

# Sustaining a Robust Alternative to Traditional Cooperative Education (Co-op): UC's Experiential Explorations Program (EEP) for Creative Majors

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the Experiential Explorations Program (EEP) for creative majors in the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning (DAAP) at the University of Cincinnati (UC). A brief evolution of this curricular innovation is provided and we focus on the current state of the program. We outline the pedagogical model with a focus on structure, accountability, and mentorship. EEP case studies are presented for three students across majors and class years. These serve to celebrate student success while providing an in-depth view of possibilities for self-directed learning in creative fields. Challenges and opportunities for continued evolution of the EEP model are discussed.

*Keywords:* experiential learning, creative majors, cooperative education, mentorship, self-directed learning, upskilling, project-based work

## BACKGROUND

The University of Cincinnati (UC) invented the model of experiential learning called Cooperative Education (co-op) in 1906. In the 100+ years since the inception of co-op, the university has been widely recognized as a pioneer in experiential learning (Cedercreutz & Cates, 2010). In addition to supporting a full spectrum of experiential learning offerings across the university, faculty and staff within the College of Cooperative Education and Professional Studies (CCPS) maintain the world's third largest co-op program (*The Ultimate Guide to Cooperative Education (Co-op)*, 2021).

Co-op work is paid, full-time, and takes place in an industry-relevant workplace. In UC programs where co-op is a graduation requirement, students complete two to five work terms, alternating with academic semesters. While "on co-op," students complete an online course focused on

academic and professional development, and their performance is assessed by their co-op employer. Upon returning to campus, students reflect upon and articulate their learnings via instructional meetings with CCPS co-op faculty (University of Cincinnati, DAAP Co-op Unit, 2022).

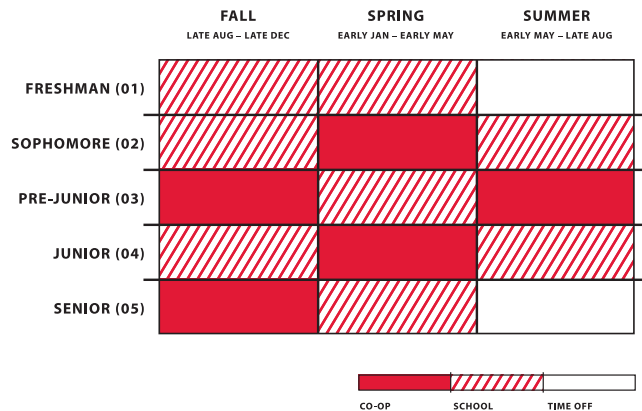
## DAAP MANDATORY CO-OP

The College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning (DAAP) is comprised of four schools with seven undergraduate programs and four graduate programs integrating mandatory Co-op participation as a graduation requirement. In the 2023-2024 academic year, DAAP co-op faculty in CCPS helped students to earn more than 1,600 experiential learning semesters, with over 600 employer partners, across 35 states, in 16 countries. In that same time period, about 40% of DAAP students traveled outside the state of Ohio for their co-op positions (UC Professional Assessment

& Learning platform (PAL), University of Cincinnati, personal communication, n.d.). Figure 1 illustrates the co-op rotation schedule for the majority of undergraduate DAAP co-op students, whereby almost 40% of their learning is completed in workplace environments via co-op.

**FIGURE 1**

**Sample co-op rotation schedule, utilized by majority of undergraduate DAAP co-op majors**



DAAP students prepare resumes as part of their co-op job applications, but the art or design portfolio is the primary marketing piece that employers in creative industries consider when assessing candidates for interviews and eventual employment (Smith, 2023, p. 2). This is most typically a web-based portfolio containing case studies of projects completed in academic studios, as personal projects, or while employed in a co-op position. The portfolio is intended to be a compilation of an artist or designer’s best work and is continually refreshed over the course of a career.

**PANDEMIC SHIFTS TO DAAP COOPERATIVE EDUCATION**

When the COVID-19 global pandemic caused shutdowns in March 2020, active DAAP co-op students fell into three groups: (1) Students working in Spring co-op positions who were just over halfway through their 16-week, full-time workplace experiences; (2) Students enrolled in classes who were planning to return to a previous co-op employer for the Summer 2020 semester or who had already been offered a role with a new employer for Summer 2020; (3) Students enrolled in classes, collaborating with DAAP co-op faculty in search of a new co-op employer for the Summer 2020 term. A majority of the students working in co-op positions were let go in March, while a smaller number were able to shift to virtual work for the remainder of the Spring term. As for students preparing to co-op in Summer 2020, the

percentage of students who were able to retain their offers for co-op employment plummeted to 39% (UC Professional Assessment & Learning platform (PAL), University of Cincinnati, personal communication, n.d.).

The underlying pedagogical and organizational structure of the present-day Experiential Exploration Program (EEP) was developed swiftly and collaboratively at this critical juncture in March 2020 (Alanson, et al., 2020). CCPS previously established EEP options to support students during the 2008 recession. Although these options were rarely utilized in recent years, they provided CCPS teams a head start in providing legitimate options for students to re-calibrate their learning plans for the Summer 2020 semester. The former Director and former Assistant Director of the DAAP co-op unit worked alongside leaders from across the College to develop revised EEP categories for faculty approval, to build out modified assessment instruments, forge partnerships, develop communications, and distribute seemingly endless lists of student resources. The amount of critical pedagogy that was developed during Spring 2020 is inspirational, but the details are well outside the scope of this article.

Over the past four years, the various academic units within CCPS have evolved their EEP requirements and processes in ways that best fit their respective student populations. For DAAP this has meant embracing that EEP is here to stay—refining EEP requirements in our student handbook, creating a robust student-facing Canvas (UC’s learning management system) community, developing student assignments, and shifting faculty workload to facilitate the planning, execution, reflection, and tracking of EEP experiences.

The EEP categories approved for DAAP co-op students are: (1) Emerging Professional EEP, (2) Professional Practice EEP, (3) Career-Related TravelEEP, (4) Entrepreneurship EEP. Table 1 outlines the core characteristics of each EEP type.

