

CO-OPING LANDSCAPE STUDENTS PUT EDUCATION INTO ACTION

By Gil Troy, editorial assistant

Managers of Green Industry businesses, although focused on different aspects of landscape preparation and management, share common complaints. Government regulation, inflation, personnel management, and misunderstanding of their work all contribute to the headache and heartache about which managers commiserate. For those who hire college students, there is a common statement to express disdain: "Those smart-assed kids don't know how to work."

Unfair as it is to fresh graduates, this reaction is often justified. They are filled with horticultural intellectualism and microeconomic theories, but act clumsily with a pruner, edger, or set of design prints in their hands. They can't learn everything in college, but they need basic skills to immediately apply to a job. In the summer when they often begin a new or first landscaping job, supervisors are too busy to teach every aspect of the job. Grads may see this lack of help as impatience or disgust. The supervisor says, "another damn college kid."

To cope with this frustration between the manager and college graduate employees, the Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) worked with the faculty at Mississippi State University to develop a program of cooperative education similar to the type engineering and other academic disciplines had been successfully using for years. Together, the school and professional association developed a model curriculum, which is now used as a base to help other schools with curriculums in landscape contracting. Mississippi State also has a landscape architecture co-op program. Faculty, students, and employers of firms that hire Mississippi State's co-ops laud the program without reservation. "We're marrying theory and reality," says Bob Callaway, assistant professor of landscape architecture.

Co-op Programs

Cooperative education began in 1906, but has only recently become available for landscape majors. Today, 54 of the 165 landscape majors at Mississippi State, almost one third of the entire department, are in the co-op program. The program takes four and a half to five years to complete. The academic year is divided into three semesters—fall, spring, and summer. The student alternates a semester of school with a semester of work. Upon graduating, the student will have worked for three to six semesters, or for one to two calendar years with his co-op employer.

Students are normally employed in pairs, with



Mississippi State students in landscape architecture apply what they have learned in the field to designs.

one working while an alternate studies on campus. Most Mississippi State students are employed by design/build firms and government agencies. Employment with more landscape architecture firms is being sought.

During the work period, the student is evaluated by his employer. The evaluation carries comparable weight to the student's academic marks in assessing his college performance. "The monitoring works extremely well," according to Len Spencer, president of the Spencer Co. in Houston. "The school gets a commitment from the students and holds them to it." Spencer's division managers do the grading, "because they associate with the students the most."

The phenomenal success of Mississippi State inspired the development of a co-op program at Ohio State University. The program is two years old. Last year two students were involved, but this year, explains Assistant Professor James Hiss, the co-op coordinator, after a "heavy-duty sales pitch at the ALCA convention in New Orleans," they placed 14 students in a "variety of firms."

Ohio State is on the quarter system. The students work the summer after their sophomore year, the spring and summer of their junior year, and the summer and fall of their senior year. They graduate in five years with one-and-a-half years' experience.

The Ohio State program, like the Mississippi State program, is trying to expand placement opportunities for landscape architecture students.

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Professor Hiss explains that, presently, "most landscape architecture students are working with landscape contractors. It's a problem placing landscape architecture students in landscape architecture offices. Co-op is a new system of hiring. Some firms can't make a commitment, they don't know what their work will be like. Some can't fit it into their schedule of hiring and firing."

Two of the fourteen Ohio State co-ops this year are working in L.A. offices. Professor Hiss wants to use the two in L.A. offices as a starting point, and hopes to gain the confidence of landscape architects at the American Society of Landscape Architects' (ASLA) Convention. "If we can promote it enough, get enough students in L.A. offices, we'll have something to offer the industry."

● "It's the nearest thing we have to old world apprenticeships." . . .
Len Spencer, president, The Spencer Co.

Although establishing the program is "very difficult" and takes a "heck of a lot of time," Hiss feels that it's worth the effort. "Most students love it. They are put to the test and are given a lot of responsibility. They return to school with a heck of a lot more confidence and are better able to put their schooling into perspective."

