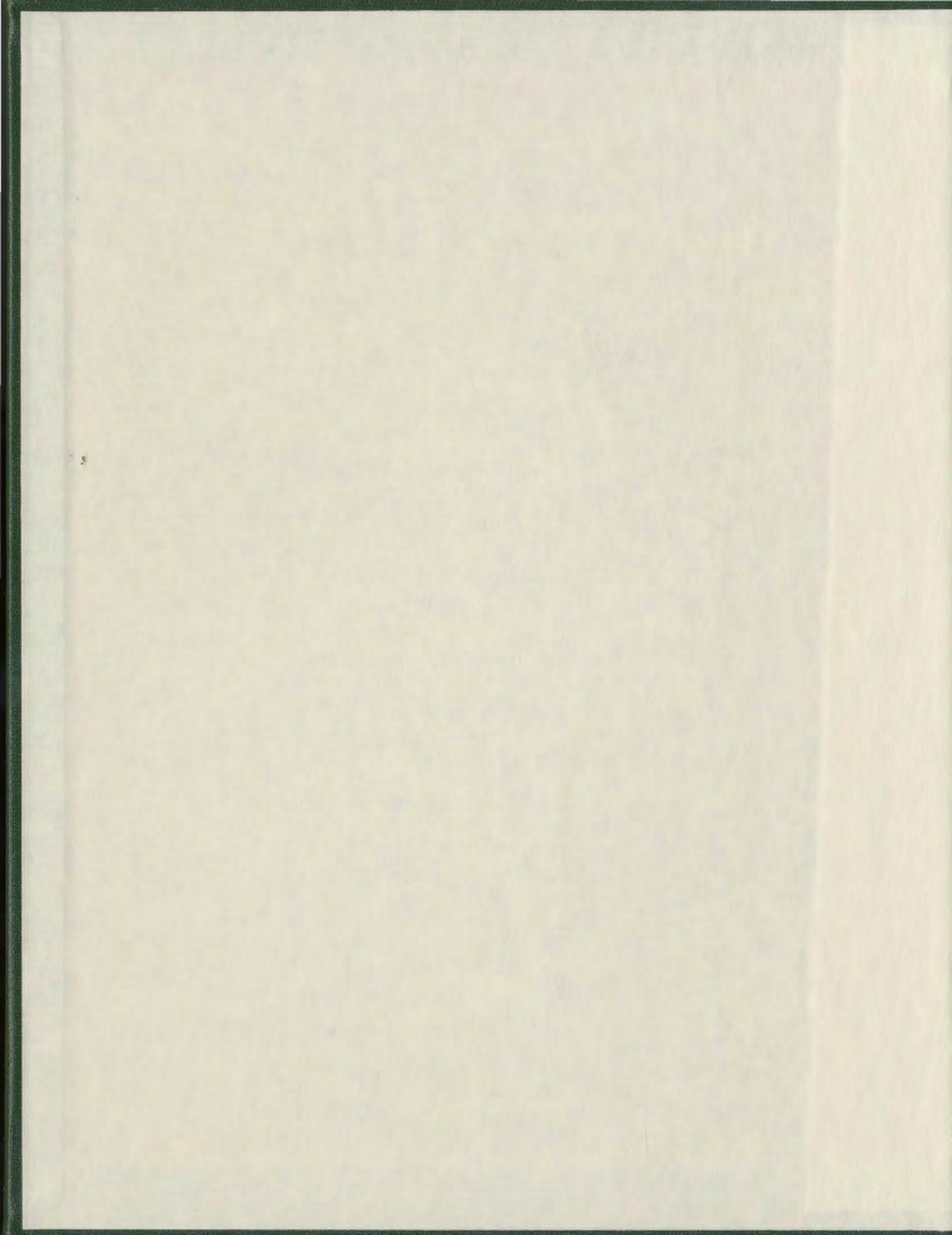


# PERCEPTIONS OF RISK IN CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION

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# PERCEPTIONS OF RISK IN CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION

BY

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my best friend and partner,  
Grant, and our wonderful daughters, Lily and Elizabeth,  
three of the funniest people I know.

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative descriptive case study examined co-operative education coordinators' perceptions of legal and ethical risks in co-operative education programs in Canadian universities. Fourteen coordinators from across Canada participated in one-on-one interviews. Specifically coordinators were asked about their perceptions of their responsibilities and liabilities for the risks that students face in the workplace, the risks the students pose in the workplace, the risks to the employer, the risks to the institution, and the risks to the coordinators themselves.

The coordinators who participated in this study identified numerous potential risks associated with co-operative education to each of the co-operative partners; however, the student was perceived as the partner who is the most at-risk. Coordinators in general were risk aware and conscious of their role in protecting students. Largely, the coordinators believed that co-operative education is a safe endeavour and examples of extreme situations were very rare.

Coordinators' opinions varied quite considerably when asked about the extent of their responsibility in assessing and minimizing risk. Generally coordinators understood risk assessment and risk management to be part of their role and agreed that responsibility for minimizing risk should be shared between the coordinator, the employer, and the student, but the balance of who was more and who was less responsible varied considerably. Many coordinators expressed that they were not clear where the boundaries of their responsibilities lay and that they often used their own judgment to determine what they were and what they were not responsible for, rather than being guided by institutional policy. It is likely that the subjectivity in

coordinators' perceptions of their responsibilities and variability in understandings of risk and liability result from unclear or poorly articulated formal policies and procedures in many cases.

Coordinators stated that their universities had done nothing to prepare them to reduce potential risks in co-operative education and that largely their abilities to do so were learned from colleagues or resulted from common sense and previous work experiences. Coordinators rely, in large part, on their own tacit knowledge to reduce risk rather than relying on expert advice from risk managers. Seemingly, university administrators and risk managers are doing little, if anything to participate in risk communication with the great majority of this population of coordinators. Despite the lack of preparation offered by universities, coordinators largely felt supported by the policies of their institution, although there was a strong sense that coordinators sought clarity or more information on policies related to risk.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

### Background Information and Relevance of the Research

The Canadian Association for Co-operative Education (CAFCE), which is the voice for post-secondary co-operative education in Canada, defines co-operative education as “a program which alternates periods of academic study with periods of work experience in appropriate fields of business, industry, government, social services and the professions” (CAFCE, 2009b, para. 1). The aim of a co-operative education program is to integrate theoretical classroom instruction with practical and authentic on-the-job learning in the student’s area of study (Billet & Choy, 2011, p. 25; Katula & Threnhauser, 1999, p. 244; Wessels, 2005, p. 6).

Co-operative education is defined by the unique tripartite relationship between the student, the employer, and the university, each of which has certain legal and ethical rights and responsibilities in that relationship. It is not simply employment any more than it is simply education and thus carries with it the legal and ethical considerations of both.

While there is little or no Canadian case law dealing with liability and negligence in co-operative education according to extensive searches on the Canadian Legal Information Institute (CanLII) database, there is an increasing awareness in higher education of the legal vulnerabilities of universities. It is widely accepted that universities, like many organizations, are increasingly concerned with managing their exposure to risk, which is likely spurred on by fear of litigation.

I perceive that there is an increasing focus on risk management at Memorial in general and within the Division of Co-operative Education specifically. This increased focus on risk

(and presumably liability) is in part institutionally driven through initiatives such as the new policies spearheaded by the International Centre regarding students who travel internationally on university sponsored activities and the presence of the Division of Enterprise Risk Management. In addition there seems to me to be a climate and culture of risk awareness in co-operative education at the moment; I am increasingly feeling that I am liable and accountable, both within the university and in the community, for students on work terms.

As a Co-operative Education Coordinator at Memorial University of Newfoundland I work equally within the university and out in the community. I work very closely with students and faculty members from ten programs in the Faculties of Arts and Science to help students secure meaningful work term experiences to enhance student learning and provide students with the opportunity to apply the theories and principles of their classroom learning in a real-world situation. I also work closely with employers, initially to secure jobs for students but more importantly to encourage the co-operative education employer to support student learning in the workplace through carefully considered work assignments and on-the-job learning objectives.

My increasing awareness of liability was heightened by an alarming situation that arose recently at a Canadian university that I became aware of only anecdotally. A student received a failing grade for a work term as a result of gross misconduct at work, for which he was terminated by his employer. The student appealed the failure, claiming that the co-operative education coordinator had not specifically indicated that that behaviour was not allowed in the workplace. The appeal was not successful because the coordinator was able to demonstrate that the student had attended a professional development session where professional ethics and the need to adhere to the employer's policies had been discussed, but the onus was on the coordinator to demonstrate that the student had been informed about how to behave at work.

The appeal was founded on the actions (or lack thereof) of the coordinator, making the coordinator responsible (or not) for students' actions in the workplace. When I became aware of this situation I was immediately concerned and reviewed my own practices to ensure that I was providing the necessary information to protect my students, my employer, and myself.

In response to this situation specifically and to the increasing culture and awareness of risk in co-operative education in general, I have put a number of measures in place to mitigate that risk including increased professional development seminars on professional and ethical behaviour for students and increased use of agreements and learning contracts between the student and the Division of Co-operative Education as well as between the student and the employer. Preliminary discussions with my colleagues suggest that this increased awareness of risk is not unique to me. I am curious to discover how coordinators here at Memorial and at other Canadian universities perceive the levels of risk in the tripartite relationship in co-operative education.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to determine qualitatively what coordinators perceive as the risks, both legal and ethical, that are associated with co-operative education. Specifically coordinators were asked about their perceptions of their responsibilities and liabilities for the risks they feel students face in the workplace, the risks the students pose in the workplace, the risks to the employer, the risks to the institution, and the risks to the coordinators themselves. This research seeks to discover a rich and thick description and account of co-operative education coordinators' perceptions of risk. Coordinators' accounts of their understandings of risk in co-operative education will illustrate the complexities of the situation and the differences

of opinion, situations and experience that coordinators encounter through their work with students, employers, and other university employees.

This research seeks to add to the body of knowledge about coordinators' perceptions of risk associated with co-operative education specifically and about institutional liability and risks in higher education in general. It seeks to explain coordinators' perceptions of risk from an individual as well as from a group of related individuals' perspectives, recognizing that people perceive and experience the world in many different and valid ways and that there is a wealth of information to be drawn from coordinators' experiences and perceptions of risk in co-operative education.

The outcomes of this research could provide information to administrators about professional development activities and additional supports that could be provided to coordinators to help them understand risk and manage their students' and their own exposure to risks. In addition the research will provide information to those engaged in risk management in post-secondary environments about what university employees perceive as their role in risk assessment and risk management. Ultimately this research should serve to strengthen the policies and procedures that universities enact to protect students.

### **Research Questions**

A number of key research questions associated with this topic include:

- What risks do co-operative education coordinators perceive are associated with co-operative education?
  - What risks do students pose?
  - What risks do students face?

- What risks do coordinators face?
- What are the risks to the institution?
- What are the risks to the employer?
- What do coordinators feel they are personally responsible for or liable for?
- How do coordinators understand risk and institutional liability in general?
- How do universities prepare co-operative education coordinators to reduce risk?
- Do coordinators feel they are supported (or not supported) by the policies of their institution?

This chapter has provided information on co-operative education and my role as a researcher interested in risk in co-operative education. It also discussed the relevance and purpose of this research and outlined the research questions to be addressed. The following chapter provides a summary of the literature on this topic.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Canadian Universities and the Law

Until the mid-twentieth century Canadian universities occupied a uniquely independent and autonomous position in society and operated according to their own internal policies and procedures, as a sanctuary for exploration, discovery, and academic pursuits (Hannah, 1998, p. 1). Traditionally the Canadian courts have demonstrated their reluctance to make decisions in disputes between universities and students, deferring decisions on academic matters to the university's internal procedures (Thompson & Slade, 2011, p. 1), see *Jaffer v. York University* (Jaffer v. York Univeristy, 2010, ONCA 654) and *Alghaithy v. University of Ottawa*, (Alghaithy v. University of Ottawa, 2012, ONSC 142) for recent decisions. A decision in 1981, still cited in many rulings today states:

The courts should use restraint and be slow to intervene in university affairs by means of discretionary writs whenever it is still possible for the University to correct its errors with its own institutional means.... The courts should be reluctant to intervene in university affairs (Paine v. University of Toronto, 1981, OJ3187).

Universities in Canada are considered to be legal "persons" with private relationships with students that are defined by the principles of contract law and tort law (Hannah, 1998, p. 7). In addition, Canadian universities are also subject to many aspects of public law including statutory law, administrative law, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, given that the mandate of universities to provide a public service is legislated and funded by the state (Hannah, pp. 8-10).

Canada's neighbour, the United States of America, is widely recognized to be a more litigious nation than Canada, but recent events reported in *University Affairs* (Mullens, 2008) and *Macleans On Campus* (Deehas, 2012) suggest this may be changing. Students are increasingly suing universities for perceived infractions of their duties and obligations and more and more cases involving universities and students are appearing on court dockets in Canada.

In the recent past, the law and legal concerns have worked their way into every facet of university activities; a cursory review of virtually every Canadian university directory presents an Enterprise Risk Management Office, charged with reducing the university's exposure to risk as part of an integrated, strategic, and enterprise-wide approach to reducing risk, thus legal action and other negative consequences. There is a paucity of research on the law and higher education in Canada and it was not until the late twentieth century that any meaningful material about legal issues affecting postsecondary education was published at all; however, the number of court cases involving Canadian students and universities increased steadily, even exponentially, in the second half of the twentieth century (Hannah, p. 3).

### **Co-operative Education in Canada**

Co-operative education degree programs include extended periods of full-time work as an integral and mandatory part of a student's academic program. The aim of a co-operative education program is to integrate theoretical classroom instruction with practical and authentic on-the-job learning in the student's area of study (Billet & Choy, 2011, p. 25; CAFCE, 2009a; Katula & Threnhauser, 1999, p. 244; Wessels, 2005, p. 6).

A recent Ipsos Reid online poll of 1,493 adult Canadians revealed that one-in-seven Canadians with post-secondary education participated in a co-operative education program (Ipsos Reid, 2010, p. 1), which demonstrates the large numbers of students, employers and

universities that could be potentially affected by risks, including legal and ethical issues associated with co-operative education.

Academic research on co-operative education worldwide, and especially in Canada, is in its infancy and there is a limited, albeit growing, body of literature on this topic. Zegwaard and Coll (2011) argue that the practice of co-operative education and research on co-operative education has matured considerably over the last ten years (p. 9). Wilson (1988) argues that research about co-operative education in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s was applied and evaluative, in response to problems and issues related to program development and the operation of co-operative education program. He laments that “co-operative education research to date has fallen short of the ideal of scientific inquiry to illuminate relationship, predict effects, explain findings in light of existing theory, or contribute to theory development” (p. 83). A group of experienced co-operative education professionals at a conference in Denver, Colorado nearly a decade later described research on co-operative education as sketchy, limited, spotty, scarce, and uncertain (Bartkus & Stull, 1997, p. 7). Currently, research on co-operative education is substantive enough to support two dedicated journals; the *Journal of Co-operative Education and Internships* and the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* as well as several recent publications pulling together established literature on best practices, learning theories, models of co-operative education, and discipline-specific topics related to co-operative education (Zegwaard & Coll, pp. 9-10). Despite the growth and maturation of research about co-operative education, there remains little to no research on the legal and ethical risks involved in co-operative education in general, although there is a group of researchers at Waterloo University currently researching risks in international work terms (J. Pretti, personal communication, December 1, 2011).

## Co-operative Education and the Law

Hannah's (1998) detailed examination of all Canadian court cases up to 1998 between post-secondary institutions and students, as well as a review of those beyond that date show that a serious legal action has never been brought by a student from a co-operative education program against a university in Canada; there is no body of case law or any direct legal precedents to draw from in a discussion of serious legal risks in co-operative education.

A small number of disputes related to co-operative education students have been before the courts since 2000 on a variety of issues (See Appendix 1), two of which are noteworthy.

One case involved a student enrolled on an engineering work term who died in a car accident when driving home from his workplace (WCAT-2009-01504, 2009, CanLII 48208 (BC WCAT)). The student had worked 96.5 hours over the previous eight days and was provided accommodation two hours' drive from his work site. His family claimed that his poor working conditions were the cause of the accident. The Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia was unable to investigate the matter because the crash was offsite. The family did not pursue a case with the university. However, this case raises important questions to consider regarding the university's role in ensuring safe working conditions for co-operative education students. What can coordinators reasonably be expected to know and what reasonable action can they be expected to take to protect their students while on a work term? If the coordinator was aware of the working conditions, could the family have claimed the coordinator was negligent in his or her duties?

The second notable case is against University of Waterloo co-operative education student Suresh Sriskandarajah (a case reported on widely in the media naming him Waterloo Suresh)

who is currently facing extradition to the United States where he will face terrorism-related charges that could see him imprisoned for 25 years, according to the *National Press* (Bell, 2010). It is alleged that Sriskandarajah began working with the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka while he was on a work term from the University of Waterloo; three other University of Waterloo students are also involved in this case. As a result of the allegations the University of Waterloo ordered an external audit of the university's Tamil student club ("University of Waterloo probes Tamil club's books," 2006). It was later reported in the *National Press* (Bell, 2012) that "the audit of the Tamil student group found no financial irregularities but a review of the university's work placement program recommended closer monitoring by campus and diplomatic officials of students who conduct their co-ops abroad" (para. 6). This is damning to the coordinators at the University of Waterloo, suggesting that they should have been monitoring Sriskandarajah more closely. Are they suggesting that if they had been monitoring him more closely they may have been more aware of the situation or that they would have been able to prevent his alleged involvement with the Tamil Tigers? It is unlikely at best that a coordinator could monitor a situation like this closely enough to be of any assistance to the student or the authorities involved, hence the value of this recommendation is questionable. Regardless, while the audit is not part of a legal action, it does demonstrate that the reviewer finds co-operative education coordinators at least partly responsible for student actions on work terms abroad.

### **The Rise of Risk Awareness and Risk Theory**

It is important to distinguish between risk and uncertainty at the outset. According to risk managers, risk refers to future adverse occurrences that can be statistically calculated based on their probability (Lofstedt & Boholm, 2009, p. 3; Lupton, 1999, p. 7). Uncertainty refers to events that cannot be predicted or characterized in terms of probability (Lofstedt & Boholm, p.

3). There is a great divide among risk researchers, some of whom characterize risk as positivistic, acknowledging facts and causality, while others view risk subjectively in terms of perception and understanding tempered by beliefs, opinions, and values (Lofstedt & Boholm, p 4).

My research focuses on perceptions of risk and views understandings of risk in idealistic terms rather than strictly realistic terms, following the dominant view in sociology and anthropology that risk is a concept that is constructed in reference to social, historical, and cultural conditions (Arnoldi, 2009, p. 15). I take a social constructionist approach that argues that risks are never fully objective but are constituted through an individual's knowledge, experiences, and relationships and are therefore dynamic, contextual, and historical (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003, p. 12). Since reality is interpreted involving reproduction of meaning and knowledge through social interaction, individuals continually construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct reality so its meanings are ever changing. Risk, or more importantly, perceptions of risk are therefore constantly changed and negotiated through social interaction, understanding, and meaning. According to Lupton (1999) "this approach to risk highlights the importance of understanding the embeddedness of understanding and perceptions of risk, and emphasizes that these understandings and perceptions often differ between actors who are located in difference contexts and thus bring competing logics to bear upon risk" (p. 30). Accordingly what is perceived as risky for some individuals may be judged differently for others based on their historical and cultural context.

Lupton (1999) argues that society is increasingly preoccupied with notions of risk and fear as a result of intensifying feelings of uncertainty, complexity, ambivalence, and disorder and a growing distrust of authority and the threats inherent in everyday life (pp. 11-12). In

sociological circles risk is often viewed as a focal point, illustrating widespread feelings of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty and that we are living in a time of major disruptive social change.

Lupton argues that while risk management strategies and risk assessment techniques aim to reduce uncertainty, they often have the opposite effect of increasing anxiety about risk through increased awareness and focus (p. 13). Risk management activities including identifying potential risk, categorizing and ranking risks, mitigating risks, and creating emergency management plans, serve to promote and highlight the myriad of things in our increasingly complex and interconnected social world that can potentially create catastrophic consequences for us all.