From the prime pandemic years to present day, Emerging Professional EEP and Professional Practice EEP have been the most widely utilized EEP types. While a portion of students (typically those seeking a first or second co-op experience) are taking advantage of EEP due to the inability to earn a traditional co-op position, a second group of students are proactively planning EEP semesters in place of co-op semesters. Table 2 illustrates the large shift from co-op to EEP enrollments following the onset of pandemic shutdowns and chronicles the sustained need for an alternative to traditional co-op.

**TABLE 1****Experiential Exploration Program (EEP) categories for DAAP students**

EEP TYPE	STRUCTURAL REQUIREMENTS
<b>Emerging Professional</b>	<p>Approved for first or second co-op term</p> <p>MUST include: Technical upskilling, Professional skill development, Project-based work</p> <p>Gain co-op faculty approval on EEP plan containing goals, deliverables, timeline</p> <p>Identify and meet with mentor minimum of once per month</p> <p>300-350 hours, depending on semester length</p>
<b>Professional Practice</b>	<p>Eligible after completion of second co-op term or with co-op faculty approval</p> <p>MAY include: Technical upskilling, Professional skill development, Project-based work</p> <p>Gain co-op faculty approval on EEP plan containing goals, deliverables, timeline</p> <p>Identify and meet with mentor minimum of once per month</p> <p>300-350 hours, depending on semester length</p>
<b>Career-Related Travel</b>	<p>Travel must be discipline- or career-related</p> <p>Plan must involve 12 weeks or more of active travel</p> <p>Detailed travel itinerary and proposed deliverables to showcase learning must be approved by co-op faculty prior to semester start</p> <p>Take all required actions to record and gain approval for international travel with the university</p>
<b>Entrepreneurship</b>	<p>Consult with co-op faculty 6-9 months prior to planned EEP semester</p> <p>Complete pre-requisite coursework: ENTR 5093* (1.0-4.0 credit hours) for academic credit OR a UC sponsored incubation program OR other approved incubation program</p> <p>Entrepreneurial pitch must be approved by incubator faculty or similar and plan must be career-related</p> <p>Identify and meet with entrepreneur-mentor minimum of once per month</p> <p>Craft start-up plan containing milestones to be executed during the EEP semester, ideally informed by mentor and approved by co-op faculty</p> <p>300-350 hours, depending on semester length</p>

*Note: University of Cincinnati, DAAP Co-op Unit, 2022*

**TABLE 2****DAAP student experiential learning, Spring 2020–Summer 2024**

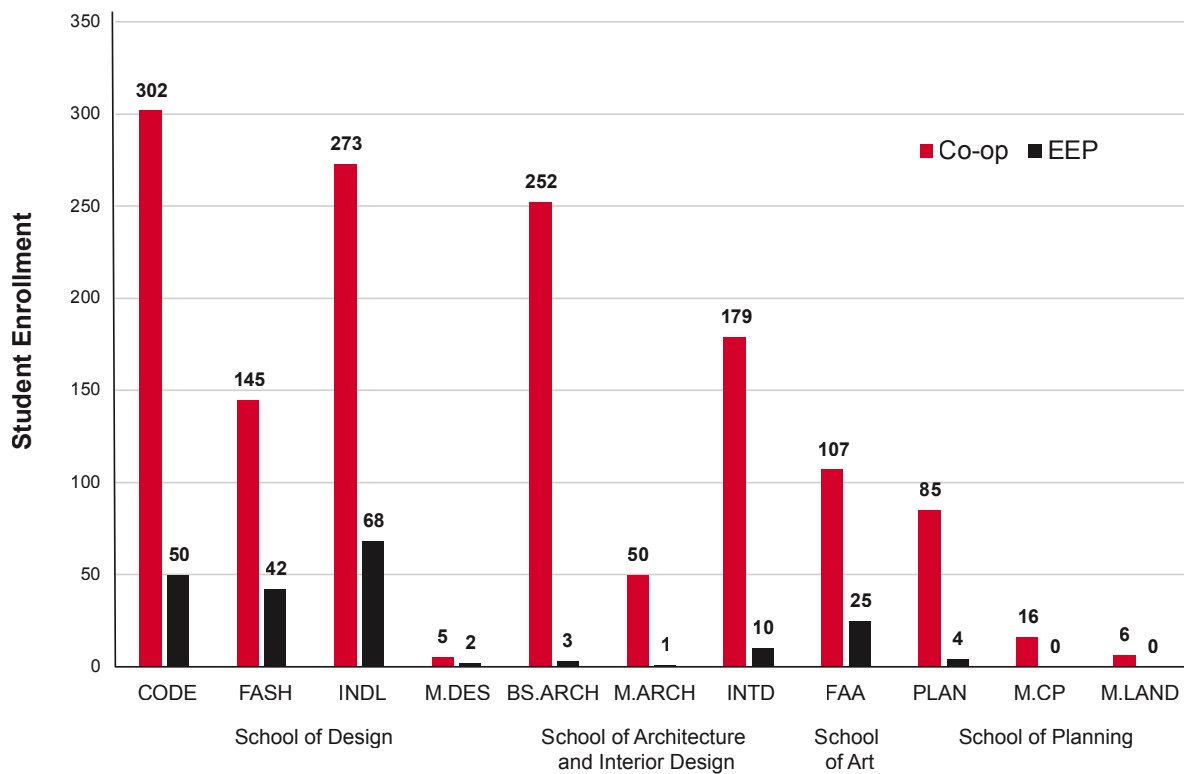
<b>SEMESTER</b>	<b>CO-OP</b>	<b>CO-OP RATE</b>	<b>EEP</b>	<b>EEP RATE</b>	<b>WAIVER/ OTHER</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
Spring 2020	671	94%	12	2%	32	715
Summer 2020	195	39%	265	54%	34	494
Fall 2020	377	56%	288	43%	9	674
Spring 2021	377	58%	268	41%	10	655
Summer 2021	406	83%	78	16%	6	490
Fall 2021	487	86%	72	13%	10	569
Spring 2022	609	87%	77	11%	11	697
Summer 2022	430	95%	19	4%	5	454
Fall 2022	531	88%	51	8%	19	601
Spring 2023	565	85%	81	12%	17	663
Summer 2023	413	92%	27	6%	11	451
Fall 2023	465	83%	78	14%	14	557
Spring 2024	558	83%	97	14%	20	675
Summer 2024	398	90%	30	7%	14	442
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,482</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>1,443</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>8,137</b>

