



University of Cincinnati Site Visit Summary Report

Year-Round Student Experience, Co-op, and Experiential Learning Programs

Cal Poly San Luis Obispo

Visit Date: March 9, 2026

Overview and Introduction

This report summarizes observations and reflections from the Cal Poly leadership site visit to the University of Cincinnati (UC), focused on year-round student experience, cooperative education (co-op)¹, and institutional structures that support experiential learning throughout the academic year.

UC was selected as a peer learning institution because it represents one of the most mature and fully institutionalized models of large-scale, year-round experiential learning in the United States. Often touted as the birthplace of cooperative education in higher education, UC has embedded alternating academic and professional work experiences into its academic structure for more than a century. Today, UC supports approximately 6,000–7,000 co-op placements annually and maintains relationships with 2,000–3,000 employers, reflecting both scale and sustained institutional investment.

A defining feature of UC's model is the presence of a dedicated academic college, the College of Cooperative Education and Professional Studies (CCPS), which serves as the centralized hub for experiential learning, employer engagement, advising, and professional development across the university.

The visit provided insight into the infrastructure, policies, and institutional alignment required to support experiential learning at scale.

¹ Cooperative education (co-op) experiences are career-oriented, transcribed, and compensated work experiences that are integrated into a student's academic program and include academic preparation, supervision, evaluation, and structured reflection tied to learning outcomes.



Participants (Cal Poly SLO)

The Cal Poly team included administrators and faculty representing Academic Affairs, Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Affairs, Strategic Initiatives and Advocacy, the College of Engineering, the Philosophy Department, Noyce School of Applied Computing, and the Academic Senate Faculty Affairs Committee.

- Jessica (Jess) Darin, Vice President for Strategic Initiatives & Advocacy
- Albert (Al) Liddicoat, Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs
- Terrance Harris, Vice President for Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Affairs
- Bob Crockett, Interim Dean, College of Engineering
- Josh Machamer, Assistant Vice President, Strategic Initiatives and Advocacy
- Rachel Fernflores, Professor of Philosophy; Director and Project Manager of Semester Conversion
- Kenneth (Ken) Brown, Associate Professor and Chair, Philosophy Department; Chair of the Academic Senate Faculty Affairs Committee
- Chris Lupo, Director, Noyce School of Applied Computing

A Year-Round Student Experience

One of the clearest observations from the visit was that UC's approach is framed around the student journey rather than around calendar structure alone. The institution operates within a semester-based system but functions year-round through the intentional rotation of students between academic coursework and full-time, paid co-op experiences.

Students involved in co-op move in and out of academic terms and work experiences in a structured sequence, often beginning in the second year. In many disciplines, particularly engineering and design, this sequencing is cohort-based and constrained by curricular and operational factors such as lab capacity and course availability.

At the same time, UC maintains variation across colleges. Some programs require multiple co-op rotations as part of the degree, while others offer more flexible or optional



participation. This creates a model that balances institutional structure with disciplinary autonomy.

Summer is not treated as a secondary or optional term. It is heavily utilized as part of UC's year-round model, supporting co-op sequencing, academic progress, and enrollment management. With significant summer enrollment and intentionally designed course offerings, including flexible or "flex" classes², summer enables continuity across academic and experiential pathways. More broadly, UC's model reflects a shift in thinking: year-round operations are not about adding a term, but about redistributing time, access, and opportunity across the student lifecycle.

The evolution of UC's model reflects a long-term, institution-wide commitment to integrating experiential learning into the academic structure. As shown in Figure 1, this approach has developed over time through a series of strategic milestones, including the expansion of co-op programming, the integration of career development functions, and the establishment of CCPS as a centralized hub. This progression underscores that UC's year-round student experience is not the result of a single initiative, but of sustained alignment across academic, operational, and workforce development priorities over time.

² Flex classes refer to courses designed with scheduling and delivery flexibility to accommodate students participating in co-op or other off-term experiences. These courses may be offered in alternative formats, such as online, hybrid, evening, or adjusted timelines, to allow students to maintain academic progress while engaged in full-time work rotations.