### **The Rise of Risk Management**

Researchers generally agree that organizations are increasingly concerned with managing their exposure to risk (Brewer & Walker, 2010, p. 19; Katter, 2002; Mark, 2001, p. 33; Lupton, 1999, pp.10-11; McWilliam, 2007, p. 311), which is likely spurred on by fear of litigation, financial loss, and loss of reputation. Huber (2010) goes further stating that contemporary social theorists view “the growth of risk to be the distinguishing feature of modernity” (p. 114). Beck (1992) in his seminal publication on risk also argues that modernity is about the eradication of risk or minimizing exposure to risk. The focus on risk from a socio-political perspective is arguably associated with the introduction of New Public Management in the United Kingdom in the 1980s and the emergence of neoliberalism worldwide. There has been a trend in the last thirty years that has seen an increase in the role of the private sector in traditionally government provided services, including education, and increasing movement in public institutions toward corporate styles of governance and private sector management styles as well as repeated calls for accountability and thrift in public spending (Besley & Peters, 2006, p. 818). McWilliam (2007)

argues that universities operate in a new educational market where faculty and management must demonstrate their usefulness to any and all potential sponsors. She laments that “Western governments are repositioning themselves as buyers of education services rather than patrons of education” (p. 315). The rise of neoliberalism has gone hand in hand with the rise of the importance of private decision making and its advantage over public rights and goals (Froese-Germain, Hawkey, Larose, McAdie, & Shaker, 2006, p. 3). In effect, private sector agendas, unilaterally geared to a profit-making model, are driving government’s approach to public institutions illustrated by the increasing emphasis and scrutiny on accountability, which has amplified and routinized institutional risk management (Huber, p. 119). Neoliberalism values private entrepreneurialism over public welfare provision, thus it values risk taking over risk sharing (Arnoldi, 2009, p. 18). The rise of risk management within corporations and institutions is an expression of, or possibly a reaction to, a culture that values and promotes risk taking.

Institutionalized forms of risk management, often referred to as enterprise risk management, refer to the formal, integrated, strategic, enterprise-wide systems of identifying potential risks, the management of risks in line with the enterprise’s level of acceptable risks, and the provision of assurances regarding achieving the objectives of the enterprise (Fraser & Simkins, 2010, p. 3). Risk management is founded on the belief that “probability can reduce the uncertainty of the future to known risks and probabilities” (Arnoldi, 2009, p. 34).

### **University Risk Management**

Litigation is more commonplace in the commercial world than it is in higher education, but it can be argued that as universities become increasingly competitive and operate more and more in line with business principles with neoliberal agendas (Jones, 2004, p. 44; Snowdon, 2005, p. v), students increasingly perceive themselves as clients or consumers of services and are

thus more willing to litigate for perceived or actual infractions of the university's duties (Katter, 2002, p. 390).

When it comes to university co-operative education programs the situation is even more complicated in that students are at once consumers of educative services and employees. Universities are also increasingly involved in external collaborations and business partnerships such as co-operative education programs, research and development projects, and sponsorship agreements that increase the university's exposure to risk and litigation from the business community for real or perceived infractions. A recent study on work-integrated learning in Ontario post-secondary institutions shows that only "one-quarter of university faculty reported providing training and support for employers/site supervisors on coordinating risk management and insurance details" (Peters, 2012, p. 43), despite the apparent expanding focus in universities on risk management and the exposure to risk that co-operative education programs bring to universities, students, and employers.

There are numerous legal and ethical implications and risks involved in the co-operative education relationship for the three partners involved: the student, the university, and the employer.

### **The Potential Risks: Educational Negligence**

The tort of negligence occurs when one person with a duty of care to another does not live up to that duty of care resulting in damage or injury. In cases of negligence the following four elements must be proven present: duty, breach of duty, injury, and proximate cause (Hannah, 1998, p. 221). Generally speaking there are two main areas of negligence in higher education and they are negligence causing physical injury and educational negligence or

educational malpractice (Katter, 2002, pp.390-391). Katter notes that because of difficulties in proof and causation, a general claim of educational malpractice against an institution would be unlikely to succeed (p. 391). Without reference to specific negligent acts, omissions, or statements the student cannot identify a failure to teach as the cause of the failure to learn, given that learning is influenced by many factors outside the classroom or learning environment including other student support services, past educational attainment levels, socioeconomic background, race, and gender (Mills, Heyworth, Rosenwax, Carr, & Rosenberg, 2009).

According to Hannah (1998), at the point of writing his book, educational malpractice had not been recognized as a legitimate legal action in Canada (p. 7). However, recent events in the case of *Gauthier v. Saint Germain* (Gauthier v. Saint Germain, 2010, ONCA 309) show this is changing. Gauthier, a doctoral student from the University of Ottawa claimed she did not graduate as a direct result of the university's failure to provide her with adequate thesis supervision. The court declined to make a determination on this case on the grounds that this case was academic in nature, upholding the notion that the university's internal procedures represent the proper forum for dealing with issues of an academic nature. The Court of Appeal overturned the decision, finding that courts do have jurisdiction in academic matters if the case is framed in tort or breach of contract. The Supreme Court of Canada refused to make a further ruling on this matter. Knelman (2012) reporting in *University Affairs* states that the decision of the Court of Appeal "has effectively established a small, newly defined area in which universities no longer have exclusive jurisdiction in disputes with their students" (p. 31). However, Thompson and Slade (2011) argue that "the Court of Appeal's decision is arguably at odds with many other decisions and does not provide a clear test for lower court judges to determine when an academic matter should proceed through the judicial process" (p. 1)

suggesting that the debate will continue regarding whether the cases of educational negligence will be decided in Canadian courts.

When attention is turned to specific acts or statements, the situation is much changed and the potential for liability is increased. For co-operative education the specific acts or statements could consist of the work that takes place between the co-operative education coordinator and the students to prepare them to apply for and be offered work terms. For example, any advice or information given to a student, actual or prospective, could form the basis of litigation. In addition, action could be taken against the institution for negative consequences that result from an act or omission by the employer, the university or a third party that formed part of the student's work term. In co-operative education a claim of educational malpractice could result if a student felt the university had been negligent in its duty to fully vet the employer and the job description for relevance to the student's academic program and the student's level of education. CAFCE states as the first of several criteria in its co-operative education standards that "each work situation is developed and/or approved by the co-operative education institution as a suitable learning situation" (CAFCE, 2006, p. 1). Adherence to CAFCE's standards should serve to protect institutions involved in co-operative education from educational negligence.

### **The Potential Risks: Duty of Care and Negligence**

Middlemiss (2000) arguing from a British context, suggests that universities do have a duty of care for their students participating in external activities that form part of the student's course of study and which are controlled by university staff (p. 79). The primary question that co-operative education coordinators need to ask is: does the co-operative education coordinator have a duty of care for students before and during their work terms? The answer in legal terms is unquestionably yes; all professionals have a duty of care to those who are affected by their

actions, but how far does that duty of care reach? What is the extent of the co-operative education coordinator's role and responsibility in exercising duty of care for students in regard to their work terms? How is that role perceived differently among coordinators at the same institution and between coordinators at different institutions? If a student is injured during the course of his/her work term is the co-operative education coordinator liable? The corollary of that question is does the co-operative education coordinator have any responsibility for the student's actions in the work place? Is the coordinator responsible if the employer sustains damages as a result of the actions of the student? These questions have yet to be tested in Canadian courts but should be considered by institutions who wish to understand their exposure to risk and liability and possibly pre-empt litigation with potentially great cost, both financially and in terms of reputation. Given that co-operative education students are still considered students while they are on a work term, it is clear that the university maintains a reasonable duty of care for students while they are working.

In order to be deemed negligent a claimant must prove a breach of duty of care and damage resulting from the breach (Birtwistle, 2002, p. 242). Birtwistle argues from a British context that universities (and therefore university employees) have an academic duty of care as well as a responsibility for physical and pastoral care for their students (p. 242). The same should apply to co-operative education in Canadian universities: coordinators have a duty of care for their students on a number of levels.

### **The Potential Risks: Injuries to Students on Work Terms**

According to CAFCE in order for a job to be eligible to be considered a work term, the conditions of employment must be full-time and paid (CAFCE, 2006, p. 2). As a result students on work terms from most postsecondary institutions in Canada are employees and are covered by

their employer's insurance policies and by any legislation governing employment, compensation, and occupational health and safety. In Newfoundland and Labrador students on work terms are paid employees of the host organization and thus are entitled to the same levels of compensation if an injury were to occur on the job as any other employee according to Article 42 of the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Act (Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly, 2009). It is likely that a student's most successful claim, if an employer were to be shown to have been grossly negligent in causing the injury, would be against the employer rather than the university assuming the university or the coordinator could demonstrate that reasonable care was taken to assess the employer and that a reasonable duty of care was exercised for the student on the work term.

### **The Potential Risks: Responsibility of Universities to Employers**

What is not clear from the lack of case law in this area is what is the university's and the coordinator's duty to the sponsoring co-operative education employer? What is the university's legal responsibility to compensate employers if they suffer loss as a result of their student employee's acts or omissions?

Peak and O'Hara (1999) outline the case of a student intern from an American university who worked for a business in the information technology sector. The student had excellent productivity and was well regarded at work but once the student returned to university it was discovered that the student's work was worthless and had to be redeveloped at a cost of \$150,000 (p. 56). In this case the business decided to do nothing in order to preserve a good relationship with the university and to save the company from embarrassment, although it did determine that the university had misrepresented the student's capabilities. If this had gone to court however, would the courts have found the university responsible, at least in part, for the actions of its

student interns in the workplace or are student actions on internships and work terms the responsibility of the employer? According to Peak and O'Hara, the onus of proof would be on the university that it had not misrepresented the student's abilities. Presumably the university would argue that it is the responsibility of the workplace supervisor to support student progress through proper supervision and careful review of the student's work.

In co-operative education, the student almost always represents his or her own skills and abilities to the employer directly through the job application and interview process. However, by providing employers access to students from a given program the university presents students as having a certain degree of knowledge and academic success. It would not be unreasonable for any employer to assume a student has certain capabilities if he or she is in a co-operative education program and thus could extend liability to the university if the student were found to be unsatisfactory.

### **The Potential Risks: International Work Terms**

Co-operative education is just one of a number of programs that universities typically offer that include international travel. There is a growing body of international case law surrounding institutional liability and students travelling abroad on university activities, in addition to the case of Waterloo Suresh discussed in the section on co-operative education and the law. An action was taken against St. Andrews University in Scotland in 2000 where a student claimed a lack of care by the university when it sent her on an exchange to Ukraine, where she alleges she was raped (Birtwistle, 2002, p. 231). A similar case in the United States was launched by a female student who alleges that she was raped by her host while on a college study abroad program in Japan, which was eventually settled out of court (Freedman, 2002, p. 10). Birtwistle also discusses several similar American cases where students travelling abroad

on university functions alleged they were raped (p. 236). In many of these cases the university relied heavily on the use of waivers with exemption or limitation clauses, which sought to reduce or eliminate the university's liability for injury. Kast (1997) argues that while waivers should be used in university international travel agreements they must be well drafted in order to be enforceable given that broad release agreements have been ruled in American courts to be unenforceable. Choy (2003) also supports the use of waivers and informed consent forms to reduce liability and manage risk in off-campus university activities (p. 12).

Lamme (2007) notes that minimizing risk in university related international travel is a function of understanding the risks associated with a particular destination or country, noting any cultural differences between the home and destination countries, and making sure that the nature of the trip and its itinerary are well understood (p. 32). Additionally the university should make the students aware that they are subject to the laws of the host country and not of Canada while they are abroad and that criminal action can be taken if a student breaks the law.

Co-operative education coordinators simply cannot keep current and know all the risks associated with a student's destination country given that they can have dozens of students travelling internationally to a multitude of different locations each year. Moreover, giving wrong or misleading information could also lead to litigation. Because of the duration of the stay for a co-operative education student travelling abroad for a work term (typically at least 12 weeks), the exact nature of the trip and the itinerary are impossible to predetermine. For example students travelling internationally for a work term may be required to travel to a location outside of the host city or even to a third country as part of their work requirements. What coordinators can do however is conduct a risk audit and meet with the student to review the country specific information on the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade website (Thomas,

2001). In addition a coordinator could be armed with a checklist of places and phone numbers that students should equip themselves with including the nearest hospital or health clinic, telephone numbers or addresses of the police station, and health/travel insurance information. Coordinators should also ask students to advise them if they are travelling to other locations or countries as part of their work. Co-operative education programs should make it mandatory for students to register with the Canadian Embassy or Consulate in their host country.

Universities should encourage students to take responsibility for researching and preparing for living and working at their destination. Thomas (2001) cautions universities to beware of what help they provide students in terms of accommodation, travel, and advice since “the more responsibility that the institution takes on behalf of the student, the greater the institution’s risk of liability” (para. 6).

### **Liability in Co-operative Education**

Peak and O’Hara (1999) state that out of the three parties in the co-operative relationship the student is the least likely to be held primarily liable for the unfavourable outcomes of his or her actions in the workplace (p. 68). They go on to argue that the employer as the direct supervisor and trainer and the university as the advisor and teacher are the liable parties who should both be prepared to mitigate unfavourable outcomes. Their conclusion is that primary liability rests with the university, the employer and the faculty supervisor (or by implication the co-operative education coordinator), in that order (p. 68). In the main they argue that the university is primarily liable because it is the primary beneficiary of an internship program since internships serve to test the quality of its programs and provide a vehicle for assessment, validation, and modifications to its degree programs (p. 71). They add that employers hire students based on the university’s judgement of the students’ suitability, thus increasing the

university's liability for the students' actions in the workplace. It is not difficult to see the flaws in this logic however, given that employers also receive enormous benefits from internships and co-operative education students. Sattler (2011) notes many benefits that employers receive from hiring students from programs such as co-operative education including improved productivity, recruitment and screening of potential future employees, student creativity and motivation, cost-savings, increasing community connections with post-secondary institutions, and commitment to the community and the profession (pp.67-73). Peak and O'Hara fail to quantify or qualify how they judge universities to benefit more from the relationship than either of the other two parties. It is not clear exactly how accurately Peak and O'Hara's analysis applies in a Canadian context given the differing legal systems and the culture of litigiousness that is widely recognized to exist in the United States.

### **Minimizing Risk**

Katter (2002) identifies three risk management strategies available to universities: professional indemnity insurance, policies and practices designed to minimize the risk of negligence, and use of disclaimers (p. 396). Freedman (2002) argues that the best way for universities to manage their risk is "to ensure the institution is taking 'reasonable care' to put in place appropriate policies and procedures" (p. 10). While the consultation and development process for the policies and procedures may be lengthy, a centralized and organized approach to risk management will benefit all parties who may be exposed to risky situations as part of co-operative education programs.

Researchers also suggest that in order to minimize the university's liability it should ensure that all parties have a clear understanding of the respective statuses, responsibilities, and duties in the relationship (Franke, 2008; Mark, 2001, p. 33; Peak & O'Hara, 1999, p. 72).

Clearly there will be some overlap in responsibility since both the employer and the university have a vested interest in the productivity of the student, the former in terms of work output and the latter in terms of learning to supplement the student's academic program. However a learning contract that clearly delineates each party's responsibilities and objectives should partly serve to mitigate legal challenges (Peak & O'Hara, pp. 72-73). Researchers also suggest the use of an errors and omissions policy that would formally alert the employer to potential errors as well as a liquidated damages clause that would define the university's maximum liability (Peak & O'Hara, pp. 73-74).

During the 1990s there was a movement in co-operative education in the United States to formalize the student's obligations in the relationship between the university and the employer (Mark, 2001, p. 33). Co-operative education practitioners were concerned that students were behaving unethically and sought to correct problematic student conduct and somewhat alleviate the potential for litigation. Examples of unethical student behaviour include students misrepresenting their skills and experiences in their job applications, accepting more than one work term position, misuse of their employer's equipment, sharing confidential information, misreporting hours worked, theft of information or property, acting in an unprofessional manner, and other criminal activity. In effect, unethical student behaviour was increasing the university's exposure to risk and as a consequence policies and procedures were sought to minimize the risk that focused on the use of formal learning contracts that explicitly set out what was expected of the student.

While the presence of insurance for university employees provides coverage in the case of a legal action and thus minimizes risk to the institution and the individual, the effects of any

involvement in a lawsuit, personal or professional should not be minimized. Insurance should not be used as an invitation to act carelessly or worse, negligently.

It is clear that universities have a duty of care to their students in both on-campus and off-campus activities, including co-operative education students on work terms. Thus universities or university employees can be held liable for injury or harm suffered by a student as a result of a university activity if it can be shown that the university or its employee did not exercise reasonable duty of care. To complicate matters co-operative education students on work terms are nearly always paid employees of the host organization and hence are subject to the legislation that applies to any employee. Employers have legal obligations to their work term students in the same way they have legal obligations to their regular employees. It is not clear, however, how these obligations and these risks are understood, perceived, and acted upon by co-operative education coordinators

Logic suggests the best way to mitigate unfavourable outcomes and to protect all parties from litigation is to have clearly laid out roles and responsibilities for each party entering into the co-operative education relationship. However, at present the question of who is primarily liable in Canada for injury or harm to a student who is on a work term is unclear and will remain so until the question is tested in a court of law.

Chapter two provided a summary of the relevant literature on risk and liability in higher education and co-operative education. The following chapter outlines the specific methodology and methods followed in this research.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

Academic research is not a trifle and must be approached systematically and carefully in order to achieve valid and trustworthy results. The research design including the genre of research, the overall strategy, the methodology, and methods all play crucial roles in producing results that will make a meaningful contribution to the body of knowledge on a given topic. The selection of the topic of research is a personal one, one which should be born out of the researcher's interests and inner drive to obtain knowledge. My research on risk in co-operative education comes in part from my commitment to the pedagogy of experiential education in general and co-operative education in particular, as well as an interest in risk as the defining feature of modern life.

#### **The Qualitative Genre, Overall Strategy, and Rationale**

Research in the field of education seeks to make sense of the activities, policies, and institutions involved in organized learning (Pring, 2000, p. 17). Educational research focuses on teaching and learning, both of which are human, personal, and subjective activities. Qualitative research is "based on the assumption that reality is subjective and dependent on context" (McMillan & Wergin, 2002, p. 119). The methods used in qualitative research are inductive in nature and rely primarily on the collection of nonnumerical data. It is an "approach to social science research that emphasizes collecting descriptive data in natural settings, uses inductive thinking, and emphasizes understanding the subject's point of view" (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007, p. 274). The goal is to provide rich and thick descriptions and understandings that go beyond the surface of an issue or problem and provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon at many

levels. Qualitative research appreciates that the subjects of study experience the world around them uniquely and that there is value in exploring the uniqueness of that experience. It seeks to explain phenomena from an individual or from a group of related individuals' perspectives, recognizing that people perceive the world and experience learning in many different and valid ways and that there is a wealth of information to be drawn from personal experiences in education. Context and perception dictate how reality is interpreted; indeed perception is reality for each individual. In order to interpret an individual's reality researchers must seek to understand the context of the individual or group. It is logical then, to use qualitative or humanist approaches rather than sterile scientific positivist approaches to understand complex human emotion and behaviour, thus a qualitative approach is entirely appropriate to study how co-operative education coordinators perceive risk. Qualitative research on coordinators' perceptions of risk will provide a rich and thick account of how coordinators perceive and experience risk in their work.

The goal of my research is to understand how Co-operative Education Coordinators in Canadian universities perceive the risks associated with their work. To achieve this I need to understand how risk is experienced by Co-operative Education Coordinators and the greater context within which co-operative education operates in Canadian universities. I needed to understand coordinators' experiences of risk with students, faculty members and employers within the university and their experiences with students and employers in the workplace. I elicited from them how they understand and experience risk and what their perceptions of risk are. By the very nature of co-operative education programs, students operate between two entirely different contexts, the university and the workplace and this can result in conflict and

risk. Co-operative education students on a work term have a unique status, that of a student and an employee simultaneously.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative approach used case study as the methodology. Case studies represent a bounded unit, a phenomenon, or social group that can be readily seen as a single entity or a unit around which there are clear and defined boundaries (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 289; Creswell, 2008, p. 476; Stake, 2000, p. 436; Merriam, 2001, p. 191; Merriam, 2009, p. 40).

Cases are units of social life that are naturally occurring and that have defined boundaries; they are studied in order to capture their lived reality (Scott & Usher, 2011, p. 93). It is important to note that the members of the social unit or the case being studied also have experiences outside the boundary that defines them or outside their case; certainly we are all different things to different people at different times.

Case studies focus on what is shared and the context within which the shared experience or behaviour takes place. Cohen et al. (2011) argue that one of the strengths of case study research is that it embraces context as powerful and dynamic and that understanding the case in context is necessary to achieve an in-depth understanding of a case or phenomenon (p. 289). Case study researchers in education are often most interested in the activities, programs, and events that individuals take part in than they are in the group as an entity or in the shared patterns of behaviours exhibited by the group (Creswell, 2008, p. 476). The major criticism of case studies is that they lack generalizability given such intense focus on the particular of the case (Merriam, 2001, pp. 198-200; Pring, 2000, p. 41). At best theory development with case study research is “cumulative, in that as a greater number of cases is studied, the database becomes

more extensive and rich and the findings more reliable, enabling the research to generalize to larger populations” (Scott & Usher, 2011, p. 93).

