



Entrepreneurial Education: The Role of Internships in Higher Education in North America

Daniel Cockayne

Department of Geography and Environmental Management, University of Waterloo
daniel.cockayne@uwaterloo.ca

Abstract

The neoliberalization of education in North America is a widely discussed topic within and outside of geography. Though much research has been undertaken on, for example, the rise of employability and other metrics in higher education, and some research has examined internships, little critical literature has examined the role of cooperative (coop) education programs: a specific kind of internship-based undergraduate program in which students alternate between school and paid work terms throughout their degrees. I explore these themes through an analysis of interviews with students who are enrolled in or recently completed coop degrees at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. I examine coop, a key element of the neoliberalization of education in North America, to argue (1) that coop degree programs are invested in the production of mobile and flexible subjects convenient to an increasingly globalized labor market and (2) that students display critical ambivalence toward coop as resistant to it while also finding value in it in general terms. This perceived value should be contextualized alongside the broader structural forces that students are faced with that include rising tuition fees, dwindling social spending, (until recently) stagnant real-wage growth, and the continued dependency on the market for social reproduction.

Keywords

Coop; critical geography of education; higher education; internships; universities



Introduction

In recent years, geographic research on education has been increasingly engaged with the theme of neoliberalism, examining the marketization and privatization of education (Hall, 2015; Holloway & Kirby, 2019; Martin & Brown, 2013), the role of education in the production of working subjects (Mitchell, 2018), and the focus within education on employment and employability metrics (Hill et al, 2016). Research on the neoliberalization of education builds on and is closely related to broader themes within the geography of education that explore gentrification (Nguyen et al, 2016), mobilities (Waters, 2017), and citizenship (Mitchell, 2003). Though geographers often focus on primary and secondary education, and less on post-secondary education (though see Findlay et al, 2012; Lewison, 2013), there is too a wealth of critical literature on the neoliberalization of higher education (Axelrod et al, 2001; Giroux, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Neoliberalism is broadly defined as the conflation of political with market principles (Brown, 2015) and through approaches to governance that include privatization, dwindling corporate taxation, diminished welfare spending, and curtailed union action (Harvey, 2005). Some of the specific ways that geographers discuss the neoliberalization of higher education is in terms of the dwindling of public resources for universities and a concomitant raise in student tuition (Thiem, 2009); an increase in the use of market-based performance metrics (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017; Morley, 2001); the rise in importance of other metrics from citations counts to international university rankings that facilitate a culture of competition at all levels, within the university and without (Berg et al, 2016; Jöns & Hoyler, 2013); and an increase in the perceived value of students' practical and professional skills, perhaps at the cost of critical thinking.

Another primary way that the neoliberalization of higher education works out is through the expansion of degree programs linked to student internships. In North America cooperative (coop) education--a specific kind of internship degree program in which undergraduates receive their degrees while alternating between school and paid work terms--has become increasingly popular.¹ The largest coop schools by enrolment in North America are the University of Waterloo (UW) in Ontario (where this study took place) and Northeastern University in Massachusetts. Coop differs from other university internship programs due to its high degree of institutionalization, its historical and contemporary STEM focus (though departments outside of those that are STEM-focused offer coop degrees at UW), its large number of partner organizations (i.e., firms and others committed to hiring a certain number of students from a given school every term), in terms of its accreditation, and since students receive specific degree classifications. While also being conceptually distinct from other kinds of internship programs, coop has similarities with other kinds university internship programs referred to variously by geographic and institutional context as placements, practicum, and sandwich degrees, among others. In the course of a coop degree program students undertake four or five four-month internships between study terms, usually with separate employers, meaning also that throughout a 5-year degree they are constantly either working for an employer or applying to do so while taking classes. 12% of Canadian undergraduates pursue coop education (Statistics Canada, 2015) and while this proportion has remained unchanged since 2005, absolute enrollment in Canadian undergraduate programs has gone up, meaning that enrollment in coop

¹ Discussions of coop in this paper refer to North American internship-based degree programs, and are conceptually and empirically distinct from other uses. In the UK cooperative education refers to higher education conceptualized as a worker's cooperative collaboratively owned by faculty and students (Winn, 2015). While the term 'cooperative' as it's used in this paper is misleading, given the more common and historical connotations of 'cooperative' with progressive labor politics and collective ownership--most commonly of housing or of the means of production--coop has become the prevailing and institutionalized term for these specific internship-based undergraduate degree programs in North America, and throughout the paper references to coop refer specifically to this use of the term and not to others.

programs has increased in absolute terms. In a relatively small survey, a further 50% of those with an undergraduate degree said that they would have liked to have study in a coop program if they'd had the opportunity (Ipsos Reid, 2010).

