NARRATOR: Welcome to Intersections: The RIT Podcast. Cooperative education – also known as co-op – plays a unique role in a student’s college experience. A paid, full-time work experience, co-op helps students achieve success through experiential learning and gives them a real-life taste of work in their chosen field. Today, Maria Richart, director of RIT’s Office of Career Services and Cooperative Education, talks with student Wil Seifried about this unique feature of the RIT experience and how students can make the most of their co-op opportunities.

MARIA: Tell me a little bit about what you have done on these co-ops.

WIL: So, I’ve done a whole lot of different things. I did R&D with the Department of the Navy in oil-water separation systems. I did some design engineering for the Department of the Navy. I worked for General Cable Corp., which makes power transmission cables. And I’ve worked for Bausch and Lomb. What it really taught me, getting involved in so many different things, was that I really wanted to move into manufacturing when I graduated. That was really nice, getting an experience to try R&D, try design engineering, and try manufacturing, knowing what I want to gear my job search toward when I graduate.

MARIA: One of the things I always ask my students when they return from co-op, not only what you enjoyed, but have you done a co-op that you literally did not like?

WIL: I actually had two. One was in design engineering. I was working with contractors that were completing engineering design projects. I was supposed to troubleshoot the errors in the design in the middle of them completing the project, decide what I was allowed to pass and what I had to say, “No. We really have to do this right.” And I noticed that I really didn’t want to get into design engineering or that contractor-faced employment. Another thing is, although I’m a chemical engineer, a lot of the first co-ops you get may just be general engineering. And so, I went into a field, and most of the work I was doing was industrial and mechanical engineering. While I really liked the type of atmosphere around the company, I really wasn’t happy with the work I was doing. And I made it a point moving forward that maybe I want this type of atmosphere but I really want to gear my search toward chemical engineering-heavy industries.

MARIA: How valuable do you think those experiences were in how you’re going to develop and where you’re going to accept your first full-time role?

WIL: I think there were two key things that were really important. One is, I know there’s a much higher chance of me going out and being happy with my first job knowing that I want to get in to manufacturing. I don’t have to fiddle around with R&D for a year. I don’t have to try design engineering once I’ve signed a two- or three-year contract with a company before I decide that I don’t like it. The second big thing was location. I’m from the Northeast. Most of my co-ops were in the Northeast. And my most recent one was down south. And for me, on top of the co-op experience – what I was going to learn from the company, what I was going to bring to the company – my big question was, how am I going to do this far away from home? Really learning that, in the short time
span of a summer, I was comfortable being away from home. I loved it and I had one of my most pleasant co-op experiences down there.

MARIA: So, not only did this co-op experience give you an opportunity to test drive the company and test drive the industry and the job. But it also tests to see if being far away from home is something that you want. As opposed to graduating and moving far away and realizing that I can’t do this. That is so valuable. It’s one of the things that no one tells you but it’s very valuable for you to know moving into your future that it’s okay. I can be eight hours away from mom and dad and I will survive. That’s great.

WIL: On top of that, I grew up just outside a huge city. So, I’m very much a city boy. And did I want to be near a city? Was I fine being out in the country or more of a rural area? And, again, I was able to learn that I need to be near some type of densely populated area, whether it’s suburbs or cities. Even if I can travel an hour and get to Atlanta or Memphis, Tennessee.

MARIA: Now that you’re a fifth-year, you really have an idea. Did you get any offers from these co-op positions?

WIL: Yeah. So, actually, my last co-op with Bausch and Lomb, they told me they’re interested in making an offer, and that I should hear some time in the next couple of months for full-time employment.

MARIA: How does that make you feel? Better yet. How does that make your parents feel?

[laughter]

WIL: For me, it’s a little relieving. It is tricky because I don’t want to slack on the job search just because I know I have an offer in my back pocket. And it makes my parents feel really happy because they know I’m going to be able to pay off all those loans they co-signed for.

MARIA: We prepare our students for co-op. So, many students coming in may not realize that we have a very large career services office with lots of program coordinators. And we also have 11 different kinds of career fairs that we do on a yearly basis. So, tell me a little bit about your first co-op search.

WIL: In your second year you take a co-op preparation class that’s actually required before you go out on co-op. You go over some of the basic things: how to write a cover letter; resume reviews and critiques; and how to use Handshake, RIT’s job platform site. Once you’re introduced to that, your career advisers will get your resume ready for you to go to our university-wide career fair. There are hundreds of companies that come to recruit, specifically, RIT students. And it’s a happy day. It’s a long day for a lot of people. My first search I applied to probably about 300 positions before finally accepting an offer.
MARIA: That’s a very daunting number for a student when you say, ‘300.’ Do you think you were just a go-getter? Or do you think that’s typical of your classmates to apply to 300?

