

Albert S. Barber

Bert Barber, known as the “father of co-operative education in Canada,” began knocking on doors back in 1958 to find jobs for the engineering students studying at the fledgling University of Waterloo.



Barber’s early attempt to link industry with education – now a mainstream concept – was met with skepticism and resistance from both the business world and academia.

Barber, who died in 1992, was remembered as a university official with vision who also maintained a personal connection to many of the students, calling each one, “one of the boys.” He once said, “When they didn’t know where else to go, we invited them in.”

In a history of the university published in 1967, it was written:

“(Barber) will fight for them, he will discipline them when necessary, he goes to their parties and shares in their fun and when the going gets rough he is with them all the way.”

When Barber joined the Waterloo College of Associate Faculties, now known as the University of Waterloo, he had already spent more than twenty years as a manager at General Motors of Canada and Union Carbide of Canada. He was born in a small town in Northern Ontario and attended the University of Toronto before getting a degree in industrial engineering from the General Motors Institute of Technology in Flint, Michigan.

Under Barber’s leadership, co-operative education flourished at the University of Waterloo and he soon found himself in the position of hiring engineers to help co-ordinate and manage the growing program. This was a challenge because successful professionals were reluctant to leave good jobs to help co-ordinate an unproven academic program for less pay.

However, Barber managed to recruit staff and with his hard work he was able to “contribute tremendously to making the Waterloo version of co-operative education work. It has attracted the support of industry; it has provided jobs for students during their work periods . . .”

For his work developing co-operative education in Canada, he received many prestigious awards. Barber was given the Canadian Centennial Medal in 1967 and the Queen’s silver jubilee medal as well as a citizenship award from the Association of Professional Engineers in Ontario.

He also received honorary doctorate degrees from the University of Waterloo and Memorial University in Newfoundland. In 1982, UW established an award in his name to honour the student with the most outstanding record in co-operative education. Barber's legacy extends beyond Waterloo with many universities in Canada and around the world adopting the model he created. "He had a job on his hands which had no precedent in higher education."

Photo courtesy of University of Waterloo Library; Personal Studio.