At California Polytechnic State University at Pomona, the co-op program has more requests from employers for co-op students than willing students. "The students don't want to interrupt their education," says Dr. William Sparks, department chairman of ornamental horticulture. "Also, at Cal Poly we have a unique program which allows students to gain experience while in school."

"The department has a retail nursery operation," Sparks explains. "The students grow and sell plants to the general public. Students can graduate with a minimum of two years experience, and they don't have to go out."

Nevertheless, about half of the 65 students who graduate from the department each year are in a co-op. Cal Poly has both alternating co-ops like Mississippi State and Ohio State, and parallel co-ops in which students work for twenty hours per week and study for twenty hours. Most students and most employers prefer the alternating co-ops. Sparks asserts that, in general, "most employers prefer a longer period of at least six months for co-op students."

Other schools that have co-op programs or provide similar opportunities to work and to study include Lake City Community College, Michigan State University, California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, New Mexico

State University, Purdue University, and Texas A&M.

Schools that don't have official co-ops encourage students to seek work experiences. Jerry Walkup, assistant professor of horticulture and landscape architecture at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, says that Oklahoma State started working toward a co-op program for landscape construction, after industry called for it. "We're not sure we can sell the program to the university or to the students. Students are not willing to give up time and stay in school longer." The department encourages summer jobs and internships on a "volunteer basis" and does grant credit for work experiences upon evaluation.

Robert Reinmann, dean of landscape architecture at Syracuse University, says that despite the fact that "students are routinely positive about their work experiences," it's just not practical for his department. There are 300 students in the program and thus "more students than there are employment opportunities," especially in the Syracuse area. Yet concern exists about the "discrepancy between the workplace and the classroom. When we don't have linkage with practicing professionals or the workplace, we get a warped sense of what preparation is needed."

Student Benefits

Co-op students have to overcome the problems of remaining an additional year in school, leaving their friends and relocating, and must find an employer who is willing to hire them. Those who surmount those obstacles support the co-op program wholeheartedly. "I was very doubtful at first," Laura Solano, a junior at Ohio State maintained. "I had been in school for so long, and I didn't want to add another year."

● "The co-op student gets an opportunity to see all the different seasons." . . . Carl McCord, president, Landscape Design and Construction, Inc.

Solano was hired by William Behnke Associates in Cleveland, and has no regrets. She's been working in Cleveland since April 1 and thinks the experience is "really marvelous. I can think of no better supplement for the education of a landscape architect. It makes you realize just what it's all about, and gives you an overview. It's a great professional and educational experience. It's especially good for a student who is doubtful about L.A. or is frustrated by school."

The "nomadic lifestyle" that comes from moving every two weeks doesn't faze Solano. "I was excited by the idea of moving to a different city, of travelling, of being independent." She says

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that other students don't go because they have other commitments or don't want to travel.

Although the professional experience is sufficient, Solano would like to see co-ops get college credit for their work. "It would help a little as incentive to join."

Co-oping is a valuable experience which can assure the competent student of a job once he graduates. Bill Dunn graduated from Mississippi State in December. In January, he joined SaBell's Inc. in Lakewood, Colorado, as a production manager. Dunn first worked for SaBell's in January of 1978, when he co-oped in the nursery for five months. In the fall of 1978 he returned and worked on a quarter of a million dollar landscaping job. In the summer of 1979, he worked as a foreman. Today, five months after graduating from college, Dunn is working in SaBell's estimating department.

● "They come here primarily as a learning experience. Students go back knowing what they don't know." . . . David Pinkus, vice president, North Haven Gardens, Inc.

"In the beginning, I was a laborer," Dunn recalls. "Once I was in a position of authority, there was some rejection at first. Experienced laborers resented this 'college kid taking over,' but once they learned to understand me, some of them became my closest friends at work.

"You're better off going back to the person you co-oped with. You've worked out many of the bugs. You graduate knowing a lot about the company, and don't have a problem getting oriented." Dunn estimates that students who co-oped start out earning \$1500-\$3000 more than inexperienced graduates who didn't co-op.

