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Co-ops and Universities  
Some Reflections

Brett Fairbairn

FEBRUARY 2016

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UNIVERSITY OF  
SASKATCHEWAN



Centre for the  
Study of Co-operatives

## Co-operatives and Universities

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## Centre for the Study of Co-operatives

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The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives is an interdisciplinary teaching and research institution located on the University of Saskatchewan campus in Saskatoon. Contract partners in the co-operative sector include Saskatchewan Credit Unions, Federated Co-operatives Limited, Concentra Financial, The Co-operators, and CHS, Inc. The Centre is also supported by the University of Saskatchewan, which not only houses our offices but provides in-kind contributions from a number of departments and units as well as financial assistance with operations and nonsalary expenditures. We acknowledge with gratitude the ongoing support of all our sponsoring organizations.

The objectives of the Centre are:

- to develop and offer university courses that provide an understanding of co-operative theory, principles, developments, structures, and legislation
- to undertake original research into co-operatives
- to publish co-operative research, both that of Centre staff and of other researchers

Our publications are designed to disseminate and encourage the discussion of research conducted at, or under the auspices of, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives. The views expressed constitute the opinions of the author, to whom any comments or queries should be addressed.



## Co-operatives and Universities: Some Reflections

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**C**O-OPERATIVES ARE COMMUNITY-BASED ASSOCIATIONS and enterprises accountable to their members and typically competing in markets for goods and services. Based on self-help, autonomy, and ages-old ways of working together, they provide important means of action when states or governments fail to meet needs or aspirations. They improve the well-being of their members, foster values such as equity and inclusion, and strengthen communities.

Universities are among the oldest institutions in society, operating under deeply entrenched norms of self-governance and autonomy. They create knowledge for society, foster critical thinking and citizenship, provide social mobility, and reproduce leadership and professions from generation to generation. They are regarded as the highest institutions of learning and of independent certification and accreditation of knowledge.

If a good partnership is one where the partners bring different strengths and characteristics to a common project, then universities and co-operatives have the makings of a great partnership: They are different, but they also have some important things in common.

Among their similarities, both co-operatives and universities are responsible for their missions and their financial results without pursuit of profit being their purpose. Both of them serve a broad public interest — universities through legislated mandates, and co-operatives through “concern for community,” one of their guiding principles. To put it briefly, both of them exist to provide opportunities for people and

improve society, while being autonomous of government or outside control. Engaged as they are with society and the economy, both are subject to competition and pressures to change. These similarities provide a basis for common interests. Indeed, some have argued that co-operatives and universities are both parts of the “social economy,” though such a view may exaggerate the commonalities.

To realise potential, partners have to find the right ways of working with each other. This is more complicated than it might appear. This essay will argue that there are reasons for co-operatives and universities to work together, and also that there are intrinsic difficulties to be managed in the relationship.

The following reflections are about the experience of and prospects for how co-operatives and universities work together. They are based on three decades of experience as a university professor who works with and on co-operatives — and three decades of experience with my specific centre, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, a unique partnership between the University of Saskatchewan and the Canadian co-operative movement.

## I

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Why should universities and co-operatives pay attention to each other in the first place?

For universities, the study of co-operatives should be part of their mission for two reasons: Co-operatives are important, and they are interesting.

Co-operatives are widespread, numerous, and make impacts in communities across Canada and around the world. There are 8,500 co-operatives in Canada with more than 17 million members or about 40 percent of the population, a huge and under-researched field of study.<sup>1</sup> Nor are they limited to Canada. Co-operatives are responsible for the employ-

ment of 250 million people worldwide, and in G20 countries make up almost 12 percent of the employed population. The largest sectors in the world by membership are the United States (256 million), India (94 million), and Japan (77 million).<sup>2</sup>

Beyond size and global scope, co-operatives are interesting because they are different. They are alternative businesses — underdogs who disproportionately benefit wide circles of the population and the less-well-off. They operate on the basis of democratic and communitarian principles. They present unique kinds of governance and participation that shed light on basic questions of human, social, and organizational dynamics. They have a rich history and diverse present-day experience of social innovation. All in all, they offer fascinating and worthwhile teaching cases and research problems for faculty and students, not only in business programs but in virtually every social and human science.

The mission of universities includes creating knowledge about human society and educating people to be part of it. Society includes co-operatives — graduates of universities will be part of co-ops — and co-operatives offer unique opportunities for the creation and sharing of meaningful knowledge.

Nevertheless, my own experience as a student is likely still typical: I went through ten years of education in humanities and social sciences at universities in two countries, and to the best of my recollection, co-operatives were not mentioned once in any course.

This brings me to part two of the question: *Why should co-ops care?* They got along fine for many years without being studied by universities or hiring many university graduates. Again, I would argue there are two reasons they should care: history and the future.

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1. Parliament of Canada, House of Commons, Special Committee on Co-operatives, *Status of Co-operatives in Canada: Report of the Special Committee on Co-operatives*, 1st sess., 41st Parliament, September 2012, p. 5.