Though an academic literature exists on coop (e.g., in the *International Journal of Co-operative Education*) there is little critical literature on coop (Milley, 2016). Most literature approaches the topic from a boosterist liberal or neoliberal perspective, with little attention toward negative findings (Rowe, 2015). There are almost no accounts of coop from radical or feminist perspectives. While there is a broader critical literature on internships and other kinds of work-placements, the majority of this literature focusses on the important topic of unpaid internships (e.g., Allen et al, 2013; Owens & Stewart, 2016; Shade & Jacobson, 2015). Since most coop placements are paid, a central criticism of unpaid internships--that they are an exploitative due to lack of payment--is less relevant. Most of the literature on coop fails to interrogate broader questions around the changing role of education in the Global North (Milley and Kovinthan, 2014), especially in the context of structural and material factors that include the dramatic increases in income and wealth inequality, the stagnation of real wage growth, and the rise in consumer debt. This literature fails to interrogate the accepted role of education in the production of working subjectivities and the popular understanding of work as the unquestioned and most important aspect of daily life for many (Weeks, 2011), that provides an affective source of belonging, attachment, and meaning (Berlant, 2011) as well as being a necessary source of remuneration.

The goal of this paper is to address that gap by examining coop with these critical themes in mind. I interviewed 36 students at UW, who had recently completed or were currently undertaking undergraduate coop degrees. Building on previous research on entrepreneurship and digital media (Cockayne, 2016), my sample focused on students in STEM programs who often undertook their placements at digital media firms, some of which were local to Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, but many of which took place in cities with large digital media sectors. Students privileged international positions in New York City, Seattle, and the Bay Area with placements in the latter location being most highly prized. Most interviewees noted the value of the coop program in broad terms, while also problematizing their programs, demonstrating resistance to, rather than just acceptance of, neoliberal circumstances (see Knight, 2013). They noted that the university prioritized employers over students, and that their own concerns were often sidelined. Despite most speaking favorably about coop, students also emphasized their frustrations with their program that demanded that they move--often internationally--every four months for work placements. Students described this as an enforced flexibility that I theorize here in terms of the production of students as mobile subjects of global capital (Theodore, 2016).

Based on an analysis of these interviews I argue, first, that coop degree programs are invested in the production of mobile and flexible subjects convenient to an increasingly globalized labor market and, second, that students display critical ambivalence toward coop as resistant to it while also finding value in it in general terms. I make this argument through an analysis of interview data that is grouped into three key themes: (1) the amount of additional work that coop creates for students, (2) how coop prioritizes the university and its relationship with placement firms and organizations over students, and (3) how student mobility is enforced in coop by encouraging students to move between the university and their placements every four months. These insights build on the broader literature on mobility in higher education (Finn, 2017a), such as Forsey's (2017) claim that academic and personal achievement is closely linked to students' capacities for movement. I first outline key insights from the literature in the critical geography of education to which this paper makes its main contribution, as well as related literature on the political economy of education. I then discuss the methods used to undertake this study, before presenting the results.

The Neoliberalization and Internationalization of Higher Education and Student Internships

The primary element of the neoliberalization of higher education that I discuss in this paper is the cultivation of productive, working subjects through student internships. Writers looking at the intersection between political economy and education examine the conservative function of schools in producing workers and narrowing working class students' aspirations (Willis, 1981). Here schools are a lever on the supply of appropriately educated workers amenable to and already capable of particular kinds of work, that is, ready and willing to acquiesce to the appropriation of their surplus labor (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Schools create expectations about work through faux-meritocratic structures that mimic 'legitimate' competition on the labor market, encourage personal development, and romanticize hierarchical structures that model docile relationships to authority. Universities' interests are closely aligned with employers' and the primary goal of education--from a structural point of view--is the reproduction of an appropriately classed surplus labor force. Bowles and Gintis (1976, page 9) note that "for the past century and a half at least, employers have been [aware] of the function of schools in preparing youth psychologically for work." Education facilitates the rhetorical construction of productive work (i.e., work involving the creation of goods or services to be sold on a market) as both more societally important than social reproduction and as a taken-for-granted and unquestioned element of society (Weeks, 2011).

Many contextualize the neoliberalization of higher education in a longer history of tension in North America around the role of schooling. Schools are assigned the task of solving all social ills depending on the issues of the day, leading to perennial efforts to reform schools, corresponding investment in the sector, and close and continual attention from policy-makers at a number of levels, as well as disappointment when schools fail to address those ills (Labaree, 2010). Policy directed toward schools comes from a range of different organizations, meaning that schools become hydra entities catering to multiple groups and levels of governance. Organizations like the OECD and UNESCO exert policy influence over the global landscape of higher education utilizing soft forms of control that discipline nation-states and universities through global ranking systems and concepts of global competencies and global citizenship (Forsberg, 2019; Moskal and Schweisfurth, 2018; see also Van Mol, 2017). These policies explicitly encourage student mobility on global education and labor markets. Neoliberal supranational organizations like the World Bank encourage the direct linking up of education with individual and national economic competitiveness and the development of 'human capital' through a shift to a focus on competence-based skills (Lipman 2004). Internship-based degree programs like coop fundamentally coincide with this push to focus on the development of human capital that views students in terms of employability and as 'bundles of skills' (Cheng, 2016).

Mitchell (2018) examines the role of education in the support, procurement, and reproduction of work as a societal value, in which children's and young adults' lives are organized around cultivating a productive and competitive selfhood. She points to structural changes around the privatization of and decline in funding for public spaces. This includes the corporatization of play spaces, and the injunction to connect play with learning that frames learning as productive and unstructured play as unproductive. She notes that children are moved between a dwindling number of highly structured and supervised spaces--home and school, then, university and workplace--an approach justified under a rubric of public safety and 'protecting' children and young people. This is related to an expanding education industry, the internationalization of education, and the competition between elite global schools.