Although students are paid for their co-op experience, Dunn cautions that co-oping is not a money-making venture. "If you moved away from school, all you could have saved goes to travel expenses. Mississippi is not that big of a market and most students have to get away. The biggest problem for the co-op student is transportation and living arrangements."

Nevertheless, the benefits outweigh the inconveniences. Co-oping, says Dunn, "lets you get some experience and find out what you want to do. You discover any adjustments in your curriculum you want to make. It makes you realize early on whether you like landscaping or not. I'd rather have somebody come sophomore year to work and then drop out, than have him suffer through school for four years."

Those students who do drop out of the co-op, but remain in landscaping, leave either because of the company or for personal reasons. Dunn

guesses that "about half didn't like the way the company is run; they just couldn't put up with it. The other half decided they didn't want to be away from home, from their girl friends, or from the lush landscape of Mississippi."

Industry Benefits

Employers who hire co-op students are not merely getting cheap labor. Students are recruited by mail, by visits to the campus, and by contacts made at trade conventions. Each company is responsible for designing some type of training program for the students. This program should allow the student to work in his chosen field and to progress as his skills improve.

A special training program was developed at Theodore Brickman Co. in Long Grove, Illinois, with the assistance of Mississippi State. The management training program is "part of a process," according to Bruce Hunt, vice president and general manager of the company. "Students go from one department to another; they work inside and outside. They experience all phases of the business—maintenance, construction, and estimating." Both landscape architecture students and others are exposed to office routine.

"We're pretty selective in our recruiting process," says Hunt. "Unless they're pretty sharp, we won't hire them. We're looking for quality, not just labor." Hunt and his company have been "generally pretty pleased" with the eight students they presently employ from Mississippi State, Ohio State, and Michigan State, as well as the 75-100 students who have worked at the company over the past ten years.

● "An employer gets to groom a person for four years so they can fit into the organization and begin contributing upon graduation." . . . Mike McMurray, landscape architect, Marvin's Garden and Landscape Service.

Most firms look for quality in their co-ops, and are more concerned with their potential than their actual experience or knowledge. "The students come here primarily as a learning experience," explains David Pinkus, vice president of North Haven Garden Inc. in Dallas. "We don't expect them to know a heck of a lot. Sometimes, we're surprised when they know something.

"Students go back knowing what they don't know," says Pinkus. "If you think you know it all, you're really in trouble. Experience shows you what you really need to be more concerned with. You hear a professor say something, or you read it

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in a textbook, and say 'Gosh, I wish I knew that last summer.' It sinks in after having had some experience and working."

In addition to training programs, some employers have implemented procedures for evaluating the co-op's experience. At Landscape Design and Construction, Inc., in Dallas, Carl McCord, president of the firm, "highly recommends that each co-op student write a report on what his experience has been. He can write what he has learned about people, about equipment, what he can do, problems with designing, maintenance, whatever he wishes. Based on what he puts into it, the report is graded on a scale of one to ten. We give him a bonus based on the grade. It gives us a gauge in the interest he had in the job, so we can start paying attention to prospects."

McCord suggests that employers recruit co-ops from a number of colleges. "The student returns as a recruiter with lots of praise or condemnation, if you've been hard on him." Greater variety decreases the chances of getting saddled with a bad or an inaccurate reputation.

He also suggests that professors visit the company. "They should have some sense of what's going on. It's not fair to recommend a place without having been there."

McCord doesn't like his co-ops to stay in the same city or the same branch of his company. He has them move around so they can "see different aspects of the industry."

"The co-op student gets an opportunity to see all the different seasons, the cycle," says McCord. "If a student is interning in the summer,

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... Bruce Hunt, vice president and general manager, Theodore Brickman Co.

that's all he knows. He's not getting experience throughout the year."

Another advantage of co-oping McCord sees is that it "breaks the nine-month syndrome. We've been trained after 12 to 16 years of schooling to live like that. It leads to demands after less than a year for promotion."

Landscape Design and Construction has been hiring co-ops since 1974. McCord estimates retention of co-ops at "60-70 percent, even higher. By the hiring time, they've discarded you or you've discarded them. You get the marriage or the divorce before graduation. Because of that, you can turn the co-op loose in the field faster than the young grad with no experience."