2. International Co-operative Alliance, <http://ica.coop/en/facts-and-figures> (accessed 6 January 2016).

Historically, it is clear that university-based adult-education and extension activities were part of how co-operatives were created in the first place in Britain, Canada, the United States, and many other countries. The world has changed since then, in ways that have made postsecondary education ever more important to society and the economy.

I graduated from a Canadian high school in 1977. Anyone roughly my age or older grew up in a different society and economy than what surrounds us today. One of the social transformations of our time has been an enormous expansion in the magnitude of higher education. This far-reaching societal change should be on the mind of every business leader in the co-operative sector.

When I graduated from high school, going to university was just an option, and there were interesting careers open to me without it, such as journalism, which was pretty much my family's occupation. By 2020 — less than five years from now — almost two-thirds of all jobs in the United States and Canada will require postsecondary education as a prerequisite, the majority of that coming from universities. These numbers represent an immense societal change in one-and-a-half generations. In 1973, someone with only high-school graduation had access to 72 percent of all jobs, but by 2020, a person with the same level of education will have access to only 36 percent of all jobs, generally jobs that are less desirable and where job-seekers outnumber the jobs.<sup>3</sup>

The numbers in Canada reflect these trends. According to the federal government, 71.1 percent of new jobs created by economic expansion will be in occupations generally requiring postsecondary education.<sup>4</sup> According to CIBC, the jobs in highest demand in Canada are those for which university degrees are required — managers in health, education,

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3. Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University, *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020*, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/report/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/> (accessed 6 January 2016).

social, and community services; human-resource and business-service professionals; and supervisors in manufacturing and processing.<sup>5</sup> The government of Ontario agrees that by 2020, more than 70 percent of all new jobs, even entry-level positions, will require postsecondary education or training.<sup>6</sup> British Columbia has an even higher estimate. There, the government projects that 78 percent of the one million jobs that will come open in the province between 2012 and 2022 will require postsecondary preparation.<sup>7</sup>

And postsecondary systems are roughly on track to deliver the growing numbers of graduates to match these estimates. A 2004 study based on a longitudinal survey found that more than two-thirds of Canadian youth had gone to college or university by the time they were in their mid-twenties.<sup>8</sup> A 2008 study in BC found that within five years of graduating from Grade 12, more than 70 percent of students had enrolled in a BC postsecondary institution.<sup>9</sup> These percentages have likely increased since those studies were conducted. Today's Canadian youth will have

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4. Employment and Social Development Canada, "Canadian Occupational Projection System 2013 Projections," *Imbalances Between Labour Demand and Supply, 2013–2022*, <http://occupations.esdc.gc.ca/sppc-cops/l.3bd.2t.1ilshhtml@-eng.jsp?lid=29&fid=1&lang=en> (accessed 6 January 2016).

5. CIBC World Markets, "The Haves and Have Nots of Canada's Labour Market," *In Focus*, 3 December 2012, [http://research.cibcwm.com/economic\\_public/download/if\\_2012-1203.pdf](http://research.cibcwm.com/economic_public/download/if_2012-1203.pdf) (accessed 5 January 2016).

6. Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, "Change Your World: Achieve your dreams," <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/yourfuture/> (accessed 6 January 2016).

7. British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, "2012/13–2014/15 Service Plan, February 2012," <http://bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2012/sp/pdf/ministry/aved.pdf> (accessed 6 January 2016).

8. Mylène Lambert, Klarka Zeman, Mary Allen, and Patrick Bussière (Corporate authors: Statistics Canada; Human Resources and Skills Development Canada), *Who Pursues Postsecondary Education, Who Leaves and Why: Results from the Youth in Transition Survey* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2004).

9. Results of Student Transitions Project cited by Kwantlen Polytechnic University, "Briefing Note: Postsecondary Participation Rates," [http://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/downloads/BC\\_PS\\_Part\\_Rates\\_Aug\\_0810327.pdf](http://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/downloads/BC_PS_Part_Rates_Aug_0810327.pdf) (accessed 7 January 2016).

the highest level of postsecondary attainment in history. And they will need it. Their life chances for good jobs, social status, and opportunities to make a difference will depend like never before on how much and what kind of education they have received.

Where will co-operatives get the talent they require in future? Skilled employees, leaders, volunteers, and members will form their skills and world views in universities and colleges. So, too, will regulators and consultants, government officials and tax specialists, leaders of organizations that sell to co-operatives and purchase from them. The increased scope of formal education means that where views of society were once shaped by working in a family business like a farm or in a small shop or trade, young people will be entering careers later, and with more of their views formed during their education. *What* people are learning about the world during a postsecondary education is more important than ever before.

Leaders in the for-profit business sector appear to know this. There are large forums to discuss higher education, one being the Conference Board of Canada's Centre for Postsecondary Skills and Education.<sup>10</sup> Within those discussions, business leaders express the urgency for the postsecondary system to produce the graduates the economy needs, that they need for their businesses. There is anxiety about real or perceived skills shortages and skills mismatches. Criticisms of universities have led some business and government leaders to favour colleges, polytechnics, and vocational training instead, which they see as providing more market-related skills.

