed to attain, position level within the organizational hierarchy, and include work with both domestic and international students. The participants described how their jobs related to cooperative education, and their
responses are offered in Table 1. In order to protect confidentiality, each participant has been given a pseudonym; Adam, Betty, Chris, David, and Elizabeth.

Table 1

*How Position Relates to Cooperative Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Number of participants to mention this response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepare students; work with students to develop interview, resume, communication skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help students find co-ops and meet requirements of co-op</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help facilitate cooperative internships through specialized curriculum when needed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case load management</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participants Background**

The participants in this study have varied backgrounds in the higher education field, with longevities between 6 and 25 years. More specifically, their backgrounds working with cooperative education programs ranged from 4 to 18 years. In general, the participants voiced a strong belief in the underlying theory of experiential learning and cooperative education
programs. They noted a difference between classroom learning and workplace learning, and the importance of wedding the two. Along with this marriage, they acknowledged the importance of both arenas also being able to stand on their own, as some things can only be learned in one venue and not the other. However, there was also some frustration that, in a department that seeks to wed theory to practice, they are not always given the resources to do this effectively within their cooperative education programs.

**Overview**

In this section, the thematic categorization of participant responses to the interview questions are presented, highlighting common themes in the data. The coding and thematic interpretation of the data derives from the participant responses revealed their perceptions and experiences related to experiential learning at their university. Further analysis of the thematic categories and key common responses helped to identify several overarching themes from the data analysis, which served as the conclusions of the analysis, revealing the perceptions and experiences of the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

The analysis resulted in a total of four primary thematic categories:

1. Utility of Cooperative Education
2. Benefits of Experiential Learning
3. Barriers to Experiential Learning
4. International Student Struggles
Each thematic category is discussed individually with textual examples from the data included to support theme development. Some thematic categories are divided into sub-themes for clarity of presentation. Textual examples offer insight into the unique expression and detail offered by participants when explaining the phenomenon.

**Utility of Cooperative Education**

The participants described their own beliefs, and their perceptions about other administrators’ views and beliefs, concerning experiential learning. These responses formed the first thematic category, which is the many areas of a university strategy that can be affected by experiential learning. Key common responses within this category highlighted experiential learning as (A) a marketing tool for the university, which sets the school apart from other universities and attracts students to the school; (B) a way to couple theoretical knowledge taught in class with practical experience; (C) that cooperative education is highly valued and a priority among the leadership and administration; and (D) an opportunity for students to develop their knowledge and skills in a field. Table 2 illustrates the top responses offered by the participants, highlighting the common response types.
Table 2

*Administrative Beliefs and Experiences of Experiential Learning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Number of participants to mention this response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing tool for the University: sets school apart, attracts students</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couples theoretical knowledge with practical experience</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly valued; priority among leadership and administration</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for students to develop knowledge and skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that the most common shared response among interview participants did not have anything to do with student benefits or outcomes related to experiential learning. Instead, almost all participants referenced the benefit that these programs provide to the University. The participants backed up this theory by describing two common ways that the university used the experiential learning program as a marketing tool. Specifically, this program is viewed as a way to set the university apart from other universities and bolster its national ranking, as well as a way to bring in new students. The most emphatic statement Elizabeth made during the course of the interview was:
“I don't even feel like I need to elaborate on it. … They obviously view it (cooperative education) as the most important thing that sets Northeastern apart from the rest of the schools in the country, in the world.” (Elizabeth)

This view is supported by Chris and David, for example, who similarly noted that the program serves as a defining characteristic of the university to attract new students:

“So from kind of a senior management level, I think that they view co-operative education as a way to pull new students into the college, and recruit more students. … Northeastern University is kind of known for its cooperative education programs. That's like our flagship program here at the university. So yeah, they view the program in itself as resource of getting our name out there and kind of promoting our brand as a cooperative education leader in the global marketplace.” (Chris)

“Well, this particular institution, I think, prides itself on that. Considering it's a signature program of the University, nationally recognized program of the University, I would imagine that the administration views it rather highly. … I think it's probably one of the main draws for recruitment and enrollment. For other institutions that are fairly new in the experiential learning realm, I think they're probably trying to leverage it to the degree in which they can attract more candidates for enrollment.” (David)
Administrator Beliefs on Coupling Theoretical Knowledge & Practical Experience

The second most expressed response by participants was the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical experience in the cooperative education model on a theoretical level. Most administrators expressed the need for theory and experience to co-exist to form a truly valuable learning experience, evidencing their belief in the necessity of cooperative education programs:

“I believe that theoretic learning and practical experience are both very important, and they should always go together. Theory and practice are not the same things, and, I believe, it's very important for students to experience everything they have been learning in real life situations. Sometimes, theoretical knowledge has nothing to do with real life situations, and students can simply change their mind and realize that it's not what they want to do; or they might find a lot of challenges they didn’t expect and they have to be ready for those things. That's the value of the co-op: it shows students what the actual experience is, what they're going to do in their life, what path they choose. So, these two things, theoretical knowledge and practical experience, should always go together because this is the only way for students to realize if they're on the right track, if they're doing everything right.” (Betty)

Later in the interview, Betty continued to express the belief that all students benefit from experiential learning because “the interrelation of theoretical learning and practical experience is
very, very important.” In addition, Betty noted her perception that the university administration “sees experiential learning as an opportunity to demonstrate your expertise, first of all, and apply your knowledge to practice.” (Betty)

Similarly, David also described a co-dependent relationship between theory and practice, stating:

“The whole premise of cooperative education and experiential learning is the fulfillment of theory into practice and while we still have different ways of tracking and monitoring theory and practice and practice back to theory, I don't see how it cannot benefit a student and an institution to promote such things, particularly in the real world in terms of a real world experience. I think for the most part, the two cannot exist in isolation. I think the theory of experiential learning and the practice of it, they have to coexist. They cannot function independent of each other.” (David)

Conversely, Chris discussed the opposite flow, but similar coupling of theory and practice, by taking what is learned in practice back to the classroom:

“Another part of it is taking what you learn in the different co-op roles that you might have and applying that to your classwork. Either with projects or with case studies, it's important to go the opposite direction in taking what you learn in a co-op and apply it to your current learning.” (Chris)
Administrators Beliefs about Their Importance to Senior Management

A few participants reported feeling highly valued or that they, and their programs, were a priority to University leadership. The participants that perceived their experiential program as highly valued by the university administration tended to express this in terms of a national higher education value, rather than a value placed specifically on them by their own senior administrators. It’s possible they see the utility in satisfying a national academic goal. For example, Adam explained:

“Research shows that professional experience in the form of co-op or internship definitely has a place in higher education. It's one of the best forms of learning students can do. Just among higher education in general, with the overall sphere of higher education and their assumptions, I'm talking like leaders in higher education across America specifically. Leadership, administrators, they all look very highly on experiential learning I don't think it's something that is really debated. … It is something that is a priority amongst all the leadership and all the administration of the university is to find a place throughout the curriculum, no matter what the circumstances are or who the student is, to implement some type of cooperative internship program. So, for us, at this institution it's highly valued.” (Adam)

David agreed with the perceived value placed on the program by administrative leaders, though less emphatically, noting, “I would imagine that the administration views it rather highly.”
Elizabeth expressed some doubts, stating, “I think they believe we’re important, but I’m not sure if it’s for the same reasons that I think we’re important.”

**Student Knowledge and Skills Development**

Some of the participants described their beliefs that the cooperative education program provides opportunity for students to develop their knowledge and skills through quality work experiences. The participants who reported the experiential learning process as an opportunity for students to develop knowledge and applicable work skills offered concrete examples of this. For example, Betty explained:

“...For a student, it is an opportunity to build a reputation because, in some of the cases, students actually get hired in the company they have performed a co-op. In any case, there is an opportunity for students to develop their skills such as leadership, or again, job survival skills, interviewing and so on and so forth. The list can be really endless, all in all, students have a chance to put something on the resume. And it is beneficial for the employer too, because the employer gets a new perspective from students. So, all these things definitely make experiential learning valuable and desirable for universities to have, and I'm very happy that Northeastern is so famous for its co-op program, and it's been so popular among the students. It definitely attracts a lot of students.” (Betty)
Thematic Findings

Much of the discussion describing the usefulness of cooperative education programs focused on how the programs are perceived to be helpful in marketing initiatives and as enrollment drivers for the University. While the interviews also touched on the necessity of experiential learning for students, it was often stated through the lens of the senior management viewing it as a priority. A qualitative study focusing on senior managers who oversee varied programs, and business priorities, at a university may be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the role that cooperative education programs play in the larger landscape of university strategy. Many of the participants in this study are making an educated guess as to their strategic role, but there does not seem to be a clear understanding of it from this study.

