The summer job can mean different things to different people. For some, it means blowing a whistle at caffeine-sugar-water crazed kids for diving into the shallow end of the pool. For others it means sitting at the 7-Eleven register and selling gallon buckets of caffeine-sugar-water to kids. But for almost everyone, a summer job means: a job that has no bearing on what I want to do for the rest of my life. Mike Tuertscher may have ended up doing just such a job last summer. “I wanted to do four years [to graduate] and get out and then find a job. I had tried for two years,” said Tuertscher, regarding his search for a summer job in the field of engineering, “I wasn’t having much luck.” He might have ended up in some sort of caffeine-sugar-water related summer job if he had not heard the voice of reason. Tuertscher explained, “She said one sentence to me, and it was, ‘a co-op is a foot in the door to a job.’” Mary Rose Tichar was the voice of reason who pushed Tuertscher to co-op with General Electric.

Tuertscher interviewed for and accepted the position because he understood the challenges he faced. “I knew all along I needed the real world experience to become more marketable,” he said. Students attending the biannual career fair will find that as the economy tightens, corporations want to make intelligent decisions in hiring. It is expensive and time consuming to hire and then fire a new employee because they were unsuited to their position. That means less job opportunities for new graduates with no credentials. Instead, companies are favoring co-op and other semi-long term positions which let the employer evaluate a potential employee for months. Then the employer can make an educated hiring decision. When Tuertscher applied to General Electric’s Edison Engineering Development program (a two year program which educates young engineers while advancing them within the organization), he was already in a special pool thanks to his co-op status. General Electric interviews co-op students for the program before pursuing other avenues. If the company has 60 positions available, General Electric will preferentially fill those slots with co-op employees. That helps explain why Tuertscher can now look forward to a hopefully-lifelong engineering career through the Edison program, rather than the hopelessly-lifelong acne of a designated burger flipper.

Of course, it is completely normal for a high school educated young person to spend some time flipping burgers. Burger flipping is one of the more complicated and responsibility-intensive tasks that high school students are trusted with. But after just two years at Case, students may be surprised at how qualified they are (even if they still cannot flip burgers). “I was really nervous that I would go in, and they would expect me to do stuff, and I wouldn’t have a clue what was going on,” said Tuertscher. As a student in the Mechanical Engineering Department, Tuertscher’s classes would be more focused on the theory of engineering than the application. But the classes gave him a strong analytical background on which he could build and learn as long as his employers were willing to teach. “I probably had the basic jet engine explained to me ten times by different people,” said Tuertscher.

Engineering is such a diverse field that it is difficult to adequately prepare students for every engineering problem they might face. Large companies with established engineering programs like General Electric will continue educating the engineer in their specific field long after hiring. Co-ops
can take advantage of this by learning about real world engineering problems and taking that perspective back to class. Time spent on co-op is an opportunity to learn invaluable company knowledge. While they may not hold such coveted summer chicken chef information as the ‘secret blend of 11 herbs and spices,’ private engineering companies pass on lessons learned from industry experience. General Electric was able to teach Tuertscher about details of aerospace that even his professors would never have encountered. And the engineers at General Electric were happy to help, “Nobody was like, ‘gah the co-op’s got another question,’” said Tuertscher. “Anybody that I asked would sit down and talk with me…” said Tuertscher, even if, “it was most likely not on their schedule.”

While no one can dispute the importance of properly bagged groceries, Tuertscher was able to find satisfaction through the importance of his work as well. “The work I did was directly applied to making sure that the engines were of a high quality and being shipped on time,” said Tuertscher. From measuring surface roughness on problematic engine turbine blades, to helping make sure that engine parts stack up evenly, his work clearly fit into the big picture. Even when his work involved the clerical cataloguing of manufacturing steps, “Everybody I worked with made sure that I understood the overall,” said Tuertscher. And the overall big picture is impressive when it means carrying people through the sky at 600 miles per hour.

Tuertscher’s experience speaks for itself:

I was sad that I had to come back [to complete my studies]. I enjoyed being there. It really made me realize that that’s what I wanted to do with my life. Now I’ve come back, and I’m taking more classes... and I’m almost frustrated that I can’t be back there working right now. But it makes me understand how the school work helps prepare for that. And I definitely look back at it as a positive experience.

Co-op is an opportunity to explore what lines of work are will lead to personal fulfillment. So while most of us know that we do not enjoy selling magazine subscriptions door to door in the 100° heat, Mike Tuertscher knows the pride that comes with improving engine manufacturing yields. Instead of looking for another summer job, why not work somewhere that can become a summer-fall-winter-spring job?