Universities and other postsecondary institutions such as polytechnics exist not only to train people but to create knowledge. The impact of postsecondary research is more difficult to quantify than the numbers of graduates, but here, too, there has been enormous growth and new

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10. Conference Board of Canada, "Centre for Skills and Post-Secondary Education," <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/spse/> (accessed 7 January 2016).

urgency. Universities play a larger role in economic innovation in Canada than in most other countries. Canada has excellent post-secondary institutions and, based on international comparisons, earns a B from the Conference Board for public (mostly university-based) research and development spending, production of academic papers, and production of top-cited papers. At the same time, business enterprise R&D spending earns only a D.<sup>11</sup> Because of this mismatch between leading public-sector and lagging private-sector R&D, business and government leaders have been strategizing how to create better partnerships linking universities to businesses.

There has not, to date, been similar dialogue with and among co-operatives about what they expect from advanced education. It is not altogether clear why the co-op sector has appeared to take less interest in postsecondary education and research than has the for-profit sector. But there are some signs that this neglect is changing. Co-operative apex organizations are starting to pay increased attention to higher education.

In late 2015, the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) issued new “Guidance Notes on the Co-operative Principles,” which outlined how co-operative principles are to be interpreted and applied. In discussing the fifth principle (co-operative education), the ICA made it clear that education initiatives by co-operatives are not only to be inwardly focused, but should address the general public and especially “young people and opinion leaders,” with “educators” specifically mentioned among opinion leaders. Co-operatives, then, are called upon to inform educators and people of typical student age about co-operatives. The ICA went on to say co-ops need to deal with the current challenge of “low recognition in curricula in elementary and secondary schools and universities.” They need to consider and recognize “the continuing significance of ... co-operative colleges and departments of co-operation within higher education institutions.” And the guidance notes assert that it is

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11. Conference Board of Canada, “Innovation,” <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/details/innovation.aspx> (accessed 7 January 2016).

“vital” to recognize that “robust and detailed academic research” should inform co-operative education.<sup>12</sup> These international calls to action are echoed within Canada, where the national apex body, Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada, has struck a committee on engagement with higher education.<sup>13</sup>

In summary, co-operatives want to inspire young people as members, employees, and leaders. They want skills, talent, and knowledge to make co-operative enterprises more resilient, more nimble, and more effective in innovating and creating value in a complicated world. They want many people in society to understand the identity and values of co-operatives. They want, in short, to reproduce the co-operative movement from one generation to the next, to innovate to deal with new challenges. Universities and colleges are where society is reproduced, where professionals and leaders are formed, and where the people and knowledge needed for the twenty-first century are created.

So whatever the difficulties may be, there are important reasons for co-ops and universities to be interested in each other.

No doubt such thoughts were in the minds of a key group of executive leaders in about 1980, who determined that something like our centre should be created. A CEO, a president, and a vice-president of three of Canada’s biggest co-operatives and businesses sat down with a university president, and the four of them concluded that co-operatives should have a multidisciplinary foothold inside the world of universities. In a world where knowledge and advanced education were growing in importance, co-operatives were almost wholly neglected from university curricula and research. Both the universities and the co-ops were a little less effective in their missions as a result of this gap. It was prescient of them to see things this way.

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12. International Co-operative Alliance, “Guidance Notes on the Co-operative Principles,” <http://ica.coop/en/blueprint-themes/identity/guidancenotes> (accessed 25 February 2016).

13. Presented as part of strategic planning at the Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada delegates meeting in Ottawa, 25 November 2015.

I have often reflected on how rare it is to have the attention of such a group of peak decision makers. Such moments of congruence are almost impossible to re-create given the conflicting demands within each type of organization. An alignment of this kind is serendipity. It must be exploited whenever it occurs.

In the history of our centre, we have never again had such concerted attention and support from key leaders on either side. Subsequent contract renewals — our contract needs to be renewed every five years — have frequently been arduous and have more often involved diminutions of support than substantial augmentations. I am mindful that our centre lives off irreplaceable social capital accrued thirty-five years ago. Many of the tensions we have experienced since that time can, I think, be attributed to a partial divergence of cultures and goals among our co-operative sponsors as well as between them and the university world.

While universities and co-operatives can be aligned, they can never be, or remain, perfectly aligned. The demands of co-operatives to demonstrate a value proposition — to justify the commitment of resources to a university initiative in competition with returning greater benefits to members — are impossible ever to satisfy finally and fully. And similarly, the questions within the academy are essentially unanswerable — whether the same resources contributed to another undertaking would create more peer-reviewed publications, more prestigious grants, more reputational impact, than contributing faculty, staff, and student time to work with and on co-operatives.

Aligning the behaviours of partners who have different interests is a principal-agent problem. A principal is someone who needs someone else's help to get something done; an agent is the person they engage. The problem arises because principals and agents have different interests and perspectives, so the agents don't do exactly what the principals want. A solution to this problem has to involve something that affects the behaviour of agents so that outcomes are more congruent with the expectations of the principals. Co-ops have, sometimes, conceptualized the need

or utility to have the postsecondary system respond to their needs, so this puts them in the role of principals. It is more rare that a university would engage a co-op to fulfill its mission. So in the co-op–university relationship, it is most intuitive to see the co-ops as the principals and the universities or their members as potential agents. The strategy question for the co-ops is how to find partners and create partnerships in order to get something different out of the universities than would otherwise occur.