Entrepreneurial education supersedes a focus on multicultural education, where the worker replaces the citizen as the primary mode of political subjectivity (Mitchell, 2018). In Canada, Mitchell notes that critical of education policy as early as the 1980s linked education with national economic competitiveness. Liberal education had waning significance in the light of supposed flagging student performance in science and technology fields; this began a shift toward skills-based curricula, frequent

standardized testing, and quantitative accountability standards (Mitchell, 2018). Many have pointed to the role that market forces increasingly play in higher education, dubbed variously academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004); the neoliberalization of education (Lipman, 2011; Olssen & Peters, 2005); and the entrepreneurialization of the university (Overtz, 1996). These writers examine not only universities partnering with businesses, but also businesses being directly involved in their governance structures and universities being run like businesses on models driven by profit and accumulation in which students are treated as consumers.

Other writers examining the neoliberalization of education have pointed to demands that schools compete for limited resources often under a rubric of ‘school choice’ linked to school closure, increased travel distances for students, and the marketization of education (Collins & Coleman, 2008). These trends have indelible effects on the spatial interface between the school and local community. Hall (2015) shows how the marketization of higher education in the UK through the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 attends to a territorial logic underpinned by expectations of better work and better salaries from both domestic and international graduates. Other geographers draw attention to the supplemental education market in the UK in the form of private tuition, which bolsters entrenched classed and racial hierarchies (Holloway and Kirby, 2019; Thiem, 2009). They show how neoliberal rhetoric (though not necessarily policy and practice) is becoming homogenized across national context, pushes students and parents to internalize responsibility for education as consumers, and leads parents to become more personally involved in education (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012).

Student mobility is a critical focus for critical geographers of education as indicative of both the neoliberalization and internationalization of higher education. Scholars focus on student mobility in terms of moving away from home or the mobilities of international students (Brooks et al, 2012; Findlay et al, 2012), linking this mobility to class status and advancement, though are less focused on everyday mobilities or mobility as a function of internships (Finn, 2017a). Others relate the internationalization of higher education to its neoliberalization, since in the dwindling of state support for education, universities turn to attracting international students to increase enrolment as a market strategy and source of revenue (McCartney and Metcalfe, 2018). This represents a shift in the 1990s from a political impetus for internationalization (i.e., developing peace and understanding between nations) to an economic one (Guo and Guo, 2017).

Attracting international students is the main dimension of university internationalization discussed in scholarly literature, with international student internships (or other factors) receiving less attention (Viczo and Tascón, 2016). Internationalization itself remains a contested term sometimes used to refer to international research integration and general connections between universities and other entities, and in other cases referring explicitly to market-driven interests (Guo and Guo, 2017). Internationalization in the context of this research is evident in the cultivation of international relationships--between universities, students, and employers--through internship programs. Though some coop students remain in Canada for their placements, many applied regularly for overseas opportunities and sought to undertake international placements. In the context of digital media internships, the phrase “Cali or bust” circulates widely on campus, signaling both the highly competitive nature of coop programs and that undertaking international internships in the Bay Area represented a central measure of success for engineering and mathematics students.

The critical literature on paid internships in general, and coop in particular, is relatively small (Milley, 2016; for exceptions see Johnston, 2011). Most of the literature on coop is celebratory, touting only benefits from a neoliberal point of view, and ignoring critical, radical, and feminist discussions around the role of work in everyday life, and the broader function of education in society (Freire, 1970). One reason for this is that paid internships are less obviously problematic and exploitative than un- or under-paid internships. A number of interviewees had worked at well-paid internships for global digital

media firms including Apple, Facebook, and Google, with avenues for full-time permanent employment following graduation. The students I interviewed--primarily those in engineering, computer science, and mathematics programs--were the privileged success stories of coop, the people for whom the system is, arguably, working well. Coop is available to students in other programs--including those outside of STEM--and many students see coop as a way to help to pay for their education in more general terms. In light of the literature on the neoliberalization and entrepreneurialization of education, there is room for critical discussions around the role of higher education in modern society around what, and who, education is for. If education's purpose is to create productive workers and fuel economic development, what of the liberal, radical, and emancipatory models of education (hooks, 1994)? Is there room for the development of critical thought and the cultivation of a politically active citizenry, not conceptualized as individuals in competition, but as members of a society?

Not focused on such questions, existing literature on coop emphasizes student success and the benefits of entrepreneurship in the sense of students starting their own businesses through university incubator programs and the added effects of those firms in turn hiring university coop students (Andrade et al, 2018). Boosters often cite Dewey (1938) as a source of theoretical support for coop programs who, though he advocated for experiential education, also emphasized that experience had to be integrated into curricula, which is often not the case in coop (Garraway, 2006). Instead (as was the case at UW) work placements are separate from study. There is little meaningful conversation with between scholarship and work, for example through the alignment of learning objectives across work placements and curricula. Most paid placements are deemed appropriate, with little oversight into the activities being undertaken therein. Employer concerns are prioritized over students' in coop programs, and are structurally incentivized through access to cheaper and less antagonistic student workers, who will also leave the firm after four months if they are unsatisfactory, or who could easily be given the opportunity to stay on at the firm if they are not. Employers in some states and provinces are doubly incentivized through tax credits for hiring students enrolled in postsecondary education.