Benefits of Experiential Learning

The second thematic category was developed from responses related to the perceived benefits of experiential learning in higher education, such as cooperative education programs. This thematic category was further broken into sub-themes of benefits to the university, benefits to the students, and benefits to the corporation/employer. Each sub-theme demonstrates common premises from the interviews, highlighting benefits of attracting new students to the university, increasing the university’s national ranking, as well as student benefits of gaining valuable work experience that add to their qualifications, adding practice to theory learned in the classroom, ability to market oneself, and career and job skill development. Each is discussed individually with examples given from the interview text. Table 3 provides the variety of responses and associated frequency of mention among the participants.
Table 3

*Perceived Benefits of Cooperative Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Number of participants to mention this response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefits to the University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attracts new students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Rank</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit from partnerships with companies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits to students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real and valuable job experience to add to qualifications/ resume</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add practice to theory to see how theory really works</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced ability to market themselves</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different for different types of students (working full time, versus FT students)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development and job skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitates transition from full time student to full time employee</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Benefits to employer

Gains new perspective from the students

Cooperative Education Benefits to the University

In these responses, participants described how the cooperative education program benefits the University as well as the students. This reflects the utility of the programs towards increasing the marketability of the University, while, also achieving the goal of benefitting student learning. Two subcategories of common themes specifically related to cooperative education program benefits to the university included improved college ranking and the ability to attract new students. For example, Elizabeth explained:

“The rankings sort of speak for themselves. That they, that the university understood that this was a niche that in a country of forty five hundred schools, I believe two, us and Drexel, have such a developed co-op program. And the rankings, the jump in the rankings has shown, not even a jump in the rankings, but actually the interest that students from all over the country and the world have coming to Northeastern as the number one job placement school and that job placement school ranking is based, in a huge part on the fact that students already have real work experience, not even internships.” (Elizabeth)

David specifically mentioned both of these advantages of school ranking and attracting students:
“I’m not sure what criteria goes into determining its nationally ranked status, but I would imagine the level of partnerships, the amount of opportunities created for students, the transition from experiential learning cooperative education student to full time employee, I think a lot of that plays into the data capturing. I think for this particular institution, I would say yes. I think it’s probably one of the main draws for recruitment and enrollment. For other institutions that are fairly new in the experiential learning realm, I think they’re probably trying to leverage it to the degree in which they can attract more candidates for enrollment.” (David)

Looking specifically at the ability to attract new students, Adam noted the program as a marketing tool specifically, and most importantly, for driving recruitment:

“Again, the biggest thing for colleges is advertising to prospective students. Well, okay, our students get hired when they graduate. They're connected to the workforce. They know what they're doing. And, again with that, most employers are looking for one or two years of experience. It becomes a necessity to have some kind of work experience because it just adds that level of connectivity to the jobs that they students will be doing.” (Adam)
Similarly, David stated:

“I think it's probably one of the main draws for recruitment and enrollment. For other institutions that are fairly new in the experiential learning realm, I think they're probably trying to leverage it to the degree in which they can attract more candidates for enrollment.” (David)

**Administrators Beliefs about Cooperative Education’s Benefits to Students**

The second thematic subcategory of the benefits of experiential learning to students revealed common concepts as well. The facets of experiential learning that were deemed important include job experience that adds qualifications to students’ resumes, the addition of practice to theory, the enhancement of students’ ability to market themselves, and the support of career development and job skills. The most common response highlighted the value of placement in the workplace environment in terms of adding quality experience and qualifications to the student’s resume, a somewhat tangible product the student can take away from his/her experience. This type of on the job experience was seen as a significant advantage when seeking employment. Elizabeth described:

“Any student goes into a job interview and talks about, you know, this fraternity they were in or this activity they did at school. That's kind of an eye roller. But when you talk about being the assistant project manager of a real experience that, of a real project that was implemented ... There's no comparison. I can't, off the top of my head, think of a
situation where not having an experiential learning environment would be beneficial to having one.” (Elizabeth)

Students also gain from the real work experience in terms of adding practice to the theoretical learning that goes on in the classroom. Adam explained the education gained through workplace experiences as:

“What's benefited them is being able to go into a place like PriceWaterhouseCooper or you know of the big four accounting firms and actually being able to see what it's like and hands on stuff because there is a lot of processes, there is a lot of stuff you can't get in the classroom, particularly where technology is concerned and how, the attraction that takes place between the worker and how certain processes are taking place or that sort of thing.” (Adam)

This type of cooperative education participation was seen as particularly helpful to new graduates and those students lacking workplace experience, as employers are seeking candidates with experience even for entry level positions. Adam stated:

“If you look at any particular employer, the number one thing is experience. You have employers who are hiring for entry level positions and they're still looking for one or two
years' worth of experience. …In those situations, they have to have a year or two, [and] they don't have that because they're graduating college and without a cooperative internship, they won't have that experience, so it automatically cuts them from the list and makes them unemployable. Having a co-op for one, two, three, whatever terms or semesters, automatically puts them in that qualifying list. … I think it's greatly beneficial for those students who don't have very much work experience or maybe those who are coming straight out of community college who are younger or maybe those students who are doing a complete job change.” (Adam)

Adam went on to note that this experience certainly adds to one’s resume, helping to obtain another job:

“You have students who want to enter an industry so certainly having the experience or working in environments where they hope to get into is great for the resume, it's a great thing to market themselves.” (Adam)

In addition, Adam noted that this type of experience also makes the student a better employee, as s/he, having had on the job experience, has a better understanding of what s/he wants in their career and knowing what their potential career choice actually entails on a day to day basis.
“It's going to make them a much stronger employee upon entering [the workforce] because they know what they're getting themselves into. They have a kind of proven record there and they know what they've liked and experienced that they say, ‘OK. This is what I've studied in school. This is what I've done as a job. I'm still pursuing that. This is what I'm passionate about, this is what I want to do.’” (Adam)

According to Betty, the benefits of experiential learning to students are numerous, pointing out that, “the list [of benefits] can be really endless; all in all, students have a chance to put something on the resume.” This program is particularly helpful for students with no experience, which includes many international students. Betty further stated, “as for international students or students who have no experience at all, this is a big plus because it is their first experience.” However, this is a benefit felt by all students, even those with prior job experience. Students who already have some work experience are able to expand their professional experiences, add to their resume, and develop new skills and a different perspective derived from working in a different company. This was articulated further by Betty:

“...any student can benefit. Say, students who have been already working, they can simply refine their skills and they can add some more experience to their resume. They can get a different perspective working in a different company, they can develop new skills, so they will be better prepared for their future career” (Betty)
Chris discussed the value of real world experience, while also noting the ability to add practice to theory learned in the classroom.

“They get the experience for the real world, they also get an opportunity to test out some of the theories they learned in the classroom with employers, as far as working on projects and things of that nature.” (Chris)

Adam agreed, stating, “Students can learn the theory behind it, which is great. But they are also able to apply that theory and see how it actually works.” This aspect of learning by bringing practical experience to learned theory was felt to be beneficial to all students. This was expressed by Betty, who stated, “I do think that everyone will benefit from an experiential learning program. First of all because, like I said, I believe the interrelation of theoretical learning and practical experience is very, very important.” Adam also felt the program is beneficial to all kinds of students and different industries:

“You also have those kind of mid-career changes or those people who are trying to get into a different industry. Again, a cooperative internship would be extremely beneficial for them because they have to know what they're getting themselves into and they have experience in one field or another and they're looking to change so, they have no experience whatsoever.” (Adam)
**Benefits to Employers**

One participant specifically discussed cooperative education benefits to the employer. This benefit was offered in terms of the company gaining a new perspective from the student. Betty explained, “it is beneficial for the employer too, because the employer gets a new perspective from students.”

**Thematic Findings**

According to the study participants, cooperative education programs can have benefits to all internal and external parties involved with them. The three main partners (students, the university, and employers), all gain from their participation. Overall, a properly implemented program that allows students to gain hands-on experience, according to the study participants, should always be positive for the students, no matter their status or place in life.

As touched on in the first theme of the usefulness of cooperative education programs, the importance of marketing and enrollment again makes an appearance in the interviews. The inclusion of experiential learning in the curriculum, while important for students, does not seem to be viewed as altruistic. Importantly, the university benefits from the inclusion of these programs, which may make them a high priority when decisions about university strategy are being made.