CCPS Evolution: Key Milestones

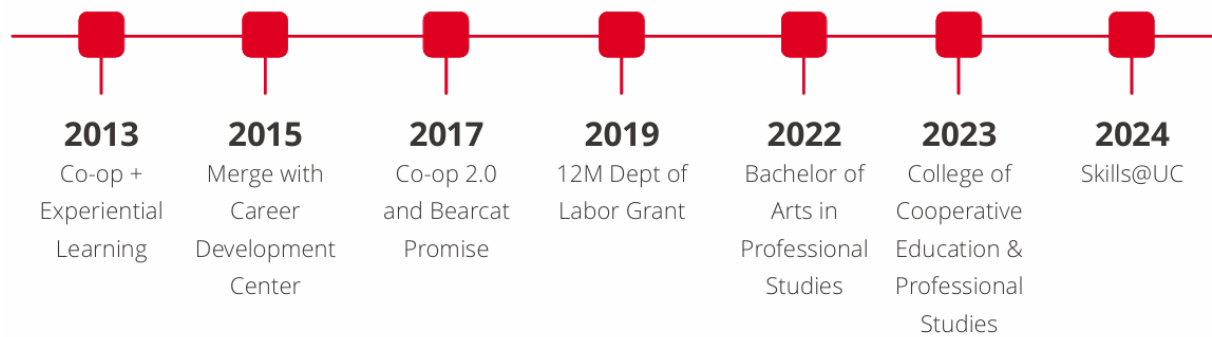


Figure 1. CCPS Evolution Timeline: *The timeline illustrates key institutional milestones, including the integration of career development, expansion of co-op programming, and the establishment of CCPS as a centralized academic and operational hub supporting experiential learning.*

Experiential Learning

At UC, co-op is not an add-on program; it is a defining feature of the institution's identity. Experiential learning is embedded within the curriculum and reinforced through the university's value proposition, often described as graduating with both a degree and meaningful professional experience.

Co-op experiences are:

- Paid and discipline-related
- Transcribed and supervised
- Integrated with structured reflection and evaluation

Students are expected to actively participate in the job search process, often applying to multiple positions before securing a placement. The institution provides structured preparation, advising, and employer connections, but does not position itself as a placement service.



Experiential learning pathways extend beyond traditional co-ops. Structured alternatives, including project-based experiences, research, and upskilling pathways, are available to ensure continuity of learning for students who do not secure traditional placements or who pursue non-linear pathways. Study abroad and other off-term experiences may also be integrated into the experiential learning framework in some programs, provided they meet defined learning and assessment criteria.

Supporting this range of experiential learning pathways is an institutional structure designed to align academic priorities, workforce needs, and student support across the university.

CCPS Core Organizational Strengths



Figure 2. CCPS Core Organizational Strengths: *The diagram highlights key institutional capabilities, including agility, interdisciplinary collaboration, curricular innovation, and a commitment to access, all of which support the integration of co-op and experiential learning across the university.*

As illustrated in Figure 2, these core organizational strengths provide the foundation for UC’s ability to embed experiential learning across the undergraduate experience. The combination of agility, interdisciplinary collaboration, and curricular innovation enables the institution to adapt to workforce needs while maintaining alignment with academic goals.



At the same time, a strong commitment to access ensures that experiential learning opportunities are designed to be broadly available to students across disciplines. Together, these elements support a model in which co-op and related experiences are not isolated offerings, but integrated components of a coordinated, institution-wide approach to student learning and development.

Scale and Participation

The scale of UC's co-op ecosystem is one of its most defining characteristics. The university supports approximately 6,000–7,000 co-op placements annually and engages thousands of employers across a wide range of industries. Participation varies across colleges. Structured, mandatory co-op models remain concentrated in engineering, design, and information technology, while business and arts and sciences programs offer more flexible pathways. This variation reflects differences in disciplinary alignment, workforce demand, and curricular design.

Sustaining participation at this level requires significant institutional infrastructure, including dedicated employer engagement staff, advising systems, and coordinated administrative processes. As reflected in Figure 3, the model's reach is evident not only in placement volume, but also in student earnings, program expansion, and the integration of career education into the curriculum.