The broader critical writing on internships outside of coop is typically focused on unpaid internships and examines their roles in the production of working subjectivities (Ashton, 2015), often framed in terms of labor market transitions that seek to conceptualize work as something that we *should*, as a normative injunction, love and enjoy, perhaps as a means to make acceptable the increasingly generalized conditions of enforced flexibility (Gill, 2010; McRobbie, 2002). Much of the writing on unpaid internships focusses on the so-called 'creative industries,'² such as those focused on the production of movies and television, fashion, and digital media. These are often ununionized sectors in which an ethos of attachment to one's work, following one's passion, and enjoying work, are strongly cultivated. Workers are framed individualistically as artists, through lenses such as Florida's widely critiqued idea of the creative class (Peck, 2005). Allen et al (2013) focus on the cultivation of neoliberal subjectivities in internships in creative sectors in the UK, pointing to how students are expected to be resourceful and willing to accept unpaid work. They point to the exclusions implied in these processes: this unpaid work is not equally available to everybody; these 'opportunities' are more available to those from particularly classed and raced backgrounds. Others have framed student perceptions of unpaid internships as a 'necessary evil,' with students self-reflexively realizing that these positions are not real opportunities (Jacobson & Shade, 2018). This research frames the unpaid internship as something that students feel they have a duty to undertake, as a 'rite of passage' or qualifier for 'breaking into' the 'real' job market (Ashton, 2014).

² See Cockayne (2018) for a feminist critique of the use of terms like culture and creativity in descriptions of economic sectors or labor market transition.

The insights in this section point to the various neoliberalizing pressures--both national and international--on higher education that push universities toward employability-oriented priorities, and encourage students to focus on careers and work. Though much has been written on internationalization and mobility, internships are rarely taken up in relation to these themes. Similarly, while unpaid internships are topics of concern, paid work placements in general and coop in particular are rarely discussed. There is much room for critical discussions and thought around the increasingly dominant role that coop, and internships and work placements, play in higher education in North America. I build on interviews with current and former coop students to explore this role. I next discuss the methods used to undertake this study, then discuss findings from interviews with current or former students from UW's coop program. While many students were pleased with their outcomes of the program, they also raised a series of questions around the university's prioritization of employers' concerns over their own, the amount of work they had to undertake, and the flexibility and mobility enforced through the program.

Methodology

I undertook this research at UW, research-intensive university in Ontario and member of the U15 (a group of Canadian universities where membership is based on amounts of research funding the institution receives) that hosts North America's largest coop program by student enrollment. Though diverse in terms of numbers of programs across the sciences and humanities, UW's branding and ostensible focus is on STEM fields, with a historical and continuing emphasis on engineering and entrepreneurship. In Fall 2019, UW had undergraduate enrolment of 33,300 (the fourth highest in Canada), of which 6,800 were international students and 23,000 were enrolled in coop programs (UW, 2020a). In the Faculty of Engineering, home faculty to a number of participants for this study, average rates of women's enrolment in first year programs is around 30%, though is much lower in certain programs, e.g., 13.3% in Computer Engineering and 14.4% in Mechanical Engineering (UW, 2020b).

In this project I am interested in speaking with students who undertook coop placements at digital media startup firms, so as to further develop earlier research with these kinds of firms in San Francisco (Cockayne, 2016; 2018). I explore the role that student placements play in the political economy of digital media work and how cultures of (over)work (that is intimately connected to an individualistic culture of entrepreneurship) in that sector emerge (see Cockayne, 2020). As such, I did not sample evenly from all coop programs across the university; I primarily spoke with students who were undertaking or who had recently completed degrees in mathematics, computer science, and engineering. In some senses, these groups were the privileged subjects of the coop program; many spoke about the wealth of software engineering and computer science-related placements on the university's job search platform, and some of these degree programs are infamously the university's most competitive, stressful, and rigidly structured.

It would be important to continue this research with a broader set of students from different degree programs to better understand how the coop program works and does not work for students, in particular, undertaking placements at smaller and less growth-oriented firms, in the public rather than private sector, and for charities and NGOs. Most of the students that I spoke with worked for for-profit private and/or publicly-listed businesses in the digital media sector, with expected business goals of growth, the accumulation of capital, and the accrual of shareholder value. Digital media firms and startup culture already have a particularly entrepreneurial orientation toward work characterized by self-imposed insecurity, long working hours, and high levels of stress at work (Cockayne, 2016). From this point of view, examining this particular subset of students may give an unbalanced impression of the extent to which students accept particular kinds of working subjectivities. Yet many of the topics covered by the students I spoke with were not specific only to their programs, so some generalizations can be made from the accounts I describe. I spoke primarily with those in their third or fourth years or those who had

recently graduated. This ensured that interviewees had already completed a number of coop placements and could therefore speak more generally about the experience of undertaking coop placements.

