

# Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan

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This short paper describes the origins, development and objectives of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. The centre is an interdisciplinary teaching and learning institute that aims to develop teaching in co-operation, to pursue co-operative research, to undertake independent publication of research and to maintain a resource centre of co-operative materials. The centre has strong link with the co-operative sector in Saskatchewan, which plays a significant role in the economy of the province.

The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives owes its existence primarily to the vision of one man, Leo Kristjanson, who was president of the University of Saskatchewan when the centre opened in 1984. He found it surprising that although co-operatives play a crucial role in all segments of Saskatchewan's economy and society, very little research was being done into their role and operation. To answer this need, he established the centre, in conjunction with leaders from the co-operative sector, the university, and the provincial government. These three groups not only support the centre financially under a renewable five-year contract, but also contribute representatives to a Management Advisory Board that provides advice, direction, and guidance in matters of policy and planning.

## Mandate

The centre is an interdisciplinary teaching and research institute. Its mandate is four-fold: to develop university courses that will contribute to an understanding of co-operatives and their role in the economic and social development of our community; to pursue original academic research on co-operatives from a multi- and interdisciplinary perspective; to undertake independent publication of our own research and that of others; and to maintain a Resource Centre of co-operative materials that supports the centre's teaching and research functions. Beyond that, our philosophy is to enrich our research by undertaking projects concerned with community and development activities. As a university-based institution, that process often begins with theory and concepts, which then translate into practical applications. Indeed, the centre facilitates a constant dialogue between theory and practice. This is the idea that underlies our unique structure, which straddles the academic world and the co-operative sector. The centre has become a recognised and productive institution within both arenas.

## A Sense of Place

Since its inception, the University of Saskatchewan has nurtured strong connections with its community, which have enriched both the university and the people of the province. This outreach and engagement is a key feature of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives as well. The co-op sector has especially deep roots in Saskatchewan. The centre connects the university to community-based organisations and a public of more than half a million co-operative members, both reflecting and affirming our sense of place in the province. The effective functioning of the centre, in fact, rests fundamentally upon the strength of its relationships with both the co-operative and university communities, so it is committed to cultivating close relationships with both these constituencies.

Engagement with the co-operative sector is vital to the centre's research and teaching and goes well beyond the boundaries of the province. It is the source of ideas, insights, examples, and knowledge; it also offers opportunities for centre personnel to share insights with those who can use and apply them. During 2006–07, centre faculty, scholars, staff, and students participated in more than twenty co-operative-related conferences and workshops in Canada, the US, and abroad. In every case, centre personnel were invited keynote speakers, presenters, trainers, and/or facilitators, making a total of forty-five presentations on co-operative topics. The research for these activities has resulted in occasional papers, booklets, journal articles, book chapters, training materials, and a self-assessment guide for organisations interested in evaluating their democratic practices and characteristics. Recognised for their expertise around the world, centre people also serve on international boards and committees of co-operative organisations.

Centre faculty and staff are frequent

participants in the activities of the Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA), the national umbrella organisation for co-operatives, which helps maintain the centre's profile with officials from co-operative organisations across the country. And we collaborate on many projects with CCA's provincial counterpart, the Saskatchewan Co-operative Association. In addition, the centre hosts a regular stream of international visitors, who come to us on study tours from co-operative organisations around the world, reflecting our international reputation as a centre of co-operative knowledge and resources.

The centre works equally hard at maintaining close ties to the university community. One means for accomplishing this is through the voluntary participation of U of S faculty in centre activities, which is nicely fulfilled by our Centre Scholars, ten of whom are university faculty. They are involved in most of the centre's work — as presenters in the seminar series, graduate teachers and supervisors, collaborators on research projects, board members, contributors to the centre's publication programme, and presenters and facilitators at conferences and workshops.

In addition to our connections through other faculty, centre personnel are deeply involved in the life of the university at many levels, serving on advisory bodies, task forces, committees at both the department and administrative levels, and as directors of units and heads of departments. Staff serve internal and external liaison roles as well as representing the centre at meetings of many community-based organisations, thus contributing to the university's presence in the community.