The relative lack of inclusion of benefits to employers may point to a student focus that could leave corporate partners out of the loop as far as feedback about the program is concerned. While cooperative education can be viewed as beneficial to employers, some may also have a negative
experience in a program that is not properly implemented. It’s possible that, while administrators hold mostly positive beliefs about their programs, they may not effectively explain this position to potential corporate partners who hesitate to enter into such an agreement with the university. This is discussed later on, as respondents reference the lack of positions available in relation to satisfying the needs of the students.

**Barriers to Experiential Learning**

The third thematic category included responses revealing perceived barriers or challenges to the experiential learning programs the participants are involved with. Commonality in the responses highlights challenges associated with (a) specific problems for international students, such as language proficiency and communication issues, timing and geographic restrictions, and lack of professional preparedness; (b) program resource constraints; and (c) lack of student commitment. Table 4 shows the variety of the response types and the associated frequency of mention among the five participants in this study.

Table 4

*Perceived Barriers and Challenges to the Experiential Learning Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Number of participants to mention this response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language proficiency and communication for international students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictions on international students</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three of the most commonly noted barriers to the experiential learning program were related to international students in particular. Study participants most commonly cited language proficiency and communication for international students, as well as specific time and geographic restrictions and a lack of professional preparedness among the international student population as barriers to success. These are discussed in more detail in the following theme regarding international students.

A barrier or challenge to the program, not specific to international students, was noted to be resource restrictions, impairing the ability to make new corporate/industry connections and opportunities for students, as there are not enough jobs in the program database for all students.

“One of the other draw-backs that I see is that ... I don't see as much resources that are needed devoted to the co-op department to make it successful. I see there is a lot potential for growth, especially in the realm of just reaching out to some employers and breaking new ground, and establishing new relationships with different employers. … There needs to be the appropriate amount of resources allocated to the co-op department in order to help those students find co-ops. It's one thing to advertise that we have co-ops and there's
opportunities available, but it's another thing to get students those opportunities. I think where we stand now, there's a big gap in between those two things.” (Chris)

This was supported by Betty, who explained the need for more job connections to support the program and the students:

“A barrier to success is the lack of jobs in our database, and there is no guarantee that every student will be given a job. And a lot of students have to find jobs by themselves, so I feel this is an issue, and a barrier because if there were more jobs, it would be a little easier for students to get this practical experience, and it definitely would be easier for our co-op coordinators to work with the students and advise them.” (Betty)

An additional barrier perceived by administrators is that many students may not be ready or willing to put in the necessary time and commitment to the program, hurting the administrations opportunity to gain further positions within a given company. Chris explained this concept of readiness:

“I think generally speaking, all students can benefit. However, I think some students, I mean at least some that I have worked with, might have trouble. I'm not sure if they're ready for that experience at that time in their educational career. Even though some of
them are, actually most of them are graduate students. Some of them need some work in just basic etiquette as far as just working in a professional environment. And again, a co-op opportunity is supposed to help them develop some of those skills, but I think in some cases, putting them in a situation would hurt them more than it would help them. And if they had that experience then they kind of, [if] the employer comes back at them and says, "You're not ready," [it] could kind of hurt their confidence as far as moving forward and applying for additional co-ops.” (Chris)

This was supported by Betty, who described challenges for the domestic students in different terms. A lack of preparedness isn’t the issue, but willingness to do the work required and having the appropriate goals and determination for success are sometimes lacking.

“As for domestic students, sometimes, they're better prepared, but they're not willing to do as much as they should do. And I've seen that people just have a burnout, they give up in the middle of the process; they're not willing to make any changes, say, in their resumes when you recommend them to do so. Of course, when you start something, you have to have courage to finish it and to overcome all those challenges that are on your way. And, unfortunately, I've seen that some students are not ready to do so. Moreover, some students, they simply don't have clearly determined goals, and they don't know what they really want. So, I've seen students who come and say they would like to do a co-op, but they have no idea what they actually want to do, and this is sad because if they
are already half way through their program, they have to have an idea of what their job will look like. And they don't. So, definitely this can be a problem.” (Betty)

Betty even noted that among the domestic students, they often have knowledge and skills related to presenting themselves, writing cover letters and resumes, but lack the particular interest to do so in a determined manner.

“Domestic students, although, in general, they have better knowledge regarding how to present themselves, how to write a resume and cover letter, sometimes, I feel that the level of their interest is much lower. First of all, it is probably because they do not need to get a work authorization, and they can do a co-op on their own, and they have a little bit more freedom. Therefore, they are a little bit less determined and less willing to cooperate, and to participate in the program, and give it their best shot, and do as much as they should do.” (Betty)

These problems are often different among the international student population, which tend to be less prepared, but were not specifically noted to lack commitment or interest.
Thematic Findings

The barriers to running successful cooperative education programs put forth in the interviews, in one sense, seem to be at odds with the perceived value placed on these programs. The success of the program depends partly on the ability to grow the corporate connections through additional resources to support the commitment, and enrollment, of the students. The focus on the marketability of the program to students does not seem to correlate to ensuring that students are able to participate in this program. Involving corporations is the only way the other goals of the cooperative education program can be realized.

The other barriers referenced are intrinsic to the students in the program. While, in theory, these programs will be beneficial to students, they will not be successful in practice if the students in them do not put forth the requisite effort. This points to the many variables that can have an effect on outcomes which lie outside the control of administrators.

International Student Issues

In considering international students specifically, and their different experiences with experiential learning, key common themes revealed, (a) challenges related to language barriers and communication issues, (b) restrictions on international students in terms of when and where they can participate in experiential learning, and (c) that these international students tend to be less professionally prepared than their domestic peers. On a different note, the interviews showed a belief that these students may benefit more than domestic students from experiential learning through learning the subtleties of the work environment (particularly as they pertain to
language), gaining different perspectives through the experience, and understanding the requirements and commitment involved in participation. Table 5 provides the barriers and challenges specific to international students, as noted by participants in this study.

Table 5

*International Student Challenges and Benefits of Experiential Learning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Number of participants to mention this response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barrier of language proficiency and communication for international students</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictions on international students; timeline and geographic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are less professionally prepared</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Barriers for International Students**

The most commonly noted barriers for international students included language proficiency and communication, restrictions on time and geographic location, and professional preparedness of this population. Elizabeth, who works specifically with international students, explained:

“The major barrier with my population is a language issue, because my students tend to be international students. They have not, even if they’ve grasped English in an academic setting, the communication, verbal understanding especially, is very limited with some of
the students. And this affects their ability to get jobs because when they interview they perhaps don't interview as well or if their accents are very strong, they may understand English, but people do not understand them. So I think that, that's obviously the biggest barrier that these students have.” (Elizabeth)

Betty and David agreed with the difficulties experienced by international students in terms of language issues and communication, particularly when interviewing with corporate partners. Betty stated, “if we are talking about international students, there is a language barrier. Poor language is always a huge obstacle on the way to get a job.” Similarly, David explained this barrier among international students as having a tremendous effect on the program at his college:

“One of the greatest barriers to overcome in this particular college has been language proficiency as it relates to international students transitioning from their native country to an American education system and possibly a work related experience. That is probably the most significant barrier to overcome within this particular college of the University.” (David)

Chris added that the international students also must work around certain constraints. This participant discussed this aspect for international students and for the program:
“There's different rules as far as domestic versus international [students], as far as when students can start co-ops. For international students, they need to start at certain times in the quarters, [when] they can start the co-op course. For domestic students they have some more flexibility as far as when they can start, and as far as when they can do in-state versus out-of-state co-ops. So they have kind of an easier time. But surprisingly, I'd say – it depends on what field they're applying to, but I think international students can have some success, especially in the realms of regulatory affairs, and project management, and finding co-ops.” (Chris)

International students were also noted to lack aspects of professional preparedness, such as an ability to write cover letters and resumes, and an ability to present themselves professionally. Chris went on to explain:

“I see a lot of the international students that we get here at the college are not well-prepared, as far as how to present themselves in a professional manner to an employer, or how to write an effective cover letter to that employer. One of the things we were working on in the class is just how to structure some of those letters, and some of the examples I get just need so much work, you kind of have to work from the ground level with the student, go back and talk about what's on their resume, and how to ... do a bridge-gap analysis where ... what are your skills, and what are the skills the employer is looking for, and kind of how to convey that in a cover letter to them. It's definitely one of the major draw-backs.” (Chris)
Betty referenced that the difference in perceived preparedness may be due to cultural differences, noting, “some of the requirements for the resume or other papers in their own countries are very different from American requirements, and they have to learn everything from the beginning.”