*Note: Data retrieved from UC PAL (Professional Assessment & Learning) platform (University of Cincinnati, personal communication, n.d.).*

*Note: "Waiver/Other" encompasses all non-enrollments, covering a variety of circumstances.*

**FIGURE 2**

**Co-op and EEP enrollments for DAAP, 2023–2024 academic year**



*Note: CODE=Communication Design, FASH=Fashion Design, INDL=Industrial Design, M.DES=Master of Design, BS.ARCH=Architecture, M.ARCH=Master of Architecture, INTD=Interior Design, FAA=Fine Arts, PLAN=Urban Planning, M.CP=Master of Community Planning, M.LAND=Master of Landscape Architecture.*

Figure 2 exhibits how experiential learning enrollments in 2023-24 were distributed across DAAP programs, as well as providing a comparison of traditional co-op and EEP enrollments by program.

### **ADDITIONAL EEP CONSIDERATIONS — CARETAKING IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY**

Mahmud, Talukder, & Rahman (2021) found that a fear of COVID-19 induced career anxiety in individuals yet to enter the workforce. At UC we saw this firsthand, as students self-reported increased anxiety and worry related to their current and future job prospects. As we supported DAAP students in the development of EEP plans, we strived to forge a sense of empowerment. We wanted students to feel they had the agency to make some decisions about their lives and careers. We embraced the need for learner autonomy, accountability, peer support (Perrin, 2014), and faculty mentorship (Alanson, et al., 2020) as best practices to empower students during experiential learning.

Students who do not obtain a co-op or internship have great

potential to experience negative emotions, but there is evidence that peer support may help to ameliorate these feelings (Cormier & Drewery, 2017). The DAAP EEP mentorship model is structurally inspired by interactions that are typical in a workplace — peers serve the purpose of colleagues, the EEP faculty lead acts in a supervisory role, and the official EEP mentor becomes a coach and direct supporter. The structural supports and requirements we put in place were intended to combat emotions such as fear and loneliness in order to improve learning outcomes.

### **EEP STRUCTURE AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN PRESENT DAY**

The current EEP process extends across two academic semesters, with planning of the experience happening in the second half of an academic term (referred to as the “Planning” term) and the EEP plan being executed during the entirety of the subsequent academic term (referred to as the “Experience” term). A general outline of the 2-semester instructional model, including accountability checkpoints, follows.

## *Co-op Search / EEP Planning Term*

### **Weeks 1–6**

Each student seeking a co-op position participates in a required meeting with their co-op faculty member individually or in a small group. These meetings are designed to reflect on previous experiential learning semesters or previous life experiences and to plan for the upcoming co-op position search by sharing learning goals, assessing resumes and design portfolios, and discussing potential employers of interest to the student. At this point, a small number of upperclassmen students may self-identify as desiring to plan an EEP in place of a co-op semester.

### **Week 7**

Students select final positions of interest in UC's proprietary job search platform, Professional Assessment and Learning (PAL), and resume/portfolio referrals are emailed to selected employer partners by the DAAP Academic Unit Head. Students are also applying to roles posted on other platforms and exploring opportunities within their existing networks.

### **Weeks 7–10**

Employers review student marketing materials and reach out to schedule interviews. Employers begin to extend offers for co-op employment and students begin to finalize employment and travel/housing plans for the upcoming co-op semester.

### **Week 11**

An official second round of co-op referrals is sent through the PAL platform and interviews and offers continue.

### **Weeks 11–12**

Any student who has yet to secure a co-op position and wishes to be eligible to complete an EEP in place of a co-op experience is required to self-enroll in the EEP community in Canvas and is encouraged to attend both an EEP workshop and the office hours of their direct co-op faculty. The EEP Canvas community houses a number of resources to be utilized for planning, including but not limited to timelines, assignments, past examples of successful EEPs, and information on structured options. One to two faculty members from the team are identified to serve as EEP faculty leads each academic year and are tasked with management of Canvas community and facilitation of planning and reflecting.

### **Week 13**

Students continue to consult with the EEP faculty lead and/or their major-specific co-op faculty. Students are required to submit Part 1 of the EEP Plan, comprised of overall concept, Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely (SMART) Goals, anticipated activities, and deliverables aligned to categories. The direct co-op faculty provides critical feedback, and student is asked to incorporate changes in next draft.

### **Week 15**

Students refine plans and continue on to Part 2, comprised of an outline of learning platforms and resources, a timeline of deliverable milestones, a day-by-day schedule, and identification of mentor(s). Faculty members facilitate the identification of mentors in various ways, from identifying a group of willing alumni and employer partners and providing students with contact information to encouraging students to reach out to past employers.

### **Week 16**

Students submit final EEP plans for faculty approval.

## *EEP Experience Semester*

### **Week 1**

EEP faculty lead conducts a mandatory kick-off meeting for all students completing EEPs for the semester. Semester structure and requirements are reviewed and students are able to ask questions and begin to connect with peers on a similar journey. Students reach out to mentors to solidify structure for check-in meetings and inquire about mentor communication preferences.

### **Week 5**

Students completing Emerging Professional EEPs meet virtually in groups of 4-5 with the EEP faculty lead for 60 minutes for what we call "33% Progress" reflection meetings. Each student presents a brief visual presentation of work completed and learnings to date, while also reflecting on successes and struggles and posing a set of questions to be discussed with peers. Students completing Professional Practice, Career-Related Travel, or Entrepreneurship EEPs typically take part in a similar reflective process through a series of required online discussion posts. At this point in time, it is common for students to set-up group WhatsApp chats or plan weekly co-working days at local coffee shops to support each other. If a student appears to be struggling, the EEP faculty lead can reach out with supports in addition to what has been provided by peers.