Cooperative education, like all programs, is

not a panacea. It is not problem free. Wally SaBell, president of SaBell's, Inc. has worked with co-op students for five years. Two years ago SaBell's employed 17 co-ops, and last year they employed 12. SaBell arranged to help students find housing, "to encourage students to get field experience. Especially in landscape architecture, before becoming directors of programs, students need field experience to relate to the problems of the contractors. You can eliminate problems due to prethinking, which comes from experience."

But SaBell was disappointed. "The co-op's staying power was not good after they graduated. Only one out of five remained. They don't know what they want to do in college or once they graduate. Many of them expect to start at the top and work their way down. I don't think they really understand the business.

"Some of the boys couldn't adjust to the real world," SaBell said. "The difference between college and industry output is not always smooth. You went and educated yourself, but there are a lot of humdrum, monotonous little events to deal with. Landscaping requires more common sense than just having a degree in your hand."

Another problem SaBell sees is that "we're trying to produce too many designers. Not all people should be landscape architects and horticulture designers—how many designers do you need? We need more superintendents, product managers, and foremen. We need more two year programs rather than four year programs."

SaBell's solution to the problem of the unrealistic expectations which burden the co-op student and their overtraining is not fewer, but more co-ops. "They've got to get more practical experience. You've got to find out what the world's all about."

SaBell is a "190 percent advocate of co-ops. It's best to get a job or co-op with a larger firm where there's a wider range of activity. We look for individuals seriously interested in the industry. Some co-ops have said to me 'we've learned more with you in three months, than in three years in college.' The industry should encourage co-oping. Students should serve—even if it costs them a fortune."

J. Grady Brown, president of Dallas Nurseries and Garden Centers, agrees. His experience with Mississippi State interns over the past several years has been "fairly satisfactory on the job, but unsatisfactory in getting them back." Too many of the students are "home grown folk" who are unwilling to leave home to "derive a living." Brown applauds the recent increases in out-of-state students attending Mississippi State, and is trying to establish co-op programs closer to Dallas at Texas Tech, Texas A&M, and in Steubenville.

"You have to sell a school on a program," Brown maintains. "You have an uphill battle regardless of the merits of the endeavor. You have to buck the administration, and sell the deans and the business end of the university on the idea. So many programs are good, but the wheel that squeaks the loudest gets greased first."

Some employers don't understand the essence of co-op. Others may feel obligated to keep students who don't succeed. At times organizations are not able, or don't think themselves able, to accommodate the beginning student.

"If you have difficulty managing a business, you'll have difficulty managing a co-op program," says Bruce Braunstein, vice president of Environmental Industries in Calabasas, California. "A certain amount of consistency and credibility building is required. Co-oping is a long term program for the benefit of the student and the employer. The co-op is concerned with doing a good job. It's not just a one time experience. The successful co-op will often come work for the company."

● "I'm a 190 percent advocate of co-ops. You can eliminate problems due to prethinking, which can come from experience. But, the staying power of co-ops was not good after they graduated." . . . Wally SaBell, president, SaBell's, Inc.

Co-oping is essential because it allows a student to find out "early in the game" whether he likes landscaping or not, says Len Spencer. One graduate came to the Spencer Co., with a specialty in turf management. "During the summers he had worked in a factory because there was more money involved. He had a fine horticultural education, and asked for a complex job. He started as a probationary Crew supervisor. He decided after two weeks 'this is not for me, it's below my level.' He got a job as a dispatcher for Sears, after four years and \$40-50,000."

Co-oping is the "nearest thing we have to old world apprenticeships," says Spencer. Students who are willing to spend an additional year in school and face the hassles of relocation and discontinuity in their education reap the rewards of experience, maturity, and greater marketability when they graduate. Schools that run the programs help bridge the undesirable gap between the ivory towers of the university and the soiled hands of the real world. As the Mississippi State prospectus explains: a regular graduate is a purchase—a co-op student, an investment. **WTT**

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