

Building a Co-op Future

Canada offers master's program, Imagine 2012 summit

BY JANE LIVINGSTON

The International Year of Cooperatives is an ideal time to think about the intellectual underpinnings of the cooperative movement. Canadian cooperators offer two key resources for this endeavor.

Master of the [co-op] universe

The Master of Management, Co-operatives and Credit Unions (MMCCU) degree was created to address the lack of postgraduate degree programs—in English, from an accredited university—designed specifically for co-op and credit union managers and executives.

Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in particular its highly respected Sobey School of Business, is the accredited institutional partner of the program.

The other partners supporting the MMCCU program are members of the Cooperative Management Education Co-operative, which includes 42 cooperative enterprises and associations, 12 educational institutions, and 12 individual members.

The faculty and the student body come from North America, the United Kingdom, and Oceania. Women and men who have earned the MMCCU degree are managers of scores of cooperatives of every type, from small worker co-ops to retail consumables giants such as Co-op Atlantic and The Co-operative (UK).



U.S. food and worker co-ops, despite the lack of similar sizeable assets, are the source of nearly one-fourth of the students.

What's the draw?

Co-operators Insurance, whose former Executive VP Dennis Deters encouraged more than a dozen managers to enroll in the program, is emphatic about the value of these Masters of Management to his co-op. "The return on our investment is having staff... understand how cooperative business is different," he says.

More than three dozen MMCCU graduates profiled on the website have said that until going through the program, they did not fully grasp that co-op difference. As Ron Fox, CEO of Northeast Gas Co-op in Alberta, Canada, put it:

"It's almost miraculous to have a business where the values come so close to what you aspire to in your personal life."

MMCCU graduates I interviewed are unanimous in praising the program as being well worth the tuition (which compares very well with U.S. MBA programs that rarely mention co-ops), as well as worth every hour of hard work put into earning the degree.

Spreading the message

One of the people responsible for the impact the MMCCU program has had is co-creator, instructor, and founding manager Tom Webb. Webb is known to the U.S. co-op community in part for his leadership in the very successful Marketing Our Cooperative Advantage initiative while he was director of Cooperative Extension at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia.

That marketing initiative itself sprouted in part from a Gallup survey in the U.S. that determined two-thirds of consumers would prefer to patronize co-ops, all else being equal. Recognizing that co-ops' differentiation was "trustworthiness" fueled the work of people like Webb and Sid Pobihushchy in Canada, who were extolling the benefits of the International Cooperative Statement of Identity, aka "the Co-op Values and Principles," especially the two newest ones, "Cooperation among cooperatives"

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF PACHAMAMA COFFEE CO-OP



Dear Friends,

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RAUL DEL AGUILA, COCLA COOPERATIVE, PERU



Pachamama Coffee is a global co-op 100% owned and governed by small-scale coffee farmers in Peru, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico and Ethiopia. Our mission is to serve customers coffee in the most direct way possible and, in doing so, improve the lives of small-scale coffee farmers. www.pacha.coop/about

and “Concern for community.”

At the same time these and other cooperators were shining a light on Principles Six and Seven, the social and environmental justice communities worldwide were making huge strides in promoting Fair Trade and organic, nontoxic, nongenetically modified food. In the United States, these movements converged in the boardrooms, managers’ offices, and membership meetings of the nation’s natural grocery co-ops.

The missing link

Just as the food co-ops taught us how to eat right, they taught us how to buy right. And (with the exception in some cases of worker relations), they showed us how businesses should act toward their neighbors.

Yet, while utilizing the cooperative social and environmental differences has become part of many co-op and credit union managers’ toolkits for developing their enterprises, the fundamental cooperative economic difference is not as well understood or practiced.

Other than the MMCCU program and a few educational courses adapted to co-ops that are spread around the English-speaking academic world, there’s no place to formally study co-op

economics. Co-op managers have few economic guidelines not rooted in profit maximization for speculative investors. And that economic model surrounds us; it’s easy to forget it is but one way to look at the global economy.

“Imagine 2012”

Webb sees this all too clearly. In February, he retired as MMCCU program manager and is currently heading up the production of the official opener to the International Summit on the Cooperative on October 6–11 in Quebec City (www.imagine2012.coop).

The Imagine 2012 International Conference on Cooperative Economics combines 15 groundbreaking “alternative” economists and an international panel of co-op and credit union leaders for two days of exchange. Their task: to begin framing a universally acceptable body of knowledge called Co-op Economics.

To this end, the conference is designed to deliver to conference-goers some of that deeper awareness, that “Aha!” experience, that characterizes the MMCCU program. Participants who go on to the Co-op Summit will be far better equipped to help draft a strategy for quickly expanding the role of cooperative enterprise in the global economy because they will be

better at distinguishing cooperative economic analyses, assumptions, measurement criteria, and other components of this very different approach.

Calling U.S. food co-op leaders

There have been co-op revolutions before: the Rochdale Pioneers in England, the Canadian farming and fishing families, the U.S. farmers and ranchers who created the rural electric co-ops, and their city cousins who floated the first wave of food co-ops in the wake of the Great Depression.

For their descendants in the U.S. food co-op community, there is an opportunity to share our successes in the social, environmental, and health arenas and to learn more about how others around the world have built success by employing co-op economics. It is a golden opportunity to expand our networks of colleagues who support Principles Six and Seven.

Humanity and the planet never needed cooperative leadership more than we do in this International Year of Cooperatives. For program details, presenter profiles, news, YouTube videos, registration, FaceBook and Twitter links, visit www.imagine2012.coop. ■

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