I interviewed 36 students during 2018. I asked broad and open-ended questions about students' experiences navigating UW's coop system during academic terms, their experiences of work during work terms, how they found moving back and forth every four months, and the extent to which university curricula were integrated with their work placements. One aim of these interviews was to investigate the role of coop in the development of attitudes toward work. Students spoke favorably about the program in broad terms, though also experienced difficulties with UW's internal systems for job search, interviewing, and matching students with placements. Most expressed frustration with the bureaucratic necessities of the coop program that demands that they complete online professional development modules during work terms and write mandatory work term reports reflecting on their work terms, tasks that they characterized as unnecessary busy work.

Entrepreneurial Education

The majority of students I interviewed were pleased with their own individual outcomes and with the program overall. Students found value in the job application process, said that getting interview practice was useful, and that remuneration and experience were major factors in their decision to do coop. While we might read this along authors like Cheng (2016) as evidence of the increasing neoliberalization of the modern university that celebrates the cultivation of individualism and competitiveness, students also critiqued and problematized the program (Waters and Brooks, 2010). Thus I argue that while coop demanded a cultivated an enforced mobility and flexibility from students, students challenged and critiqued these demands while acknowledging the individual(istic) value that coop offered. In the sections that follow I develop this argument by discussing three student concerns with the coop programs: (1) that coop produced too much unnecessary work; (2) that the university prioritizes employers over students; and (3) that the coop program itself often seemed inflexible, but demanded significant amounts of flexibility from students, demanding student mobility through the necessity to move, often internationally, every four months. I examine these three problems in terms of a complex acquiescence and resistance to students' becoming (or not) ideal neoliberal subjects of global capital (Theodore, 2016), in which they are asked to be highly mobile, moving back and forth between school and work placements thereby eschewing interpersonal relationships and maintaining minimal possessions (Allen et al, 2013).

Overwork for Coop

During study terms students spend long hours sorting through and applying for jobs, and preparing for and completing interviews for placements, in addition to the usual responsibilities of attending lectures and completing assignments for academic courses (see Cockayne, 2020). Students either use the university's job search platform, which posts jobs available exclusively to UW students, or they can find jobs outside of this system. One student commented on the variety of tasks they undertook--while taking full-time classes--in order to secure a placement the following term: "it's first doing through filtering and shortlisting [jobs], that's the first part, and the second part is going through and applying" (1). Jobs are posted in several rounds, the first of which is a little over a week long and is the most competitive, since the majority of students won't yet have jobs, and students typically want to find placements as quickly as possible so that they're not worried about finding a job later in the term or at the last minute.

Since students in their first and second years are the least competitive for jobs, many write a large number of applications to mitigate concerns that they won't receive offers. Some students noted that they applied for up to 50 jobs in the first round, which had a one-week window for application. Estimates of the time it took to complete applications varied, with one student noting that filtering and sorting jobs

took around 3-4 hours, while applications took around 8 hours, and another stating that their applications took 15 hours (1, 2). Many students found this part of the term particularly challenging, “it was very stressful honestly, like having that one week to apply for most of the jobs is just so insane” (2). Students who don’t find jobs can apply for more jobs later in the term if they unsuccessful in the first round. Students unsuccessful in the first round experienced additional levels of stress and work: “in [the second] round, I probably applied for 70 jobs and got one interview [...] there were lots of nights where I stayed up basically the whole night stressing myself out thinking about trying to get a job.” (3). In this way coop creates additional work during study terms for those who are least well-positioned to find jobs. This relates to what Holdsworth (2017) calls the ‘cult of experience,’ her term for the drive to develop ever more skills through experience--such as internships and volunteering but that in this context includes applying and interviewing for jobs--deemed necessary for students attempting to mitigate the uncertainties of the job market in neoliberal times. Indeed, feelings of stress could be read as developing students’ tolerance or as a method of practicing resilience while still in school and in the face of increasing precarity.

Interviews for the first round occur during already-busy parts of the academic term, often coinciding with midterms, putting further pressure for students. As one noted, “I need to study for midterms, [...] and I had seven assignments due. It’s just really stressful” (4). The coop and academic schedule make little or no attempt to address these overlaps; because of the relative lack of integration between the academic side of the university and coop (Coll et al 2009), many professors are unaware of coop deadlines and don’t attempt to schedule deadlines around them. Students signaled the benefit of spreading applications over a longer period of time, especially since some noted that the quality of applications suffered from having such a short window to search and apply for positions: “you have to personalize the cover letter and sometimes the resume as well. But when you [...] have a week to do it, it really limits the ability of that” (2).

Once on placement and on top of the regular rigors of (often more-than) full-time work students have to complete mandatory professional development (PD) courses and write work term reports. These activities were derided by students as unhelpful busy-work. One student asked, in a sentiment widely repeated by interviewees, “for coop I work 9 to 5, why am I coming home to work on a 20-page report that has nothing to do with my job?” (5). Though these activities could be read as an attempt to relate internships to academic content, students noted that they had little to do with either study or work. Reports are not connected to learning objective or curricula of students’ majors or home departments, or reflected upon in terms of examining what kinds of jobs students are taking on, the work that they’re doing on that job (Garraway, 2006). As Holdsworth (2018) notes, despite excessive busywork during school term and while on placements, there is a lack of attention toward what is actually learned through the ‘experience’ gained during internships.