Our librarian is at the hub of connectivity between the co-operative sector and the university, providing research support and answering hundreds of reference questions annually for centre faculty, staff, students, sector personnel, and researchers from around the world. Our communications officer also plays a significant role in maintaining the centre's ties to both the sector and the university community. And the centre's frequent involvement in collaborative work with co-operative sector organisations and with faculty in other units on campus and across Canada assists in maintaining our profile and that of the university in these settings.

## **Structure**

To accomplish its goals, the centre is structured in an unusual manner, distinctive in the university.

The four academic members — currently from agricultural economics, history, marketing and management, and sociology — are hired into their home departments, where tenure and promotion decisions are made, and where they teach and do research. They also come together at the centre, which has its own set of offices and a library, to work on co-operative topics. There, they are joined by associate researchers, visiting scholars, and students whose work complements the research of the centre's own faculty. The result is a group of people who address a common set of questions and issues through different disciplinary lenses. By examining co-operatives from a variety of perspectives, researchers can begin to understand them more fully. Universities are increasingly adopting this approach to problem solving, and the centre has played a valuable role in demonstrating how interdisciplinary work can be fruitfully undertaken.

The centre's work is enabled by five dedicated staff who deal with office management, research and liaison, publications and communications, and maintenance of the most comprehensive Resource Centre on co-operative and related topics in Anglophone Canada.

## **Teaching**

Undergraduate students generally come to the centre through the university's regular academic programmes, while graduate students arrive through a variety of means. It may be via the recently approved Research Concentration in Co-operative Studies within the Interdisciplinary Programme of the College of Graduate Studies and Research, which has facilitated drawing together the students connected with the centre's work. It may be through an individual interdisciplinary graduate programme, designed around student interests that do not fit in any single discipline. Or it could be by means of a disciplinary graduate programme in which a centre faculty member has expertise. Students already admitted to any university programmes are also invited to become involved with the centre if their research concerns co-operatives.

Although the centre does not offer degrees of its own, centre faculty teach a number of regular undergraduate and graduate courses with co-operative content in the disciplines outlined above, incorporating co-operative theory and models to increase students' understanding of co-operatives and to foster an appreciation

for the significant role co-operatives have played, and continue to play, in economic and social development. Faculty also develop special topics classes — six of them over the past couple of years — to satisfy the needs of individual students with special research interests.

Through their regular discipline-based classes with co-operative content, centre faculty teach several hundred undergraduate students annually. Promising students often obtain summer employment as research assistants at the centre, and many of these go on to become graduate students specialising in co-operative topics. With the assistance of two large research grants awarded to the centre over the past five years, the number of graduate students associated specifically with the centre has increased dramatically. Three MA students have received their degrees and ten other MA and PhD students are at various stages in their programmes. Centre faculty are in fact currently supervising twenty-five graduate students working on co-operative topics.

Our students are fully integrated into the centre's academic and outreach activities, participating in workshops, making presentations at local, national, and international conferences, organising a seminar series, doing development work, and even occasionally staffing an annual co-operative youth camp in Saskatchewan. Two recently completed co-operative internships in Africa sponsored by the Canadian Co-operative Association and one is involved in an agricultural training project in China.

Beyond the university, the centre also works with community groups and co-operative sector organisations to provide educational programmes about co-operatives.

## Research

Although co-operatives are an integral part of the Canadian economy and society, their special contributions and potential are often not fully understood. The centre undertakes scholarly, often interdisciplinary, research about co-operatives and political, social, and economic issues relating to them. Its research flows from, draws on, and leads into the practical work of partner organisations in the co-operative sector, particularly in Saskatchewan and in Canada, although it is also networked to researchers around the world. Connections to co-operatives and communities stimulate the research questions it pursues, and it not only welcomes but requires collaboration

and interaction with co-operatives to succeed in the work it does. Projects are supported by the centre's own resources, by external research funding agencies, or by organisations commissioning particular studies.

Although the centre has some core research funding, it relies heavily on grants from outside agencies to carry out its largest projects. This funding has sponsored many research and knowledge mobilisation activities of importance to both academics and co-op practitioners. Two recent awards from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada have enabled the centre to significantly expand the reach of its research activities, involving many academics and community-based partners across the country. Both projects were interdisciplinary and based on innovative university-community partnerships, including strong and growing links with community and co-operative leaders, managers, and employees.