Key Accomplishments



Co-op Enrollment and Wages

Achieved consistently high student participation rates with substantial wage growth, directly impacting student financial outcomes and post-grad success



Career Education Integration

Implemented comprehensive professional development pathways with career-focused general education learning outcomes across colleges



BPS Degree Launch

Working toward Ohio's first 90-credit-hour completion degree, creating a statewide market differentiator



Liberal Arts Co-op Expansion

Developed new co-op tracks in A&S, expanding career preparation options for humanities and social science majors

Figure 3. Key Accomplishments: *Highlights sustained student participation, wage growth, expansion of co-op into new disciplines, and integration of career education into the curriculum.*

As illustrated in Figure 3, UC's co-op model has expanded beyond its traditional disciplinary roots to support a broader range of academic programs while maintaining strong student participation and measurable outcomes. The continued growth in placements and integration of career education into the curriculum reflects a sustained institutional commitment to experiential learning. At the same time, these outcomes highlight the importance of coordinated infrastructure and cross-campus alignment in supporting participation at scale.

Organizational Structure and Campus Coordination

UC's co-op model is organized through a centralized academic structure anchored in CCPS, which functions as both an academic college and a comprehensive career and experiential learning hub. With approximately 98 full-time employees (management, faculty, and staff), CCPS serves as a strategic partner to colleges across the university by coordinating employer engagement, advising, curriculum, and professional development.



This centralized structure enables coordination at scale, particularly in employer engagement, where dedicated staff maintain relationships with thousands of organizations. At the same time, advising and implementation are distributed across colleges, creating a hybrid model that balances central coordination with local expertise.

CCPS: A Unique Hybrid Model

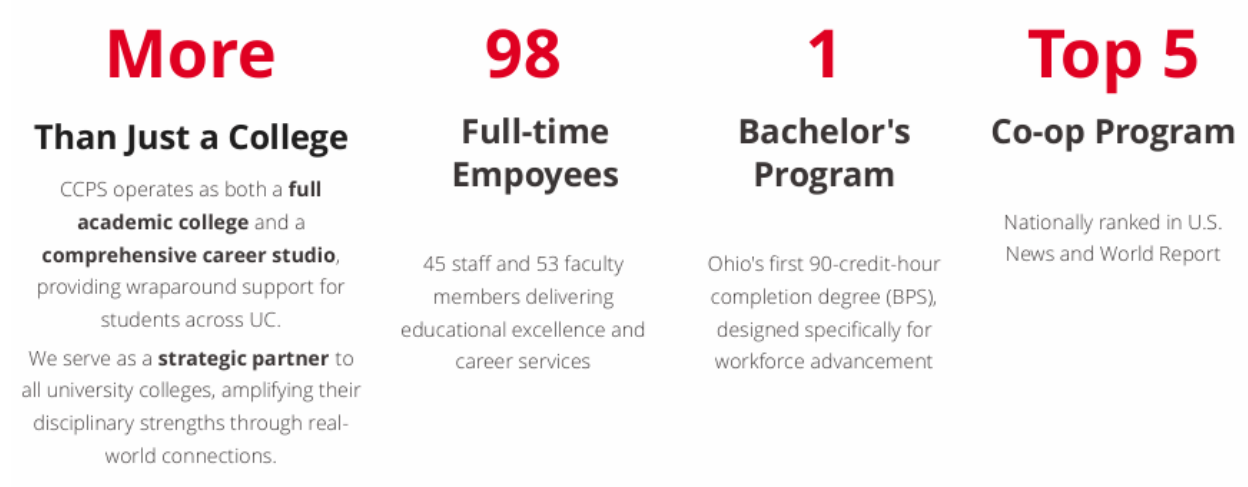


Figure 4. CCPS Hybrid Model Overview: *The figure illustrates how UC’s College of Cooperative Education and Professional Studies operates as both an academic college and a career services hub, providing wraparound support and serving as a strategic partner to colleges across the university.*

Faculty Classifications & Structure

The University of Cincinnati primarily operates under an academic-year (AY) faculty model, rather than a broadly defined 12-month faculty structure. Faculty are typically structured across two primary terms (full-duty) and one secondary term (limited-duty), with responsibilities during the secondary term varying by program needs. This model allows UC to maintain traditional academic roles; teaching, service, and governance, within the primary terms while providing flexibility for engagement during the third term.