Given those concerns, let us begin with the question of how co-operatives experience universities, and what options the co-ops have in the relationship.

## II

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For a popular audience, it perhaps requires little explanation why universities might be difficult partners. As organizations, universities are notoriously inward-looking. Faculty have academic freedom and pursue their own concerns. Universities are jaw-droppingly expensive to operate. And they have really, really bad press. In recent years, any narrative about mismanagement, high costs, or neglect of students in a university enjoys immediate currency and credibility. Although it is not scientific, I find the website [whatdoestheinternetthink.net](http://www.whatdoestheinternetthink.net) to be charming. Evaluating the context in which the word “universities” is used on websites, it concludes that 96.2 percent of references are critical: “The internet is very negative about ‘universities,’” it tells me.<sup>14</sup> Scientific or not, this reflects the mood of the times. Perhaps precisely because they have grown so immensely in importance, universities are scrutinised and criticised like almost never before.

What may require more explanation is the other side of the equation

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14. What does the Internet think website: <http://www.whatdoestheinternetthink.net/universities> (accessed 7 January 2016).

— why universities might have difficulty partnering or neglect partnering with co-ops. I think the answer here is twofold. Co-ops are obscure — they are not in the mainstream like study of for-profit business or of government. And doing work on co-ops competes with other choices.

To understand universities, you need to understand the lives of faculty members. Universities serve students, governments, the public, communities, business partners, and so on. But universities revolve around professors similarly to how engineering firms revolve around engineers or air forces revolve around pilots. They may not be the largest part of the workforce or the budget (at our university, faculty salaries and benefits are about one-quarter of the operating budget) — but they drive the rest of the activity. Ultimately, if co-operatives want something different out of universities, they need to get something different out of faculty.

So what does the world of a faculty member look like?

To start with, it is commonly assumed that at a research-intensive university a faculty member's time will be 40 percent teaching, 40 percent research, and 20 percent administration (or service — the two terms are used in overlapping ways). At less research-intensive universities, teaching would be more and research less. So if you wanted to create a faculty position to teach a couple of courses (call this 40 percent of the 40 percent of their time that is teaching — 16 percent of their total time), the total cost of the faculty position would be about six times the cost of the time they spend on those courses. This is the reality of a model of self-governance where multiple functions are entwined in the job of each faculty member; you can't normally or sustainably get one function without (someone) paying for the others. And this is not counting the overhead of the university's costs of space, personnel systems, student services, and so on, which would triple the cost again.

You also need to consider that faculty members have to meet the expectations of their profession, such as standards for tenure and promotion. In the long run, if you work with faculty who do not meet these

expectations, your partners will cease to be employed or will be low in status and influence. For faculty, meeting the expectations of the profession is typically about publishing in peer-reviewed academic formats and teaching in large, existing university-credit degree programs. So if you are successful in interesting faculty members in doing non-peer-reviewed research or teaching outside their university's degree programs, this will limit their career and influence; it could lead to them failing to achieve tenure and losing their jobs.

People in universities are working to recognize alternate forms of scholarship and to reward interdisciplinary and community-oriented contributions. It is important to consider the doctrine of “engaged scholarship,” which revolves around the idea of mutually beneficial partnerships — ones that give both the faculty member/university and the co-op or community partner what they most need.

So there's one part of the reality: To get even a small slice of a faculty member's time, you probably also have to help the individual achieve outputs that are not so important to the co-op or community, such as peer-reviewed grants and publications.

But which faculty member would you approach, unless he or she has already sought you out? To make a contact, you may work through the leaders of the university or one of its faculties or departments. This raises another issue. A university president or dean may be eager to conclude a deal with you. But, due to academic freedom and collegial self-governance, they can't actually direct faculty members to teach or research other subjects. Your partners may lack the ability to commit what you want.

A person could ask why faculty have this independence. A short pair of answers would be: (a) This is entrenched in the institutional idea of the university, so that an organization not following these principles would not be recognized as a university; and (b) The value of the partnership is precisely what comes from the independence, status, and legitimacy of a faculty member's work.

So what are the strategies by which co-operatives could influence universities?

In my view, they fall under three headings.

### *Individual-Focused Strategy*

First, co-ops could, as implied above, quietly pursue networks of contacts to find individual faculty members who — by reason of character or prior experience — are already inclined to work with and on co-operatives. This is what I would call the individual-focused strategy. Its advantage is that it works with the willing, so it does not have to concern itself with how to motivate a faculty member. Its disadvantage is that, as experience has shown, such faculty members are rare and their distribution by geography, institution, and discipline may bear little relation to what co-ops are interested in.