Case study is an appropriate methodology for my research because co-operative education coordinators represent a single bounded unit with a shared set of practices and circumstances. Merriam (2009) argues that “by concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon” (pp. 42-43). I have achieved just that by concentrating on coordinators’ perceptions of risk to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the group and their understanding of risk. More specifically, this research is a descriptive case study, meaning that the end product is a rich and thick description and account of the coordinators’ perceptions and experiences with risk that illustrates the complexities of the situations and the differences of opinion and experience of risk in co-operative education.

### **Site and Population Selection**

In this research I used a criterion-based purposeful sampling technique with a quota or maximum variation in order to include a roughly representative subset of my given population, co-operative education coordinators. Coordinators from multiple universities with long standing co-operative education programs in multiple disciplines were invited to take part in this research in order to achieve a rich and thick understanding of how coordinators perceive risk in co-operative education across Canada. CAFCE has a growing mandate to support research about co-operative education in Canada and assisted me by sending an email to its membership on my behalf to introduce my research agenda and to provide legitimacy to my requests to participate in interviews (Appendix 2). This email invited interested coordinators to identify themselves to me directly or to their directors. Once CAFCE members were contacted, I followed up by email

with the directors of co-operative education programs in many Canadian universities (Appendix 3). Only universities with long-standing programs across multiple disciplines were selected for follow up emails in order to achieve comparable case sampling so that all the participating coordinators had similar work situations and shared other pertinent characteristics. I asked the directors to identify coordinators who might be appropriate research participants, using both reputational and ideal-typical sampling strategies. The former refers to selecting individuals based on the recommendation of experts and the latter refers to participants who are selected because they are the closest match to the ideal or best individual in the population (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). I followed up with an email to those coordinators identified by their directors (Appendix 4).

Through this method of selection I identified sixteen coordinators from across Canada who were nominated or who expressed interest in participating and who fit with the criteria for inclusion in this study. A sample of the consent form completed by each participant is included in Appendix 5.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

As a co-operative education coordinator since January 2009, I have experience working with students, university employees, and workplace employers in both positive and negative circumstances on campus and in the workplace. Part of my role is to support students and employers before and during work terms and to help identify and address areas of concern. I have a strong understanding of the risks that I perceive go hand in hand with my job and I have put many measures in place to reduce the risks to my students, to the students' employers, to the university, and to me personally and professionally. In an effort to expose my biases and beliefs

and provide a context for my interpretations of my research results, I have included the following section where I briefly outline my own perceptions of risk in co-operative education.

I work with students from undergraduate and graduate programs in the Faculties of Arts and Science at Memorial University of Newfoundland. It is my experience that undergraduate students are more vulnerable to risk and more likely to expose their coordinator and the university to risks than graduate students. This is typically the result of a lack of experience and maturity, as would be expected with any young person. Younger students are more likely than older more experienced students to misunderstand their employer's instructions or policies and less likely to seek information or clarification if they are confused. This can lead to dissatisfaction for both the student and the employer and may result in numerous consequences including poor student evaluation by the employer, failing the work term, inability for the student to connect theoretical learning with workplace activities, loss of a future co-operative education employer, and damage to the reputation of the university or the academic program. My approach is to provide undergraduate students with information, comprehensive professional development, and ongoing support in order to provide them with a safe environment in which to develop professional skills and to perform as expected in the workplace.

The risks with graduate students are quite different and mainly revolve around their need for sophisticated work placements. Graduate students typically have more focused research interests and are more career-oriented and are thus much more concerned with the kinds of work placements that are available.

Many of my students are international students and in my experience need much more support before and during their work terms and are more vulnerable to risk than domestic students. There is a higher need to educate international students before they start their work

terms in areas such as workplace cultures, acceptable and unprofessional behaviours, workplace policies, and communication. The risks that these students experience often start during the job competition. International students are disadvantaged in that their first language is often not English and they usually do not have the same networks and connections within the community that domestic students have through their family and friends. Levels of work experience and volunteer experience often vary between cultures, which puts some students at a disadvantage. I have also seen evidence of discrimination based on race on a number of occasions, where employers have selected only domestic students for interviews even in cases where the international student has better qualifications. Many international students fail to secure a work term, or secure work terms that are less relevant to their specific interests and their academic program or deemed less desirable. Risks during the work term can be as stated above with the undergraduate students.

Seasoned employers of co-operative education are typically better at reducing risk in co-operative education. Employers who are familiar with the process and the work that students are capable of performing, typically offer more appropriate work situations and provide students with better levels of support. Employers new to co-operative education benefit from more support from the coordinator in order to design a better work plan and to provide appropriate mentorship to the student while working.

The university and the sponsoring co-operative education department should take the lead in reducing risks. As the coordinator and orchestrator of the student-employer relationship, I have the best opportunity to minimize risk resulting from students' actions (or inactions) and to evaluate the employer as an appropriate partner in co-operative education. Through comprehensive professional development opportunities and written forms and agreements that

the student brings with them from the university to the workplace, the potential for risk should be reduced.

There are serious risks that students face in the workplace that could affect students from any program or background, regardless of age, experience, or country of origin. For example, who is responsible if a student sustains a physical injury as a result of a work term or is sexually harassed by a colleague in the workplace? A co-operative education student has a unique legal status as both an employee and a student and as such a legal action could be launched against either party. There is no Canadian case law to date to test the relationship or to indicate which party is primarily liable for students on work terms.

I have my own perceptions of risk and tacit knowledge of risk and co-operative education, but I will attempt to put those understandings aside, or bracket my own assumptions, in order to let my participants' voices speak through this research. It is not possible to be entirely objective, but by acknowledging and understanding my own subjectivity and stating it upfront, I will contextualize my own understandings of risk and allow the readers of my research to understand how my interpretations and potential theories were formed. This is in line with Merriam's (2009) assertion that when authors clarify their own assumptions it "allows the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data" (p. 219). My priority will be to present the views of my research participants and allow their voices and experiences to be heard through my research but also to be upfront about my own assumptions and worldview.

### **Data Collection Methods**

There are numerous data collection methods used by qualitative researchers studying education. More often than not, educational research takes places in schools and within

classrooms to shed light on the transactions between the teacher and the learner in all its complexities (Pring, 2000, p. 27), thus observation is probably the most common form of data collection in qualitative educational research. Observation in rigorous research refers to a systematic approach to observing people, events, behaviours, settings, and artifacts that allows the researcher to gather live data in naturally occurring social settings (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 456). The emphasis is on naturalistic systematic observation, thus the researcher does not have to rely on second-hand accounts of behaviours, facts, or events. The role of the researcher in observation lies on a continuum, from that of complete observer where the researcher only observes and is detached from the group, to that of complete participant where the researcher is a member of the group and conceals his or her role as an observer (Cohen et al., p. 457). My research focusses on coordinators' perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and understandings of the risks in co-operative education. This information cannot be gathered through observation; it can only be gathered through dialogue.

Questionnaires and surveys can also be used in qualitative research to find out information about a population's attitudes or beliefs. They usually consist of several standardized questions with structured response categories or open-ended responses administered by mail, email, telephone or in person (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, pp. 125-126).

Questionnaires are most appropriate for "making inferences about a large group of people based on data drawn from a relatively small number of individuals in that group" (Marshall & Rossman, p. 125). Their strength is that data is collected from a large number of participants and therefore produces more robust results (Scott & Usher, 2011, p. 78). By necessity this means that questionnaire responses can be easily compared and analysed, therefore they are ordinarily not used for examining or understanding complex social relationships or social constructs. The

data collected through questionnaires can be strong and generalizable, but it lacks the rich and thick description that my research will achieve, thus I did not rely on questionnaires or surveys.

Simply stated, interviews are focussed conversations for the purpose of gathering information (Berg, 1995, p. 29; Merriam, 2009, pp. 87-88). The process, techniques, and best practices used to gather information cannot be stated so simply and are a matter of debate (Berg, p. 29). Interviews allow the research participants to speak for themselves and to be explicit about the significance that they attach to the research topic. However, interview responses must still be interpreted and that depends largely on the understanding that the interviewer has of what the participant said in the interview. Pring (2000) states the same, “the interviewer inhabits his or her own unique world of beliefs and understandings. The responses would need to be filtered through those, and thereby become different from the beliefs and understandings of the person interviewed” (p. 40). Member checking, triangulation, and stating the researcher’s context and presuppositions are good measures to counteract the potential to misrepresent or misunderstand what the participants say.

There are three major types of interviews: standardized or formal interviews, unstandardized or informal interviews and semi-standardized or guided semi-structured interviews (Berg, p. 31). The definitions of each are straightforward and relatively obvious from their names. Pring (2000) suggests that interviews should be semi-structured in order to provide the participants the scope to expound the full significance of their actions or opinions (p. 39). A guided semi-structured interview was most appropriate for my research in that the discussion had a direction and a focus, but there was always room to navigate away from the questions should the need arise. Standardized or formal interviews could have acted as a barrier to reflection and interactions during the interviews that allow authentic accounts to emerge.

I interviewed sixteen Co-operative Education Coordinators from a total of twelve universities across Canada. The participants represented coordinators from a range of co-operative education programs from a number of different disciplines. Two of the participants worked exclusively with students travelling outside of Canada for work terms. It became apparent during the analysis stage that these two participants were not part of the case that I intended to study, so their data was omitted. This is explained in further detail in the section on my data analysis strategy. My research results are derived from interviews with fourteen Co-operative Education Coordinators from a total of ten Canadian universities.

My intention was to interview each participant in person rather than over the telephone, as telephone interviews do not foster the same levels of trust, intimacy, and understanding that face-to-face interviews allow. Creswell (2008) argues that the lack of direct contact through telephone interviews can “affect the interviewer’s ability to understand the interviewee’s perceptions of the phenomena” (p. 227). While I was not able to conduct every interview in person because of the distances involved impacting time and budgetary restraints, I was able to conduct twelve interviews in person with the other four taking place via telephone. I agree to a certain extent with Creswell’s comment above, however I am confident that I was able to understand the interviewee’s answers to my questions to the best of my ability despite the lack of direct contact. Interviews ranged in duration from 20 minutes to approximately one hour. All interviews were audiorecorded.

Interview questions should be open-ended and geared toward providing descriptive data in order to achieve valuable results (Merriam, 2009, p. 99). In addition multiple questions, leading questions (those that expose my own biases), or questions that can be answered with yes or no should be avoided (Merriam, pp. 99-100). Open-ended questions allow the participant to

provide the information that is most appropriate for them and allows the participant options without being forced into response possibilities (Creswell, 2008, pp. 226-227).

A list of questions that I used in each interview follows (Appendix 6):

#### Background information

1. How long have you worked as a co-op coordinator?
2. Do you work with students from one discipline or more than one discipline?
3. Do you work with domestic and international students?
4. Do your students travel nationally and internationally for work terms?

#### The coordinator's understanding of risk

5. Do you think your understanding of the risks associated with your work is strong or weak?
6. What are the risks to the partners in co-operative education?
7. What do you think are the most important or biggest risks to students, coordinators and institutions in co-operative education?

#### Risk management and the coordinator's role

8. Given that students on work terms are employees and adults, what is the extent of your responsibility in risk assessment and risk management?

#### Risk management, the coordinator's relationship with the institution

9. Do you think your understanding of institutional liability and institutional risk is strong or weak?
10. How does your institution prepare you to assess and minimize risky situations?
11. Do you feel supported or not supported by the policies of your institution?

#### Personal experience

12. Can you tell me about a time when you felt a student was at risk in the workplace?
13. Can you tell me about a time when you felt personally or professionally at risk as a result of a student's behaviour in the workplace?

I transcribed ten interviews, while six interviews were transcribed by two part-time student assistants funded through the Memorial University Career Experience Program (MUCEP) under my supervision. Time and volume of data prevented me from transcribing all of the interviews myself so I was more intimate with the data and the information from the interviews that I transcribed than those transcribed by the students. I counteracted this by

listening to the interview tapes and reading those transcriptions several times until I felt I was equally intimate and familiar with all interview data.

All research data was held securely in my office on the campus of Memorial University, either in a locked cabinet or on my password protected computer as appropriate.

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) data analysis “involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (p. 159). Ultimately the goal of data analysis is to find the answer to a research question. It is crucial to keep the research question at the forefront throughout the research in order to stay on track and to achieve what was set out to be achieved.

Data collection and analysis should be iterative and dynamic, meaning that researchers should cycle back and forth between data collection and analysis rather than treat them as discrete and separate activities (Creswell, 2008, p. 245; Merriam, 2009, p.169). My preliminary analysis began during the data collection phase, although these ideas and interpretations were free-formed hunches and educated guesses to begin with. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) advise researchers to speculate, vent, and keep track of wild and crazy ideas. I reflected carefully and deliberately on my experiences throughout my research and kept a journal of my thoughts, impressions, and gut feelings, which allowed me to explore ideas and try out different explanations and interpretations, as Merriam suggests (p. 170). I also bounced ideas off colleagues and friends in order to fully explore my thoughts through dialogue. I was careful to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of my research participants during these discussions. These speculations and hunches informed the next interview, and so on. Bogdan and Biklen

even suggest trying out these ideas and speculations on the participants to see if they can advance the analysis (p. 165). I found moderate success with this approach, although largely the responses to my interview questions reaffirmed emergent themes and categories without my having to do this. Continuous analysis during data collection and during the transcription process provided me with a starting point for my intensive analysis, by which point I already had a set of tentative categories and themes.

Once the data were collected I began the intensive analysis stage in order to construct the categories and themes that became my research findings. The transcribed data was read and re-read and the interviews were replayed where necessary in order to make meaning from the data or to code the data. Coding refers to “assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 173). Coding seeks to make sense of the data, to identify where ideas interact or overlap, and collapse the data into broad themes (Creswell, 2008, p. 251). Key words, phrases, and concepts were identified and coded from my interviews. Analyzing codes means finding recurring regularities in the data that allow the researcher to construct categories, themes, patterns, or answers to the research question (Merriam, p. 178). Merriam (2009) argues that the categories that grow from the coded data should be responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent in order to allow the data to be analyzed and communicated effectively (p. 185-187). Creswell (2008) and Merriam both encourage researchers to keep the number of categories low in order to allow a greater level of abstraction and analysis, starting with 25 to 30 categories and then reducing those to five or six key categories with associated themes.

As I grew more intimate with my research data through rereading and coding I was able to identify five broad categories representing perceived risks, within which I saw various emergent themes. In order to make sense of what each participant said about each of these categories and themes, I created a new document listing each category and its associated themes. Then I went through each interview to cut and paste the relevant text under the appropriate category and theme. A small minority of transcribed text deemed irrelevant was stored in a separate file. What resulted was a very large file of 80 pages, or just short of 50,000 words. Each category and theme was then carefully reviewed, deconstructed, and analyzed in order to create the rich and thick description of coordinators' understandings of risk, which I present in Chapter Four.

During this process I found that the interview data from the two coordinators who worked exclusively with students travelling internationally for work terms was significantly different from that of the coordinators working with a variety of student work terms, primarily domestic. The focus and the work of these two coordinators was significantly different from the others, so much so that I regarded them as existing and working outside of the case being studied; they were not part of the bounded entity of co-operative education coordinators and did not have a shared set of practices and circumstances with the rest of the group. For this reason they were excluded from the analysis and their responses do not appear in the results.

### **Trustworthiness Features**

Qualitative research is a form of naturalistic inquiry that is systematic and disciplined but makes no commitment to generalizability. It is the reader or the end-user of the research who determines whether he or she can apply the research in other situations (Merriam, 2009, p. 226). Triangulation is the best strategy of ensuring internal validity in qualitative research (Merriam,

p.215). In social sciences triangulation refers “to the use of multiple data-gathering techniques (usually three) to investigate the same phenomenon” (Berg, 1995, p. 5). The result of triangulation is to confirm and validate research findings through the use of three or more reference points. By combining data gathered through different collection methods the researcher should be able to “relate them so as to counteract the threats to validity identified in each” (Berg, p.5) and produce a more reliable and valid set of findings. The product of triangulation should be a thick description, one that is supported at a number of levels rather than simply at the surface.

Merriam (2009) distinguishes between triangulating with multiple methods of data collection and using multiple sources of data. The former refers to triangulating data collected through interviews, observations, and documents for example, while the latter refers to comparing and cross-checking data obtained from interviews with different people with different perspective as well as follow-up interviews with the research participants (p. 16). I used multiple sources of data rather than multiple methods of data collection; my only source of data collection was interviews with multiple individuals from different universities. I also conducted member checking or respondent validation to solicit feedback from my research participants on emerging findings in order to confirm my interpretations. The interview data allowed me to present a thick description of coordinators’ perceptions of risk that is supported at a number of levels and which is internally valid.

Reliability in research on human subjects is problematic because human behaviour is not static and cannot necessarily be replicated (Merriam, 2009, p. 220). There is no such thing as reality; perception is reality and perceptions of an event or a phenomenon can vary wildly from one person to the next, thus reality is not a constant. While qualitative research cannot

necessarily be replicated to give the same results, credibility is proven by demonstrating that the results of the research are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, p. 221). In the following chapters I will present the realities and perceptions of risk in co-operative education of the coordinators involved in my research. If I present their realities in a way that is consistent with the data that I collect in interviews and from documents, then the research will be reliable.

Chapter three described the methodology and methods used to conduct my research on risk in co-operative education. Chapter four provides the results of the research and presents the rich and thick description and account of how the participants understand and perceive risk in co-operative education in Canada.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This study explored Co-operative Education Coordinators' perceptions of risk in Co-operative Education in Canadian universities through semi-structured interviews with fourteen Co-operative Education Coordinators. Analysis of the interview data identified five broad categories, each of which can be further explored through a number of themes. These are represented in the following table.

Category	Understanding of Risk and the Coordinator's Role	Risks to the Student	Risks to the Employer	Risks to the Coordinator	Risks to the Institution
Themes	<p>Self-assessed Level of Understanding of Risk in Co-operative Education</p> <p>Self-assessed Level of Understanding of Institutional Risk and Institutional Liability</p> <p>Extent of Perceived Responsibility</p> <p>Perceptions of Policy</p> <p>Increasing Focus on Risk Generally</p>	<p>Youth and Limited Life Experience</p> <p>Personal Safety</p> <p>Harassment</p> <p>Mental Health</p> <p>Social Media</p>	<p>Financial or Productivity Risk</p> <p>Reputation</p> <p>Breaches of Confidential or Proprietary Information</p> <p>Workplace Health and Safety</p>	<p>Personal Safety</p> <p>Mental Health</p> <p>Liability and Negligence</p> <p>Reputation and Relationships with Employer Partners</p> <p>Breach of Student Confidentiality</p>	<p>Reputation</p> <p>Legal Action</p>

Table 1: Categories and associated themes illustrating coordinators' perceptions of risk in co-operative education in Canadian universities.

Before I present the perceived risks identified by my research participant I think it is important to set the scene and present a general overview of how coordinators understand risk in general and how they understand their role in managing and assessing risk. This should provide the reader a greater context in which to understand coordinators' perceived risks in co-operative education in Canada.

### **Category 1: Understandings of Risk and the Coordinator's Role**

#### ***Theme 1: Self-assessed level of understanding of risk in co-operative education***

All coordinators were asked to qualify their understanding of the risks associated with co-operative education as strong, weak, or any other qualifier that they were comfortable using. The responses were varied, with half identifying themselves as having a moderate understanding of risks associated with co-operative education and the other half evenly divided between a strong and a weak understanding of risk.

Sarah, Clare, and Susan self-identified as having a strong understanding of risk in co-operative education. "I think I have a pretty good grasp of risk" (Sarah). "I would say that I have a fairly good understanding of the risks, however I sometimes wonder if I think I know the risk, if there's risk out there that I haven't even identified" (Clare). "On a scale of one to ten, an eight. With a lot of my life I don't think about the risk until someone presents it to me, or gets me to think about it" (Susan).

The majority of coordinators stated their understanding of risk in co-operative education was moderate. "I think they are probably moderate, neither strong nor weak" (Nancy). "I feel like I'm aware of risk, I don't know if I would say it's strong, I would say I have a medium understanding of the risks" (Amanda). "I would say it's medium" (Patricia). "I think it's

somewhere in between [strong and weak]" (Natalie). "I would say it's middling, it's not strong, I don't say it's weak" (Tanya). "I think it's moderate, intermediate I would say" (James).

