Sometimes a Co-op job can seem like any other job. For a semester you go in to work, do what is expected of you, and then go home. Through the co-op program, though, you learn that jobs are so much more than that. As a Co-op student, you are in a unique position where your employer and co-workers understand that you are still learning and are more than willing to help in this process. They know that this is an opportunity for you to become familiar with a position you hope to fill in the future, or one that makes you curious to see what else is out there. Because of this, they are often very forthcoming when you have questions or show interest in their projects. By investing effort into these positions, you find that you can explore much more than the position for which you are hired.

As a Fundraising Coordinator for eight months, I expected only to collect donations. Instead, with a little investment, I found a position rich with opportunity. I had the chance to experience and hone my skills in marketing, data entry and analysis, and event planning. When I agreed to take on the position of Environmental Stewardship Liaison for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, coordinating distribution of educational materials, I did not expect to learn database design and maintenance or the creation of a digital office. By stepping out of the confines of my position description and comfort zone, as well as taking advantage of the opportunities afforded to me as a co-op student, I was able to create an enriching job experience. Investing time into the program led to my own personal growth. Even better than that, though, was the feeling I got when, after each co-op position, I was offered the opportunity to continue working part-time during my studies, showing that my enthusiasm and initiative impressed my employers.

The Co-op program is a great way to explore career choices, learn new and unexpected skills, and form lasting relationships with potential future employers. The Co-op program can do all this for you and all you need to give is a little bit of effort and enthusiasm.
Culturally Rich: A Diverse Co-op Experience with Evergreen Cultural Centre

by Scott Owens

Last week, I found myself dragging an archaic metal asylum bed through grass that stretched higher than my head at a park in Coquitlam. Stopping to allow the photographer to sit on my shoulders to take pictures from a better angle, I realized that my Co-op semester at the Evergreen Cultural Centre in Coquitlam was not exactly what I thought it would be. But, as my supervisor noted, you do it all at a small gallery. And, in my role as a curatorial assistant, she couldn’t have been more right.

During my time at the Evergreen Cultural Centre, I have been involved with every component in the process of developing a visual arts exhibition from writing curatorial essays and didactic panels, to visiting the sites related to the exhibitions, to participating and executing art gallery tours and the hanging of an exhibition. As a double major in English and Art and Culture Studies, my background is directly related to my work term and my knowledge of art history has greatly benefited me. One thing this opportunity allowed me was to build on my previous experience and knowledge, and thus I have learned many new skills. Giving tours to ESL groups, preschool aged children, teenagers, senior citizens, and experienced art groups, I have learned how to relate to different audiences. Along with greatly improving my oral communication skills, this position has allowed me to discuss and relate knowledge to different audiences, an essential skill for the field of education. By writing curatorial essays, media releases, instructional panels, and teacher’s guides for exhibition workshops and tours, I enhanced my written communication skills. This position has solidified my aim to pursue graduate school in Art History and Curatorial Studies with the intent of eventually becoming a curator. All in all, this position did exactly what I hoped cooperative education would do; it gave me work experience and helped me find a career path.

Going Green, Co-op Style: First term Co-op with Be the Change Earth Alliance

by Shannon Peters

Going into my first Co-op semester, I was ecstatic when I found out that a Vancouver-based non-profit wanted to hire me on to be there Youth Coordinator and Special Events Assistant. Be The Change Earth Alliance helps communities, faith groups and schools to make sustainable lifestyle choices through workshops and weekly facilitated groups run by members. As an Anthropology student with a minor in Dialogue, this was really a great opportunity for me to build my resume and get experience in the field I wanted to work in after graduation.