Since co-ops are not a key focus in any mainstream university, existing faculty, if they are interested in co-ops at all, will be interested in them tangentially — because they relate to some other topic. The result is a perennial mismatch. Faculty and students are motivated by their own interests and career pressures, as will be discussed below. Many academics in my experience are fascinated by the study of democracy, workplace participation, worker co-ops, and alternative kinds of social enterprises. These are great topics, but they don't correspond exactly to the kinds of co-ops that are widely represented in Canada and the typical concerns of those organizations. Many academics like to do theoretical and philosophical papers; fewer want to do (or perhaps have the time and capacity to do) empirical grunt work on co-ops. The result is a bit like a dance where the partners know different steps.

A reader of an early draft of this essay commented on the problem that academics and students tend to be “left-wing,” while co-ops (or at least the older, larger, better-established co-ops) tend to be seen as “right-wing.” I think those characterizations are oversimplified, but

anyone familiar with co-op studies knows there is something to them. When I talk to students, to young academics, and for that matter to many academics period, about co-ops, their interest is not necessarily in how they do business or meet needs. People are drawn to co-ops, in my experience, because they perceive co-ops to be different, often in ways that are unrealistic. They expect co-ops to institute total democracy, social justice, noncapitalistic or anticapitalistic principles — the elimination of hierarchy. Few or no co-ops can satisfy such expectations, which no one attaches to mainstream businesses. I occasionally have the sense that a co-op has to be new, far away, or have gone out of business before it can be considered worthy of academic celebration. Economically successful co-ops are less interesting. Indeed, they can elicit suspicion or hostility.

So to some extent, there are divergences that make it difficult for co-ops and academics to connect organically and spontaneously. Co-operatives with resources, looking for partners, may not share the language, perspective, or concerns of the faculty and students who tend to be drawn to studying co-operatives. I suspect they can learn a lot from each other, but both sides may need to develop their intercultural competencies before this can happen.

Despite its limitations, the individual approach is the default strategy and is the one that prevails in most countries and regions of the world. This is why it is rare to find faculty members or students in mainstream universities working on co-operative topics.

### *Incentivize a Different Behaviour*

So what else to do? Well, a second approach might be to incentivize a different behaviour — offer a reward for faculty members to be interested in the concerns of co-ops. In the academic world, a reward is more likely about offering opportunity or status than about offering money directly, though in some disciplines faculty do hire themselves out as consultants. Generally, though, an incentive would be something

like a research grant, access to a rare data set, an opportunity for students to gain recognition or experience, scholarships, etc. The key understanding is that you can't usually just pay academics directly to do what you want. You have to help them get what they want, which is often the esteem of their peers and their professions, and help to free up time from their other responsibilities. So your incentive likely has to be one that gives them added ability to publish in academic outlets, in addition to whatever your co-op may do with knowledge that is assembled or created. Or it has to cover their teaching in core programs so they can do more of what you want them to. The timeline must not interfere with their academic work because, again, faculty members who set aside their academic work to help you may not be faculty members for long or may not be influential.

So, incentives have the advantage of leveraging desired behaviour with one-time outlays, and they promise clearly defined outcomes — when they work. But beware of excessive expectations. Most faculty are doing many jobs at once, and in taking on an extra one, may do the minimum they think is necessary to satisfy you. This is normal human behaviour when people have different agendas. It is not easy to set up clear and accountable principal-agent relationships within the complicated setting of a university, where there are so many competing demands and interests. So the smaller the incentive you offer — the more efficient and leveraged it appears to be — the greater by far the risk that it won't budge behaviour much at all.

One of the key issues is information asymmetry. In any relationship where one party has more or better information, it is difficult for the other party to know that quality work is being done or that the best choices are being made. Faculty themselves are the most knowledgeable about what constitutes creativity, what is ground-breaking, or what is outstanding quality in outputs. This is not an accidental situation; it is inherent and is the reason why faculty members constitute a profession and why they are organized in universities. So when you contract with a faculty member, how do you know whether you are getting the best

work? If it is only a one-time, short-term contract, their heart and soul may not be in it. Co-ops could try to minutely specify the outputs, but if they do, this raises the question of why they need to engage a university faculty member in the first place. There are many other researchers, educators, and trainers outside universities, including co-op staff themselves, who could research or teach to precise specifications. The more precisely specified the outcome, the less likely it is a job for a university — or that a faculty member will be interested in it.

I suspect that contractual, incentive-type relationships will risk producing outcomes of mediocre quality and impact. Faculty members who do accept such contracts will likely get them out of the way in between other duties, but will not necessarily put their passion into them.

A better strategy is to provide larger, repeated, and longer-term incentives, which would help develop a more complete relationship within which trust and a mutual sense of obligation could ensue. Of course, these types of incentives would reduce some of the benefits co-ops could have got from more precisely specified short-term outputs, so there is a trade-off.