I would say I fall in the middle of that spectrum. I wouldn't say it's weak because I've had previous experiences with students who were in kind of tangly situations that I would define as risky, but I believe that I certainly could be more educated in the area. (Alice)

Paul, Rachel, David, and Julia identified their understandings of risk as weak or vague. "I would imagine weak" (Paul). "I would say they are weak" (Rachel). David responded by saying "you know it's interesting because what comes to mind is I haven't given it much thought actually."

I would say that I kind of in an intuitive way understand what risk is... I think the word risk management is something that is thrown around a lot now, so I'm informed in that way but I've never taken a course on risk management or anything along those lines. So in terms of a qualifier I'd say a vague understanding. (Julia)

Coordinators' self-assessment of their understanding of the risks associated with co-operative education was not necessarily correlated with their length of service in co-operative education, with some seasoned coordinators identifying themselves as having a weak understanding of the risks. The coordinators who assessed their understanding of the risks as strong had all worked as co-operative education coordinators for 12 years or longer.

### ***Theme 2: Self assessed level of understanding of institutional liability and institutional risk***

In addition, coordinators were asked to assess their understanding of institutional liability and institutional risk, again qualifying their understanding as strong, weak or any other qualifier they were comfortable using. The responses were fairly evenly distributed between strong, moderate and weak understanding of institutional liability and institutional risk, and were not necessarily reflective of the seniority of the individual in a coordinator role.

Paul, Tanya, Susan, Clare, and Sarah felt they had a strong understanding of institutional liability and institutional risk. "I think it's strong" (Paul). "Strong" (Tanya). "I'd say it's 8 again where 1 is weak and 10 is strong. I don't know all the policies and procedures but I have a sense where the university is or is going with risk management" (Susan). "I think I know what it is but I don't think my full understanding of it is strong" (Clare). "I think I have a fairly good grasp of institutional liability" (Sarah)

Three coordinators identified their understanding of institutional liability and institutional risk as moderate. "I think it's probably moderate" (Nancy). "I'm going to slot myself right in the middle" (Alice). "I would say intermediate again; I wouldn't say it's strong or weak" (James).

Julia, Amanda, Natalie, Patricia, and Rachel self-identified as having a weak or vague understanding of institutional liability and institutional risk. "I would say that it's vague" (Julia). "I would say it's pretty weak" (Amanda). "When I was going through and brainstorming for this session, the answer I gave was weak" (Natalie). "I don't think it's strong because I think I've stayed under the safety cushion of that's not our issue, it's the employer's issue" (Patricia). "It's weak. It needs to be strengthened" (Rachel). Once again David responded by saying "normally I don't give it much thought."

Participant responses reveal the significant variation in understandings of institutional liability and institutional risk among coordinators, which again were not necessarily associated with length of service.

### ***Theme 3: Extent of perceived coordinator responsibility in risk assessment and risk management***

All coordinators were asked the following question: Given that students on work terms are employees and adults, what is the extent of your responsibility in risk assessment and risk management? This question elicited by far the most varied set of responses and for me represented some of the most interesting discussions in my interviews with coordinators.

In general coordinators felt that risk assessment and risk management were part of their role as a co-operative education coordinator; however, the extent of that responsibility and their perceptions of the boundaries of their responsibility varied considerably.

Clare, David, Sarah, Tanya, and Rachel formed a group who felt a strong sense of responsibility for assessing and minimizing risks.

I think the keyword is that they're still students. And while they're adults and employees, they are students of our university. And I have been put in a position whereby I'm expected to take a great deal of responsibility, I think, in assessing risk and managing it, as much as possible. So I think my responsibility is huge, responsibility of the institution overall is huge, because at the end of the day, employees or adults it doesn't matter to me, they're still students of [university name removed to protect confidentiality and anonymity] and they still have a right to know that things have been managed and assessed. I do believe they should be able to expect that. You know, it's not a buyer beware situation at all.... I am comfortable with what I do to assess risk. I probably, and I don't know that I do more or less than anyone else, but I think over time I've done a pretty good job of assessing the risk on the part of my students. (Clare)

It's up to us as the coordinator of the institution, it's up to us to ensure that we're not putting our students in unsafe environments outside of the normal environment.... So our obligation to them is they're on a course and like in our classroom, we're responsible for their safety. (David)

They are adults but I don't think they are adults who know all the risks.... I don't think they have the knowledge of all that's out there that can harm them.... I think we should [take our responsibility in risk assessment and risk management seriously] as coordinators. (Sarah)

I certainly have a significant enough role in that because it is me and my organization, not me alone placing a student there in the first place. So I am accountable for having done due diligence on the employer, making sure that I know where they're going, who they're dealing with and what the work is. And that is in my job description so there is some, let's say, I don't know if you could put a percentage on it, but that's a big part of what I do. (Tanya)

So instead of the buyer beware type mentality, I think as the co-op officer we should make sure that students are aware of these external risks. (Rachel)

Conversely Susan and Paul did not feel a strong sense of responsibility for assessing and minimizing risks.

I feel that they are as you say, we know they are adults they make the choice to go to the work place, I can't possibly know everything that's going on in their lives certainly if I've never talked to them and we run a job competition in many cases where we don't necessarily sit down and talk to every student.... I don't stay awake at night very often to do this. (Susan)

I don't feel that we have that much responsibility [in risk assessment and risk management] because the moment the student goes to a work term it becomes the responsibility of the employer. (Paul)

Another group of coordinators expressed how their understanding of their responsibility in risk assessment and risk management was not clear to them. Natalie in particular noted that the boundaries of their responsibility were not well articulated to her by her employer:

That's one of the areas that I'm actually a little bit fuzzy on. As part of the training that I underwent it was kind of ad hoc training, you know, here's the information go read your information, if you have questions, come and ask.... I'm not entirely certain what my own responsibilities are.

Patricia wondered whether her unit could or should do more to assess and manage risk:

That's a tough one because on the one hand we clearly haven't been doing a lot but on the other hand your research and bringing it up is making me think we should do more. Because I've just talked about the immaturity of some of our students and really kind of thrusting them out there. We're putting a lot of the onus on the employer.... It does make me think that maybe we need to do more but then I'm also thinking on the other hand that if we start taking on that, how much are we going to have to take on? Our job

is to prepare them for the work and get them out there, there's a lot, we usually focus on their résumé, their cover letter, their skills, making sure they do a good job, but if we're going to take on this whole aspect of risk too, how many, how much of an intensive workshop are we going to need to cover that, we're probably going to have to bring in professionals so I'm not sure.

Nancy also discussed how she did not feel completely clear on the extent of her responsibilities and to what extent she would be found responsible if a situation arose with a student on a work term. She also commented on her own risks in terms of liability and accusations of negligence:

They are going to an external employer with their own rules and regulations they are adults so that's a little shifting for me. I never feel really solid about that. To what extent if something comes back, to what extent would that have been my responsibility to let the student know that.

Alice and I discussed this topic at length. She expressed the uncertainty she feels about the extent of her responsibility in risk assessment and risk management in terms of a balance between supporting and helping her students, but not taking on too much responsibility and undermining their ability to develop decision making skills:

I am not sure honestly how far to go. I hope that that helps with your research because I think that that's an honest answer. Part of me believes that students are adults and they have to learn how to act like adults by acting like adults and suffering consequences if they have made bad decisions. If I know of a company, for example, who is not stepping students through safety or orientation, but believes that students should just understand it that's a different story altogether. I step in in that case. So that's kind of a bit more cut and dry. But there's so many different situations to deal with. So, generally speaking, I probably keep my eyes open more than I should because I know that they are young adults and still not always making good decisions. But I think you will drive yourself crazy if you feel 100 percent responsible for everything that happens to a student on their work term.... If you are trying to make all the decisions for the students, if we go to extremes, you're kind of undermining their ability to develop those skills for themselves. So I try to balance that....And maybe balance is the best word for it because you do have to strike a balance because at that age, at the age most of our co-op students are at it is a transitional point in their lives. So they need a little bit of guidance but they actually need to take on more and more responsibility so they learn how to manage it. And

finding balance while in anything that people do is always hard to achieve, so why would it be easy here?

As with Nancy, Alice also connected the extent of her responsibility in risk assessment and risk management to questions of her own liability.

What if I don't catch something? How much am I liable if something happens to a student? The other part of me thinks how much can we cover off? Where is that boundary where our role can stop? Because, in my mind, they are young adults, and they are transitioning from teenagers to adults, but they are young adults and they have to learn to be responsible for some of their own decisions and some of the negative things that happen on a worksite are a consequence of some of their poor decisions. So you can't always take responsibility for everything that somebody else does.... I'm not sure sometimes how far I need to reach. Like what do I need to cover to make sure that a student is safe and as risk-free as possible?

The balance of who is responsible was reiterated by a number of coordinators. Julia, Nancy, James, and Sarah all noted that responsibility for risk assessment and risk management is to some extent shared between the three partners: the university or coordinator, the employer, and the student, although each interpreted the balance in a different way.

Julia acknowledged the unique status of the co-operative education student as both a student and an employee in her response:

I like the question because in many ways it implies that it's not just our responsibility, right and it's true. They, co-op students, are kind of straddling two spheres at the same time, they are a student they have a student number, we're going to see them during their work term but they're also employees of the organization.

Nancy discussed the responsibilities of the coordinator, the employer and the student as follows:

I think that's a really challenging one. I mean you know I think that we have a responsibility to insure that they're working with a bona fide employer and all of that. I think we have the responsibility to prepare them through the PD [professional development] seminars so they have an understanding of things like their rights with

regard to health and safety, sexual harassment. That they know who they should contact if something came up. And all of that so that they're prepared and then otherwise the employer has certain responsibility because once they walk in the door of the employer, that is the employer's workplace. So it becomes, the employer has to assume that responsibility and because they are adults they do also have the responsibility of asking questions and taking responsibility themselves for those sorts of things.

James and Sarah's sentiments were very similar in this regard, and both perceived the employer to be the party primarily responsible for risk assessment and risk management, although they both acknowledged that as the coordinator, they also had an important role in this:

I see myself as a third party, I mean I'm part of the agreement between the student, the institution, the employer but I'm just one of the parts.... I would say in many situations the employer [is ultimately responsible for risk assessment and management] but also us.... Mostly the employer I would say because they're governed by the employment standards act and the student is considered an employee. But we still have a part in that. (James)

I think the employer primarily, it is the employer's responsibility because they are providing the environment but what if the employer doesn't care? You're talking a small business where the student could be harassed, there could be sexual harassment so the employer doesn't care then the responsibility falls on us as the institution and on you as the coordinator who should have checked that out right? So I don't think we can wash our hands of the responsibility. (Sarah)

#### ***Theme 4: Perceptions of policy***

Discussions on university policy related to risk assessment and risk management centred on the following two questions:

- How does your institution prepare you to assess and minimize risky situations?
- Do you feel supported or not supported by the policies of your institution?

Interestingly, the great majority of coordinators felt that their university had prepared them poorly or had not prepared them at all to assess and minimize risk. The following comments illustrate the general accord that coordinators presented in response to this question of how their institution prepared them to assess and minimize risky situations. "They don't" (Patricia).

“Poorly. I don’t know, we haven’t had any training on this part” (Paul). “I don’t think it does a great job” (Nancy). “I don’t think there’s any preparation at all” (David). “I would say minimal preparation” (Alice). “To be honest not a whole lot.... my institution really doesn’t do a lot to prepare me” (Amanda). “I don’t know, I think we’ve done it pretty organically to be honest.... I wouldn’t say that we’ve had, we have not had formal training on risk management or risk assessment in any capacity” (Julia). “That’s an interesting one. I was trying to think how we would do this. I think it’s like I said, a case-by-case basis. I really don’t feel like I have a good amount of training in the area” (Natalie). “I think the institution can do a lot more in terms of preparing co-op advisors or internship advisors. I just don’t know exactly how” (Rachel).

I don’t think they’ve done anything to prepare us, we have just learned how, you know from being on the job, facing situations and using our God given intuition and common sense and what we consider to be safe or not-safe. I don’t think anybody has received any training here on risk. (Sarah)

I’m not sure the institution has prepared me to do it any more so than I prepare myself just through other work experience, and you know, I guess common sense. ...I’m not sure that I have been prepared. Not by the university. (Clare)

Tanya stressed the availability of the risk management office at her university as a resource as well as the clear guidelines established for coordinators in her unit:

We have a risk management office and they are a resource available to us at any time. We’ve had, I believe we may have had a, and it’s vague to me now, but at least one information session with the risk management people, I’m sure we have. Whenever we have a question they respond, so and we have clear guidelines on placement of students internationally let’s say, and as I’ve talked about my job description, although it isn’t focussed on the topic of risk, the things we do to ensure the placement is appropriate, academically and obviously risk-wise that’s all encompassed in there so we’re pretty clear.

James commented that his institution prepared him to assess and minimize risk through its policies. He noted that anything not covered by those policies was to be passed up the management line:

Well we do have our policies as I've mentioned. And they're good policies.... We're supposed to notify upper management of extraneous situations so we can work through them, so that's probably the best way I could describe it.

Despite the majority of the coordinators noting that their institution does little, if anything, to prepare them to assess and minimize risk, they mostly identified that they felt supported by the policies of their institution.

Rachel noted she felt supported, but elaborated on the importance of collaboration in developing and evaluation of university policy:

I feel supported. I think there can be more done in terms of support networks so while the policies and the procedures exist, I think it's important also to make sure that the people within the institution are discussing policies and procedures and monitoring them and evaluating them to make sure that it works and if it doesn't work, what's the solution.

Tanya concurred and noted that she felt supported by the policies of her institution. She noted her concern regarding the availability of time to be diligent in assessing situations for risk and reiterated the question heard from many coordinators of what is due diligence and how much is enough.

I would say supported, the culture there is very much one of we don't give it short shrift, there's not this feeling that management doesn't want to deal with it or don't worry about it, which is comforting to us.... As always a concern in the workplace is do you have enough time to do what's needed? What is due diligence? How much is enough? That's a constant concern in anything you do in life. So I would say that's the only area, it's not that there's lack of support, it's a tug and pull. If there were three more of us life would be easier and we could do more of everything, but that's the one constant in any job.

Susan and Clare both stated that they felt supported by their institution and that they felt the institution supported the decisions that they made:

I find that the university itself is very supportive, and I would hope, and I think that if a coordinator made a judgement, I think in general the university would support that. If it was a judgement that was made with well intentions, and if the individual was trying to do the right thing. (Susan)

Oh, certainly supported, from the risk...yeah I think if at any time I felt students were at risk I can't imagine from all that I know of [university name withheld to protect anonymity and confidentiality], that I wouldn't be supported. (Clare)

Natalie felt strong support from policies within her division and from the leadership in her group, "I definitely feel supported in terms of the type of leadership in the group that I work with." James made similar comments and noted that he is more familiar with the policies of his division than he is of university-wide policies:

Mostly supported, now are you talking the institution or the department?... I'm much more aware of our policies within the department than with the institution itself. We have some really good policies that are tried, tested and true. We're always updating them and some recent updates I know needed to be done specifically in terms of liability. We outline the student's responsibilities, the employer's responsibilities and I think we're doing a decent job of that.

Julia also replied that she feels supported by the policies of her university and qualified that by stating that the policies support her because they were developed collaboratively from a bottom-up approach rather than being imposed in a top-down approach:

I definitely feel supported, probably because it's [policy development] from the ground up right? So we are always kind of as a team collaborating. If we need advice or if we need something approved we will build a case and move it to the chair and to the dean that way so I definitely feel as though we are supported and you know the policies were developed by the faculty and by the co-op team initially right, so there's a reason why a lot of those policies have existed and so I definitely feel supported.

Susan wondered whether a more collaborative approach to developing policy related to risk management would be beneficial to her unit:

I think the university does a pretty good job you know. To the best of their ability. And you don't want them to have to be talking about risk all the time so to the point that we are afraid to do anything or to shut us down and not even try.... Perhaps we in co-op should develop, we should be more involved in the risk management process. I think... [it]might be a good idea rather than it being imposed by the risk managers it might be better if we sat with them and talked about what we are actually doing and come up with.

Nancy had mixed feelings about whether she felt supported or not supported by the policies of her institution:

I can't say I feel, I don't say I feel not supported because I do feel if I had any questions I could ask someone and they would be open to them. I feel not supported in the sense of as I say it would be nice if we had some kind of reference manual or clarification.

Paul, David and Sarah all commented that policies at their institutions were either unclear or that they did not know them. "I must say I am not aware of the policies, if they exist in regards to the co-op work terms" (Paul). "I don't know what they are. Nobody's ever told me what they are. So I wouldn't know how to answer the question. Scary isn't it" (Sarah). "I think the policies are unclear" (David). Patricia implied that her understanding of the policies was not strong "of what I know of them I feel supported. Clearly I need to know more."

Three coordinators noted the general lack of guidelines or procedures laid out for coordinators in terms of risk assessment and the extent of their responsibilities. Alice stated that the lack of guidelines leads to a lack of consistency between what coordinators do to assess and minimize risk:

And I think another reason for the lack of consistency is there are few guidelines from the institution. So if there's no real guidelines to follow, then I don't know how you keep something consistent.

Nancy and Natalie also expressed a need for more clarity and written procedures to provide guidance. “I think it would just be nice to have something that clarified a little bit more to what extent we were responsible for what aspects, what legal aspects” (Nancy).

I think I’d prefer to have something in writing. But I know that what we do changes all the time.... It would be nice to sort of have an overview of these are my rules and responsibilities as a coordinator. This is what I should be looking for. (Natalie)

***Theme 5: Increasing focus on risk generally***

While my standard interview questions did not include a general question asking whether participants felt there was an increasing focus on risk at their institution, this topic was discussed with most participants. The majority agreed that there was an increasing focus on risk, risk management, and risk awareness at their university. Some participants were able to point to specific programs or activities that had occurred or divisions that had opened within their universities in the last decade (not listed here to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants) while others were aware of a shift of consciousness only in an indirect or intuitive manner. When asked whether Alice thought there was an increasing focus on risk in her university she said “I think it’s beginning, yeah, and that’s just a vague sense” while James replied with “I think so, I’m hearing, I’m hearing it kind of through the woodwork.” Several participants remarked that 9/11 had marked a turning point in awareness of risk in off-campus university activities. Sarah and Clare both noted a shift in public consciousness and focus on risk following 9/11, Clare stated “I think since 9/11 when we had people who were working in all parts of the world all of a sudden that day it seemed like the world was, the world changed.” Neither Julia, Patricia, nor David felt there was an increasing focus on risk noticeable at their institutions.

## Category 2: Risks to the Student

Without fail all coordinators identified the student as having the greatest exposure to risk in co-operative education, both in terms of the types of risks they are exposed to and the significance or seriousness of the potential risks. This was a point that everyone agreed on; the student is the most vulnerable to risk in co-operative education and the risk to the student was certainly the topic that generated the most discussion with the large majority of coordinators. “Most vulnerable is the student who is out there in the workplace” (Sarah).

They [students] are the least powerful if you look at the relationship and the most impressionable, they’re in the environment of adults and organizations and organized things and they’re an individual... I always think of who’s in power, an employee has less power than an employer. (Tanya)

Despite coordinators’ agreement that the student was the most at-risk in the co-operative education partnership there was a general agreement that the actual risk was minimal and that in general students were safe on work terms. Coordinators were all asked to provide examples of exceptional circumstances involving students at risk on work terms and while an assortment of examples of injuries, minor mishaps, bad experiences, and interpersonal conflicts were provided by most coordinators, largely they felt that these were exceptions, extremely rare cases, and did not represent the majority of work term experiences. Susan discussed students subject to actual risk as follows, “with respect to students over time, I guess there are more risks associated with co-op than we ever really think about. But if I’ve been with the university for 22 years, and if in every year I deal with 450 placements on average, and that is a huge number of students [who have not experienced serious risk].” Hence in terms of volume, while risks are present and arguably on the increase, students are in reality rarely affected.

Coordinators identified a number of possible risks to the student, which are discussed in the following sections.

*Theme 1: Youth and limited life experience*

The coordinators involved in this research work primarily with undergraduate students, who are typically in their late teens and early twenties, the odd mature student notwithstanding. As a result of their students' age, coordinators noted that many co-operative education students lack life experience and sometimes maturity. Clare remarked on the vulnerability of the co-op student as a young worker:

I'm always thinking they're vulnerable and that the key, I guess for students, that's the key element of their vulnerability. As young workers, they're more vulnerable anyway and as new to a company or industry, you're always vulnerable.... But put that with someone who is naïve, new to workplaces anyway and then it's a workplace that they don't know much about and the vulnerability quotient just goes right up.