## Week 11

Reflective interactions similar to what is described above take place as a “66% Progress” touchpoint. The EEP faculty lead sends a performance assessment survey to students’ mentors.

## Week 16

Students elect to present their final EEP reflection as a recorded Pecha Kucha- style presentation (20 slides with 20 seconds of accompanying narration, originally conceived of by a set of architects) (Pink, 2007) or to submit an abstract and visual artifacts for inclusion in an EEP Showcase— an exhibit hosted in a gallery on campus. We have been intentional in assigning arts-based methods of reflection that promote connection with peers and feel celebratory in nature.

## STUDENT EEP CASE STUDIES

In order to add dimension to the pedagogical framework of the Experiential Explorations Program, we present a deeper look at the EEP experiences of three DAAP students from the 2023–24 academic year. The case studies that follow include information and imagery summarized or directly quoted from student EEP assignments, stored privately on the university’s learning management system.

### *Reece, Communication Design Sophomore (Second Year)* — *Emerging Professional EEP*

Reece began his experiential learning journey by participating in the co-op position search in Fall 2023, applying to approximately 40 Cooperative Education positions. When a traditional co-op position was secured by November of his search term, his co-op faculty approved him to plan and execute an Emerging Professional EEP. This is the type of EEP experience typically approved for sophomores (second year) and pre-juniors (third year), in order to ensure that growth occurs across the categories of Professional Upskilling, Technical Upskilling, and Project-Based Work. Reece’s Spring 2024 EEP plan included the following components:

#### SMART Goals

The following SMART goals are replicated directly from the student’s approved EEP plan:

1. I will learn new programs which will help my overall ability and comfortability in this field.
2. I will complete one finished branding project for

my portfolio.

3. I will explore different niches within the graphic design field.

(Reece, personal communication, December 2023)

#### Activities and Deliverables

Reece’s experience was centered around his service to the non-profit Uhambo 8286. As shared on Uhambo 8286’s website, “We partner with entrepreneurs in former apartheid communities of South Africa to educate, market and brand build their dream business. We learn as much from them as they learn from us and it’s incredible to see their hard work pay off. Their businesses provide them with a sustainable income and better their communities” (About Us | Uhambo 8286, n.d.). Faculty in CCPS originally partnered with UHAMBO 8286 founder and UC Lindner College of Business (LCB) annualized adjunct, Karen Manning, in November 2020. The faculty saw great potential in solidifying a relationship by which DAAP EEP students could learn while contributing their talents to the non-profit organization. Since Spring 2021, 18 students have been able to serve as interns for UHAMBO 8286, working alongside LCB students to provide branding and design services to entrepreneurs in Khayelitsha, South Africa.

Additionally, Reece chose to focus on upskilling in the design softwares of Figma and Adobe Photoshop via LinkedIn Learning and to showcase those learnings via a branding project for a fictional coffee shop. Table 3 outlines the various components of Reece’s plan.

#### Learnings and Outcomes

In the 33% Progress peer check-in meeting, Reece shared visual progress on Uhambo 8286 website sketches and profiles of entrepreneur needs, as well as a near-final Bunny-Fish logo for discussion. Figure 3 is a screenshot from the visual presentation.

During the 66% Progress check-in meeting, Reece presented progress on all visual projects and discussed his struggles and successes associated with self-directed learning, as shown in Figure 4. Struggles related to time management and staying motivated are quite common and are typically a topic for discussion between students and EEP faculty lead during the accountability checkpoints.

**TABLE 3****Components of Reece’s Communication Design Emerging Professional EEP**

CATEGORY	ACTIVITIES	FINAL DELIVERABLES	MENTORSHIP	HOURS
<b>Technical Upskilling</b>	Figma courses, LinkedIn Learning  Photoshop courses, LinkedIn Learning	Certificates of course completion  Newly attained skills are evidenced in EEP projects	Self-motivated, mentors below available for consult, as needed	40
<b>Professional Upskilling</b>	Uhambo 8286 project work	Branded visuals for Madam H Beauty Bar  Branded visuals for Tasha’s Beauty Spa  Pages for Ekasi Village House website  Pages for Uhambo Connect website	Karen Manning, founder of Uhambo 8286	320
<b>Professional Upskilling</b>	Online networking with professionals from the Society for Experiential Graphic Design (SEGD)	New LinkedIn connections	Self-motivated, using network to grow network	24
<b>Project-Based Work</b>	Coffee shop branding for BunnyFish	Logo, packaging, menu design  App screens, designed and built in Figma	Family friend/owner of marketing agency	64

*Note: Summarized from student’s approved EEP Proposal (Reece, personal communication, December 2023) and Pecha Kucha (Reece, personal communication, April 2024)*



The founder of Uhambo 8286, Karen Manning, shared her praise for the impacts of Reece's participation:

*Reece's design work truly transformed the way our entrepreneurs in Khayelitsha present their businesses. The creativity and attention to detail helped them develop a professional brand identity, giving them confidence and a polished image to attract more customers. Reece's contributions went far beyond just design, making a meaningful difference in the lives of these business owners by helping them take a huge step forward in their entrepreneurial journeys. Many thanks to the team at CCPS for creating this empowering experience for their students.*

(K. Manning, personal communication, October 4, 2024)

Reece's Emerging Professional EEP prepared him to earn a co-op position for Fall 2024 with a Chicago-based interiors studio (University of Cincinnati, Professional Assessment & Learning platform (PAL), personal communication, n.d.).

### **Eddie, Industrial Design Pre-Junior (Third Year)**

#### **— Emerging Professional EEP**

After spending his first co-op semester in a tech and digital function for a large national grocer, Eddie was focused on attaining a second co-op experience in the field of toy design and development. They kept their list of applications small and focused. When this plan did not ultimately pan out, he was highly motivated to craft a robust self-directed EEP with the goal of tailoring their portfolio for the toy industry for the subsequent co-op position search.