**Benefits Specific to International Students**

Despite a lack of common responses with regard to the specific benefits of the program to international students, the responses given still offer insight into the unique benefits for this population of students. Adam felt the benefits to international students are greater compared to domestic students due to the increased needs of this population:

“I think that there is an added benefit for international students. … International students I think benefit more from the work place environment than would domestic students, particularly when it comes to communication issues. International students, they're great as far as where they're at, they do pick up a lot in their classrooms as far as language and how to communicate and express themselves well. But, again, there's a lot of subtleties when you cross the line from academia or a classroom environment into the business environment. I think that's really where they pick up the most. … Domestic students, I think they still, again, benefit a lot from the co-op model and the co-op program, but not quite as much as international students, again because of those subtle things. It's easier for domestic students to pick up on.” (Adam)
Adam continued to explain the benefits to these students when they return to their native countries:

“And I think that is incredibly beneficial to them because when they go back to their home countries, wherever they're from, they're now bringing in several different spheres of understanding. It's helped them, when they go back to their companies where they're from and that's extremely beneficial.” (Adam)

International students have much to gain from the real work experiences, moving from the classroom to the work environment, and learning the subtle ways of getting along and communicating in a work environment in this country and elsewhere.

**Thematic Findings**

While cooperative education programs were viewed by the participants to be a benefit to international students, their utility is severely limited if the students do not have the English language proficiency necessary to function in this environment. Further study may be necessary to determine whether or not the language proficiency skills required to enter the program are high enough, or if enough is being down to ensure that the appropriate mastery level is learned before placing students into an internship. If this is a common theme, it is likely worth exploring the root causes, as poor perception of students in the cooperative education program can have a
negative impact on university marketability, as well as student outcomes and corporate partnerships.

Other comments point to how cooperative education programs can have a particular benefit for international students, as they may have more of a deficit to make up for as compared to their domestic peers.

**Conclusions**

From the analysis of the interview data, which was clustered into thematic categories, several overarching topics were revealed that shed light on the experiences of administrators with experiential learning in higher education. These topics represent the perceptions and experiences of the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994) and therefore, represent the conclusions of the analysis.

**Improved School Rank and Ability to Attract Students to the University**

According to the participants, the cooperative education program supported the goal of increased ability to attract new students, as well as the achievement of a higher university ranking on a national scale. In this way, the university is able to use the program as a marketing tool, setting the university apart from other colleges and universities.

**Linking Practice to Theory**

The cooperative education program was felt to support the educational link between theory and practice, moving the students’ education from the classroom into the real world, and in some cases, vice versa.
Real World Experience

The experiential learning program offers students quality job experiences with the opportunity to build career and job skills, qualifications, and general experience. These skills and job experiences are an advantage in that they can set the students apart from other candidates, supporting a higher probability for earning a job. The experience also was felt to support a greater sense of what the student wants in his/her career and the ability to identify their career direction more easily.

Barriers: Program Resource Constraints/Student Lack of Commitment

Two specific challenges were noted for the general population of students utilizing the cooperative program, which included resource constraints in that the program needed to continuously build corporate relationships to support placement for all interested students, and student motivation and commitment to the program, which was felt to be lacking. This specific issue was noted to be more pressing among the domestic student population.

Barriers for International Students

Specific barriers and challenges were noted by participants with respect to international students. These students were challenged by their language proficiency and the nuances of the language in a workplace environment, despite proficiency in an academic setting. This language issue hindered communications in the workplace. In addition, international students were limited by restrictions on the time and geographic locations available for participation in the program.
However, perhaps due to these specific challenges, international students were also believed to benefit more from the program in terms of professional growth and development.

**Summary**

The overarching theme of this study seems to point to a theory vs. practice issue even within the beliefs and perceptions of the cooperative education administrators themselves. While most of the participants believe that experiential learning is beneficial to students, their statements evidence that these benefits certainly exist in a theoretical program. They believe that tying theory to practice, allowing students to learn on the job, and allowing employers a look at students before hiring them are all benefits to the students, and therefore the school and employers.

However, as the conversations continued, the answers of the participants point to a belief that this does not actually happen for many students. The discussion of a lack of resources, their own perceived importance in the eyes of senior administrators, and the practical deficits of students within the programs show that their theories do not always apply once the students enter the workplace. In fact, their statements show that they may believe their biggest value to the university is as a marketing tool.

This chapter has presented the data analysis and findings related to the analysis of interview data obtained from a purposeful sample of five participants. The conclusions of the analysis points to several overarching themes which highlight the benefits and challenges of experiential learning to the university, to the students, and more specifically, to international students attending the
university. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions of the study and the previous literature in the field.
V: Discussion

The goal of this study was to understand the larger picture of cooperative education programs from the viewpoint of university administrators. To address this goal, university administrators were interviewed about their cooperative education program and experiences in an effort to identify their beliefs about, and experiences with them. This shed some light on the role of the program in the overall plan to help students become successful upon graduation. Companies partner with universities to develop professional, educated, competent, and skilled employees that will fit well within their own corporate culture. Thus, cooperative education programs are attractive to domestic and international students alike.

The cooperative education program involves a series of activities such as internships/co-ops, part-time jobs, group projects and intercultural events, all of which can be used to effectively bridge cultural gaps, and as such, can be particularly useful with international students. Through the cooperative educational model, students are able to translate the theory learned in the classroom into workplace practice. Students’ successes and failures in this endeavor have farther reaching effects than solely on their individual prospects for employment. Their performance reflects directly on the university, which can have far-reaching ramifications. The impact of the cooperative education program is highly visible, both internal and external to the university, which affects the university in a myriad of ways. These include internal resource allocation, reputation, and relationships with prospective employers.

Utilizing an interpretive phenomenological research design, the purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs and experiences of higher education administrators with regard to cooperative education programs that support experiential learning opportunities for students.
Data for this study was obtained from a purposeful sample of five administrators who were directly involved in the cooperative education program at the university. These participants offered insight into the specific benefits, challenges, and unique properties of their program, and how it serves to benefit a variety of stakeholders. These stakeholders include the students, the university, and the business organizations that provide the real world experiences of the workplace.

This study was framed within the context of Kolb’s experiential learning theory and Winter’s (2009) concept of academic identity schisms in higher education. Within the context of Kolb’s experiential learning theory, student learning is supported through concrete experiences, which are reflected upon and lead to the formation of abstract concepts or understanding. These concepts and understandings then allow for generalizations, or conclusions. These conclusions on the part of the student are then used to experiment or test what was learned through the experience, resulting in new experiences and continuing the learning cycle. Thus, learning is construed in terms of a cycle or continuum of both processing and perception on the part of the student in the context of experiences and observations.

Within Winter’s (2009) theory, conflicting viewpoints, goals, understanding of the roles of individuals, and understanding of the role of the academic institution precipitate two distinct and often opposing groups of administrative personnel: the academic manager and the managed academic. Because academic managers are defined by their need to manage the institution from a corporate perspective, they are generally aligned with corporate value systems and tend to view the institution as a business that must be managed. As with most corporations, there is a focus on financial systems (Deem et al., 2008). Conversely, the managed academic represents an autonomous contributor to the university, who serves to contribute intellectual knowledge in
their field to support student growth. The managed academic may often act or generate ideas without giving thought to the financial ramifications of their proposals. Therefore, these positions are generally seen as existing in conflict, presenting a barrier to the creation of a blended model that incorporates the need for financial security and academic integrity.

Accordingly, administrative professionals need to view problems and opportunities from multiple viewpoints to be successful (Winter, 2009). Winter (2009) suggested this can be accomplished through collaborative problem solving. He goes on to explain that universities represent multiple (or hybrid) identities, making it difficult to effectively problem solve with only one staff perspective being taken into account. Leadership that holds different interpretations of the organizational problems, rather than a solely corporate perspective or managed academic perspective, will usually come up with the best solutions. The relative success of the cooperative program explored in this study supports Winter’s theory, demonstrating administrative personnel who seem to understand both the fiscal needs of the university, while supporting the academic mission that such a program offers to its students. Winter suggested that by framing the problems from multiple angles, regardless of personal value placed on the program, each administrator (whether academic manager or managed academic oriented – or blended) will feel a valued part of the university community. Feeling valued often leads to more successful partnerships and a stronger likelihood to taken another’s viewpoint into account when making decisions as well.

The central research question for this study asked; what experiences and beliefs do university administrators hold about cooperative education programs? To more completely address this research question, a sub-question was included, which asked: In what ways do cooperative education administrators see their programs being different for international
students, as opposed to domestic students? In an effort to answer the research questions, the interview data was coded, sifted into thematic categories, and interpreted for final conclusions. The findings of the study revealed five themes reflective of common experiences and perceptions of participants related to the cooperative education program. These themes highlighted school reputation, rank, and recruitment; experiential learning as a means of linking theory to practice; gaining real world experience, skill development, career advancement, and ability to market self; challenges in resource constraints and lack of student commitment; and specific challenges associated with international students related to communication and restrictions due to their international status.