Later she elaborated on this point as follows:

When you have students you have younger workers. When you have people new to an organization who are, you know, benefitting by doing a good job by getting a good performance evaluation, I think that ups the ante on the risk. Then putting distance and cultural differences and new cities and all of that, you're really layering it up there aren't you? But you've got to do it or else how are people going to get experience.

Alice remarked on her students' sometimes poor decision-making skills resulting from their youth and inexperience, noting her heightened feelings of responsibility for her students, "generally speaking, I probably keep my eyes open more than I should because I know that they are young adults and still not always making good decisions."

Nancy also acknowledged that she perceived her students to be at risk as a result of their youth and lack of life experience:

[A student] doesn't have a lot of life experience and it's one thing for us to say they're adults but you know we all gathered our life experience as we went and I think all of us create that, our life experience when we were nineteen, is a whole lot different than it is now. You know? And so I think on the student perspective that's, there are risks related to the fact they don't have a lot of life experience. Yet they are expected to behave, they are expected to be an adult.

Patricia discussed this minor incident, which demonstrates how student immaturity has the potential to compromise work term relationships and evaluations:

It's more just life stuff and the immaturity of students. We had a unique case a few years ago where a student just I guess they didn't have any professionalism and they were doing things like throwing their leftover lunch down the sink and it resulted in the employer having to get the plumber in twice to fix the plumbing.

Tanya argued that life experience and maturity had a direct impact on work performance and therefore could impact a student's success on a work term and the subsequent work term evaluation, "the extent to which a student is, let's say mature, has had some sort of independence, responsibility in their lives pre- taking on co-op, impacts greatly their performance on the job."

It is widely argued that the current generation of young people are generally less independent, live more sheltered lives, and have parents who are more attentive and involved in their children's lives than they were in the past. Julia elaborates:

I think the challenge for the generation that we're working with too is that millennials in many ways is, is kind of exacerbating that risk because we've, generally millennials have had very involved parents and if they've lived at home their whole lives and then they move away for the first time [for a work term] that involvement, it's really, now you need to figure out how to get to work on time and what to wear and how to get your groceries and all those things that if you've lived at home you probably take for granted.

There was general agreement among coordinators that one of the main goals of co-operative education programs is to address this lack of experience by supporting and nurturing

students' exposure to new environments, new tasks, and new people, thereby increasing life experience and maturity levels. Tanya expresses the role of the co-operative education coordinator in this process as follows:

Maybe because of the nature of who we're dealing with, these are young people, they're in their formative years, we can have an impact on their lives and we're aware of it. And that's the culture of the office, it's who does this kind of job, we're not just people there to stamp and doing our job, it's not a kind of a job, you get drawn in anyway even if you started off that way maybe but it's just not, it has nothing to do with the way we could do our job. We worry or we're concerned with, that's why we're there. It's not to get a student for an employer really, although that's not our external message to the employer, and of course it has to be a win-win relationship or it doesn't perpetuate, but first and foremost we're there to develop and give the skills, develop skills in these people for success going forward and if we're not doing that nobody sees the point... There's a lot they don't know. And we're there right when they sign up, the first thing they get is some compulsory workshops on a resume on what to expect in the workplace, how the interview process goes, they get mock interview, they get coaching on why it's like that, how to navigate it, it's all predicated on the fact that the knowledge level is down here on level one and we're building on top of that throughout the process and when they're done they're up here. Because it is a university and this is an academic program.

It is clear that coordinators acknowledged that co-operative education students are typically young and need guidance and support through new experiences in order to get the maximum benefit from their co-operative education experience. Consequently coordinators largely perceived student inexperience to be a risk in co-operative education, but were aware of their crucial role in mitigating against and limiting their students' exposure to this risk.

### ***Theme 2: Personal safety***

Personal safety on work terms was identified by virtually all coordinators as a potential risk to students. In fact, when asked what they thought was the most significant risk in co-operative education, including risks to the student, risks to the coordinator, risks to the employer

and risks to the institution, ten of the 14 coordinators interviewed felt student personal safety was the most significant risk.

Not unexpectedly, awareness of and focus on workplace health and safety for cooperative education students was higher among the coordinators of engineering and science programs where student work term positions are typically riskier including laboratory, manufacturing, construction, and other onsite work. “In working in manufacturing environments, or if they happen to go offshore, or up North in a camp, then there could be actual safety risks for them” (Susan). “In engineering in particular, they are often times exposed to big moving machinery so there certainly is safety issues around that” (Alice). “They’re going to face, especially where we have engineering students, there’s going to be health and safety issues” (Patricia). “Laboratory safety is a big one, so the safety of the student, physical safety” (James). Natalie qualified her concern, stating:

In terms of the physical risks to students, I don’t, from my experience so far, I haven’t identified too many. Now granted we have science students, obviously that go out to work in labs. So I guess there is some modicum of possible physical risk but they all take laboratory safety courses and that sort of thing. So I guess there’s that, the very small chance of that.

While she acknowledges the risk, she describes it as a “modicum of possible physical risk,” noting that she feels the actual risk is extremely low. This sentiment was widespread among the coordinators who were interviewed.

Generally coordinators felt that between the university and the employer, that students had adequate health and safety training. “It is the responsibility of the employer to train these students in terms of safety, which I am getting feedback on what kind of safety training the students are undergoing which I’m fine with” (Rachel).

Several coordinators supplied examples of occasions when students had suffered minor injuries or broken bones as a result of a work term, but these represented a handful of injured students out of thousands of work terms. Two examples of extreme situations did arise in my discussions with coordinators however they will not be presented here in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

### *Theme 3: Harassment*

In addition to personal safety, the vast majority of coordinators cited that they perceived harassment to be a potential risk to co-operative education students on work terms. Harassment in the context of my discussions with coordinators includes bullying, physical or emotional intimidation, neglect, and sexual harassment. David explained that students “face the same risk as any worker, there’s the risk of being harassed, sexually harassed, a risk of being bullied by colleagues and employers.” Similarly Amanda said, “anything could happen to them when they’re in the work place... they might be subject to bullying or discrimination or something like that in the workplace, sexual harassment anything like that could happen to them in the workplace.”

Clare viewed harassment differently and draws the connection between workplace harassment and mental health (discussed in more detail in a later section):

I can think of abuse, and not probably the most outward abuse, but abuse of getting them [students] to do the stuff no one else wants to do, which is a risk, I guess, to people’s confidence, it’s a psychological risk probably to be given really bad work all the time,”

Similarly Sarah expressed how harassment was a broad concept:

I think harassment can happen at so many different levels. If a supervisor is not giving enough guidance and then criticizing [the student], that’s kind of, maybe it’s bad

supervisory skills but it's also bordering on harassment because the student feels harassed.

She elaborated and provided this scenario:

It could be bullying, there are some instances of that I can think of... the student could see paperweights flying out of the little cubicle because the supervisor was mad, so how do you think the student feels walking in there and asking any questions?

Susan tempered her concern, noting that it was very uncommon for students to be harassed in her experience:

There's risks with students when they are in the workplace of being harassed, whether it be sexually harassed or personally harassed.... However, there's very few cases of that come past my desk. Very few. Probably one or two cases of sexual harassment, in all the years I've been there.

Patricia noted particular concern for female co-operative education students working in non-traditional occupations and work sites who are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, "where it's engineering and we would have lots of cases where we have females students at work in a very male dominated environment so that's a concern of ours."

Approximately half of the coordinators I interviewed were able to provide specific examples of students being harassed by colleagues or supervisors on work terms. David spoke of a small family owned business that mistreated a group of five co-op students who all quit en masse one day, which as a result prompted David to be more diligent in vetting the suitability of small business employers for co-op students.

James noted an example of students being physically intimidated on a work term:

They were male students and they felt intimidated physically by their foreman. They didn't feel like they could say anything because they were afraid of him. And this one person, one young man was more sensitive than the rest and I would say he has likely some degree of mental health issue and he didn't handle it well and he came in [to the co-

op office] on a regular basis, we had many phone calls, he was very upset by it, very affected by it.

It was clear to me that student harassment on work terms is taken seriously by coordinators, often with long term consequences, like the situation Julia outlined that resulted in the termination of the co-operative education partnership between the university and the employer:

This employer in particular we had had issues with, she definitely had a strong personality and was not, I would not say in any capacity would she be a supportive type, kind of like throw you in, figure it out.... I would say a bit of a bully frankly so the student definitely was experiencing that and it was just a really, a lot of back and forth with her and the employer and then finally realizing that after this work term we're not going to be posting with this employer again. Even if they approach us to post a position. Just because it was a really, I just felt really bad for the student, she had moved away from home... in order to get this work term and then her co-workers were kind of being bullies towards her.

Tanya also explained how she intervened to support a student who felt harassed by her work term supervisor:

I did know of another student who was working up North... who was feeling harassed by a supervisor but by the time, let me try to remember this now it was several years ago, she made it through the co-op term okay, I talked to her supervisor about it and by that time the co-op term was over, but the supervisor was shifted into another area, anyway so I think that kind of mitigated the risk and I don't know if that's because of my comments or if it had already been recognized but it was no longer an issue and I met with her afterwards and she seemed fine.

One of Sarah's students endured harassment on her work term:

That student continued on and finished [the work term] but there was... the supervisor of the female student, he was singing something, a song that had her name in it, an actual song, some song, I don't know what, so I think that made her very uncomfortable.

Julia provided an example of sexual harassment and the supporting and mediating role of the co-operative education coordinator:

A student on their last, second last day of their work term was out for the staff party and someone made a comment about her physical [appearance], and she came in after her work term really upset about it and I could, it was very impactful for her because she didn't know how to, if she should say anything, what she should do, and really it was kind of a sexual harassment issue, it was, so I was immediately on the phone with the fair treatment advisor because she was, she's a student but she was also an employee of that environment and she's an adult too, so we had to try to, really what I did and what I was advised to do, was lay out all the options for her and then she, at the end of the day because she had the information, was able to make the choice that was best for her.

This example highlights the complicated relationship between the co-operative education coordinator, the student, the employer and the university. To what extent can a coordinator regulate or control the things that happen to the student in the workplace or with his or her colleagues? In this case the coordinator and other university services supported the student by providing information so that she could make an informed decision about what to do, rather than to intervene directly with the employer on her behalf.

One example of a student perceiving discrimination based on sexuality surfaced in my discussions with coordinators. Natalie explained as follows:

one particular student that I'm thinking about, in a homophobic environment... it is not like it was fostered in the work environment, but there were comments that were made and this particular student felt that just through the camaraderie between the people who work there and sort of the things that they would say to each other were quite homophobic but were considered ok. And this particular student was very, very hesitant to sort of bring up his concerns because he didn't want to create any waves. And he said "It's fine but it makes me very uncomfortable."

#### ***Theme 4: Mental health***

Student mental health was identified by virtually all coordinators as a risk in co-operative education. Coordinators identified four main areas of concern related to student mental health including: serious mental illness, the loneliness or homesickness factor, self-confidence/self-worth, and stress.

Susan noted particular concern for student mental health; when asked what she considered to be the most significant risk in co-operative education she responded that student mental health was the most significant risk in her view. Similarly David spoke of his concern for student mental health or emotional well-being in general. In answer to the same question he responded that personal safety was the most significant risk but that, “second to that would be the emotional risk, we try to avoid putting students in situations that we might know are, from an emotional point of view are going to be disturbing or distracting, harmful.” Tanya was also acutely aware of mental health issues and the vulnerability that goes hand in hand with mental illness. She remarked on her relationship with students and the implications that her work could have on a student with a mental health problem:

There’s the average population and then there’s people with mental health issues and in the everyday world things that work for the average person don’t necessarily, and can impact extremely, on someone with a mental health issue. So it does happen that I see a policy or a way of dealing with a student or an issue that seems quite direct and quite categorical and sometimes I worry to myself, gee I hope that if they’re sad about that, if it doesn’t sit right that they’ll know to come to us, and I strive, struggle that at least my students know they can talk to me. I talk to them like I’m their coach, on their team, rather than some administrator who you have to look up to, I’m on their side.

Like many coordinators, David mentioned that his department works very closely with the Counselling Unit at his university and while he is very aware of mental health and the risks that mental illness can pose, he does not consider this part of his role as a coordinator, “we work quite closely with our counselling department... so if it comes up we refer them to counseling. It’s not our work role, but we’re all pretty aware.”

Natalie also spoke of her unit’s partnership with mental health services available at her university:

There's really been a push university wide for all faculty and staff to go through mental health training. But to recognize when students are in distress, how to help students who are in distress, knowing what the different avenues and referrals can be here on campus. So we've been sort of, not necessarily been put on high alert, but just keep your eyes and ears open for these sorts of things, because it's becoming more and more predominant.

Nancy explained how, in her view, mental illness can compromise a student's success in selecting an appropriate work term as well as their performance on a work term:

Their mental health can be a risk to co-op in the sense if they're not very, if they're not mentally stable and settled within themselves then again they may go to a job, they might misjudge the job they want, they might go to one that's too much pressure, too busy, doesn't work, they're already, maybe not that stable. And so, yeah, then their mental health can be a risk.

Tanya also drew a link between mental health and work performance:

The extent to which your mental health is in good shape impacts directly your success on the job, there's no question. But how much is it impacting, how much is mental health affecting the student, I'm not qualified to assess that."

### **Serious mental illness**

Several coordinators cited incidents where students were not able to complete work terms as a result of a serious mental health problem. Susan stated she had been involved in a number of situations related to student mental health and provided an example of a student who had a psychotic break on a work term:

I have dealt with several students that had issues related to mental illness. So I've had a student, years ago who called me at home, who had been out on her first work term, first couple of days of work and basically she, as it turned out she was having a psychotic break. So in that instance, she didn't finish her work term.... We went and got her and brought her to where she had to be to be taken care of. So that was a huge risk for her and she was at a very vulnerable stage in her life. And this extra added stressor of going to work just put her over the edge. If it wasn't going to be working, going to work for a work term, then something else would have occurred, in my thinking. It was just brewing. Just that vulnerable point in people's lives where mental illness often shows up. Probably because of the transition itself, so there is that kind of risk.

Susan reiterated the connection between mental illness and students' age, "the age that they're at is such a vulnerable age and if their mental illness is going to come up then if they have a predisposition for it. And the stress could certainly bring it on."

James talked about an incident with a suicidal student on a work term:

I once had a student who was suicidal, I didn't even know it until somebody from our... who was it? Our counselling unit notified me, I didn't realize it. I knew he was having performance problems but we, he actually ended up being fired from the job, which was probably a good thing and I escorted him out and he had the appropriate counseling. Great student, just who had a lot of personal problems who ended up being okay in the end.

Alice had also experienced a student having to leave a work term as a result of a serious mental illness. Here she drew the potential connection between workplace safety and mental health:

I know that students have had to leave work because of mental health issues. So it was probably a good thing that they had to leave work before something happened to somebody else or to them. And I don't mean the student was going to physically harm someone else, but if they're going through troubles in their life and they're not paying attention then the consequences can be disastrous if you're working in a dangerous worksite. So that's another big piece too.

Similarly, Natalie and Patricia worked with students who had to terminate work terms prematurely as a result of a serious mental illness, "we have actually had students leave work terms part way through because of mental health issues" (Patricia).

### **Loneliness/homesickness**

Susan also identified students travelling outside of their home city or province as being more vulnerable to mental illness:

I guess another risk, just getting back to like mental illness again is when students go away to work, in itself can be a huge stressor for students, and we as co-op coordinators

would never really know how well someone is, if they are well enough to go away, and the individual themselves might not be self-aware enough to know that they aren't well enough to go. Maybe they're being pushed by friends, peer pressure, you know "this would be really cool if I went away and I worked for a big name company."

She reinforces the idea that students travelling away from home for work terms are extra vulnerable to mental health illnesses:

The risk is if they go away and get really sad and once again it can easily bring out the mental illness. So I keep coming back because I have seen that, I have seen it happen with students a few times, over the years.

Clare also discussed the risks for students travelling away from home for a work term and identified loneliness and homesickness as potentially risking student mental health, "I think that's a risk, because when students are away from home for the first time, they're facing new jobs, new people... and I think that there is a loneliness risk and a psychological risk there." She elaborated on her concerns about loneliness and also discussed her role in supporting students working out of province:

[Students are]struggling maybe with work, they don't know very many people, they have a work report to do which brings some of them down believe it or not. They're thinking this is going to be such a great thing living in this great big city and what they realize is that they're lonely. They're surrounded by millions of people and it's lonely. So I often think about that as being a big risk for students. And so when I've had them like that I try to do more monitoring calls, call more often, see how things are. Encourage them to you know, stay in touch with home and those kinds of things. And that's, I don't know, maybe that goes beyond the coordinator role to the mother role but still again they're your students. You don't want to see anything bad happen to them.

Sarah also reiterated this concern, "I'm not sure how to categorize it, when students leave town and go away it opens up all kinds of other risks." She elaborated on her thoughts about the loneliness factor, "when you're away from home you're a lot more vulnerable to maybe

loneliness, who knows, whatever your situation, a bad thing, it gets aggravated when you're alone, your safety [net] is not there."

### **Self-confidence/self-worth**

Several coordinators communicated their perceptions of the connection between student mental health and co-operative education in terms of self-confidence and self-worth. "It also poses a risk to their confidence levels as well because they're put into a situation that they're not really prepared for and they're not kind of being guided through in some cases" (Alice). Julia discussed the lasting effects of a work term on a student's confidence level:

I've seen students who had a really bad work term and frankly probably a bit of a mean supervisor and that impacts their confidence going into the next work term. It's almost like the next two work terms they're trying to rebuilt what was lost in the first, or on the other hand you have a student who doesn't feel confident in their skills, they go to an amazing workplace and that really changes them for the better, but I don't know, just anecdotally, we've seen more of those, needing to take medical or going to see counselors and medical documentation and all of those things.

Julia went on to talk about confidence and experiences of failure in co-operative education. She explains how the competitive set-up of co-operative education in terms of the interview and job offer process is the first opportunity for many students to experience failure in a meaningful and important way:

I think that frankly that co-op is for many students the first time they've ever failed. Ever. Or you know really competed where there's a bottom line, so you might have competed in soccer and everybody gets a medal or a certificate but at the end of the day there's only one spot and only one job so you might think or you've been told your whole life that you're going to do whatever you want to do and the workplace is finally telling you that that might not be the reality that you've been told. So that I think that that's a generation reality that we're facing.

Julia elaborated on the competitive nature of co-operative education and students' notions of self-worth by stating that being at university, "is a stressful time. And ultimately co-op is super stressful... you're competing against your friends and you really at some point can question whether you're worth it if it's not working out for you."

Nancy also noted the potentially profound effect that a negative experience on a work term can have on how a student sees him or herself:

Just as anything in life when they go out on co-op [work term] with certain expectations and images of themselves and they don't find that they are what they thought they were. That's a mental health issue there, suddenly how they see themselves has changed drastically and that can have profound effects on them. It can be positive but it also can be negative.

### **Stress**

Coordinators acknowledged that co-operative education is a stressful endeavour. University students face many stressors, but co-operative education students face many additional stressors. They have to participate in additional activities including professional development seminars placing a burden on the time they can commit to other pursuits. In addition co-operative education students are expected to apply for multiple jobs and attend subsequent interviews, all of which requires a great deal of time and energy in order to achieve success, as well as being stressful activities in themselves. Several coordinators remarked on the extra work completed by co-operative education students compared to other university students. "It's like taking another course when you're on your academic terms" (Julia).

Susan suggested that the extra stress experienced by co-operative education students could bring out a mental health problem in students with a predisposition to mental illness. Julia noted an increase in the number of student situations related to stress, anxiety, and mental health

seemed to be rising, “I’ve noticed in the six years that I’ve been here that students have, there have been more issues with students levels of stress and anxiety and mental health since I started working here.” She went on to say that being at university, “is a stressful time. And ultimately co-op is super stressful.” She noted that coordinators at her university routinely deal with students who are extremely upset and stressed, “I mean we joke sort of like, oh first crier of the semester and that sounds pretty cynical but it kind of speaks to the level of stress that the students are experiencing.”

### *Social Media*

The subject of social media and its influence on university students and employees is a much discussed topic in the popular press and increasingly in academia; however it only emerged as a discussion point in my interview with Paul. While social media does not represent a true theme, I felt it was important to include it here as it formed a large part of my interview with Paul and it felt wrong to omit his strong feelings on the topic simply because others did not voice similar thoughts. In addition the idea of risks resulting from social media resonated with me personally as I had a situation with a student recently where the student’s work term was put at risk as a result of a series of comments he published through social media on his own time, despite the fact they were measured and intelligent arguments.