#### **SMART Goals**

The following SMART goals are replicated directly from the student's approved EEP plan:

1. Dedicate an hour a day to sketching and rendering a character or product.
2. By the end of my EEP, I would like to be able to model a character in Blender from imagination.
3. I will reach out to professionals from toy companies and people who are on my career path monthly to grow my network to 5 people by the end of the semester.

(Eddie, personal communication, August 2023)

#### **Activities and Deliverables**

Eddie strategically crafted an EEP plan comprised of learning and deliverables that hit all required categories of the

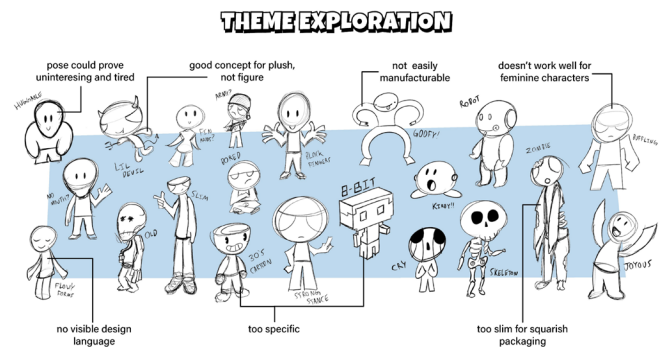
Emerging Professional EEP, while remaining singularly focused on the goal of attaining a future position in the toy industry. Table 4 outlines the various components of his plan.

#### **Learnings and Outcomes**

In the 33% Progress peer check-in meeting, Eddie shared a robust visual presentation with their peers, including market research; Blender experiments; anatomy studies; and concept sketches. Additionally, he shared his struggles and successes as a catalyst for deep discussion and sought peer critique on proposed form language for his collectible line. Figure 7 is a sample page of their presentation.

**FIGURE 7**

#### **Presentation of sketch exploration for peer discussion**

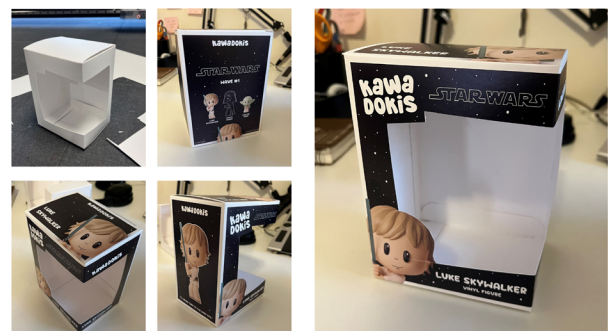


(Eddie, personal communication, September 2023)

By the time of the 66% Progress check-in meeting, Eddie had made great progress on the collectibles packaging, as shown in Figure 8.

**FIGURE 8**

#### **Package prototype**



(Eddie, personal communication, November 2023)

**TABLE 4**

**Components of Eddie’s Industrial Design Emerging Professional EEP**

CATEGORY	ACTIVITIES	FINAL DELIVERABLES	MENTORSHIP	HOURS
<b>Technical Upskilling</b>	<p>“Master 3D Sculpting in Blender” course</p> <p>Daily Sketch-a-Day practice</p> <p>Various YouTube training videos</p>	<p>Multitude of practice sculpts, renders, and sketches</p> <p>Newly attained skills to be evidenced in EEP projects</p>	<p>Self-motivated, mentors below available for consult, as needed</p> <p>Connect with peers doing similar upskilling, as needed</p>	120
<b>Professional Upskilling</b>	<p>Grow collection of contacts and advisors through online and in-person networking</p>	<p>New connections</p> <p>Gain advice on current projects and longer-term industry goals</p>	<p>Self-motivated, using network to grow network</p>	16
<b>Project-Based Work</b>	<p>Build System Project, extending school Power Tool project to full toy product concept: stages from market research through final rendering</p>	<p>Rendered digital models of Build System concept</p>	<p>Class of 2017 UC Industrial Design graduate working in toy industry</p> <p>Class of 2019 UC Industrial Design graduate working in toy industry</p>	40
<b>Project-Based Work</b>	<p>Collectable Figure Project: all phases from market research, sketching, digital sculpting, resin printing, painting</p>	<p>Full line of three figures with packages and promotional renderings</p>	<p>Class of 2017 UC Industrial Design graduate working in toy industry</p> <p>Class of 2019 UC Industrial Design graduate working in toy industry</p>	340

*Note: Summarized from student’s approved EEP Proposal (Eddie, personal communication, August 2023) and Gallery Abstract (Eddie, personal communication, December 2023)*

Eddie elected to participate in the EEP Gallery Showcase as his final method of reflection. Figure 9 shows the final collectibles that were displayed during the EEP Showcase.

**FIGURE 9**

**Final collectibles deliverable**



(Eddie, personal communication, October 2024)

In the abstract that accompanied Eddie’s gallery show submission, they describe their learning from the EEP semester:

*The project itself has solidified my goals as an industrial designer. I want to be a toy or collectible designer. I love designing with fun and aesthetics in mind, and I love digital sculpting. The only skill that needs significant improvement is my anatomy sketching, something that would be required for quick conceiving at a collectible company. I’ve improved my digital sculpting tenfold this semester, upgrading from Nomad 3D to Blender, and soon, I’ll upgrade once again to the industry standard, ZBrush. I have a plan that will help me learn the various skills I need to get a toy/collectible design job, the plan including me learning surface modeling via Solidworks, Subd modeling via Rhino, and continuous practice and analysis of anatomy. This has been my most productive semester yet, and I’m so excited to improve further.*

(Eddie, personal communication, December 2023)

Figure 10 showcases additional work Eddie created for his portfolio as a result of his EEP experience. Eddie’s commitment to overhauling their knowledge, skillsets, and portfolio paid off when they earned a Summer 2024 co-op

position with a Cincinnati-based 3D design and development studio focused on the toy industry (University of Cincinnati, Professional Assessment & Learning platform (PAL), personal communication, n.d.).