Prioritizing Employers Over Students

Many interviewees had negative experiences during internships that raised critical questions about whether the coop program is for students or employers. As Grantham (2018) notes, Canadian universities tend to operationalize international mobility programs in ways that promote the university (in this case UW’s relationship with employers is a key marketing tool) rather than cater to students’ needs. Some students said that they felt that employers’ concerns were consistently prioritized over students’ concerns. Students noted a focus on maintaining good employer relationships over helping students to find placements that best suited them, or facilitating a positive experience while on placement. They pointed to inflexibility in the interview and matching systems. If an employer selects a student for an interview, the student is obliged to follow through with that interview, even if they’ve already found another external placement. As one interviewee explained, they “have to do the interview even if they don’t want the job [...] and then you could get matched with the jobs that you don’t want” (6). Another

said, “the system doesn’t allow you as a student to back out” (7). Students were told that it was unprofessional to turn down an interview, which they noted was a scapegoat for the university’s concern about their own reputation with employers. Many felt this demand to follow through with interviews a waste of their and prospective employers’ time. They also noted that this demand did not accurately match ‘real-world’ scenarios, where if you get one job before you interview for another, you can politely decline the latter interview.

Once interviews are complete, students rank their top choices of employer, and employees do the same. Here too students noted inflexibility within the matching system. Once successfully matched, students are strongly discouraged from turning down job offers, even if, as noted above, they have already found placements that they preferred outside the university’s system. One said that in one of their coop terms, accepting an external job “meant going against a match that [the university] had given me, which kind of does a strike against me” (8). Another said, during an interview they realized that, “I didn’t like the position and I realized instantly that this is not what I want, so I told them, ‘please don’t rank me,’ and then he ranked me [...] So I actually reneged on the job” (9). In this case, as in others, the university’s response to students turning down a job was punitive. Students were barred from using the university’s job platform for a term thereafter, meaning that they would have to find work without the platform, while still paying coop fees. In extreme cases students said that turning down a job resulting in their being asked to leave their coop program altogether and seek instead a general degree without a coop component.

Students described how the ranking and matching system created feelings of uncertainty and fear. Ranking created ambiguity through by incentivizing game-playing since the only way to guarantee a match is if both applicant and employer rank one another as their top choice. This led to students ranking jobs highly only if they thought those jobs were going to rank them highly in return, even if they would have preferred another job. One student said “it just always felt like a huge gamble to honestly rank your choices because it felt like you [...] really risked this falling through completely to the next round” (7). Another student noted that even when ranking a job that they didn’t want as their lowest choice, they might receive an offer that they had to accept or face repercussions from the university. That students can’t simply back out of an interview and eliminate the possibility of a potential offer, on top of the fact that students often applied for many jobs that they didn’t want out of fear of not finding *any* jobs, meant that these kinds of anxieties around interviewing, matching, and accepting jobs were commonplace.

In summarizing these trends, one student stated, “it’s overwhelmingly clear that [UW] is focused on, broadly focused on employers. And, actually, worse than that, they’re entirely focused on statistics, which don’t align at all with students’ needs” (10). Evincing this focus on statistics, another student said, the university “take[s] into account people who found their jobs without using [their system]” (3), referring to university data boasted very high coop placement rates. This means that whether the student found the job through the university’s platform or not, they would still be counted as finding a successful placement. These data are misleading in the sense that they give the impression that more students find jobs through the university system than they do in reality.

Though this perspective was the prevailing attitude among students (in another interviewee’s words, the university “already has a reputation of caring way more about employers than students” [11]), one student, when describing a negative experience that led to being let go during a placement, said that the university allowed them to count the placement as credit for the term, despite an official policy stating that placements that ended early wouldn’t count toward coop credit. Many of the circumstances were out of her control, including having an inexperienced manager, working for a firm that was unused to hiring coop students, being asked to undertake projects that she felt unqualified to complete with little guidance or oversight, and grappling with her own mental health issues. The student spent most of her time feeling frustrated and angry before being asked to leave and then had to worry about punitive action from the

university, who she feared wouldn't give her credit for the term. She had to explain the situation to them, forcing her to relive difficult experiences, before hearing that she would in fact receive credit for the term. Though nominally a positive outcome in the end for the student, we might ask why she didn't feel comfortable reaching out to the university earlier during a negative coop experience, perhaps anticipating limited meaningful intervention, or why there are few resources already in place for students managing a negative coop experience.

Another student noted, "the businesses get away with doing whatever they feel like, but we're held to such a high standard" (3). Indeed, we presume based on the story above that the employer didn't face negative consequences from the university even though they handed the student's circumstances poorly. Another example of low accountability for employers was a student whose placement vanished when the employer lost funding for the position, "the company who hired me lost funding so they couldn't pay me so they retracted their offer" (1). The university doesn't require employers to guarantee positions when they post them, which led to this student having to find another job at the last minute, creating additional work and stress. There is a distinct power imbalance then between employer, university, and student, despite this triad often being framed (by the university) as an equilibrium. The primary relationship is the one between employer and university where the university needs to maintain good relationships with the employer so that they will continue to supply the university with coop positions that will maintain the university's supply of students, given that the strength of the coop program is a key marketing tool--and student tuition an increasingly vital source of income--for the university. Students were broadly aware of these power imbalances, as one noted, the university "has no real authority over the companies that want to apply through them" (12). In this case, as in others, employers treated students badly with impunity, as they often do with their employees.