Cooperative education students have shown a significantly higher rate of academic success compared to traditionally educated students as well as higher general scores in the arts and sciences, supporting a correlation between cooperative education programs and higher achieving students (Van Gyn et al., 1996). However, in order to demonstrate effectiveness of experiential learning programs within Kolb's framework, reflection is necessary to identify administrator perceptions of the benefits from the educational and financial sides. The findings of the present study help to fill this gap.

These findings are discussed in this chapter in relation to the research questions and the prior literature reviewed for this study, providing the interpretation for this study. The discussion of the findings is organized thematically. The chapter also includes a discussion of the implications of the findings and recommendations for future directions in research.
Interpretation of the Findings

Student Recruitment and University Recognition

Certainly, a significant concern for any academic institution is recruitment in terms of the ability to attract and retain students, and the school’s overall reputation and academic standing. Findings of this study supported administrative perceptions of the cooperative program as supporting improved school rank and the ability to attract new and promising students to the university. The administrators in this study described the use of the program as a marketing tool and a means of setting the school apart from other colleges and universities, both in the country and in the world. One participant described, “They (senior administrators) obviously view it as the most important thing that sets (the school) apart from the rest of the schools in the country, in the world.” The program was perceived to be a critical characteristic in defining the university and promoting it as an academic leader, solidifying its place and rank among other colleges and universities. Chris noted:

“The University is kind of known for its cooperative education programs. That's like our flagship program here at the university. So yeah, they view the program in itself as resource of getting our name out there and kind of promoting our brand as a cooperative education leader in the global marketplace.” (Chris)

With recognition comes enrollment, which was seen as a major benefit of the cooperative program to the university. More specifically, this was seen as important in terms of attracting new, more competitive, students and increasing the school rank, nationally and internationally.
“I think it's probably one of the main draws for recruitment and enrollment. For other institutions that are fairly new in the experiential learning realm, I think they're probably trying to leverage it to the degree in which they can attract more candidates for enrollment.” (David)

This finding supported prior research by Weisz and Chapman (2004), who described a positive correlation between student recruitment and cooperative learning programs.

The participants in this present study also described the perceived benefit of extended partnerships with business organizations, both for students and for the university. These partnerships support more opportunities for cooperative education participation for students, with the likelihood of continuation of the program into the future. The business organizations benefit from access to new and talented graduates with new ideas and contributions to the organization. The data highlighted the program as a marketing tool, or advertising for the university by providing results in terms of marketability for the students who graduate from the university. These students graduate with on the job experience, skills, and problem solving that enables them to contribute positively to the business organization. For example:

“Again, the biggest thing for colleges is advertising to perspective students. Well, our students get hired when they graduate. They're connected to the workforce. They know what they're doing. And, again with that, most employers are looking for one or two years of experience. It becomes a necessity to have some kind of work experience
because it just adds that level of connectivity to the jobs that they students will be doing.”

(Adam)

In addition, one participant felt a benefit was offered to the employer in terms of the company gaining a young and new perspective from the student. This participant explained, “And it is beneficial for the employer too, because the employer gets a new perspective from students.”

Like the administrative personnel who participated in this current study, those in the study by Weisz and Chapman (2004) also presented positive perceptions of the cooperative education program, which reportedly supported positive relationship building in the industry, and curriculum and staff development. In addition, despite the costs of implementing experiential learning opportunities such as the cooperative program explored in this study, financial gains are realized through enhanced recruitment, as well as positive program outcomes that support institutional grants and government funding (Weisz & Chapman, 2004). This allows the program to be more than just cost efficient, but actually become a revenue generator. These types of financial benefits can support a positive perception of the program among university administrators as well, particularly academic manager oriented administrators. Recognizing the benefits of offering opportunities to compete in a global economy, university administrator perceptions were generally positive with a strong motivation to recruit international students, adding a multicultural and global impact, but also introducing acculturation issues.
Recruitment of International Students

International recruitment within colleges and universities in the United States is continuing to grow, related to the global economy and with emerging effects on the international recruitment processes (Bollag & Field, 2006). During the 2008 to 2009 academic year, the number of international students increased by 8%, the largest percentage increase in international enrollments since 1980 (Open Doors, 2009). The influx of international students to the university supports greater tuition revenues for the university, which also supports positive administrator perceptions and motivation to recruit more international students. Administrative understanding of the increasing trend for international enrollment and the benefits of recruiting international students in presenting a global academic environment impacts related decisions that affect the future of the university, involving both academic managers and managed academics. Indeed, administrators have used experiential learning programs, such as the cooperative program at this university, to attract international students to the concept of a global campus and a results oriented style of education.

In this context, the recommendations offered by Bollage and Field (2006) seem to remain appropriate, including to encourage administrators to remove restrictions on foreign scholars (Bollag & Field, 2006) and to address issues of acculturation. Specific to the international student population at this university and in this cooperative program, the data was used to address the research sub-question, which asked, in what ways do cooperative education administrators see their programs being different for international students, as opposed to domestic students? Because the influx of international students affects revenue, ultimately, as enrollment increases and international students become more sought after, administrators report...
perceiving experiential learning programs as a means of attracting students or as a “marketing tool”, as it was described by a study participant.

Similarly, Martin (1997) studied the impact of cooperative learning programs on international student recruitment, finding that cooperative education was the most influential factor for students choosing to join the institution studied. The factor of influence on the decision was great enough so that 89% of the students surveyed in the study reportedly preferred a five year program with the cooperative education program compared to a four year program without the cooperative education element (Martin, 1997). The findings of Martin suggest that with clearly revealed benefits of cooperative education (or experiential) program participation, students’ decisions are affected in terms of which institutions to attend.

Overall, the institutions and administrators seem to be driven to recruit international students to support increased revenue, while the students are attracted to the benefits of the experiential learning programs. According to the findings of this study, these benefits to students center on linking learned theory to practice, gaining job experience, ability to market oneself, career development, and job skill development, which all work to ease the transition to the work environment and support employability of the graduates. Among international students in particular, the administrators interviewed for this study felt the benefit may be greater, offering the opportunity to gain an understanding of the subtleties of the work environment in the United States. One benefit described by participants in particular was business language skills. Again, this was felt to be particularly beneficial to international students, who need experience in the business culture to learn the nuances of communication in the business organization, above and beyond personal communication and academic communications.
Experiential Learning: Linking Theory to Practice

The administrative participants in this study reportedly felt that the cooperative education program supports the educational link between theory and practice, allowing the students’ classroom education to transition into the real world setting. Educational experiences from both settings combine to provide a more comprehensive learning experience. Looking to the data in the study, this was described by one of the study participants, who stated:

“I believe that theoretic learning and practical experience are both very important, and they should always go together. Theory and practice are not the same things, and, I believe, it's very important for students to experience everything they have been learning in real life situations. Sometimes, theoretical knowledge has nothing to do with real life situations, and students can simply change their mind and realize that it's not what they want to do; or they might find a lot of challenges they didn’t expect and they have to be ready for those things. That's the value of the co-op: it shows students what the actual experience is, what they're going to do in their life, what path they choose. So, these two things, theoretical knowledge and practical experience, should always go together because this is the only way for students to realize if they're on the right track, if they're doing everything right.” (Betty)

The importance of the cooperative education program is in the support for experiential learning, which, according to Kolb (1984), is critical to the learning process itself. Kolb (1984) contended, “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). Accordingly, Kolb believed that learning encompasses gaining abstract
concepts that are then applied flexibly to a variety of new situations, and therefore, new concepts are developed out of new experiences (Kolb, 1984). Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning can be used to explain a process of learning by which students participate and learn through transformative and grasping experiences, creating a cycle of active learning incorporating elements of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and testing. The active learning process progresses through these four stages, beginning with a concrete experience, followed by observation and reflection on the experience, which leads to the formation of an abstract concept and conclusions, which are then used to test hypotheses in new situations. This cycle is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Kolb’s Cycle of Experiential Learning. Adapted from Kolb (1984)
According to the model, experiential learning for students is based on both processing and perception. Classroom instruction falls short in providing both aspects of learning. When addressing the processing continuum of experiential learning, administrators implement learning programs that focus on the type of approach students take to accomplish a task (i.e. observing or interacting); whereas the perception continuum involves the emotional response students take to the task (i.e. thinking and feeling) (Kolb, 1984). Integration of the four cycle elements from the Kolb model can help administrators find a balance in helping all students better learn new workplace norms (Kolb, 1984).