**FIGURE 10**

**Additional portfolio work created by Eddie, as a result of learnings from EEP semester**



(Eddie, personal communication, October 2024)

**Olivia, Fashion Design, Pre-Junior (Third Year)—  
Professional Practice EEP**

Following a first co-op term with an East Coast footwear, apparel, and accessory brand, Olivia spent her second co-op term with a Los-Angeles-based fabric studio. Her work with fabric mills around the world during this co-op piqued her interest in the product development side of the fashion industry (University of Cincinnati, Professional Assessment & Learning platform (PAL), personal communication, n.d.). She elected to explore her passion for textiles with a self-directed EEP in Summer 2024 in place of her third co-op term.

**SMART Goals**

The following SMART goals are replicated directly from the student’s approved EEP plan:

1. I will educate myself on natural fabric dyeing techniques by researching, testing, and dyeing various fiber types. This will include individual studies as well as fiber dyeing workshops at the Weavers Guild and Sew Valley in Cincinnati. All of this work will be documented in a sample book by the end of the semester.
2. I will travel to Hawaii July 12–August 1 to learn indigenous fabric manipulation techniques from native artisans. All of this work will be documented in a sample book by the end of the semester, and a video essay will also be created to document my time.

3. I will create an 8-look womenswear collection based on the fabric dyeing techniques learned. It will include 8 looks and 2 final prototypes and will likely be print pattern heavy and primarily woven pieces.

(Olivia, personal communication, April 2024)

### Activities and Deliverables

With two co-op semesters of industry experience, Olivia was approved by her co-op faculty to plan and execute a Professional Practice EEP. This category has less prescribed requirements than other categories, allowing for students to

utilize their own expertise to structure deep exploration of a subject. Table 5 outlines the various components of her plan.

### Learnings and Outcomes

While the Professional Practice EEP check-ins are intended to be asynchronous interactions between upperclassman students, for the Summer 2024 term the EEP faculty lead had all participants take part in the real-time virtual peer presentations. Figures 11 and 12 show visuals Olivia presented for peer and instructor feedback.

**TABLE 5**

**Components of Olivia’s Fashion Design Professional Practice EEP**

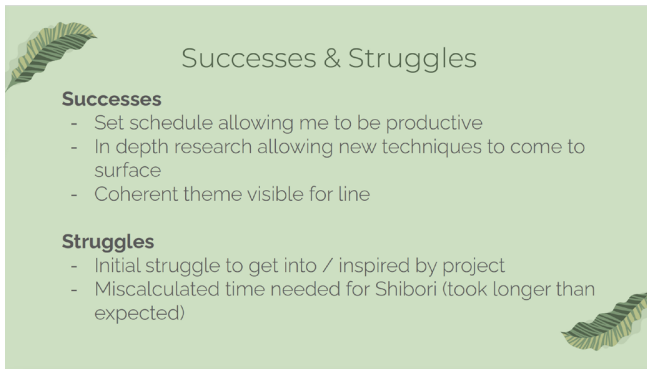
CATEGORY	ACTIVITIES	FINAL DELIVERABLES	MENTORSHIP	HOURS
<b>Technical Upskilling</b>	Weavers Guild workshop	Dyed materials for sample book	Workshop instructors	5
	Sew Valley workshop	Newly attained skills to be evidenced in EEP projects		
<b>Project-Based Work</b>	Self-directed experiments in fabric dyeing	Dyed materials for sample book Newly attained skills to be evidenced in EEP projects	Class of 2017 UC Fashion Design graduate working in fashion industry	129
<b>Project-Based Work</b>	Traditional indigenous weaving and dyeing courses at Nā Kūpuna Makamae Center, Hawaii	Dyed materials for sample book Video essay	Course instructors	120
<b>Project-Based Work</b>	Womenswear collection	Design 8 looks, including flats and selection of fabric techniques Produce one finished garment, utilizing traditional fabric dyeing processes	Class of 2017 UC Fashion Design graduate working in fashion industry	72

*Note: Summarized from student’s approved EEP Proposal (Olivia, personal communication, April 2024)*

*Note: Total hours are less than 350, due to fewer weeks in the Summer academic term*

**FIGURE 11**

**Successes and struggles presented for peer discussion**



(Olivia, personal communication, June 2024)

**FIGURE 12**

**Example of physical fabric samples Olivia produced**



(Olivia, personal communication, June 2024)

During the 66% Progress check-in meeting, Olivia praised her mentor’s valuable feedback and discussed timing and production setbacks. She shared how initial garment sketches (Figure 13) had evolved into more finished illustrations of final looks (Figure 14) and sought peer and instructor critique.

**FIGURE 13**

**Initial garment sketch exploration**



(Olivia, personal communication, July 2024)

**FIGURE 14**

**Color illustrations, showcasing fabric samples**



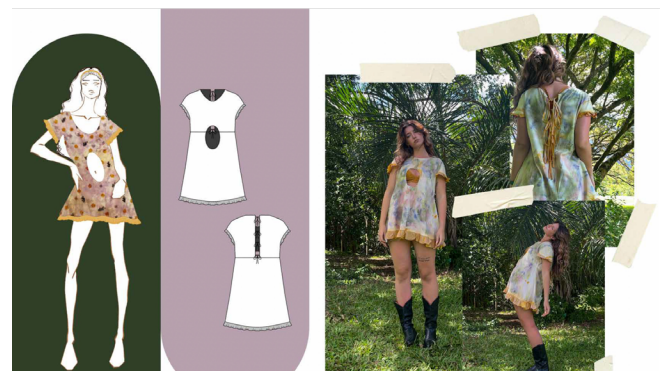
(Olivia, personal communication, July 2024)

As presented in Olivia’s final Pecha Kucha reflection video, she discusses how her EEP semester increased her knowledge and confidence:

*I really learned a lot from this EEP ... it really taught me how to manage my own time wisely when I don't have someone telling me what to do and also really helped me utilize all of the things that I learned in school and create one big passion project. I think it's gonna be really, really helpful in the long run because I am very interested in going into the research and development or fabric field and I'm really happy that I got to dive deep into this because it helps me understand a lot more about fabric (Olivia, personal communication, August 2024).*

**FIGURE 15**

**Spread from Olivia’s design portfolio showcasing a garment from her collection**



(S. Schaffer, Co-op faculty, personal communication, September 2024)

For her fourth co-op semester, Olivia will be traveling back to Los Angeles to work for a celebrity-founded lifestyle and apparel brand where a portion of her work will be focused on fabric buying and communications with mills and factories (University of Cincinnati, Professional Assessment & Learning platform (PAL), personal communication, n.d.).