Beyond these negative examples, students noted little or no university oversight of work activities. Some students noted that they were expected to work excessive hours (Cockayne, 2020), and others said that in certain placements they were put in circumstances that were inappropriate (e.g., verging on sexual harassment) and that made them feel uncomfortable (e.g., given far more responsibility than warranted). Some of these circumstances are characteristic of work in the digital media sector in which work is presented as casual and fun (Marwick, 2013) but that may also be stressful, involving high degrees of responsabilization (McRobbie, 2002) and filtered through a rhetoric of openness and meritocracy that is often discriminatory (Gill, 2014). While it may be over-reaching for the university to demand extensive oversight over students' placements, there should be a meaningful way for students to identify and report problematic behavior. Though it would be difficult to cover all the national contexts within which different students work, in general terms the university makes no effort to educate students about employment law, their rights and responsibilities in the workplace, and the possibilities and benefits of representation. This is especially critical since students only get credit for the work term if they stay for a certain number of weeks, and are so further disincentivized from leaving a placement, even if they are experiencing inappropriate circumstances. These issues appeared especially prevalent in early-stage startup firms that had minimal regulatory structures in place (e.g., HR personnel or departments), which, as one interviewee noted, seemed to "care more about cultivating an impression that they're a cool, hip start-up, than actually considering their employees as people" (8).

Procuring Mobile Working Subjects

Enforced mobility is built into the structure of coop degree programs. Alternating between work and school every four months means that, unless students find jobs close to the university, students physically move back and forth between their placement and the university throughout their degree programs. This also meant students made an international move, and had to find new accommodation remotely every four months (a time-consuming, stressful, and complex task in and of itself), and assumed that students could afford to pay for transportation, visas, usually higher rent, and other costs. As one

student noted, “finding housing is always a huge pain” (13). Students widely remarked upon the frustration of moving every four months, e.g., “you have to find a sublet for your leaves, and you know, move everything into storage” (6). Whether endorsed by students or not, moving every four months presented personal as well as logistical and financial challenges: “it makes it really hard to build relationships, especially romantic ones because you’re moving every four months” (14). Another stated “it gets tiring after a while of having to pack up and move your life every four months to a different place; being able to work [at a placement close to the university] for the last year it’s been really nice because I have a stable place” (11).

Though largely proscribed by the coop system itself, an ideology of frequent movement was also endorsed by some students: “there’s this very prevalent attitude of, you should work somewhere new every coop term to figure out what you want” (8). Another student commented on how they adapted, stating, “it becomes a habit, [...] I would almost say that I’ve gotten it down to an algorithm in the sense that I always have one suitcase of bare minimum stuff, and minimize the friction” (6). Describing this activity as a ‘becoming a habit’ or getting moving ‘down to algorithm’ implies a routinized attitude toward moving frequently that was learned by having to do it over and over again. This shows how students might learn their mobility by using placements as a springboard and model for temporary international migration—including visa applications and finding rental housing abroad—following graduation (Findlay et al, 2017). Because this activity is widely valorized it also becomes accepted, normalized, and unquestioned. This is on top of the basic point, that “having to start a new job is really hard and stressful,” (8) so in addition to moving back and forth every four months, students add to that the stress and uncertainty of starting new work again and again.

Another student framed this flexibility as beneficial, in the sense that working in a full-time permanent position can be onerous if it’s not a position that you really want. They said, “you’re taking a hit to your pay in exchange for the pre-determined agreement to stop working in the future” (10). In this sense, students are able to get a better sense of what they want from employers, even though, as this student mentioned, they’re being paid less well than those in full-time permanent positions. Another framed taking a job local to the university as novel and something that they enjoyed: “I got to stay in the same apartment for eight months straight, which hadn’t happened for a really long time because you move all the time. So that was actually really nice and I got to keep seeing my same friends and keep going to the same places” (15). Others were less concerned saying, “in general it’s something that I really enjoyed, because I liked the experience of living in a new city every four months,” but also acknowledging, “the background stress it causes [...] all you’re thinking about is I have to book flights, I have to pack my stuff, I have to arrange this and that, my visa’s not ready” (16).

The comments above show an ambivalent attitude toward these factors of coop placements. Though we might take coop as a form of learning that accedes to the demands of neoliberal capitalism through enforced deference toward employers, flexibility for employers but not for student-workers, and through demands of increased mobility, students also showed an awareness of the structural forces to which they were subject, and an ability to critically resist these forces. Yet in general and broad terms we can view coop in the context of the neoliberalization of the university, in which students--conceptualized by both universities and markets as dispassionate rational actors (Finn, 2017b)--are asked to evaluate their degree programs in terms of their prospective employability following graduation, in line with terms set by an increasingly globalized capitalist labor market. This is in opposition to a view of education that might see the university, more critically, as a site for developing critical thinking skills or questioning the status quo.