WIL: I would say, typically, somewhere in the range of 80 to 100 is normal. The way I liked to think about it was, if I apply to one or two a night, in three months I had already applied to 90 positions.

MARIA: Now, the career fair. I think on average it has about 263 companies that attend. And for some students, that can be a little daunting. So, in your preparation process, what did you do to prepare?

WIL: I can get a little overwhelmed when there’s a lot of people around, so I picked 15 companies. I did my research: What does the company do? Where are they located? What products or services do they offer? And I said, I’m going to go to these 15 companies. If I went to those 15 companies, I would be happy. By the time I got to number 15 I was ready to do about 10 more.

MARIA: Did you prepare an introduction? And if it’s not too on the spot, would you mind sharing with me your introduction?

WIL: Yep. So, leading up to the career fair, they actually have tons of workshops for students. Actually, some of the recruiters at the career fair will come and teach them about elevator pitches and what the recruiters are looking for. When I start out introducing myself to a company, I say my name. I say, “Hello, my name is Will Seifried. I’m an x-year chemical engineer looking for a co-op in spring and summer. And I was interested in your company. I saw that you make product x, y and z. And I really think that I could be beneficial.”

MARIA: As you went through each of your co-ops, and it became a little bit more easy, did you find that your intro at a career fair was a little bit more like, “Now I have this experience, and this is how I can insert myself into your company.” Did you find that it was a little easier to talk to people now that you had a little bit more experience in your field?

WIL: Absolutely. I actually even found it was easier to talk to people as the career fair went on. Out of my list of 15, I was like, “What were 13, 14 and 15? Let me go talk to them first, so I can practice a few times before I get to one, two and three – the ones I’m hoping to nail down.” So Maria, you mentioned that there’s about 260 companies that come to RIT’s career fair. How do you get so many companies interested in RIT students?

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MARIA: Because you guys are all fantastic. No, seriously. We are a team. Each program coordinator in our office specifically oversees industries. For example, your program coordinator, Kate, who oversees chemical engineering. It is her job to go after
those chemical engineering companies and tell them more about students. We travel every summer. We try to get out to companies and visit while students are out. But really, try to tell them more about the curriculum, the benefits of the co-op program. But, at the end of the day, you all that are participating in co-op, you all do more of the selling than we could ever do. When you go out and you are performing those duties, and the companies are aware of your skill set, it just makes them want to come back. Our alumni also do a fantastic job with helping us to recruit because they understand the co-op program, they understand the value while they were going through it, they understand what it could bring to a company. So, if our alumni are at new companies that don’t utilize RIT co-ops, they make sure they’re talking about the value of bringing on a co-op. It’s kind of like a cycle. But the number one seller is our student and what you do while you’re on co-op.

WIL: So, you mentioned that alumni are an important piece in that co-op recruiting process. Do you keep track of where alumni go when they graduate and try to follow up with them?

MARIA: Yes we do. And the value of our graduating students telling us where they’re going really helps us to the next group of students coming in. It helps them with salary negotiation or really trying to say, “When you go to California, here are these alumni that are there to welcome you at this company.” And a lot of companies, because there are such a large volume of RIT alumni, network and help the students when they come to their company. An example is, my niece graduated in May and she started with Target in Minnesota. And the HR department was able to tell her, “Hey, there are three or four RIT alums.” Right away she got connected, and they moved into a house together, and she’s having a fantastic first couple of months at Target. So, yes, we definitely try to keep in touch with our alumni.

WIL: How did you get into career advising at the higher education level? Was it really what you expected when you were getting into it? Or how have things been a little different?

MARIA: It was a passion for students that really led me to this field. When I graduated, I started working for admissions. One of the things that I found when I was working in admissions is that I wasn’t creating relationships with students. I got them into RIT, and then they went off. And I wanted a position where I was able to create relationships and really see students grow. Career services really helps you do that. Especially at RIT, it really helps you see students grow from that second year when you meet them in co-op prep to going out on their first co-op to coming back from their co-op saying, “Thank you so much! This was so wonderful!” And then seeing them at graduation. Graduation is my best day – the smiles on students’ faces, the energy of their parents. That, to me, brings it all home and makes me happy. When they come into my office and say, “I’m going to work at this company and I’m making this much,” I’m like, “I am so proud of you!”
NARRATOR: Thanks for listening to Intersections: The RIT Podcast, a production of RIT Marketing and Communications. To learn more about our university, go to www.rit.edu and to hear more podcasts, find us on iTunes or visit us at www.soundcloud.com/rittigers or at www.rit.edu/news/podcasts