### IMPACTS OF EEP PARTICIPATION

EEP was intended to be a temporary fix to allow students to develop skills and take part in experiences that would allow them to grow as professionals and individuals. The ultimate goal was to ensure that students would be more marketable to employer partners in subsequent co-op position searches. In many cases, a first-semester EEP became a “soft-launch” to the co-op journey, allowing students to spend a full semester focused on growing technical, professional, and project-based skillsets.

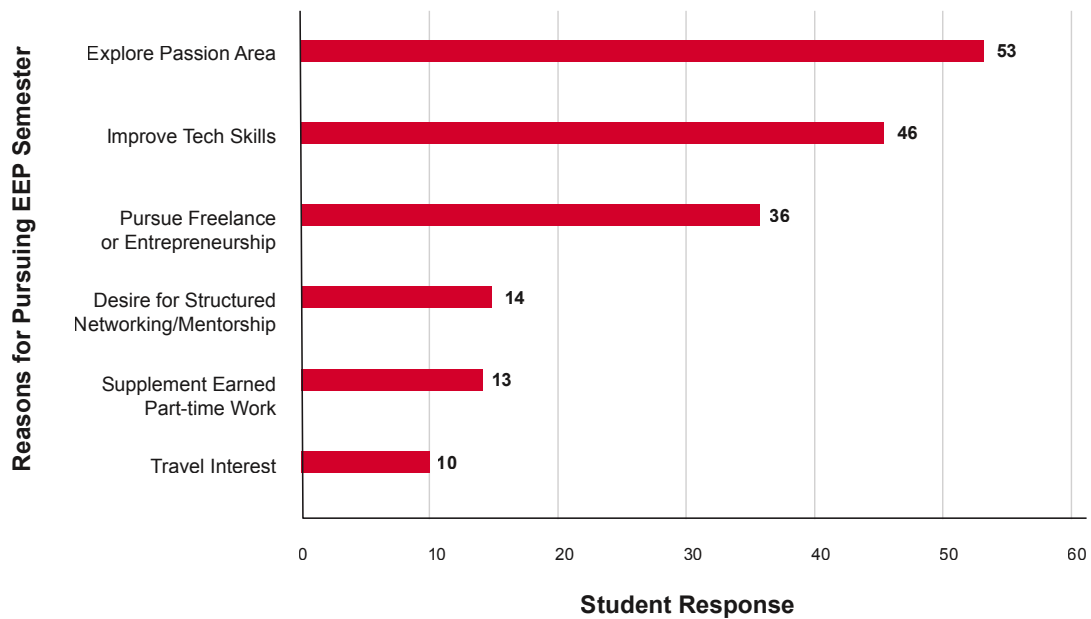
For DAAP students, participating in a robust EEP semester overwhelmingly leads to positive outcomes. An examination of 3-semester outcomes for Class of 2026 students in the School of Design who completed an EEP in place of their first co-op term ( $N=38$ ) supports EEP as a valid learning alternative. By the time of this cohort’s second experiential learning term, 69% ( $n=25$ ) of the first-term EEP students

who remained at the university were able to attain a traditional co-op position. By the time of the third experiential learning term, 86% ( $n=31$ ) of the cohort had secured a traditional co-op position.

Additionally, we have found that the EEP option provides a welcome alternative to DAAP students across all class years who may be seeking to learn outside the traditional co-op model. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 2% of DAAP students took part in an EEP each academic year (see Table 2), with most experiences being travel-related. Of the 205 students pursuing EEP in 2023–24, 197 completed a survey on their reasons for pursuing EEP as a co-op alternative. Sixty-four percent of EEP students ( $n=126$ ) indicated the pursuit of an EEP was a back-up plan upon not securing a traditional co-op position. Thirty-six percent of EEP students ( $n=71$ ) indicated they proactively pursued an EEP as their first-choice experience for the co-op semester. Figure 16 illustrates the reasons DAAP students chose to proactively pursue an EEP in the 2023-24 academic year. The belief that EEP should remain as an alternative to traditional co-op is supported by the fact that over a third of DAAP EEP participants proactively sought this self-directed learning path in 2023-24.

**FIGURE 16**

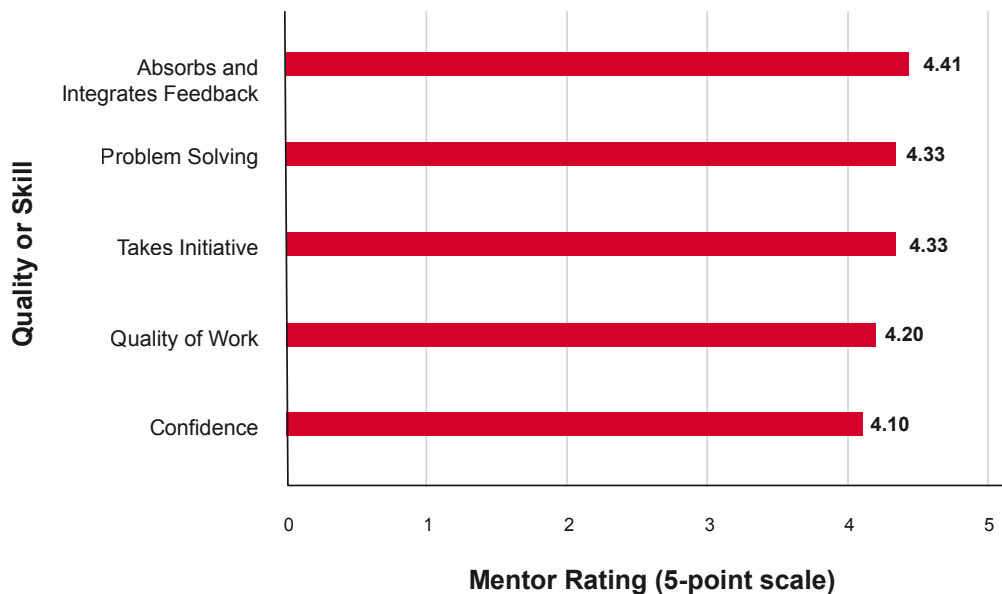
**DAAP student selection of EEP as first, 2023–24**