Overall, the three concerns expressed here--that coop produced large amounts of additional and unnecessary busy work, that the university consistently prioritized employees over students, and that it required a particular kind of mobility--were variously acquiesced to and resisted by students. Students

both questioned these elements of their coop experience, while acknowledging that repeated international coops and the kinds of mobility that it encouraged would be beneficial for them as they learned and practiced the navigation of a globally competitive labor market. These findings augment and add to discussions of both the neoliberalization and the internationalization of higher education, as well as research on mobility and higher education, which have said little about paid and international internships.

Conclusion

Students resisted the rigors of the university's coop program in complex and ambivalent ways that acknowledged the structural circumstances in which they found themselves (Knight, 2013). Some dropped out of their formal coop programs while continuing to pursue internships that they organized independently as a way to evade the university's coop fee and placement structures. One downside is losing access to the university's job search and placement system. Students pay to access this system--C\$729 per term at the time of writing--and to remain within the coop program. One interviewee noted, "a lot of [...] people don't find it really valuable to be using [UW's] rules," (6) while another said, "the fees are really expensive" (10). Yet, some students wanted to pay into the system so that it could benefit others: "the more people that drop out of coop, the less money collectively the coop system has and I know that first year students who are still coming into the system might really be able to benefit from the resources, even if I never did" (16). Many acknowledged the benefits of both options, showing that they were concerned not just with their own outcomes, but also with the structural forces within and outside the university. Students' agreement with coop might be seen less as an uncritical acquiescence to the ideologies of the neoliberal university--an interpretation that denies students agency of their own--and more in terms of the necessities of navigating a capitalist mode of production in which social reproduction remains structurally dependent on the market (Wood, 2002). For many students across the university (i.e., not just the predominantly STEM students that I interviewed) coop was a mechanism to pay for their degree programs in the absence of other support structures, such as personal savings, their families, or the government.

In this paper I've argued that coop is invested in the production of particularly mobile and flexible subjects suited for competition on an increasingly globalized labor market, but also that students both acquiesce to and contest that role in complex ways. For the most part student dissatisfaction with the university's coop program was concerned with administrative details and individual cases. Most agreed that there was value in the coop program, and that they benefitted in terms of employability, practical skills, interview skills, work experience, and remuneration. If part of the university's function is to help students to live effectively within, while also questioning, a given society's mode of production and social reproduction, coop certainly aids in students' navigation of the global labor market. Yet, if we suggest that education can and should have a more radical function, seeking to challenge the status quo, and pursue an agenda oriented toward social justice, poverty amelioration, against discrimination, and toward themes of decolonization, it's clear that coop is unable to meet these goals. As Bowles and Gintis (1976) note, schools will only be able to play a more progressive role in society following a change in the culture and politics of work--a far-reaching economic transformation--in North America to allow for more worker-owned and controlled workplaces.

My point here is not that coop or internships and work-placements serve no function, or that the university should always and only be opposed to work. Many forms of work do not contribute to an only destructive and exploitative accumulation- and growth-based global capitalism; work per se is less an issue than the overwhelming acceptance of and tendency not to question waged work as the only source of economic and social value and only means to survive the market society to upon which we remain dependent (Weeks, 2011; Wood 2002). Coop education does give us an opportunity to question the role of the university in neoliberal times, and in the context of increasing pressure put on universities, educators, and students, by federal, and provincial and state, cuts to education (Mitchell, 2018). Work is

likely to retain a dominant role in our everyday lives, and the university has a role to play in understanding, coming to terms with, and, indeed, resisting and questioning that role. Coop is thus an opportunity to teach students about the world of work that they are soon to enter. Pushing coop education away from a solely liberal and neoliberal function and more toward a leftist or radical function would mean educating students about employment law; histories of labor action; discrimination and power in the workplace; their own rights and responsibilities; and the dominance of paid, formal work (as opposed to unpaid and informal forms of work) as a cultural and social value in the 21st Century. Arguably, the university is the ideal place to create such discussion and pose such questions, especially in combination with actual work placements that coop offers.

Cooperative education offers limited opportunities for critical takes on the world of work. Coop seeks to produce students oriented toward and acquiescent to globalized labor markets that demands that its most privileged workers be as mobile as possible, or at least, as mobile as capital. Coop teaches global labor mobility by asking students to move--often internationally--every four months between school and placement, and thus become familiar with finding accommodation remotely and navigating the bureaucratic necessities of frequent visa application. This forces them to maintain a lean lifestyle with a minimal amount of possessions and limit both interpersonal and romantic relationships for the duration of their degrees. The ideal subject is flexible and mobile, able to move easily based on the demands of capital. The intransigence and punitive measures of the coop program as an intermediary between student and employer models both deference toward capital and the notion that students should be happy with receiving a placement in the first place. While troubling, for many these trends are a necessity in light of broader structural forces including the rising cost of higher education, the relative stagnation of real wage growth, and the continued dependence of everyday social reproduction on the market, and thus, in turn, on work.

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