### *Institutionalization*

Incentives have their place. But in cases where incentives are not enough, what else is there? A third option would be to carry to its logical conclusion the idea of repeated and long-term commitments. I would call this option institutionalization — the creation of a durable structure inside the university involving permanent university resources and co-op resources, with joint goals and a dual mission — a hybrid structure that embodies both university and co-op objectives. An endowed or annually funded chair is probably a half-way step between incentivizing and institutionalizing. A chair would involve a single faculty member and associated researchers and students, but they might not constitute a critical mass to resist the pressures of the surrounding internal university culture. So the full version would be a centre or institute involving multiple

faculty members and potentially multiple disciplines, which would create sufficient critical mass to remain focused on its mission.

By creating a permanent structure, this option optimally aligns the interests of the principals (in this case, the co-ops) and the interests of the agents (in this case, the faculty) in a voluntary but fairly binding way. The advantages are clear: Faculty members have long-term interest as well as long-term means to satisfy and reconcile differing obligations to their peers and to society/co-operatives. The disadvantages are cost and permanence. Given competitive pressures on co-ops and universities, they will probably commit to few such relationships across Canada.

So co-ops could approach universities under the rubric of what I would call the three I's: the Individual, Incentive, or Institutionalizing approaches.

### III

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How does it look from the other side? If you are a faculty member or group of faculty members inside a university, what are your options for how to engage the co-op sector if you wish to?

Where the co-op's problem is how to influence the behaviour of the faculty, the faculty member's problem is how to access resources to enable different behaviour on the part of faculty and students. Again, there are a variety of possible solutions to this problem, and some come more naturally than others.

#### *The Faculty Resource Solution*

Faculty members enjoy considerable autonomy compared to most employees of most organizations. Within the frameworks of their academic units, faculty can allocate their own time, which is a resource — indeed, a costly and scarce one. Faculty can use their individual scope of action within their roles to direct time and attention toward co-operatives. This is what I would call the faculty resource solution —

to direct resources that are under faculty control, mainly allocation of their own time but potentially also the efforts of some students and staff.

Assuming the faculty member is interested in co-ops in the first place, the advantage of the faculty-resource approach is that little authorization is required, particularly as long as the faculty member's choices have minimal impact on what the department perceives as its teaching and research obligations. As long as the department does not care much what is taught or researched, faculty can make their own decisions. This freedom implies its own limitation.

The most common problem is teaching. Most faculty dream of creating unique courses tailored to their personal interests, and they are rarely free to do so. Instead, they are called upon to teach a rotation of junior, senior, and graduate courses in core topics of their discipline. Students need to be taught; required courses need to be offered; degrees need to be awarded to meet the objectives of students, parents, and the state, among others. Often there are program accreditation requirements to consider, as well as university standards to meet. Quite a few faculty members interested in co-ops work for their entire career without ever having the opportunity to design their own course about co-operatives.

Research could also be a problem, particularly the close identification of university-level research with peer-reviewed publication. In some disciplines, the only kinds of publications that really count are peer-reviewed publications in what are perceived as top academic journals; and many top academic journals take only articles on subjects that are recognizable to them. Faculty members are generally smart, but it takes an exceptionally clever person to figure out how to package a subject related to co-operatives in such a way that it appeals to one of these exclusive, prestigious disciplinary journals.

### *Fee-for Service Relationships*

Faculty members can escape these limitations to certain degrees if they are able to bring in additional resources from outside the univer-

sity that can support them in their teaching or research roles and increase their productivity. These resources can be used to pay teaching or research assistants, provide funding for students who work for a professor as part of the conditions of their scholarship, or hire administrative support staff. With more resources, the faculty member can possibly get more of what they want (whether this is to do different kinds of teaching or more fulfilling research) while also doing what a partner wants.

A special case is when faculty members seek additional resources from academic agencies or foundations and direct them towards co-operative topics. This is about applying for grants to support teaching innovations or research activities. In Canada, we have had some striking examples of faculty mobilizing funding from federal granting councils, foundations, and other sources and using these funds to support work with co-ops. Logically, co-ops should laud such work, although unless they were partners in the grant applications, the work may not address their most important concerns. Regrettably, sources of this type of funding have declined significantly in recent years and many faculty members face low overall probabilities of success.

In addition to grants from agencies or foundations, or in their absence, faculty may be interested in funding from external partners such as co-ops. Deals with external partners can take various forms, but I will generalize and refer to them as fee-for-service relationships. The faculty member may do contract research or may teach in a special certificate program; the key is that the activity brings in new resources that free up the faculty member's time and/or improve their productivity. Thus, the co-op's work may get done in addition to that of the university and the faculty member. It takes entrepreneurial faculty members, those who have some skill at planning and seizing opportunities, to work their way through this kind of system and see how taking on new obligations and resources can help them realize personal objectives more fully down the road.

Contractual relationships involve problems for co-ops (such as vulnerability to information asymmetry and costs of contracts and monitoring) as well as for faculty members. Most faculty do not like administration, and many are not good at being entrepreneurial. The skill sets for which they are selected do not systematically include administrative and entrepreneurial skills. So many, while they would like access to increased resources, are put off by the complications involved. They would rather operate on their own time, doing what they like best, than take on reporting obligations and deadlines. Fee-for-service and similar transactional relationships take many faculty members out of their comfort and competence zones.