During my time at Be The Change, I assisted in coordinating their new Student Initiative. I managed a team of volunteers for their call-based fundraising campaign, helped with the web design and created graphics for the launch of their new website, which was both challenging and exciting. As the semester progressed, I was given more of a lead role in the Student Initiative. One of my main responsibilities was editing sections and assisting in the design of their new Student Action Guide; a document used by various high schools and their clubs. I was also able to sit in on meetings with principals, teachers, and the Vancouver School Board as well as assist teachers in incorporating this program into their curriculum. Working at Be The Change Earth Alliance was an
Seeking Help: The Role Co-workers Play

by Amy Chen

Serving the community since 1973, the Burnaby-based Dixon Transition Society is a non-profit organization that provides services to women and children whose lives have been affected by violence and abuse. In addition to operating a Transition House and a Second Stage Housing Program for women and children fleeing abuse, Dixon Society provides outreach and counseling services to empower families to build healthier, safer, and better lives.

The Summer Recreation Program is one of the many programs offered at Wenda’s Place (Second Stage Program) that aims to help families create a safe and successful future. The purpose of this yearly Summer Recreation Program is to foster independence, confidence, and provide opportunities for individuals who have experienced common hardships to closely support one another.

This summer, I had the pleasure of working as a Summer Recreation Program Assistant for the Second Stage Program at Wenda’s Place. My main responsibility for this position was to solicit donations and to organize recreational activities for the families residing at Wenda’s Place. The experience was very inspirational and rewarding! This position allowed me to work very independently so my organizational, planning, and interpersonal skills improved greatly as a result. In addition, I gained valuable insights from working so closely with Chandra and Tammy, my co-workers. I was able to observe how Chandra, the Wenda’s Place Second Stage Coordinator, used her non-judgmental and professional ability to deal with an overwhelming number of highly sensitive and confidential cases each day. As a result, I developed an even better sensitivity and understanding of individuals from various backgrounds.

Tammy, the Child Support Worker, has taught me how to work professionally in a caring and unbiased way with vulnerable children that have witnessed or experienced abuse. I frequently had the opportunity to work with Tammy and the Second Stage children during the one-on-one child support sessions. This hands-on experience of working along-side Tammy has helped me to develop and identify the skills needed to work with children who are in a very vulnerable position.

Both Chandra and Tammy were readily available to assist and support me in any possible way. I received valuable input throughout my work term, especially when planning the summer recreation events. As well, Chandra and Tammy were always open to suggestions, which improved the efficiency and quality of my job performance.

Everything that I have learned from working at Wenda’s Place will be a valuable asset with my future career goals in the field of Social Sciences and Education. Thank you, Dixon Society, for this fun learning opportunity.
Choosing SFU from all other educational institutions boiled down to two facts: a) it was only one (albeit long) bus ride away, and b) their co-op program held an exemplary reputation. Being part of the Arts co-op program at SFU was THE best and most influential part of my university development. It is the reason why I am now able to give so much back to the clients I serve for the YMCA’s Federal Public Sector Youth Internship Program.

When considering a future working in the not-for-profit field, it is important to remember that volunteering or interning for a particular organization is a great way to learn and develop strong skills. It also leads to networking and creating important contacts for the future. Showing passion for the particular field or program you are working in, volunteering or helping colleagues with their programs and projects, and showing that you are capable of taking on more responsibility will take you far in this field. But the most important thing to keep in mind is to truly have a passion for the work that you are involved in. Not-for-profit work is incredibly interesting, developmentally stimulating, and immensely rewarding; however, the working conditions can be extremely stressful, financially insufficient, and quite indeterminate. Often, I leave work exhausted and drained, but I know that I have had a small part in making someone else’s day a little more positive and promising. What more could you ask for in a day’s work!

Sarah Hamid-Balma @ Canadian Mental Health Agency

Co-op played a huge role in my career success. I was able to do four very diverse work placements. It turned out, through the process of job tastetesting, that non-profit work was the best fit for me. People forget that well over a million Canadians are employed by the voluntary sector. But it’s not just employment growth, there’s also huge personal growth too. Working for an NGO is food for the soul. I get to follow my passion, I help people, I’m not heaped in layers of bureaucracy, I get to see the impact of my work, and I get to work with amazing staff and volunteers (many of whom are co-op alum too). Without co-op, I may never have found my niche (and my husband!). I think it should be mandatory for all Arts and Social Sciences students!