In a related research article by Chen and Shaurette (2012), Kolb's model of experiential learning supported implementation of cooperative learning programs, as experiential learning opportunities. Therefore, there is a need to integrate cooperative programs as part of higher education curriculum (Chen & Shaurette, 2012). Cooperative education programs offer students a well-rounded educational experience (Dewey, 1938) in which the students are able to apply the theoretical concepts they learn in a classroom to a real world setting. University administrators believe that the benefits of such programs could be even more impactful for students who may struggle with making the theoretical connections solely on abstract level, and in particular, international students, who may also struggle with communication and social and cultural norms.

Aligning with the ideology of Dewey (1938), the findings of this present study support the notion that cooperative education programs provide students with the most well-rounded educational experience. This is achieved by providing a marriage of theory and practice that offers students an opportunity to apply the theoretical concepts they learn in a classroom to a real world setting. However, this finding was contrary to the conclusions of Sovilla and Varty (2004), who found administrator perceptions of disagreement with the objective of experiential
learning, with opinions that it did not improve student educational experiences and demonstrated administrator failure to prioritize experiential learning.

The discrepancy may be explained through Winter’s (2009) concept of hybrid identities as applied to university administrators, in which leaders articulate multiple interpretations of organizational problems and goals. University administrators must be concerned with the satisfaction of multiple stakeholders and the financial effects of these different aspects. For example, from a financial aspect, experiential learning programs, such as the cooperative program at this study university, can be used as a commodity to increase enrollment of full-pay students (such as international students) by increasing student satisfaction and employability. Academically, experiential learning can be difficult to manage successfully, as when managed improperly the experience can result in rushing students into work experiences they are not fully prepared for, which could damage the student academically, professionally, and or emotionally. In addition, academic administration may recognize a need to address multiple learning factors, particularly among international students, such as acculturation, which can decrease the efficiency of the program.

Value of Experiential Learning in Benefits to Students

The administrators in this study described experiential learning as a means to provide students with real world experience that builds skills and career development, adding to students’ qualifications and experience. This supports a more impressive resume, increasing their likelihood of gainful employment, and supporting their ability to market themselves. The participants in this study felt that these skills and job experiences gave their students an advantage that served to set them apart from other candidates and supported a higher probability
for job acquisition. In addition, the administrator participants in this study explained a perception that through these experiential learning opportunities, students are able to experience different aspects of the workplace, and better match their career goals and identify their desired career direction, which would be more likely to support greater career success and satisfaction. These findings build on existing research data that supports the benefits of experiential learning to students. According to Dressler and Keeling (2004), experiential learning increases disciplined thinking, retention of knowledge, a sense of responsibility for learning, problem-solving, analytical thinking, academic performance, and commitment to educational goals. Similarly, within the context of Kolb's learning cycle theory, the experiential learning model has been shown to have a positive effect on the outcome of the student’s work (Chen & Shaurette, 2012).

In contrast to Sovilla and Varty (2004), the administrators in this study expressed a high value on the cooperative program in higher education and felt this value was universal among higher education leadership across the country. To highlight the data, one interview participant stated:

“Research shows that professional experience in the form of co-op or internship definitely has a place in higher education. It's one of the best forms of learning students can do. Just among higher education in general, with the overall sphere of higher education and their assumptions, I'm talking like leaders in higher education across America specifically. Leadership, administrators, they all look very highly on experiential learning I don't think it's something that is really debated. … It is something that is a priority amongst all the leadership and all the administration of the university is
to find a place throughout the curriculum, no matter what the circumstances are or who
the student is, to implement some type of cooperative internship program. So, for us, at
this institution it's highly valued.” (Adam)

The perceived value is based on the benefits students receive in terms of job skills and
experience, and value to the employer in terms of gaining new perspectives, which, according to
the participants in this study, make experiential learning valuable to the university. From the
data, one participant described:

“There is an opportunity for students to develop their skills such as leadership, or again,
job survival skills, interviewing and so on and so forth. The list can be really endless, all
in all, students have a chance to put something on the resume. And it is beneficial for the
employer too, because the employer gets a new perspective from students. So, all these
things definitely make experiential learning valuable and desirable for universities to
have, and I'm very happy that Northeastern is so famous for its co-op program, and it's
been so popular among the students. It definitely attracts a lot of students.” (Betty)

Specific to international students, participants in this study expressed the added benefit
gained from experience in the workplace environment, particularly in terms of communication
skills. International students are able to adapt to language and communication needs in the
classroom, but experiential learning opportunities expose them to the communication needs in
the workplace environment, which can be very different than a classroom environment. Again,
highlighting the data, one participant explained:
“I think that there is an added benefit for international students. … International students I think benefit more from the work place environment than would domestic students, particularly when it comes to communication issue. International students, they’re great as far as where they’re at, they do pick up a lot in their classrooms as far as language and how to communicate and express themselves well. But, again, there's a lot of subtleties when you cross the line from academia or a classroom environment into the business environment. I think that's really where they pick up the most.” (Adam)

Students who participate in cooperative education programs have demonstrated significantly greater test scores and success rates compared to traditionally educated students, representing a correlation between cooperative education and higher student achievement (Van Gyn et al., 1996). Prior research has supported benefits to students in terms of development of transferable skills in interpersonal communication, networking, team work, and time management, as well as evidence to support development of technical skills and knowledge (Hughes, Mylonas, & Benckendorff, 2013). These learning outcomes support stronger learning experiences, as universities and colleges are frequently criticized for lacking opportunities for teaching practical knowledge and skills that will support successful transition from the classroom to the workplace (Hughes et al., 2013). The findings of this study as well as that of prior research (Hughes et al., 2013) support the inclusion of experiential learning opportunities to create graduates with experience that supports transferable skills and industry perspective.

Adding administrator perceptions of the benefits and value of the cooperative program, both in terms of educational and financial value, at this university has supported the effectiveness of experiential learning programs in higher education within the context of Kolb’s framework,
offering opportunities for observation, review, and conclusions. The findings support the implementation and continued support for experiential learning programs in higher education for general student population as well as, and indeed possibly more so, for the international student population.

**Program Challenges in Resource Constraints and Student Commitment**

Administrative participants in this study discussed challenges to the program in terms of resource constraints and lack of student commitment. Again, within the context of Winter’s (2009) concept of hybrid identities, the administrators need to be considering the resources available to support the program, relative costs of the program, and the implications to student learning and financial growth due to positive effects of the program. The cooperative education program explored in this study required the administration to continuously build and enhance the corporate relationships needed to support placement of students in the program. Administrators must weigh the benefits of the program to the students and the university (particularly financially) to decide the level of resources they are able to commit to supporting the program. In a school such as the university in this study, where the cooperative education program provides a distinction for the university in terms of reputation and student interest, the value of the program supports increased resources to provide enough opportunities for all interested students. This theme is where the conflict between academic manager and managed academic was most evident throughout the study.

In addition, student commitment and motivation was also described as lacking by the administrative interview participants in this study. The student lack of motivation and commitment was felt to be particularly evident among the domestic student population,
suggesting that the international students maintained adequate motivation and commitment levels to provide a more successful experience. According to Sheehy (2004), to successfully meet the challenges of cooperative learning programs, it is important to understand students’ social, emotional, and educational experiences, including cultural experiences. Sheehy concluded that cooperative learning is most effective when taking into account cultural norms and experiences. The findings of this study align with the conclusions offered by Sheehy, suggesting important distinctions based on cultural differences, which can affect learning styles, communication, group cohesion, and tension within a group.

**Challenges for International Students: Language Proficiency and Government Restrictions**

As noted by previous research as well (Trice, 2003), international students face specific challenges to their participation in the cooperative education (or experiential learning) program. Administrators in this study expressed challenges to international students such as language proficiency and understanding the nuances of the English language in a workplace setting. One participant expressed, “One of the greatest barriers to overcome in this particular college has been language proficiency as it relates to international students transitioning from their native country to an American education system and possibly a work related experience.” Language issues can hinder communications in the workplace, causing misunderstanding, despite gaining proficiency level in English for the academic setting. However, in light of this specific challenge, one can see how such a program can be more beneficial to international students specifically in supporting experience, language and communication growth in the workplace. This is particularly true for students who plan to seek work in the United States after graduation or in global organizations.
In addition to language and communication issues, Trice (2003) described challenges for international students in terms of cultural adjustments and integrating with other students or coworkers. According to Trice, due to the specific challenges faced by international students, it is more difficult for them to obtain experiential learning opportunities, establish a diverse network, and communicate their experiences to peers and faculty. Compounding communication issues among international students, the participants in this study also noted that international students often lack aspects of professional preparedness, such as writing cover letters and resumes, and presenting themselves professionally. For example, one participant described, “I see a lot of the international students that we get here at the college are not well-prepared, as far as how to present themselves in a professional manner to an employer, or how to write an effective cover letter to that employer.” Therefore, special considerations and program resources may be useful in addressing these needs of international students prior to participating in the cooperative education program, such as additional course offerings supporting advanced communications in the workplace and understanding of workplace culture.