Many faculty members would experience working for fees or grants as a distraction from what they love doing — a kind of mission drift. Not surprisingly, in universities, fee-for-service activity will often be hived off into a separate operation and be seen as a kind of ancillary activity associated with revenue-generation or cost-recovery targets. Such activities rarely get the best attention of the best faculty.

It may seem paradoxical that people put their best efforts into things that bring no extra resources, while treating resource-generating activities as marginal. I would argue, nevertheless, that this is a common feature in academic culture, and that contractual-service relationships will work well for certain faculty but rarely be a basis for sustained, high-quality collaborations.

### *Giving Knowledge Away for Free*

What remains? Well, the ideal for faculty who are so inclined is to align permanent funding with what they most want to do — to capture enough resources from inside or outside the university that they can work on co-ops (if that is their wish) and essentially give away their knowledge without worrying overly about contracts and fees. If there is a permanent structure dedicated to working with co-ops and supporting the work of faculty, and if this structure has its base budget covered in-

dependently of the faculty member's particular work, then the individual can research and teach and disseminate knowledge freely. The interests of both the faculty member and the co-ops are aligned through culture, norms, and interactions in a long-term structure and not by specific contracts. This is the option I would characterize, from the faculty viewpoint, as giving knowledge away for free.

Naturally, the option is not free in a larger sense. Those who allocate resources within the university (deans and vice-presidents) have to be persuaded to re-allocate them; or co-ops have to be persuaded to provide resources; or more likely, one sort of commitment is used to leverage the other. Co-ops and the public and students and parents and others are thus paying for the work. But the faculty member can concentrate on the research and teaching, not revenue generation. This is the sense in which this option is about giving away knowledge for free.

In such a relationship, long-term resources can be used to leverage the hiring of more faculty, to provide scholarships, assistantships, and staff who make faculty members more productive in teaching and research, and to cover the direct costs of teaching and research, much as a fee-oriented option but with more long-term stability.

There are drawbacks, to be sure. Stability could cause both sets of partners — co-ops and faculty — to take their mutual commitments for granted. These commitments would need to be periodically renewed and supported by lasting norms and expectations of each other.

So, for faculty, the options are three: to employ faculty resources only; to augment with fee activities; or to work (so-to-speak) for free within a core budget covered by longer-term arrangements. I will call these the three F's of faculty partnership strategy: Faculty, Fee, or Free.

## IV

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The options discussed above have a certain parallelism. It is tempting to match up the I's and the F's to create some IF's. The individual net-

working strategy for co-ops can link up with the faculty-position-based approach of particular academics. An incentivizing offer from co-ops can match a fee-for-service mentality on the part of an enterprising professor. And an institutionalized approach by co-ops can provide core funding to support the knowledge-for-free style of engagement where faculty are interested and able to follow this model. I suggest that there are at least three equilibria for co-op–university partnerships:

IF (1): Individual networking by co-ops — faculty make individual commitments of resources

IF (2): Incentive strategy by co-ops — faculty engage in fee-for-service types of activity

IF (3): Institutionalized commitments by co-ops — faculty undertake for-free types of activity

These are, of course, ideal types. There will be variations, including hybrid models where one type of relationship is supplemented by another (such as individual relationships where faculty take occasional contracts, or institutionalized arrangements with project funding for additional activities).

Simple as they are, perhaps these categories can help academics and co-ops to think through their modes of collaboration with each other so they can develop the right strategies for each partner.

And what are the prospects?

Since each combination requires progressively more resources and greater commitment from each side than the one before it, I predict that they would be decreasingly common. In other words, IF (1)'s would outnumber IF (2)'s, and IF (3)'s would be the most rare. I doubt that one model will take over. There will remain a diversity of models reflecting different co-op partners, universities, and faculty members and their preferences in different regions, and they will change over time.

Where partners do not solve alignment issues well, the result will be

work of low quality. This is likely to be the biggest problem with many partnerships. Without conscious and intentional action on both sides, I think the likely or default outcome will be a patchwork from region to region, university to university, co-op to co-op, with uneven or mediocre quality of outcomes and dissatisfaction on both sides. So what can co-ops and academics do to improve the number and quality of partnerships?

I have seven suggestions.

**1. People need to be realistic.** Neither side can buy or harangue the other into doing what it wants. Co-operatives will not behave as academics tell them to, but as their members and leaders tell them to. And academics will not do what co-ops tell them. Despite occasional appearances to the contrary, universities and their expertise cannot be bought.

Consider that the average annual research-grant revenue in one of Canada's major universities is \$350 million per university per year, and that in addition to research grants, a middling university might receive another \$33 million in fundraising donations.<sup>15</sup> In this environment, grants and donations of less than seven figures are unlikely to turn heads.

