

A Cooperative Approach to Management Education

BY ERBIN CROWELL

Education is a central principle of the cooperative movement, enshrined in the 5th principle of the cooperative identity, which states, “Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives.”

The investment that our co-ops make in education is commendable and is also crucial to our success as member-owned enterprises. At the same time, the need for higher education and training in business management, and specifically for programs that reflect the unique character of the cooperative model, has been recognized as a challenge for the movement.

It was with this in mind that a group of cooperators and academics came together to create the Master of Management: Co-operative and Credit Unions (MMCCU) degree program at St. Mary’s University in Nova Scotia. While the program is comparable to a conventional Master of Business Administration program, it was developed from the ground up to place traditional business knowledge and skills such as accounting, finance, marketing, and people management within the broader context of the cooperative model, identity, and movement.

The program is designed for active managers and provides learning not only for students but also for their home cooperatives. Courses are offered online and involve a high level of student collaboration, made more effective by the international character of the student body. To date, students from six

Editor’s note: In this article, when citing Canadian sources, we have retained their practice of hyphenating “co-operative.”

“It has been said that co-operativism is an economic movement that uses the methods of education. This definition can also be modified to affirm that co-operativism is an educational movement that uses the methods of economics.”

— Don Jose María Arizmendi, inspiration of the Mondragón cooperative movement.

countries have been enrolled, representing a broad spectrum of cooperative enterprises, including food, agriculture, credit unions, and worker co-ops, as well as federations and associations. Faculty also are drawn from diverse backgrounds and countries and bring a wealth of experience to the program. Participants attend an orientation at the beginning of the program, and travel together on a study tour of cooperative regions such as Emilia-Romagna in northern Italy or Mondragón in Spain.

“The MMCCU program is a great opportunity for co-op managers to obtain a deeper perspective on the history, types and structures of cooperatives,” said Sean Doyle, general manager of Seward Co-op in Minneapolis, Minn., and an MMCCU graduate. “The exposure to current thinking about the future of cooperation helps me better lead my co-op.”

MMCCU is also unique in that it is a partnership between a cooperative—CMEC, the Co-operative Management Education Co-operative—and a university. This means that the program fulfills the requirements of a business school but is also overseen and guided by cooperatives and is responsive to their priorities. The curriculum was approved by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education

Commission as well as by the Faculty of Commerce, the Senate, and the Board of Governors of St. Mary’s University.

Today, CMEC includes over 50 cooperatives, co-op associations and support organizations in seven countries. U.S. members include Brattleboro Food Co-op, Hanover Consumer Co-op, and Wedge Community Co-op, as well as other organizations in the cooperative community such as National Cooperative Bank, Credit Union National Association, and National Cooperative Business Association.

“Effective management is crucial to the success of co-op enterprise,” says Rebecca Dunn, executive director of the Cooperative Fund of New England, which recently joined CMEC. “We’re excited to be part of MMCCU’s efforts to grow the next generation of leaders.”

MMCCU is a successful example of co-ops coming together to meet their educational needs and empower the next generation of managers to advance the co-operative movement.

“With daily reminders of all that is disheartening, destructive, and depressing these days, it has been important to have intentional conversations with others deeply involved with their cooperatives,” says Suzette Snow-Cobb of Franklin Community Co-op (Green Fields Market and McCusker’s, Greenfield and Shelburne Falls, Mass.), now in her second year of the program. “In visiting Italy this fall with other MMCCU students, I look forward to gaining a hopeful picture to carry back with me of what a co-operative economy can look like.”

The MMCCU program is now accepting applications for the fall of 2010. For more information, please contact Tom Webb, program manager, at tom.webb@smu.ca; call 902-496-8170; or visit www.mmccu.coop. ■

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