Experiential learning is supported through a centralized academic unit, the College of Cooperative Education & Professional Studies (CCPS), which includes approximately 50 faculty who primarily serve in educator-track (non-tenure) roles. These faculty blend responsibilities across teaching, advising, and career development, supporting co-op programs and student learning integration across the academic year. While most faculty are not formally on 12-month contracts, there is an expectation of ongoing engagement during off-terms, including participation in key activities and program needs during summer. Faculty appointments vary, with many operating on 10.5-month contracts and some variation (9- or 12-month) depending on program requirements.

Overall, UC’s model reflects an integrated approach, where year-round operations are supported by adapting the academic-year faculty structure, supplemented by a dedicated co-op college and educator-track faculty, rather than relying on a fully differentiated 12-month faculty system.

Category	University of Cincinnati Model
Primary Faculty Structure	Academic-year (AY) appointments
Faculty Workload Model	2 primary terms (full duty) + 1 secondary term (limited duty)
12-Month Faculty Roles	Limited; varies by program
Experiential Learning Faculty	CCPS faculty (educator-track, non-tenure)
Faculty Responsibilities	Blend of teaching, advising, and career development
Summer/Off-Term Role	Expected engagement for key activities and program needs
Contract Lengths	Primarily 10.5-month; some 9- or 12-month variations
Structural Approach	Integrated model adapting AY faculty structure

Figure 5. UC Faculty Structure Supporting Year-Round Experiential Learning. *This table provides an overview of the UC’s faculty structure as it supports year-round experiential learning and co-op integration.*



Registration, Enrollment, and Student Status

The University of Cincinnati (UC) utilizes a zero-credit co-op enrollment model that enables students to remain classified as full-time while participating in full-time, off-campus work experiences. During co-op terms, students enroll in designated zero-credit courses and pay a program fee (approximately \$465–\$600 per term), rather than standard tuition. This structure is intentionally designed to support continuous enrollment, financial aid eligibility, and access to student services, while minimizing disruption as students alternate between academic and work terms.

A key feature of UC's model is that it decouples credit-bearing units from full-time status. Although students are not enrolled in traditional coursework during co-op terms, they are still reported internally as full-time (equivalent to approximately 12 units). This allows UC to preserve alignment across Registrar, Financial Aid, and federal reporting systems, ensuring students maintain eligibility for financial aid, loan deferment, insurance coverage, and other institutional benefits. Financial aid is often packaged across Fall–Spring–Summer cycles to accommodate alternating academic and work schedules, reinforcing continuity across the year.

In addition to maintaining financial aid eligibility, students benefit from paid co-op employment, which serves as a primary source of income during work terms and helps offset educational costs. Combined with the reduced cost of attendance (co-op fee vs. full tuition), this model creates a more affordable and continuous financial pathway for students. Overall, UC's approach represents a financial aid continuity model, where enrollment status, rather than credit-bearing coursework alone, drives access to financial support and student services.



Term Type	Enrollment Status	Financial Aid Eligibility	Primary Student Support
Study Term	Credit-bearing units (traditional coursework)	Eligible for full financial aid	Financial aid, scholarships
Work (Co-op) Term	0-credit enrollment (full-time status)	Financial aid maintained	Paid co-op wages + financial aid

Figure 6. UC Enrollment and Financial Aid Summary. *This table summarizes how the University of Cincinnati maintains full-time student status and financial aid eligibility across both academic (study) and co-op (work) terms using a zero-credit enrollment model.*

Student Preparation, Advising, and Success

Student preparation is highly structured and begins early. Required first-year coursework focuses on resume development, interview preparation, networking, and career exploration.