Paul discussed students using Facebook at work in general and provided an example of a student who was fired from a work term for spending too much work term time on Facebook,”

Being on Facebook during the day, that occurs regularly. And so far employers have been very, very easy on that except maybe one or two who, and one especially who had to terminate the work term because the student didn’t want to comply....This student had been forewarned a couple of times by the employer and that was a case where she was really spending lots of time on it [Facebook].

Paul felt that there was a shift of thinking in this generation of students. He started by saying, “they [students] have their own ways of doing things and their own ways to include social media and stuff like that, within the work time.” He elaborated by comparing the unwritten rules followed by the current generation of students to those who grew up before the pervasive presence of social media:

It’s an unwritten law that us people of experience we will never get involved with. We know that the moment we say things publically we’re bound to get in trouble. They [students] don’t, they’re very naïve in that regard and a lot of times, if we have a situation like that we’ll talk to them but most of the time their employer will talk to them and most of the time their employer will try to face things out but when they go public something is bound to happen.

He argued that feeling that you have the right to say anything publically is a generational phenomenon resulting from growing up in a culture permeated, or perhaps propped up, by social media:

It’s not only university students, youth in general. We’re talking from 18 to 30. They feel that they’ve got the right to say everything... you’ve got the right to do whatever you want but at the same time, there are consequences, you’ve got to live with some consequences because if people don’t like what you’re saying they have the right to do all kinds of things, go legal as well and I think that the students, kids with those tools that we call social medias they’re going far, they’re testing and they don’t know it.

### **Category 3: Risks to the Employer**

All of the coordinators who participated in this research project work in co-operative education programs that largely follow CAFCE standards, whether their programs are accredited or not. As a result all of the students that participating coordinators work with are full-time, paid employees of the host organization as well as registered students of the participating university while on they are on their work terms. As such all work term students are subject to the same

legislation that governs all workers and employers have the same responsibilities for work term students that they have for their other employees.

Coordinators generally perceived that employers were subject to minimal risks through participation in co-operative education programs. Tanya in particular felt that the risk to the employer was something that was out of her control and responsibility and therefore was not something she was concerned about, “in terms of the student’s impact in the workplace, that’s nothing that we worry about, or certainly that I worry about let’s say, because once they’re in the workplace my impression is that’s the responsibility of the employer.”

Despite the general agreement among coordinators that employers were not exposed to much risk, a number of themes representing coordinators’ perceptions of employer risk emerged from the research data including financial/productivity risks, employer reputation, breach of the employer’s confidentiality or proprietary information, and employer health and safety. In order to temper this section and provide context, discussions of employer risk were succinct and did not generate much discussion in the interviews with coordinators.

### ***Theme 1: Financial/productivity risk***

Several coordinators identified that employers were subject to business risks as a result of participating in co-operative education in terms of their bottom line and their productivity.

“There is a bottom line cost risk to the employer in the case of student errors” (James). Clare expressed the financial risk to employers:

I think there are risks in the discipline I work with, risks to, that the students pose would be loss, financial loss to employers.... When I say financial loss I do mean, you know losing money. But the other side of it too is losing business for the employer by things they do to clients and customers.

Nancy also noted that the student's actions can have consequences on an employer's business:

And of course employers have risks too and liabilities when they're hiring students because students, again by their actions then, they represent the employer and so if they perform poorly they can negatively impact an employer's business. They can harm the employer's business because, by their actions. So when an employer takes a student on, they take on those risks and liabilities for sure.

Julia provided an example of a work term student who negatively impacted a fundraising effort for a small non-profit organization, demonstrating how a student has the potential to impact productivity and ultimately an organization's bottom line:

I can think of a student this summer who was working for a small non-profit and they had developed a fundraising [item not identified to protect confidentiality and anonymity] and it was like "no, no I've got this under control" the whole summer and then of course it ended up getting done but it wasn't at the level that the employer had expected so I mean that's a risk that an employer takes when they accept a student is, okay are we really going to be able to ensure that the projects that we want the student to take on are going to happen. Now most times, students excel and actually exceed their expectations, but there's always that fear like really, what is going to happen if I take this student on, would it be easier for me to do this myself or to hire a contract person who knows what they're doing.

Students can also have a financial impact on employers through damage to employer equipment.

Certainly in the technical programs students have access to and are expected to operate a lot of expensive technology and equipment or drive company vehicles. Patricia discussed a student who created a financial loss to the employer, "there was a student who did get into an accident in a company vehicle, nobody was hurt but again that did cost the employer money."

### ***Theme 2: Employer reputation***

Students' potential to risk employers' reputations emerged from my conversations with three of the coordinators. Rachel noted that work term students have the ability to risk

employers' reputations for strong safety track records on worksites when they fail to follow health and safety regulations or take those regulations seriously:

One student got fired from their work term because he didn't follow safety protocol. He was too close to some contractor work and the lawyers of that company were involved... Safety protocol was broken [so] that student was fired because that company has a high reputation of safety. And when they do come here on campus for info sessions and such, their emphasis on safety is so high that I don't think students realize what kind of risks are associated with it.

Employers' reputations with students are also at risk if employers provide students with poor work term experiences, put them in difficult situations, or do not provide adequate training in order for the student to succeed. "From the perspective of the employer, risking their reputation by maybe putting someone in a difficult situation" (Alice).

When a student doesn't get a good work term, then I feel it, and other coordinators feel it because they are hearing that they have stories. And that's risk to the employer because these stories come out and people go "well I'm the one that worked there." Even after graduation people say "yeah I know someone who worked there and it wasn't good." (Clare)

Both Alice and Clare's comments highlight the need for employers who value and depend on securing work term students on a regular basis to maintain a good reputation with work term students and future full-time employees.

### ***Theme 3: Breach of confidentiality or proprietary information***

While it was not a pervasive theme, a number of coordinators noted that they perceived employers to be at risk as a result of potential breaches of confidentiality or proprietary information. Clare and James both noted a risk of confidentiality and privacy, "to the employer there's a risk of breach of confidentiality, absolutely, through the work report or otherwise" (James). Susan noted the theoretical risk of a breach of confidentiality in the work report, but

also noted that this had not happened in her experience as a coordinator. She explained that the responsibility for preventing breaches of confidential information is shared with the employer and also the procedures that she follows in order to protect private information contained in work term reports:

And of course there is the work reports, I didn't mention to you that the students could or might not understand what is proprietary and what isn't proprietary. But I have never seen that happen either.... They [employers] have to read the work reports so they do take some responsibility there. In that, well, I can't force them to read the work reports but they fill out a form saying that they have. And they are not reading it to edit it, or they don't have to provide any kind of input, they can if they want, but it is more to show that they have read it for proprietary reasons. But in that case, we also allow students to have confidential work reports, which means then that we are even more careful, because we are always careful, with the information in the reports. So we keep it under lock and key, and the marker knows that it is a confidential work report.

Paul's discussion of social media also relates to this point. While his focus was on risks to the student as a result of the things they might publish through social media, the converse is also true by implication, employers' confidentiality and privacy is at risk as a result of students' comments on social media. Paul noted that they provide seminars to the work term students, advising them to be careful what they say about their employers publically:

We give them a presentation on basically the dos and don'ts and give the presentation only to the first year students. They have time to forget. And the first thing we tell them, we give them the example of the girl who lost her job [by using Facebook excessively in work time] and we forewarn them the things not to do and one of them is definitely not to go on Facebook and all that. Do that on your own time. And we will forewarn them also on things to say and things not to say about the employer. But basically it's because we saw some, we have some examples and we're trying to help them not to fall into the trap.

#### ***Theme 4: Workplace health and safety***

Student personal health and safety was discussed in a previous section as being a risk to students; however, two of the coordinators that I interviewed noted that students have the

potential to pose health and safety risks to their employer and to their colleagues. Given the coordinators who discussed this point work with engineering students, this is likely to be an issue more relevant to students working on construction or fabrication sites and other similarly dangerous environments that are heavily regulated by health and safety rules and procedures.

Patricia discussed students posing a health and safety risk. While none of her students has been the cause of a workplace injury or major worksite infraction, she noted that employers take any breach of health and safety regulations very seriously:

From the employer point of view the student of course has the responsibility to follow those safety guidelines because they're [the employer] taking a risk as well if the student isn't following them. And we've had, we have had, and again this is just from my point of view from what I've dealt with personally and have been told around the office, we've had some minor stuff where students are, you know, not wearing their safety equipment and well I say minor because no one really was hurt but the employers take that very, very seriously so it's really not actually minor, to get a call about a student not wearing their safety hat or their safety glasses or whatever, the employer's taking a huge risk there.

Alice also stressed the importance of health and safety training and the potential risks posed by students who are improperly trained or who do not take safety regulations seriously:

The risks that students pose are related to health and safety, like actual people's lives and equipment failure, equipment damage and those things that I believe can happen if a student is not properly trained to understand safety in those environments and if they don't understand the consequence of the actions that they take.

Rachel also demonstrated how seriously employers take health and safety regulations, both to protect the well-being of employees and contractors on site as well as to maintain the employer's reputation. Although noted earlier in the section related to employer reputational risk, the following discussion also relates to students risking workplace health and safety:

One student got fired from their work term because he didn't follow safety protocol. He was too close to some contractor work and the lawyers of that company were involved... Safety protocol was broken [so] that student was fired because that company has a high reputation of safety. And when they do come here on campus for info sessions and such, their emphasis on safety is so high that I don't think students realize what kind of risks are associated with it.

#### **Category 4: Risks to the Coordinator**

##### ***Theme 1: Coordinator personal safety***

Coordinators largely agreed that their personal safety was rarely at risk as a result of their work. Throughout her extensive career working with co-operative education students Susan noted that, "I have never felt physically threatened by any students, I never felt psychologically or emotionally threatened by students." "I haven't had any students be violent towards me or I haven't been fearful for my safety" (Amanda). Tanya commented that she was never physically at risk in her job, "risk to me personally, I don't go anywhere physically where I'm in physical risk."

For other coordinators there were some who perceived a potential for physical risks, "safety risks again, I sometimes go into laboratory or production environments. So safety, the potential of exposure to chemicals, odours, that kind of thing" (James).

I visited students on the side of a mountain, I would go in the woods and spend the afternoon with them tree planting or doing the silviculture survey, bears and cliffs and everything else that was around, it was more of an adventure, I didn't think of the actual risk to myself. (David)

David and Nancy both noted that they were required to travel frequently in order to meet with students and employers and that travel has the potential to involve risk:

The risks that I've faced over the years have been more physical... we pride ourselves on visiting all of our students in person, which means I drive and fly all over [area omitted to maintain confidentiality and anonymity] Canada for sure and definitely drive long

distances in remote communities so there's risk in that just in terms of a driving perspective. (David)

There's risks involved in that we travel. We travel alone. I think there is probably a heightened risk because I'm a female traveling alone.... On highways and superhighways I didn't know, in rental cars, then meeting with people I didn't know and having to find places and all that. So I mean there's a heightened risk there any time you travel for any job because your risk goes up.... But certainly there's that kind of personal risk involved for the coordinator. Which I think probably has not really been recognized. I think maybe it is more now but certainly when I started, I don't think it was really well recognized. (Nancy)

Sarah's response to questions about coordinators' personal safety and physical risks initially stated that that she was not subject to physical risk although throughout the discussion it came out that she had encountered a situation where an employer had made her female colleagues feel uncomfortable and intimidated:

I think for us [coordinators] there's not so much of a physical risk, I don't think there's too many, none of us have to, I don't know about the engineers maybe they have to go offshore or something but in my job I've never had to face too much of a, well it is possible, in theory that you go to a place in an office and that you're trapped alone with an employer things could happen... there was one situation where we had an employer who was a bit shady, it was a small business office and he had a bit of reputation for making women uncomfortable and I just refused to go. Fortunately we've always had a male on our staff, I've never done that visit, we don't have that employer anymore but I remember there was one situation where the supervisor was making the women coordinators uncomfortable.

Alice noted a situation where she felt uneasy about a student's behaviours toward her:

I've had a student follow me down to the parkade one day asking me questions, after asking me questions every day the previous week. Like I don't really want you following me to my car in the parkade. And I had started walking to the parkade after leaving the university and I had thought that he had stopped and gone back into the university but he kept following me. So it just makes me feel uneasy.

Nancy, Alice, and Paul all connected risks to their personal safety with student mental health. Nancy noted that as a coordinator, it is often her role to intervene in difficult situations

with the student or between student and employer, to act as the face of the institution, and perhaps make decisions that are not popular. When situations like this take place with a student who is suffering from mental health problems, she noted that the potential for risk to her personal safety is elevated. She did temper her point by saying that this was a rare occurrence:

We will also be the ones that will deal with a student if a student is having a work problem in a workplace. They could have mental illness or whatever and we're often an intervener in that situation or certainly someone who is trying to sort the whole situation out. I mean I have had a situation with a student who had mental illness and security was called. So I mean you know those, that's now really rare and it was all fine, but it is there and that really highlighted to me that that potential is there. Because we are the face of the institution to that particular student or can be the face of the institution if that student has a particular mental illness that the face of the institution is important. It's us.

Alice provided similar commentary, noting that she was responsible for imposing consequences on students and sometimes worried about students' reactions:

But certainly there's been... cases here where we've had to impose consequences on a student for maybe their work term performance and we really worried about the reactions. So, I actually feel, at times, mildly at risk because I'm not sure how that student will react because you're the person that's imposed the negative consequence on them.

When I questioned her if this point related to student mental health, she made an explicit connection between student mental health and coordinator personal safety in her reply:

Their mental health and our physical safety. Not that anything has ever happened, but if you're dealing with unstable individuals and you've imposed a consequence that they are really not happy with. I do worry about that and that is completely different than the other risks we were talking about. We actually have an alarm at the front desk now.

Paul provided an example of a time when he felt threatened by a student who he suspected had a mental health problem. In this case the student had made threats against his work term supervisor and the police were involved:

As far as my personal safety I must say that I was scared once, years, many years, like several years ago a student on his report, final report did some threats to his employer, like personal death threats.... For him it was a joke... but when the kid returned and he came in my office for his interview, he came in with a big bag, I suddenly felt like something could happen. I've got a good sense of humour and quick and all that so I diverted the whole thing but once we were in a safe environment when I told him about the whole situation the kid he just fell on his head because he said "oh it was not a threat it was just a joke." I said, "well that's no joke buddy because now the police are looking at [the situation], there's a complaint from your boss, she got scared".... I think it was a case of some mental health problems and some family problems as well. A good cocktail, but when that happened I sort of questioned myself as to, I was stuck in an office, someone doesn't like my face, hate what he did, feels that we're trapping him one way or another, all kind of things can happen.

### ***Theme 2: Coordinator mental health***

Three coordinators discussed their perceptions of the risks to their own mental health.

Nancy and Susan noted their concern for student success and their empathy for students experiencing difficulties and how that had the potential to affect their own mental well-being:

In terms of coordinators and mental health, one of the other things I meant to say was I think by from what I see from many coordinators, coordinators are really, they really are interested in the students doing well. They really are interested in the students having the best experience, they want to develop good experiences, they want to talk to the students, they council the students. I mean they have a real interest and that on the other side because of the empathy factor then creates mental health risks for the coordinator because you are so invested in your students in many ways. (Nancy)

The only risk I guess is that I would get too emotionally involved if the student was upset themselves and even then I'm pretty good, the students have elsewhere to go in the university and I don't try to, if I sense the student is not well I bring it up where it should go. (Susan)

Sarah noted that there was sometimes a lot of workplace stress and pressure associated with working with co-operative education and that resulted in emotional and psychological stress at times:

Emotionally and psychologically yes there's plenty. There's plenty. It was more so in the past than now, in the past we've had a lot of pressures on jobs, finding jobs for students, our class sizes were huge, 190-200, and when I first joined this job, we used to have 60 unplaced at a time when everyone should be placed and we used to sit and look at it and think what are we going to do with this. And at that time we used to get calls from fathers and mothers and sometimes they could be pretty nasty saying what are you doing for my son or daughter and little did they know how bad the son or daughter's transcript was or how badly they performed so it was like you know an onslaught on the phone sometimes, people calling and there would be calls from the [provincial government].... But that's all in the past because of our smaller classes that's not an issue, but if class sizes became big again it could happen.

She continued by remarking that coordinators work with so many partners, the student, the faculty, the employers, and often the government, which resulted in having to answer to and to please sometimes differing interests. "It's just one of those jobs where you have so many partnerships everybody can criticise you."

### ***Theme 3: Coordinator liability and negligence***

Several coordinators discussed their own risk in terms of liability and negligence. Coordinators questioned what they were and were not responsible for and what they reasonably could be expected to do to assess and minimize risk for their students. These questions and discussions relate directly to coordinators' legal duty of care to their students and their own understanding of the extent of their responsibility for co-operative education students and participating partners. This topic is discussed extensively in the section on coordinators' perceptions of the extent of their responsibility, although it merits discussion here as one of the perceived potential risks to coordinators.

Nancy questioned how much information she should provide to students about employers or employment situations, given they are outside agencies with their own rules and regulations

that coordinators may or may not know. In addition she also notes importantly that students are adults, implying that they also have responsibilities:

There's other personal risks in terms of feeling that there's always a risk of negligence that you will or won't have given all the information that you really could have, should have, so that the student was aware what they were getting into or fully prepared to go in. And the risk for me is how much do you give, because it's that situation where they are going to an external employer with their own rules and regulations, they are adults, so that's a little shifting for me. I never feel really solid on that.... To what extent if something comes back to what extent would that have been my responsibility to let the student know that, or to prepare for that particular situation.

Tanya also made comments about what information she gives to students and the importance she places on providing the right information and on doing her best to make sure that what she is saying is being understood:

I feel very responsible and very earnest in giving them the right information and the right impressions and I don't have total control over how, what they hear. I have total control over what I say, but not how it's perceived and what they take away. I'm always sensitive to that and certainly concerned with doing my best in that area, around messaging, clarity and trying to get a message across that I'm intending.

Alice's comments were similar to Nancy's and concerned her own risk and liability for the information she provides to students and her duty of care for students. She also noted that her students are adults and have responsibilities for their own decisions and their own actions and that through taking responsibility they were learning and being given the opportunity to develop better decision making skills:

In one way, when I think of risks to me, I think about my liability. What if I don't catch something? How much am I liable if something happens to a student. The other part of me thinks how much can we cover off, where is that boundary where our role can stop because, in my mind, they are young adults, and they are transitioning from teenagers to adults, but they are young adults and they have to learn to be responsible for some of their own decisions and some of the negative things that happen on a worksite are a consequence of some of their poor decisions. So you can't always take responsibility for

everything that somebody else does.... Sometimes they are put in situations that are difficult so I do worry about the liability in terms of my risk. Like, I'm not sure sometimes how far I need to reach. What do I need to cover to make sure that a student is safe and as risk-free as possible?... So the risk to me I feel is the liability piece. I don't want to be in a situation where someone is pointing a finger at me saying why didn't you look into this and because you didn't this resulted in something negative happening to a student. Like that certainly would be a lot of guilt. So that is certainly something I worry a lot about.

Clare related her duty of care to her students to her process of approving work term positions and evaluating potential work term employers. She stressed the added risk in approving an employer outside her province. She recognized that she is responsible for doing her due diligence in evaluating the employer and the position but also that there is always the possibility that the situation is not as good as it seems and that she could be held liable if something went wrong:

Coordinators, the biggest risks, when I approve a job to be posted, or I approve a job as a coordinator, we do all of the due diligence that we can do with that employer, especially if it's a new employer, new industry, all that type of thing. But there is always risk when you say yes, it's okay for you to go on that work term. And there's always butterflies in my stomach, no matter how well I know, and everything that I can possibly do, especially when that workplace is not in [this province]. So I haven't seen it, I've only talked to people on the phone, searched the website, you know you looked at all that you need to do with it, but there's times when you sit and you say, okay, I just hope this is as good as I think it is. Now it's always, it's always been fine, but there is risk. Right, you're sending someone into an unknown workplace. And you're sending in someone who is vulnerable.

#### ***Theme 4: Risk to coordinators' relationships and personal reputations with employers***

Coordinators discussed their own risk in terms of their reputation and their relationships with employers. The success of any co-operative education program relies largely on the good relationships that coordinators develop and maintain with the participating employers and a number of coordinators noted that poor student performance could compromise the good relationships that they had built with the employer and thus compromise future work terms for future students with these employers.

Nancy noted that coordinators use their own networks to develop work term positions for students and leverage their own reputations to do so:

There's also somewhat of a risk to our personal reputation I think because I think as coordinators we very often will leverage our reputation in developing jobs. We will use our contacts, people we know within the disciplines and in the community, to work with them to develop jobs and so when students go out if something disastrous were to happen or if they weren't up to expectations we can be the one whose reputation is impacted in that employer's eyes.