In this current study, international students were also described as challenged by restrictions on the time and geographic locations available to participate in the cooperative program. Participants in this study described certain restrictions that apply to international students in terms of the time during the semester or academic year that they can begin participation in the cooperative program and whether they can participate in out of state programs or business locations, placing limitations on their opportunities to participate in the cooperative education program. In contrast, domestic students have much more flexibility. These findings support the previously noted recommendations of Bollage and Field (2006), who suggested encouraging administrators to remove restrictions on foreign scholars (Bollag & Field,
and to address issues of acculturation to support greater international student participation in experiential learning opportunities.

A key finding of this study was that the benefits to international students, at least in part because of these significant challenges, may be greater. Although educators can try to prepare students for the workplace and real world setting, the experience and learning from working within the environment is critical to effective practice that will support career growth, opportunities, and assimilation into a potentially foreign workplace culture.

**Significance and Implications**

Given a more globalized economy, companies are actively seeking minorities and international employees to cultivate diverse talent (Franks, 1997). An estimated 50,000 employers hire students who completed cooperative education programs each year in the United States, including a majority of the top Fortune 500 companies (Franks, 1997). As job placement is a factor in rating effectiveness and success among higher education institutions, university administrators should seek to ensure they will be able to supply prepared and sought after candidates who demonstrate the necessary skills and experience for success. Through this exploration of the perceptions and experiences of cooperative education administrators, a better understanding is offered of the impact of cooperative education programs from the perspective of the administrators and whether their beliefs align with the current educational and business environment.

As higher education strives to better prepare its students for the workplace and to meet the demands of a global workforce, challenges arise related to cultural and language differences in the workplace (Sahin & Troy, 2009). Responding to this need, many universities, like the one
in this study, have explored and or implemented new instructional strategies and curricular offerings, such as cooperative education models, which provide real-life, hands-on experiences and support greater cultural integration. Although designed for both international and domestic students, the cooperative education model using experiential learning strategies seems to be specifically increasing recruitment of international students in the United States (Open Doors, 2013).

Results of this study and previous research support that cooperative education programs offering experiential learning opportunities that provide understanding and experience in the domestic work culture and bridge cultural gaps, particularly among international students, supported students who are better prepared for the professional environment. The cooperative model allows students to put classroom theory into practice in the workplace, which was perceived as highly valuable by the administrative participants in this study. This finding did, however, contradict with prior research that suggested administrative personnel do not value experiential learning programs at the post-secondary level. This may be due to the relative success seen at this particular university related to the cooperative education program. Although the findings of this study are not necessarily generalizable to other populations, the results suggest that other universities implementing similar experiential programs may also benefit from the programs and realize a greater perceived value based on the actual benefits seen from the program.

The results of this study support the need for cooperative or experiential learning programs at the university level, from the perspective of cooperative education program administrators who serve both as academic managers and managed academics. For the academic manager, support for the program can be seen from its ability to increase rankings, university
marketability, and enrollment numbers. Managed academics are satisfied by the stronger learning experience for students, as well as their personal marketability when it comes to obtaining a professional position.

The greater the support for the program, the more likely the university will benefit from the success of the students involved. The findings of this study suggested that the success of the student in the program impacts not only the student, but also the university by way of financial gains and in terms of the enhanced reputation of the university. Indeed, the successful implementation of a cooperative learning program is important to a variety of stakeholders.

Placing students into an internship or workplace position that they are not equipped to handle is bad for the student, the corporate partner, and the university. Ill prepared students may lose confidence in their abilities and struggle on the job, causing the corporate partner to deem the university’s students as inferior and not worth placing in the future, all while the corporate partner loses time and money by working with a student who is not capable of handling the rigors of the position.

Transitioning to the workplace can be difficult, especially if the student is simultaneously facing barriers of cultural assimilation, learning and adjusting to the workplace environment, culture, personal interactions, and language barriers. Meeting the needs of the international student population may prove critical to university success, as these students may be sought after by corporations for their potential contributions in an increasingly global economy. Additionally, the increasing international student population represents a critical student population for U.S. schools by demonstrating the potential for increased revenues, as international students tend to be full-pay students.
The findings of this study are particularly relevant to the different members of the university community (i.e., variety of stakeholders), with particular importance to top university administrators who are examining and considering cooperative education implementation or reform. Among administrators who perceive a value in experiential learning opportunities in higher education, the findings of this study support their continued efforts to provide such experiences to their students. For administrators who disagree or fail to prioritize experiential learning opportunities in higher education, the findings of this study will at least give them cause for thought. Given the diversity of the administrative concerns for the university or college, experiential learning opportunities, such as the cooperative education program explored in this study, offer potentially significant benefits to both students and universities. These include increased enrollment and associated revenues, access to grant or other opportunities for growth in the program, improved recognition and rank among other colleges nationally, and benefits to students in terms of providing real world, on the job experiences that will be valuable to potential employers, supporting employability, ease of transition to the workplace, and potentially advancement in the workplace.

A cooperative education program may also have more personalized benefits for the employees involved with it as well. The theory behind this type of learning should be kept in mind when administrators are dealing with students. In short, students do not come to the institution as a blank slate. Their own experiences inform their beliefs, and administrators must work with them in a personalized manner, as opposed to treating them as a blank slate or like they may treat other students.

This type of program can also have an effect on problem solving within a cooperative education program. Academic managers and managed academics, when faced with a problem,
must be able to keep the other’s perspectives and mandates in mind. While a managed academic may ask themselves in their potential solution to a problem may be cost prohibitive, academic managers can consider the long-term ramifications of their decisions as opposed to just the short term profits and losses. This ability to keep the experiences of others in mind can make for a more cohesive work environment and cooperative education program.

The successful development and preparation of university students to bridge the gap between the academic environment and the workplace is critical. From the results of this study and previous research, cooperative education programs can indeed serve this purpose by providing many direct benefits to the students, particularly in terms of real world experience, skill development, and marketability. At the same time, cooperative education programs can support growth for the university in terms of reputation and rank, as well as financial growth. The information gathered in this study can be used as a resource by those administrators considering cooperative education reform.

Conclusions

This study utilized an interpretive phenomenological research design to explore the beliefs and experiences of higher education administration with regard to cooperative education programs that support experiential learning opportunities for students. Using data obtained from a purposeful sample of five administrators who were directly involved in the cooperative education program at the university, the goal of this study was to understand the larger picture of cooperative education programs from the viewpoint of university administrators. The program administrators were interviewed, offering their perceptions of the university cooperative education program and their personal experiences with regard to the program, shedding light on
their beliefs and experiences with the program as an experiential learning based program, and the role of the program in educating the university’s student population and preparing these students for success in the workplace.

The co-operative educational model supports student learning in an experiential framework where students are able to put the theory learned in the classroom into practice in the workplace. The cooperative program places students with partner companies to provide a real world job experience that serves to develop professional, educated, talented, competent, and skilled graduates and future employees that will assimilate effectively into the corporate culture. In this light, cooperative education programs have become popular among domestic and international students. Specifically, the cooperative program at the university in this study serves as a marketing tool, attracting new students and business relationships with the college/university.

The students, the university, and the companies involved in the program are all affected by the success of the program. The individual students’ successes and failures affect not only the individual student’s employment possibilities, but also reflect directly on the university and the reputation of the university as providing a strong education. In addition, the impact of the cooperative education program is highly visible, both internal and external to the university, which affects the university financially and in terms of recruitment and reputation. The cooperative education program involves a series of activities such as internships/co-ops, part-time jobs, group projects and intercultural events, all of which can be used to effectively bridge cultural gaps, and as such, can be particularly useful with international students, who may struggle with cultural and communication gaps, particularly when transitioning to the workplace.
The findings of this study provided five key themes common throughout the interview data. These included (a) perceived improvement to school rank and ability to attract students to the university; (b) linking practice to theory learned in the classroom; (c) building real world experience that supports skill development, career development, experience, qualifications, and ability to market oneself; (d) challenges associated with resource constraints and student lack of motivation and commitment; and (e) international students hindered by language proficiency.