Students are supported through a multi-layered advising model that includes academic advisors, co-op advisors, and faculty mentors. Advising is active and continuous, with regular check-ins and expectations for progress throughout each co-op cycle.

Reflection is a central component of the model. Students complete structured assignments during their co-op experiences, including goal setting, mid-term check-ins, and final reflections, along with employer evaluations.

Students frequently report that the structure and early preparation are among the most valuable aspects of the model, while also expressing interest in increased flexibility and opportunities for shared reflection and peer learning.



Employer Feedback

In AY 2024-5, **1491** employer evaluations collected

Evaluations by college:

- DAAP** = 4.119
- CEAS** = 3.745
- CECH** = 3.927

LEGEND:

- 5 = exceptional
- 4 = exceeds expectations
- 3 = meets expectations
- 2 = improvement needed
- 1 = unsatisfactory



Figure 7. Employer Feedback and Evaluation Metrics: *The figure outlines assessment categories such as quality of work, initiative, communication, and problem-solving, demonstrating how employer feedback is integrated into student learning and program assessment. **DAAP** – College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning; **CEAS** – College of Engineering and Applied Science; **CECH** – College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services.*

As illustrated in Figure 7, employer feedback is systematically incorporated into the assessment of student learning, providing an external validation of skills developed through co-op experiences. These evaluation mechanisms help ensure that experiential learning is not only participatory but measurable, aligning student development with workforce expectations while informing continuous program improvement.

Employer Engagement and Industry Ecosystem

UC’s co-op model is sustained through a large and actively managed employer ecosystem. Employer relationships are cultivated year-round through dedicated staff responsible for partnership development, coordination, and long-term stewardship. Employers engage



with UC not only to recruit students, but to address talent and workforce needs, positioning co-op as part of a broader pipeline strategy. This emphasis on relationship management helps explain how UC sustains placement activity across terms and across disciplines.

Financial Model and Affordability

UC's financial model combines institutional investment, student fees, and employer-paid wages. For students, paid co-op experiences can help offset educational and living costs. For the institution, however, the model requires sustained staffing, advising, and administrative coordination, underscoring that experiential learning at scale depends on long-term budget commitment rather than tuition revenue alone.

Operational Impacts of Year-Round Operations

UC's model has significant operational implications across the institution:

- Continuous use of facilities and infrastructure
- Flexible housing systems and subleasing culture
- Year-round advising, financial aid, and student services
- Integrated academic scheduling across all terms

These operational realities highlight that year-round experiential learning requires coordinated systems across academic, administrative, and student support functions.

Equity, Access, and Key Considerations

Even with strong infrastructure, UC's model surfaces several persistent equity and access challenges:

- Not all students secure co-op placements
- Job search expectations can create access gaps
- Financial and logistical barriers remain



In response, UC has developed a set of structured alternatives and support mechanisms to help maintain continuity of experience and expand access. These include the Experiential Explorations Program (EEP), which provides supervised, outcomes-based alternatives such as project work, research, and skill development, as well as on-campus and equivalent experiential opportunities for students who are unable to secure traditional placements.

Additional support includes flexible co-op formats (e.g., part-time or local placements), strong advising and early intervention, and required career preparation coursework beginning in the first year. The paid nature of co-op experiences also serves as an important mechanism to offset educational costs and reduce financial barriers.

At the same time, UC recognizes that equity remains an ongoing area of focus. Challenges related to placement competition, financial accessibility, and differential student outcomes continue to be actively examined as the model expands across disciplines.

Summary

The University of Cincinnati's model demonstrates what it takes to sustain experiential learning at scale within a year-round operational framework. Its effectiveness is grounded in:

- Deep integration of co-op into academic design
- Centralized infrastructure with distributed implementation
- Significant investment in advising, employer engagement, and systems
- A strong institutional identity centered on experiential learning

At the same time, the model reflects ongoing tensions between structure and flexibility, centralization and autonomy, and scale and personalization.

Taken together, UC's approach illustrates that year-round experiential learning is not simply a programmatic expansion, but an institutional transformation requiring alignment across academic, operational, and cultural dimensions.