Amanda also noted the time and energy coordinators put into developing good relationships with employers and that a student's performance could negatively impact that relationship and compromise her professional integrity in the eyes of that employer:

For myself personally and professionally I guess for me I worry about students in the workplace because I, we develop good relationship with our employers, we spend a lot of time developing relationships and maintaining those relationships so I know a lot of the employers quite well. So if a student, if I send a student to them and that student has below average performance or poor performance I worry that that will reflect on me as the co-op coordinator. So my professional integrity, I guess you could say.

Rachel made similar comments about poor student behaviour or performance on a work term reflecting badly on her professionally, but also noted that it was not a common occurrence:

I'm the one who gave that student a recommendation, so it looks poorly on me because I'm the one who recommended the student. But at the same time, the employer shares the risk because they interviewed the students... accountability is shared between institution and employer. So that mitigates some of the risk on me.... In terms of my connections to the industry, because I do have a connection with the industry and I know a lot of people. That sets some risk associated, and it has to stay at the professional level, not the personal level. So, I don't take it personally. I can't take it personally. It doesn't happen very often at all.

Tanya recognized that student and employer satisfaction was a reflection on coordinators, but did not feel it was her primary concern. She remarked that she and her colleagues were primarily motivated by the student experience:

In terms of the student and the organization and me, obviously if they're unhappy it reflects badly on us. But that's a secondary concern. I don't exist to puff myself up or to support the organization. I exist for the students. We're all motivated by the students and their experience, otherwise we wouldn't do it. And we wouldn't put the time and energy we do into it.

When asked about her reputation and whether she thought it was at risk as a result of poor student performance on a work term, Patricia replied that it was not something that she had thought about:

I've never really thought about it from my own personal point of view. So I don't know, I don't know if should, but no, I've never really thought about myself personally. Maybe if I worked closely with an employer and really promoted the student.

Susan disagreed and did not feel that a student's poor performance was any reflection on her:

I don't really feel a whole lot of risk personally. I don't. I guess too if I wanted to go, I don't know, I could say if the students are performing poorly then that would be a reflection on me. But I don't truly believe that, I feel I am separate enough that I don't feel like that.

James' comments on the topic of coordinator reputation and relationships related to the impact that coordinator interactions with employers can have on fundraising and research funding across the university, "if we co-op coordinators or staff don't seem to be dealing with the employer properly that could compromise some of the donations or the research."

I think Alice sums up the responsibility that coordinators feel for building and maintaining strong relationships with employers and community and the risks and challenges that they sometimes face in trying to do that:

I think with what we do in co-op, we're the front line and even if we're not the individual responsible for something that's happened, it does come down to us. We're the people meeting with the companies and the students and we're seen as the face of the institution. We struggle with that a lot, I struggle with that a lot because I feel sometimes there's things that I would like changed and you're being advised by companies and students that

this should be changed and you know it almost comes across as personal but you're the one that people are talking to. So you feel responsible for it except it's really hard to kind of push that change forward from where you are in some cases.

***Theme 5: Risks to coordinators from breaches of students' confidentiality***

Coordinators perceived privacy and confidentiality issues as a potential area where they were at risk. They discussed problems surrounding what you can and cannot say about a student to parents and employers.

Clare noted she needs to be careful not to breach the confidentiality of her students' information in conversations with employers, "there's privacy and confidentiality issues when it comes to students. So when an employer asks about a student I have to be careful that I'm not and I don't obviously, say anything that would breach their confidentiality or privacy." James also noted his concern about confidentiality, "confidentiality, breach of confidentiality is sometimes something we worry about." He continued with discussion about students' parents calling his office seeking information about their children, "students' parents often call us asking for information about what their kids are up to, what students are up to, we can't divulge that, we have to be very general, professional about that."

Julia also discussed this issue and expressed that she was extremely aware of confidentiality and privacy, but that the situation was not always clear cut and that there were competing interests influencing how much information was shared with employers:

I would say one of the big things was trying to negotiate how much information can be, when things don't go well, how much information can you share with the student and how much information can you share with the employer? What's your role in that?.... Confidentiality can be applied to all environments. I think it's one that we're probably a little more open to in this environment, and so part of it is I think recognizing that there are times, this is our experience with a few students this summer who had medical issues, one student who moved away who really had a lot of personal things happening at the

same time and wasn't meeting the employers expectation and it just didn't work out well at all, but then we're trying to negotiate that dance between ensuring that the employer is able to post in future semesters and offer opportunities for future students and then on the other hand ensure that the student's concerns are heard and valued and that there's support for students who have moved away from home for the first time and really don't know how to handle it.

### **Category 5: Risks to the Institution**

Coordinators were asked to provide their perceptions of possible risks to their university that could arise from co-operative education. In general coordinators argued that co-operative education brought more benefit to the university than it did risk; however, issues around reputational risk and liability were discussed.

#### ***Theme 1: Reputation***

Reputation was discussed as a perceived risk to the institution by virtually all coordinators participating in this research. The risk to the reputation of the institution was considered at the university level as well as at the program level.

Nancy stressed that the reputation was the biggest risk to the institution and that the institution's or a program's success was often measured by employer and the community through the performance of the co-operative education student:

Its [the university's] biggest risk is its reputation I think. That is the biggest thing that a university has on the line It's all of these students are going out, all of these students are being judged how well prepared are they, what's their knowledge base, what's their work ethic, and their work ethic if they're not considered a good worker then that's going to be those [university name removed to protect confidentiality and anonymity] students. You know we get it all the time from employers. And fortunately it's all good. We get really positive feedback.... It can go the other way too very easily for an institution. So [the university's] reputation is on the line because in a number of ways, academically if the student is felt to be not well-prepared academically or doesn't have the strong knowledge

base and then all those other characteristics that the student has maybe independent of the institution.

Patricia noted that poor behaviour or poor performance by a co-operative education student on a work term had the potential for creating a bad reputation for her university. She provided an example of a student's inappropriate behaviour on a work term and asserted that that kind of situation could create a bad reputation for the program with a participating employer:

That leaves a bad reputation with your program, it's costing the employer money and then there's just the general risk of sending a co-op student out there who's just not qualified, doesn't do a good job, costs that employer money, gives a bad impression of our program and our university, so there's that kind of risk too.

Amanda noted concern for students carrying out inappropriate or illegal activities at work and how that might impact the reputation of her university:

I also worry, I guess it is a risk for the university too, if the student does carry out an inappropriate activity or an illegal activity that will reflect back on the university, it's a risk to the university's reputation because the students are representing the university.

Clare continued this theme and concurred that co-operative education students pose a risk to the university's reputation and have the potential to compromise employers' willingness to post positions for future work term students. She also noted the possibility of a work term student causing a scandal through media coverage of a negative event:

Other risks that students pose would be the risk to the university, of reputation and risk of, I guess to future students who are looking for work terms because if a student does not do well, or does something which an employer really dislikes, that's a risk to our program. For down the road, and being able to secure additional work terms with that employer or even employers in the same industry. Especially if it were to become, and I'm not going to say public knowledge because it might not be on the radio or TV, but it certainly could become well-known throughout the industry.

Clare continued by remarking that co-operative education students are ambassadors of their university and have the potential to make an impact on the reputation of their university,

especially outside their home province or abroad, where there may not be an established reputation within the community where they are working:

I think too reputation, marketability of programs, and you know when students go out there we tell them you are ambassadors of the university.... When they're out of province or out of country it's huge, because they are the face of [university name removed to protect confidentiality and anonymity] wherever they are. And not just at the workplace, in probably the town or city where they are.

Sarah, Natalie, and Rachel all noted that students are ambassadors for their university, but they all questioned whether students are aware of their role in representing their university. Rachel in particular noted the need to provide more training for students in this area:

There is the risk of students misrepresenting the university.... Sometimes I think that students don't recognize or realize is that when they are going out into the work place, they're not just representing themselves, they're the larger institution and their professionalism in the workplace, their rate of attendance, their ability to conduct themselves properly really does reflect upon both themselves and us as a larger institution. (Natalie)

That's also interesting, when you have students who have no sense of what they do in the workplace, that they represent the university, or sometimes they just don't know what they are doing and what their place is in the organization. (Sarah)

There are other risks associated with co-op because some of these students get out into the workforce not understanding the corporate culture. There are huge risks associated with this because it's not always monitored and some students say the darndest things to supervisors, or peers, or they do things outside of work hours not realizing the effect they have on the company they work for, the institution they represent, and also the program itself.... Students don't understand when they go out and represent themselves in a co-op environment that they not only represent themselves by name but also the institution, as well as the company they work for. So there's a lot of pressure without realizing how good their professionalism has to be not only inside the workplace but outside the workplace.... I mean we try and educate them beforehand and we do have workshops not only on CV writing skills and interviewing skills but also workplace etiquette .... I think we can do a little bit more in terms of educating students with the concept of reputation and reputation when they're out in the work place even when they're preparing for their co-op work term through networking activities, student-industry events, mock interviews, career fairs, that sort of thing. (Rachel)

James discussed how co-operative education students have the potential to compromise the university's reputation and how that could affect research partnerships or funding:

Institutional risks, I think there's the university's reputation, maybe the employer is a donor to the university, maybe they're donating money, doing research with the university and our student could compromise that with poor performance.

Susan and Sarah both noted that while co-operative education students have the potential to act as bad ambassadors and damage the reputation of their universities, it has to be an extreme situation to have serious reputational damage and is a very rare occurrence:

There is the risk of students being in the workplace, and being poor ambassadors for the university. I'm not so concerned about that because I think it is a very low percentage that that happens. I think too, we choose students, and we do our PD well, so that's less likely to occur. (Susan)

It can damage the reputation of [university name removed to protect confidentiality and anonymity] and but it has to be really bad performance to do that. And the other thing is employers who've been with [university name removed to protect confidentiality and anonymity] for a long time do know that we have very good programs here, one bad apple doesn't make the whole barrel bad so we've had situations where students have been fired but employers have come back [and continued to post positions to co-operative education students]. (Sarah)

### ***Theme 2: Liability***

Clare, Alice, David, and Sarah all perceived that universities are exposed to liability and legal risks as a result of offering co-operative education program. "Risk to the institution. Again, I just think about liability" (Alice). "The risk of legal you know, potential legal suit, law suits from parents, whatever, to the university" (Sarah). It was noted that co-operative education students, by virtue of their potentially dangerous work environments and the fact that they are off-campus on a university sponsored activity, have a greater potential for injury and damages that could result in legal action against a university. David noted the potential for legal action by parents or families if a co-operative education student was injured or killed on a work term:

So institutionally the risk that the institution takes is if the student were seriously injured or God forbid, killed. For whatever reason, the institution always faces risk no matter how they try to mitigate it, as a parent I think we would always do our best to get some satisfaction if we felt that the risk wasn't taken care of, if the school didn't do its best job, so I don't think, I think it's one of those things once again that comes up for the institution when it comes up, but when it doesn't come up they don't think much about it, they don't give it much thought and they don't think about practicum and co-op students that are out in the field and the risks that come with them until something happens, which interestingly is rare at our school.

Chapter four presented a detailed and extensive commentary on coordinators' perceptions of risk in co-operative education. These findings were systemically ordered and presented as five major categories, each with a number of associated themes. The extensive use of interview text throughout this chapter presented each participant's perceptions of risk in his or her own words. The following chapter interprets these results and discusses the relevance of coordinators' comments and perceptions on risk.

## **CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research study was to understand qualitatively how co-operative education coordinators perceive the risks associated with co-operative education in Canada to the participating partners. When I introduced the topic to my research participants I expressed to them that I viewed risks in terms of the risks that students face, the risks that students pose, the risks to the employer, the risks to the institution, and the risks to the coordinator; this is the context necessary to understand the research results and the subsequent discussion.

Coordinators' perceptions of risk was a topic that was previously entirely unexplored and this research is meant to provide a summary of how coordinators understand and perceive risks in co-operative education rather than to discuss what coordinators do to mitigate or minimize risk. The research seeks to fill an important gap in the existing literature related to co-operative education and perceived risks to students, employers, universities, and coordinators and to contribute to the existing discourse on risk.

In this chapter I present a critical analysis of the findings, make judgements regarding their meaning and what they add to the academic discussions of risk, and suggest further areas for research. In chapter four I presented the trees; in chapter five I describe the forest. In order to approach the discussion systematically and clearly, each research question is presented and discussed separately.

## Research Questions

*What risks do co-operative education coordinators perceive are associated with co-operative education?*

The primary research question in this study asks: what risks do coordinators perceive to be associated with co-operative education? Unsurprisingly, the fourteen coordinators who participated in this study identified numerous potential risks associated with co-operative education. Coordinators in general are risk aware and conscious of their role in protecting students, although to some degree less risk aware or less concerned about risks in terms of employer risks, institutional risks, and their own risk. Largely the coordinators believe that co-operative education is a safe endeavour and examples of extreme situations are very rare. Beck (2000) discusses risk as a concept that is characterized as a peculiar intermediate state between security and destruction; he argues that it is the perception of threatening risks that determines thought and action (p. 213). Accordingly, coordinators' perceptions of risk are not necessarily reflections of their experience with trauma, destruction, or conflict. Their perceptions of risk result from imagined or real fears, *what could be*, not necessarily *what is*. Coordinators' awareness of risk is in line with many academics' assertions that the concept of risk is pervasive in everyday life in most Western societies (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). We are all very risk aware so why should coordinators be otherwise? In fact, the majority of coordinators agreed that there was an increasing focus on risk at their institution. Whether real or imagined, it supports the notions of society's elevated risk consciousness and the pervasive fear of the unknown.

Coordinators perceived risks to all parties involved in co-operative education, although it was clear that the risks to the students were those that coordinators felt most strongly about. The

risks to the coordinator, the employer, and the institution in all cases were of lesser importance and in many cases the discussion of the risks to the coordinator, the employer and the institution eventually wound its way back to how it could affect the student or future students.

Coordinators' understandings of risk were student-centred; they measured virtually all risk in terms of its effect on the student.

Without exception, coordinators indicated that students were the most at-risk population in co-operative education. Many reasoned that this was as a direct result of co-operative education students' age, their limited experience, and their lowly place in the hierarchical world of work. Much of the discussions with coordinators focused on the fine balance of treating the students as adults, but also understanding that they are students and thus owed obligations from the university. Legally, co-operative students are adults, but according to Côté and Bynner (2008) "one of the least contested issues in contemporary youth studies is that the transition to adulthood is now taking longer on average than in the past, delayed until the mid-twenties to late-twenties for a significant proportion of youth cohorts in many developed societies" (p. 253). Therefore it can be argued that most undergraduate university students are transitioning to adulthood, but do not yet have established commitments and independent lifestyles that most people associate with being an adult. As a result the majority of the students participating in co-operative education are still in a transitional stage of life, neither child nor adult. Nelson and Barry (2005) summarize much research on this period of human development, which states that emerging adults are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours in general. The transition to adulthood for many is a time of exploration and experimentation, testing and trying, taking risks. It is not surprising then, that coordinators identified the student as the most at-risk and that they identified their youth as one of their students' key risk factors.

Co-operative education is perfectly positioned to capitalize on the risk-taking behaviour of the emerging adults enrolled in these programs; co-operative education encourages risk-taking by facilitating both career and academic exploration and experimentation in a supportive and safe environment. Coordinators acknowledge that their students' youth and limited life experience puts them at risk, despite encouraging risk-taking through seeking varied and new work experiences.

Other risks to the students relate to their personal safety at work, workplace harassment and mental health. The ramifications of the workplace health and safety violations and workplace harassment are well known, but less well known is the vulnerability of university students to mental health problems. Storrie, Ahern, and Tuckett (2010) conducted a systematic review of academic publications on university student mental health that demonstrated that serious mental illness in student populations was a growing problem worldwide. According to their review common problems experienced by university students include depression, eating disorders, self-harm, and obsessive compulsive disorder (p. 2); Martin (2010) identified depression and anxiety as the main conditions (p. 264).

While mental health problems affect people of all ages, three quarters of people who will develop mental illnesses will do so between the ages of 16 and 25 (Martin, 2010, p. 259), which is typically the time of life when people attend post-secondary education. An American study of students who experienced psychiatric problems during college showed that just under half of the students (49%) experienced the onset of mental illness while they were attending college (Megivern, Pellerito, & Mowbray, 2003, p. 221); roughly half of the students experienced psychiatric problems only after entering post-secondary studies. While the findings of Martin and Megivern et al. show that post-secondary students experience high levels of mental health,

Stallman (2010) goes further and demonstrates that university students experience significantly higher rates of mental health problems than the general population. She concludes that the “extremely high prevalence of mental health problems in university students provides evidence for this being an at-risk population” (p. 249). Thus, coordinators correctly identified co-operative education students as being at-risk for mental health problems.

It is clear that university students and thus co-operative education students are vulnerable to mental health problems. When it comes to risk in co-operative education, students’ mental health can affect their ability to perform at work, their ability to connect what they learned at work with what they learned in the classroom, and ultimately the reputation of the co-operative education program and/or the university.

Coordinators identified risks to the other partners involved in co-operative education: the coordinator, the university, and the employer; however in the great majority of cases these issues were not considered to be significant or likely risks. While coordinators recognized the potential for risks in the areas identified in chapter four, they were not overly preoccupied by or concerned about these risks.

*What do coordinators feel they are personally responsible or for liable for?*

Coordinators’ opinions varied quite considerably when asked about the extent of their responsibility in assessing and minimizing risk. Generally coordinators understood risk assessment and risk management to be part of their role but the extent to which they were responsible (more so than the student or the employer) was varied.

Giddens’ (1999) discussion of the relationship between risk and responsibility makes explicit the link between decision-making and risk:

The relation between risk and responsibility can be easily stated, at least on an abstract level. Risks only exist when there are decisions to be taken, for reasons given earlier. The idea of responsibility also presumes decisions. What brings into play the notion of responsibility is that someone takes a decision having discernible consequences. (p. 8)

Hence the decision-maker is responsible for consequences. In the case of co-operative education, decisions are made by all of the partners and therefore they all have the opportunity to expose one another (and themselves) to risk. The difference between the decisions that these players make is that students and employers are making decisions for themselves while coordinators are making decisions on behalf of others. Recent research (Charness & Jackson, 2009) set out to determine how feelings of responsibility influence decisions to take on risk in a strategic environment. Charness and Jackson's experiment found that a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others has an effect on decision-making; participants were more likely to choose a risky option when choosing for themselves only and less likely to choose a risky option when making decisions for a group. Reynolds, Joseph, and Sherwood (2009) also found that people are more risk averse when making decisions that affect others, especially in large publically owned firms. The influence of feelings of responsibility on risk-taking and decision-making suggests that coordinators, who routinely make decisions on behalf of employers and students as part of their work, are the most cautious decision-makers in the partnership and likely to be more cautious and less risky in making decisions on behalf of their students and the participating employers.

Most coordinators did however agree that responsibility for minimizing risk should be shared between the coordinator, the employer, and the student, but the balance of who was more and who was less responsible varied considerably. This is a good illustration of the unique and ambiguous status of the co-operative education student, as both student and employee. Given the

student status granted to co-operative education students on work terms, the coordinator has certain responsibilities; however, as many coordinators correctly identified, the student is also an employee, therefore the employer also has responsibilities. How the coordinators (and by implication the employers) interpret those responsibilities is in many cases a personal decision rather than an institutional one. In other words the institutions are in many cases not properly defining for coordinators, or employers for that matter, what they are responsible for in terms of risk management and risk assessment. The result is that coordinators are deciding for themselves what they are responsible for and acting according to their own understandings of risk and liability, which in a lot of cases as demonstrated in this research, is not a strong understanding. The potential for misunderstanding, conflict, or injury is strong in situations where so much is assumed and so little is properly defined.

This research question also provoked discussions about liabilities. Several coordinators correctly noted that they can be considered liable for the information they provide to students and that they could be putting themselves at risk if the information they provided turned out to be incorrect. Coordinators can provide information given to them by employers but coordinators are simply not in a position to enforce standards or conditions in an external worksite. They are often responsible for providing information but do not have the authority to ensure a particular safety standard is being adhered to or if an established work plan is being followed. How can coordinators be responsible for maintaining standards on a worksite over which they have no control? How can coordinators ensure the information they are providing is correct and consistent? These and similar questions add to coordinators' ambiguity on the extent of their responsibility in risk assessment and risk management.

*How do coordinators understand risk and institutional liability in general?*

Coordinators' understanding of risk and liability is important because it is this knowledge plus situation specific information that forms the basis on which coordinators make decisions on behalf of their students. Their understanding of risk and liability forms the context in which they make decisions to approve or not to approve work positions and the decisions they make to support and assist students when situations arise between students and employers, as they inevitably do from time to time.