These findings highlight the multiple aspects of the administrators’ perspectives, as described by Winter (2009), seeking to improve the university in terms of reputation and financial status, while also striving to provide the strongest program possible to support student growth and development, as well as employability after graduation.

From the findings of this study, it is recommended that administrators support efforts to implement and support cooperative education programs. This can be done by supporting resources primarily related to continuously fostering the creation of corporate relationships to allow for additional connections and opportunities for students to participate in these types of cooperative experiential learning opportunities. This recommendation is based on the administrator participants’ perceptions of the benefits to the various stakeholders (including the students, university, and business corporations) involved. The students gained valuable real world work experience, opportunities to acquaint themselves with, and assimilate into, the workplace environment, and practice applying classroom knowledge and theory to practice in the work environment. The university was felt to benefit and indeed profit from enhanced reputation and rank among universities nationally, as well as increase desirable international student recruitments. Lastly, the employers or corporations involved were felt to benefit from the unique and fresh perspectives of the students. The findings also described challenges associated with
resource constraints; however, given the perceived benefits, particularly financial benefits, of increased recruitment, university rank and reputation, among others, based on student participation in and university support for the continuation of the cooperative program, the data support the recommendation for additional university support, including financial support for cooperative and other experiential programming.

Given limitations of this study related to the small sample of administrators at a single university implementing a very successful cooperative program, additional research is called for. One suggestion would be to look into the effect of the administrators’ attitudes and perceptions, and the overall development of student achievement, when compared to the non-cooperative education participating students, both at colleges and universities in which the program is active and at institutions attempting to implement such experiential learning opportunities.

An assessment of administrator compared to student attitudes toward experiential learning opportunities would highlight the impact of administrative and leadership support for such programs and the overall impact on the success of similar programs. Another direction for future research would be to specifically look at highly successful programs, such as the one explored in this study, to identify key aspects of the programs that are critical to success. This type of research may hone in on essential elements of cooperative education programming when tied to theoretical frameworks of experiential learning processes. This would also support more effective implementation for new programming at universities and colleges trying to initiate and integrate experiential learning opportunities into the curriculum.

Additionally, a longitudinal study comparing the career outcomes of students who utilized a cooperative education model versus those who did not would all be useful. While the participants explain their belief in the importance of experiential learning to career development,
empirical evidence would help academic managers have a viable reason (and selling point to potential students) for allocating resources to such a program. This evidence would also support the continuation and addition of cooperative education programs at universities across the country.

A key aspect of this study was the perceived effect on international students, a growing population within U.S. higher educational institutions. Further research on this specified population, in light of the increasingly global economy, and how well prepared international students can assimilate more easily and more productively into the organizational culture is needed. U.S. corporations and universities can benefit from the global perspectives of these international students and those students who can cross the cultural and workplace divide can provide a unique resource to the business. Because businesses may be seeking out international students specifically, the ability to attract and recruit greater numbers of international students can serve to support the university reputation among business organizations seeking to hire quality candidates. Existing job opportunities and increased attention from employers towards international student recruitment and cooperative education programs support the implementation of experiential learning programs.

Given the growing importance of intercultural compatibilities in the corporate environment due to globalization of the workplace, experiential learning opportunities that support cultural competencies across a variety of cultures and norms in the workplace seems to be advantageous to employers. Recent graduates who can assimilate easily into the workplace environment and provide intercultural understanding and communications can support business growth and development and within the context of the experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984),
cooperative programs serve to build knowledge on a continuum that supports enhanced processing and perception of the students.

Thus, cooperative, experiential learning opportunities based within U.S. colleges and universities have the potential to support this essential contribution to the success of the business within a global economy, while at the same time positively contributing to the reputation and recruitment efforts (and ultimately the financial well-being) of the university. The results of this study support the importance and contributions of cooperative experiential learning programs in higher education to support well-prepared students, particularly international students, who are able to transfer classroom learning and theory into practice and are ready to positively contribute to the workplace while the program simultaneously supports the financial sustainability of the university through increased enrollment and financial gains.
Appendix A: Sample Letter to Interview Participants

Dear (First name of university administrator),

My name is Stephen Rando, and I serve as the Assistant Director of Co-operative Education at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies. I am sending you this letter because you have been selected as a candidate for participation in a qualitative research project titled “University Administrators: Experiences and Beliefs about Cooperative Education Programs in the United States”.

This research is being undertaken as partial fulfillment of the requirements toward my doctoral degree in the Doctor of Education Program (Ed.D.) here at the College of Professional Studies. This research will collect data on the experiences that administrators have regarding cooperative education, and, secondarily, some of the differences of these experiences between international and domestic students. I hope the information I gather will expand the knowledge of university administration on the benefits of cooperative education programs while also being useful for creation of alternative experiential learning theories for the higher education administrative community.

Only one hour of your time will be needed for an interview. The interview will be done in person, at a confidential location and time that is convenient for you. All information will be confidential and no personal information will be released to the institution. Also, interviewees will be able to participate in fact-checking by having the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview for clarification during the data analysis phase of this research. Finally, all participants will receive a summary of the research results. Participation is entirely voluntary.

I am scheduling one-hour interviews immediately and hope to complete all interviews by [TBD]. I hope that you are interested and willing to participate in this research, and we can schedule a convenient meeting time. I am also available to answer any questions you may have about the research.

Are you willing to contribute to this study as an interviewee? If so, please respond to this request via e-mail at rando.s@husky.neu.edu, and I will reach out to you so we can set a time for your interview. Thank you for considering this request.

Best,

Stephen S. Rando

rando.s@husky.neu.edu

781-330-1540
Northeastern University

Investigator Name: Principal Investigator, Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed

Student Researcher, Stephen S. Rando

Title of Project:

University Administrators: Experiences and Beliefs about Cooperative Education Programs in the United States

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are being invited to participate in a research study about university administrator experiences with, and beliefs about, cooperative education programs. This form will tell you about the study. You may ask any questions that you may have and, after consideration, may realize that you do not want to participate, for which there are no repercussions. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will provide a copy for your records.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to participate in this research because you are:

- An administrator at a higher education institution
- Have worked with the cooperative education department

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to better understand the beliefs and experiences held by administrators of cooperative education programs.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to be interviewed. The confidential interviews will take place, one-on-one, at your convenience and will be done
in person at a location of your choosing. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. All interviewees will be able to review/correct the transcripts of their interviews.

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?**

The interviews will be conducted in a location that is most convenient for you. The interviews will take between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

**Are there any known risks to me?**

There is little risk if you decide to participate in this research study. There are no costs to you for participating in the study.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help universities develop more effective professional and leadership development for cooperative education administrators.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher on this study will see the interview transcript and audio file from your interview. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. The researcher will keep a key to identify the interview subjects’ recordings and these electronic recordings will be stored in a password protected environment. The transcribed interview will not have names affiliated with it and will be stored similarly, in a password protected environment that only the researcher has access to, and the instructor will share the interview transcript with the interviewee only. During the coding process, the interview subjects will be entered using the same “key” to maintain confidentiality.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this study is voluntary. By taking part in the interview process, you are voluntarily agreeing to participate. You are free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to, for any reason, and you may stop participating at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Dr. Reiss Medwed (Principal Investigator)
k.reissmedwed@neu.edu

Stephen Rando (Student Researcher)
rando.s@husky.neu.edu
Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Questions (Protocol)

1) Please describe your current position and how it relates to cooperative education programs.

2) What are your beliefs about, and experiences with, the role of experiential learning in the overall realm of academia?

3) In what ways have you seen the university and students benefit from your cooperative education program?

4) In what ways have you encountered barriers when trying to administer your cooperative education program?

5) Have you noticed a difference in the experience of international students, as compared to domestic students, when it comes to the cooperative education program?

6) Do you feel all students would benefit from an experiential learning program, and, if so, why?

7) How do you think the overall university administration views the experiential learning program?
Appendix D: Participant Profiles

Adam is a program manager for undergraduate education. He has worked in the international education sector as well as a division of Kaplan.

Betty is an assistant director in career services. Her prior work experiences include teaching at the K-12 level and a private inner city career academy.

Chris is currently an academic advisor at a large private institution in the Northeast. He has worked in various roles within the university setting including admissions and counseling.

David is and has worked in both K-12 and higher education. He currently works in developing university partnerships for a private research intuition in the northeast.

Elizabeth works in a management position within a university setting in Boston. She has worked in counseling, academic advising and career development for a few differently higher education institutions.
Figure: 1 Kolb’s Model of Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984)
References


http://www.cpedinitiative.org/files/Chapter%209%20from%20Creswell.pdf


http://www.northeastern.edu/coop/