*Note:  $n=71$ , students were able to select more than one reason.*

**FIGURE 17**

**Mentor assessment of EEP student performance, Spring 2024**



*Note: n=50, a mentor response rate of 52%.*

*Note: Scale provided was: 1=Unsatisfactory, 2=Needs Improvement, 3=Meets Expectations, 4=Exceeds Expectations, 5=Exceptional.*

An additional measure of impacts is mentor survey responses on the performance of their mentees across more than 20 dimensions. Figure 17 presents mentor assessments of five key performance factors completed by Spring 2024 EEP mentors.

In post-experience reflection conversations with co-op faculty, students routinely report increased feelings of professional confidence and improved time management skills. Some students expressed gratitude that there was an opportunity to step -back from the realized stress of an unsuccessful job search or the perceived stress of a “9 to 5” workday. In a study of design students’ perceptions of “creativity,” McInerney (2022) uncovered “sanctuary seeking tendencies” in novice design students — the desire to create in an environment free from risk and ambiguity, where they are confident that they can succeed. This corroborates UC student self-reports of the great sense of freedom in being allowed to opt-in to a self-directed learning experience in a time when stress and competition may feel like insurmountable barriers.

### **CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The DAAP co-op faculty have been committed to experimenting with new processes for EEP students each year, but the challenges have been great and the opportunities for future improvement are greater still.

#### **Assessment**

We have not done an effective job of measuring the impact of our EEP innovations. The added emotional workload of supporting students through a time of great uncertainty was intense and it was difficult to commit to designing and implementing sustainable assessment instruments. For instance, the mentor survey (referenced in the previous section) was not always deployed consistently, and response rates were relatively low. Our current methods are largely qualitative, the amount of data collected vast, and limited space in faculty workloads has made it difficult to commit to rigorous assessment of the EEP program. We have continued to allow EEP students to reflect on their experiences in less regimented ways, as a way of celebrating the uniqueness of their self-directed learning. We can make an informed determination on whether it is most strategic to assess EEP students on the same measures as their peers

completing traditional co-op experiences or if there is a benefit to formalizing differentiated measures of success. As we are now convinced the model is not just a temporary fix, we should commit to developing sustainable processes for quantitative and qualitative assessment of EEP experiences to inform structural and pedagogical improvements.

### ***Streamlining Instructional Processes***

After four years of evolution and experimentation, it is time to commit deeply to instructional best practices and to focus on streamlining communications to students. The EEP planning has been so intense and we would all benefit by making it easier for students. In the 2024–25 academic year, we have plans to streamline the crafting of student EEP plans by simplifying the plan structure and requiring attendance at a 2-hour group writing workshop in place of optional attendance at faculty office hours. We have an opportunity to simplify information housed in the Canvas community and to commit to a long-term plan for EEP that remains rigorous while consuming a smaller percentage of faculty workloads.

### ***Mentorship***

Mentorship has been a core tenet of the EEP experience, but we can always optimize. We have purposefully allowed the mentor/mentee interactions to remain fairly organic, but we may be able to design more structure and administer more rigorous assessments to enhance learning. We could devote energy to examining the benefit to the mentors, rather than remaining focused on mentee outcomes. The DAAP co-op unit has made a commitment to increasing peer mentorship opportunities in the 2024-25 academic year, and the EEP program is a prime opportunity to optimize near-peer mentoring through pairing upperclassmen and underclassmen during the Planning and Experience semesters.

### ***Creative Entrepreneurship***

There is a need to revise the criteria for DAAP Entrepreneurship EEP to fit creative majors. We have had a number of students exploring entrepreneurial ventures that were

ultimately categorized as Professional Practice EEP, as the experiences did not quite meet the stringent criteria approved by CCPS faculty. We can lean into the unique landscape for creative entrepreneurs and redefine a structure to encourage student exploration.

### ***“Structured” Experiences***

Our faculty were committed to offering a number of “structured” EEP components early in the pandemic. With very large numbers of students seeking EEPs, we leveraged alumni, university, and employer relationships and created many opportunities for groups of 10–20 students to collaborate in shared learning environments, similar to the Uhambo 8286 experience. There is a belief that these structured experiences were of great benefit to sophomore students and we should determine whether devoting faculty workload to re-invigorating experiences of this type is sustainable.

### ***Compensation for Non-profit Work***

In most cases, students completing an EEP earn no money during a term when they originally anticipated earning a paid co-op position. This is perhaps the largest drawback of the EEP program. The DAAP co-op team is committed to partnering with CCPS leadership, the CCPS industry advisory board, and CCPS partnership development staff to explore ways to obtain funding for service to non-profits. This is something that has been in place in the past and we believe re-focusing efforts to think about this in new ways can provide a huge benefit to students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Student, faculty, staff, alumni, and employer receptiveness to the Experiential Explorations Program (EEP) has allowed it to grow into a legitimate alternative to traditional co-op for students in creative majors. The DAAP co-op faculty are poised and energized to continue innovating to ensure the EEP program will remain a robust alternative that evolves alongside student learning needs for years to come.



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