The centre also gets external funding from organisations such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Government of Canada's Co-operatives Secretariat, which currently are enabling research into topics such as Aboriginal co-operative development, the roles of co-operative boards and management and the challenges of governance, and the impact of co-operatives and credit unions on communities. Over the past few years, our work has increasingly taken on an international focus, with CIDA/Agriculture Canada and CIDA/Canada Corp funded initiatives in China and Mongolia providing enriching experiences and laying the foundation for ongoing research and training opportunities for faculty, staff, students, and local practitioners in both countries.

Working with so many community-based organisations, these projects have provided an opportunity to cultivate a deeper engagement with place than has been possible in the past. An added bonus is the participation of international partners, which helps consolidate the centre's leadership role in interdisciplinary co-operative research. Inhabiting a globalised world, we recognise that our community is international in many respects. Acting on this knowledge to foster partnerships at every level can only enrich the contributions we make to our most immediate constituencies.

## Visiting Fellows

The centre sponsors a Visiting Research

Fellows programme, which is designed to encourage and promote research that focuses on co-operatives. Financial support is provided to both academic scholars and co-operative practitioners who undertake a specific short-term project that would benefit from concentrated study in a research milieu and from access to extensive academic resources. While at the centre, researchers typically develop a research paper, present one or two seminars geared for the public, give a more in-depth presentation to centre staff, and provide guest lectures in classes taught by centre faculty.

## Centre Scholars

The centre also encompasses a category of associates known as CSC Scholars, who are actively involved in teaching, theoretical or applied research, and/or extension education concerning co-operatives. They are people from a wide variety of disciplines at the university and elsewhere whose research complements the centre's mandate. The scholar model has given the centre an opportunity to involve more faculty members at the University of Saskatchewan in its activities, to broaden the base of its interdisciplinary teaching and research, and to create linkages with external organisations and other universities. The three-year terms have allowed the development of close partnerships in which the mutual exchange of ideas, advice, and information have enriched the teaching, research, and extension activities of everyone involved.

## The Resource Centre

The Resource Centre, housed with the centre's offices, is a specialised library offering an extensive collection of journals, newspapers, books, reports, and videos that focus on co-operatives and related social, political, and historical topics. It offers information and research support to anyone interested in studying co-operatives. Our website ([www.usaskstudies.coop](http://www.usaskstudies.coop)) provides wide, convenient access to information on co-operatives, links to several hundred co-operative organisations around the world, as well as downloadable versions of many of our publications. Two related websites:

- [www.socialcohesion.coop](http://www.socialcohesion.coop)
- [www.usaskstudies.coop/socialeconomy](http://www.usaskstudies.coop/socialeconomy)

provide detailed information about the centre's largest research projects.

The centre's online resources play a significant role nationally and internationally, providing a rich source of easily accessible information to co-operative researchers around the world.

## The Seminar Series

Our monthly seminar series provides a forum for the research of centre faculty, scholars, and others in complementary fields. It draws a faithful audience that includes our graduate students as both organisers and participants. Although seminars normally involve a presentation by one individual, a recent highlight was a day-long series of presentations from nine of our students who spent a month doing fieldwork in Mongolia, Saskatchewan, and BC. Other presentations over the past year included topics such as co-operative renewal in Canadian communities, the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool share conversion story, measuring the brand equity of credit unions, and the social economy and the 'co-operative' university.

## Publications

The centre publishes research results in various forms including books, professional journals, and conference proceedings, and produces its own series of occasional papers, booklets, and research reports. Many centre publications are also available electronically on our website. For up-to-the-minute information, the centre produces several types of newsletters, thrice-yearly director's reports, and an annual report to keep its various stakeholders fully informed of its activities. All of these are accessible via our website at [www.usaskstudies.coop](http://www.usaskstudies.coop).

## Conclusion

The existence of the centre, and the strong and ongoing support of its founding organisations, testify to the importance of co-operatives in the Saskatchewan community, where co-operative principles and organisations have had a formative influence for nearly a century. Like the university of which it is a part, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives fulfils a significant role in teaching, research, outreach and engagement, and publication, and through these activities maintains its commitments to the co-operative sector, the university, and the people of Saskatchewan.