Coordinators self-identified as having a range of understandings of risk and institutional liability in general, with good representation across the scale of weak to strong. The variability in understandings of risk and liability is linked to coordinators' questions about the extent of their responsibility. Many coordinators expressed that they were not clear where the boundaries of their responsibilities lay and that they often used their own judgment to determine what they were and what they were not responsible for rather than being guided by institutional policy. It is likely that the subjectivity in coordinator responsibility and the variability in understandings of risk and liability result from unclear or poorly articulated formal policies and procedures in many cases.

Interestingly coordinators self-assessed understandings of risk and liability in cooperative education were not necessarily connected with their length of service as a coordinator or other work experience suggesting that personality or other external factors were strong influences on their understandings of risk and institutional liability and thus on decision-making. Factors involved in decision-making and risk assessment is the subject of much research, which articulates that cognition, emotion, intuition, and mood all play a role. Until recently,

researchers focussed on cognition and logic as the key driver of decision making; however, increasingly the effects of other factors are under review. The connection between risk perception and emotion is well documented in the literature and “it is largely recognized that emotions are in manifold ways involved in judgments, risk perception, and decisions” (Böhm & Brun, 2008, p. 1). In addition (Khatri & Ng, 2000) argue that “intuition is central to all decisions, even those based on the most concrete, hard facts” and that intuition plays a large role in gathering and interpreting data (p. 62). Intuition, according to Price and Norman (2008) is both conscious and subconscious, resulting in a feeling that is conscious even if the underlying reasons are not. De Vries, Holland, and Witteman (2008) found that mood also affected decision making and risk assessment, finding that a positive mood produced stronger decisions than negative mood.

Coordinators’ understandings of risk and liability and the decisions that they make predicated on this knowledge are influenced by many factors and thus are idiosyncratic and likely inconsistent.

*How do universities prepare co-operative education coordinators to reduce risk and do coordinators feel they are supported (or not supported) by the policies of their institution?*

Coordinators answered almost entirely that their universities had done nothing to prepare them to reduce potential risks in co-operative education and that largely their abilities to do so were learned from colleagues or resulted from common sense and previous work experiences. Coordinators rely, in large part, on their own tacit knowledge to reduce risk rather than relying on expert advice from risk managers. Seemingly university administrators and risk managers are doing little, if anything to participate in risk communication with the great majority of this

population of coordinators. Current concepts of risk communication take for granted that messaging about risk must be an interactive of exchanging information and opinions (Sellnow, Ulmer, Seegar, & Littlefield, 2009, p. 5), which evolved from a linear one-way approach to risk communication. Sellnow et al. provide a number of best practices in risk communication including infusing risk communication into policy decisions and understanding that risk communication is a process of communication and dialogue over time, not simply a one-time injection of information in order to produce the desired outcome. Coordinators and university administrators should be collaborating in order to incorporate their respective experiences and expertise into policy development. Unfortunately, it is apparent that university administrators are not interacting with the majority of this group of coordinators and are not engaging in effective risk communication.

Surprisingly, coordinators largely felt supported by the policies of their institution, although there was a strong sense that coordinators sought clarity or more information on policies related to risk. These positions seem at odds with one another. How can coordinators acknowledge that their institution has done nothing to prepare them to assess and minimize risk but still purport to feel supported by the policies of their institution? Is it possible that coordinators do not see the connection between risk assessment and risk minimization and university policy? It is difficult to explain otherwise. It is likely then that as a result of ineffective risk communication coordinators lack awareness of the relevant policies and are unaware of the connection between risk and university policy.

## Implications and Recommendations

Readers may draw any number of conclusions from the research, but in the main this research leads to two main recommendations; one recommendation for university administrators and one for managers of co-operative education.

As indicated by the literature and this research, coordinators' understanding of risk and their decision-making processes are influenced by many factors. By their own admission most of the coordinators participating in this research perceive that universities have not done anything to prepare coordinators to assess and minimize risks. As a result *it is recommended that university risk managers and policymakers collaborate with co-operative education coordinators to identify and assess risks and develop appropriate policies to minimize risks to students, employers, and the institution.* Their collaboration should be dynamic, iterative, and long-term to ensure policies are developed, evaluated and modified effectively with input from all parties.

Many coordinators expressed concern about the extent of their responsibility and through my interviews with coordinators it became clear that there is not a clear or uniform understanding of coordinator responsibilities versus those of the employer and those of the student. In order to make clear what each of the participating partners are responsible for *it is recommended that Co-operative Education Managers, in collaboration with coordinators, employers, and students, establish and distribute clear guidelines delineating the responsibilities of each of the partners.* It is not enough that each individual understands his or her own responsibilities, he or she must also understand the responsibilities of the other parties involved.

## **Further Research**

The topic of risk in co-operative education represents new ground in academic research. There is no existing body of literature on this topic; hence, areas for further research related to risk and co-operative education are too numerous to list completely. However, now that there is research outlining how coordinators perceive risk, it would be valuable to complement this with research on co-operative education managers' perception of risk, students' perceptions of risk, and employers' perceptions of risk. It would be beneficial to determine where and how perceptions of risk differ and where they are perceived similarly.

In addition this research has exposed issues concerning university policy and risk communication. Further research on risk communication and effective risk policy development in university settings in general as well as in co-operative education specifically would be beneficial to the partners in co-operative education.

## **Conclusions**

This study sought to understand how coordinators perceive the risks in co-operative education in Canadian universities. It demonstrates that coordinators perceive students as the most vulnerable partner in co-operative education and have a very student-centred approach to minimizing risk and decision-making. Coordinators have a strong commitment to the safety as well as the experience of the student. They perceive co-operative education as a largely safe endeavour. Coordinators' comments on the sometimes ambiguous nature of their responsibilities are reflective of the dual status of the co-operative education student, both as student and employee at the same time. As such who is responsible for what is often a question that is answered idiosyncratically by coordinators. University policy-makers should take a leadership role in engaging in risk communication with their employees in co-operative education in order

to collaborate on best practices and policies that will guide coordinators and enable them to provide consistent and effective risk management strategies in order to support student learning and development.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

#### Legal Cases Involving Co-operative Education Students in Canada since 2000

2010-717-AD (RE) 2012 CanLII 35046 (NS WCAT) — 2012-06-26

Court: The Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia

Note: The subject was 25 years old and enrolled in an engineering program. She was a collegiate-level wrestler who suffered a chronic back injury in October 2008 as a result of a lifting-related task on the job. The student was granted workers compensation in January 2009. She applied again for compensation in July of 2010 but was rejected because it was thought that the injury was wrestling-related. Due to her injury being chronic the worker was allowed compensation because it was a recurrence of the injury suffered on the work term.

Alberta Union of Provincial Employees vs. Alberta. 2011 CanLII 81626 (AB GAA) — 2011-02-14

Court: Alberta Grievance Arbitration Awards

Note: The student was enrolled in a management co-op program at the University of Lethbridge. The student was employed by the Government of Alberta in the position of Policy Assistant at the Department of Employment, Immigration and Industry. He had cerebral palsy and had to use a wheelchair and voice recognition software. The employer and the student agreed on a work term from May 1<sup>st</sup> to December 1<sup>st</sup> 2008. Agreement was terminated on July 8<sup>th</sup> to take effect on 22<sup>nd</sup>. Subject filed grievance claiming it was unfair because of his medical condition. Grievance dismissed because he was not entitled to an arbitrator because he was a wage employee, not a salaried employee as stated by the parties' agreement.

Arias vs Desai. 2003 HRTO 1 (CanLII) — 2003-02-07

Court: Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario

Note: This incident relates to sexual harassment during a work term. The student was on a work term in a hotel management program at St. Clair College in Windsor. The owner of hotel sexually harassed student by forcing her to partake in acts such as hugging him, making her feel his erect penis and nibbling on her ear. These incidents happened on June 25<sup>th</sup> 2000. When the student threatened to complain about harassment, student was fired. Court ruled that firing was unjust and was given \$5,000 in compensation.

Bakay vs Bakay. 2000 SKQB 563 (CanLII) — 2000-12-12

Court: Regina Family Law Division

Note: The subject was 23-years old and enrolled in an engineering co-op program. The subject was in the middle of a child support case where his father did not pay child support and tuition fees during his work term. As the child was still enrolled in university in a full-time program, the father had to pay child support and tuition fees for his 23-year-old son.

Decision no. 101/06. 2006 ONWSIAT 341 (CanLII) — 2006-02-16

Court: Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Appeals Tribunal

Note: Subject was enrolled in a co-op program where she was employed as a prison guard between 1988 and 1989. She asked for compensation relating to PTSD from a series of incidents between 1988 to 1991. In 1988, an inmate asked her to deliver a letter to the warden. Contained in this envelope was a piece of skin that was consistent with the inmate's history of self-mutilation. Later that year, she would see the same inmate's corpse being taken away after the inmate committed suicide. Also during this placement, an inmate threatened the subject with scissors, however other employees managed to intervene and there was no physical harm. She would be hired by the prison after graduation where other incidents happened that are included in this court case but did not happen during the work term.

Marta Re, 2001 CanLII 28440 (ON SC) — 2001-02-07

Court: Ontario Supreme Court

Note: The subject was 27 years old and in an environmental studies program at Waterloo. After completion of the program, he decided enter a Bachelor of Architecture program which contained a co-op program. He also filed for bankruptcy during this time and had to repay \$11,800 in owed money. Due to the amount he would be making in the program, his wages were eligible for repayment and he would have to repay at a rate of \$250 per month for 3 years.

McMaster University Academic Librarian Association v. McMaster University. 2010 CanLII 6716 (ON LRB) — 2010-02-16

Court: Ontario Labour Relations Board

Note: This was regarding a dispute over the role of co-op students in a strike vote. The dispute was regarding whether the student should be allowed to cast a ballot in a strike as their placement's funding comes from an agency external to the university. It was ruled that if they wish to vote then they should be allowed to vote and the vote would be in segregation until the Board or other parties agree. A further ruling on March 16<sup>th</sup> stated that the votes of the co-op students could not be counted.

Reyes v. Rollo 2001 CanLII 28260 (ON SC) — 2001-12-14

On: 12/14/2001

Court: Ontario Supreme Court

Note: Dispute over child support between parents. The Child was 21 years old and enrolled in Ryerson's Commerce co-op program. This case revolved around the question of does a parent need to subsidize the child's living expenses even though they make an income from the co-op program.

UBC vs Magolan, 2008 BCPC 299 (CanLII) — 2008-10-20

Court: Provincial Court of British Columbia

Note: There was a dispute regarding a student's deferment in University of British Columbia's (UBC) engineering co-operative education program. The UBC wanted its money back while the defendant wanted to withdraw from the program. UBC was unable to prove defendant was responsible for fees and thus the case was dismissed.

United States of America vs Sriskandarajah, 2010 ONCA 857 (CanLII)

Court: Ontario Court of Appeals

Note: The American government sought to extradite the subject from Canada due to laundering money through American bank accounts to fund the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) terrorist group. The subject is also suspected of acquired aviation equipment, submarine and warship design software and other communications equipment for members of the LTTE. The court ruled that the American government's request was reasonable. The subject was released on bail on January 6<sup>th</sup> 2011 and the Supreme Court of Canada was expected to hear their case in June 2012

WCAT-2009-01504 2009 CanLII 48208 (BC WCAT) -2009-06-04

Court: British Columbia Workers' Compensation Appeal Tribunal

Note: Subject was enrolled in an engineering co-op program when he died in a car accident when driving home from his worksite. Worked 96.5 hours over previous eight days. Originally was offered place closer to worksite than 2 hour drive from home but the offer was rescinded. Mother blamed employer for poor working conditions. Board was unavailable to investigate matter because crash was off worksite.

## Appendix 2

Email to Member of the Canadian Association for Co-operative Education (CAFCE)

Subject: Research on perceptions of risk in co-operative education

What is your understanding of the risks in co-operative education? Memorial University researcher and co-operative education coordinator Rebecca Newhook is currently investigating Co-operative Education Coordinators' perceptions of risk in co-operative education. Her research seeks to understand how coordinators understand and experience risk in their work with students, employers and universities. She is looking for answers to questions like: what risks do students face in the workplace, what risks do students pose in the workplace, how do coordinators understand institutional and personal liability and the risks in higher education in general? This research is being conducted out of Rebecca's professional interest and as part of the requirements for her Master of Education degree program.

Rebecca will be making contact with the Directors of Co-operative Education in selected universities in Canada in the coming weeks. Directors will be asked to identify coordinators who could participate. Please approach your Director or Rebecca directly if you are interested in taking part in this exciting research. Participants are required to conduct a one-on-one interview with Rebecca in the fall of 2012.

Participation is purely voluntary and your choice of whether or not to participate will have no impact on your employment status. All information and participation will be kept in total confidence.

*The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.*

Contact: Rebecca Newhook, Division of Co-operative Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland [rnewhook@mun.ca](mailto:rnewhook@mun.ca), (709) 864-4098

## Appendix 3

### Email to Select Co-operative Education Directors

Subject: Research on perceptions of risk in co-operative education

I am a Co-operative Education Coordinator at Memorial University of Newfoundland and I am currently researching risk in co-operative education. You should have received an email regarding this research from CAFCE [last week]. Specifically my research seeks a qualitative understanding of how Co-operative Education Coordinators in Canada perceive the risks associated with co-operative education. My research is seeking answers to questions like: what risks do students face in the workplace, what risks do students pose in the workplace, how do coordinators understand institutional and personal liability and the risks in higher education in general? This research is supported by CAFCE through its Co-operative Education Research Grant and has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. I am conducting this research out of my professional interest and as part of the requirements for my Master of Education degree program.

This email is to request your assistance in identifying research participants. Research participants are required to conduct one interview with me that will probably take around one hour. Interviews will be audio-recorded. I hope to complete the interviews in person, although in some cases they may take place over the telephone.

Can you recommend coordinators at your university who could participate? Participation is purely voluntary and all information will be kept in total confidence. My aim is to interview at least 15 coordinators across Canada from universities with long-standing co-op programs in multiple disciplines. Any assistance you can provide me in identifying research participants and providing them with time to participate is greatly appreciated.

*The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.*

Contact: Rebecca Newhook, Division of Co-operative Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland [rnewhook@mun.ca](mailto:rnewhook@mun.ca), (709) 864-4098

## Appendix 4

### Email to research participants

Subject: Seeking participants for research on perceptions of risk in co-operative education

I am a Co-operative Education Coordinator at Memorial University of Newfoundland and I am currently researching risk in co-operative education. You should have received an email regarding this research from CAFCE [last week]. Specifically my research seeks a qualitative understanding of how Co-operative Education Coordinators in Canada perceive the risks associated with co-operative education. My research is seeking answers to questions like: what risks do students face in the workplace, what risks do students pose in the workplace, how do coordinators understand institutional and personal liability and the risks in higher education in general? This research is supported by CAFCE through its Co-operative Education Research Grant and has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University. I am conducting this research out of my professional interest and as part of the requirements for my Master of Education degree program.

Your director [director's name] identified you as a coordinator with an interest in risk in co-operative education. This email is to invite you to participate in my research. Participation is purely voluntary and all information will be kept in total confidence. Your choice of whether or not to participate will in no way impact your employment status and I will not inform your director whether you choose to participate or not. Your director will not have access to the interview data if you choose to participate.

Should you agree to participate you would be required to conduct one private, audio-recorded interview with me that will probably take around one hour. I hope to complete the interviews in person, although in some cases they may take place over the telephone.

Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you would like to participate. I am available to answer any questions or discuss your concerns.

*The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.*

Contact: Rebecca Newhook, Division of Co-operative Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland [rnewhook@mun.ca](mailto:rnewhook@mun.ca), (709) 864-4098

### Consent Form

**Title:** Co-operative Education Coordinators' perceptions of risk in co-operative education in Canada.

**Researcher:** Rebecca Newhook, B. A., M. Ed. (candidate) and Co-operative Education Coordinator, Memorial University of Newfoundland

**You are invited to take part in a research project entitled "Co-operative Education Coordinators' perceptions of risk in co-operative education in Canada."**

**This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any other information given to you by the researcher.**

**It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in the research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.**

**Introduction:** This research proposes to determine qualitatively what co-operative education coordinators in Canadian universities perceive as the risks, both legal and ethical, that are associated with co-operative education. Specifically coordinators will be asked about their responsibilities and liabilities for the risks they feel students face in the workplace, the risks the students pose in the workplace and risks associated with work terms across Canada and Internationally.

**Purpose of the study:** This research seeks to discover a rich and thick description and account of co-operative education coordinators' perceptions of risk in co-operative education in Canada. It will add to the body of knowledge about coordinators' perceptions of risk associated with co-operative education specifically and about institutional liability and risks in higher education in general.

**What you will do in this study:** Research participants will be required to participate in one private interview with the researcher (in person or over the telephone) and if possible, provide examples of any presentations, forms, or documents associated with student work terms.

**Length of time:** Interviews will usually take one hour.

**Possible benefits:** There is no existing research surrounding risk in co-operative education demonstrating a pressing need to investigate this topic. The outcomes of this research could provide information to administrators about professional development activities and additional supports that could be provided to coordinators to help them understand risk and manage their students' and their own exposure to risks. In addition the research will provide information to those in risk management in post-secondary environments about what university employees perceive as their role in risk assessment and risk management.

**Possible risks:** There are no anticipated risks involved with participation in this research.

**Confidentiality:** Neither research participants nor universities will be identified in this research; pseudonyms or generic terms will be used for both. Your director may or may not have identified you as a potential participant in this study. Your choice of whether or not to participate will in no way impact your employment status and your director will not be informed about whether you choose to participate or not. Your director will not have access to the interview data if you choose to participate. The audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed by student assistants who will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Confidentiality and privacy will be maintained.

**Anonymity:** Every effort will be made to protect the anonymity of the research participants by using pseudonyms for the names of the participants and their universities, however given the small size of the population and the details of risky situations that are expected to be discussed it may be possible for those familiar with the situation(s) to deduce who participated in the research or at least the institution that he/she works with. I believe for the majority of discussions this will not be the case however.

**Recording of data:** Interviews will be audio-recorded. A participant may request that he/she not be audio-recorded at any time before or during the interview. Direct quotes may or may not be used in the published findings (identifying information will be omitted). A participant may request that he/she not be quoted directly at any time.

**Reporting of results:** The data collected will be used to write a Master of Education thesis. In addition the data will inform an article in the Journal for Cooperative Education and Internships and a presentation at the Canadian Association for Co-operative Education Annual General Meeting or Biennial Conference. Publications in other academic journals or magazines are possible. No personally identifying information will be used in reporting the results.

**Withdrawal:** Research participants have the right to withdraw at any time. A participant may inform the researcher in writing or otherwise at any point before the data has been submitted for publication or the final thesis submitted that he/she wishes to withdraw. If a participant chooses to withdraw from the research, the data relating to that participant will be destroyed. There will be no consequences for a participant who wishes to withdraw.

**Storage of data:** All data generated by this research will be kept securely in a locked cabinet or on a password protected networked computer on the campus of Memorial University. All data will be kept for a minimum of five years as per Memorial University policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research.

**Access to study results:** Participants can access the study results in person in the published Master of Education thesis, which will be held by the Queen Elizabeth II Library at Memorial University. The researcher also intends to publish at least one article in the Journal of Co-operative Education and Internships. The researcher can email a copy of the thesis or journal article to a participant if requested.

**Questions:** The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 864-2861.

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research
- You have been able to ask questions about this study
- You are satisfied with the answers to all of your questions
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights, and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form for your records.

**Your Signature:**

I have read and understood the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I consent to be interview and audio-recorded. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher's Signature:**



## Appendix 6

### Interview questions

#### Background information

1. How long have you worked as a co-op coordinator?
2. Do you work with students from one discipline or more than one discipline?
3. Do you work with domestic and international students?
4. Do your students travel nationally and internationally for work terms?

#### The coordinator's understanding of risk

5. Do you think your understanding of the risks associated with your work is strong or weak?
6. What are the risks to the partners in co-operative education?
7. What do you think are the most important or biggest risks to students, coordinators and institutions in co-operative education?

#### Risk management and the coordinator's role

8. Given that students on work terms are employees and adults, what is the extent of your responsibility in risk assessment and risk management?

#### Risk management, the coordinator's relationship with the institution

9. Do you think your understanding of institutional liability and institutional risk is strong or weak?
10. How does your institution prepare you to assess and minimize risky situations?
11. Do you feel supported or not supported by the policies of your institution?

#### Personal experience

12. Can you tell me about a time when you felt a student was at risk in the workplace?
13. Can you tell me about a time when you felt personally or professionally at risk as a result of a student's behaviour in the workplace?