In December 2015 alone, eight Canadian universities and colleges announced million-dollar-plus donations: Guelph, \$1 million in Vet Med; Cambrian College, \$2 million for bursaries; Trinity College, University of Toronto, \$1.75 million for mental-health initiatives; St. Mary's, \$2 million for bursaries; Brock, \$2.5 million for bursaries; Manitoba, \$5 million towards an engineering building; Waterloo, the creation of the Intac Centre on Climate Adaptation based on a \$4.25 million donation from Intac; and finally, York opened the Dahdaleh Institute for Global

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15. Figures from the University of Saskatchewan 2015 Achievement Record, <http://www.usask.ca/achievementrecord> (accessed 7 January 2016). The research revenue is the average of the U15 group of research-intensive universities for 2013–14. Similar figures are not widely shared for donations; the \$33 million is the University of Saskatchewan's own number for 2014–15.

Health in recognition of a \$20 million donation from an alumnus.<sup>16</sup> Business schools, in particular, have received transformative donations from individuals. McGill's management faculty was renamed in 2005 after Marcel Desautel's \$22 million donation, and was outdone when Ottawa's business school received \$25 million from Ian Telfer in 2007. Numerous other business schools have received gifts in the range of \$10 million or more.

These are huge sums of money that likely dwarf what co-ops can afford. But even then, they do not buy service. Academics work on projects of their choice, often subject to peer review by colleagues. Donations usually come from individuals, not corporations, and rarely do they directly fund work of interest to a business. Rather, donations by businesspeople to universities fund scholarships, create centres, and generally build relationships without dictating specific work.

If even the for-profit sector cannot directly buy university work, what are the chances that co-ops can do so? Co-ops can learn from the ways that for-profit businesses build relationships to shape the university environment, including sometimes targeted, long-term sponsorship of centres or endowments for scholarships or research. Where co-ops do not have as much money to bring to the table, they do have much else of interest to academics and students: their democratic character, their unique governance, their community basis and societal missions.

The key is for each partner to come to the table with a realistic appraisal of what it has to offer and of what pressures and incentives the other side faces. Starting from there, they can develop a relationship.

**II. The first step in a relationship is that partners need to meet.** It is difficult to see how this can happen unless both academics and co-ops make efforts to get to know each other — to visit, to extend invitations, to at-

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16. Various announcements in Academica Group's "Today's Top Ten in Higher Education," archived at <http://www.academica.ca> (accessed 7 January 2016).

tend each other's meetings, to share space in communications even when it is not strictly essential to do so. No one has unlimited time for this, but fortunately, networks enable people to leverage each other's contacts.

Universities can invite co-op leaders and staff to give talks and meet students. Co-ops can invite faculty and students to their meetings. News from the university world can be included and cited in co-op sector communications, and vice-versa. Organizations like the Canadian Association for Studies in Co-operation (CASC, a predominantly academically based association that includes co-op practitioners), Co-operatives and Mutuels Canada (which has CASC as a member), as well as provincial and sectoral co-operative federations can serve these purposes. There is a lot of high-quality academic work on co-operatives and the social economy done in Québec, and co-operatives, perhaps especially Anglophone ones, would benefit from bridging the linguistic divide.

**III. In getting to know each other, co-ops and academics should wherever possible stress their common values and principles,** which include not-for-profit service to communities and to the public. Stressing shared values will reduce the tensions and potential problems in every partnership model.

The more each side stresses contracts, fees, or its own idea of a value proposition to the exclusion of its partner's, the less co-operation there may be. Contractual specifications by co-ops cannot solve the basic problems and asymmetries involved in academic work, and may even make matters worse. On the academic side, zealous assertion of rights and autonomy may similarly provoke co-ops to put up walls. The optimal way to reconcile the divergent interests may be to have slightly fuzzy expectations within relations that cultivate trust and shared norms.

**IV. Partners need to develop history with each other.** Within each type of partnership, longer-term or repeated interactions are better than isolated one-offs. Repeats, follow-ups, and spin-offs with known partners serve an important function of deepening trust and legitimacy.

Common projects create trust. Canada's current call to establish historic new, respectful relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is an example of a challenge that implicates both universities and co-operatives. So, too, is the challenge to understand new generations of young people and their modes of participation and collective action.

**V. Co-ops and academics should acknowledge that there will be a range of models of sector-university collaboration** and that no one pattern will win out. Each has its merits and each project and partnership will help inspire others. A strategic approach will seek a range and balance of different approaches in different places, but it will likely not achieve a standardized or uniform model.

It would be reasonable to think that there will be concentrated hubs, some places better at one aspect of co-op-related teaching or research and others better at another; there will also be scattered individuals or small groups and occasional projects that cross organizational lines. A national strategy might consider a loosely planned, flexible identification of a range of regional and sectoral partnerships that make sense.

Organizations that have large resources and the ability to make clear commitments (both co-ops and universities) will have greater capacity to undertake the longer-term and more far-reaching kinds of collaborations. It is important for everybody else that they do so because it sets an example. Multifaceted and long-term partnerships will be precious because they will be rare.

**VI. Co-ops should be clear that their goal is not to access only specific knowledge or skills they can identify in advance**, or at least not only these types of things; their goal, ideally, should extend to systemic change across universities. Canada has more than a hundred universities and university colleges and nearly two thousand postsecondary business programs. Any institution and any program may be training future co-op leaders.<sup>17</sup> The idea of developing individual partnerships with each of

them is daunting. Rather, co-ops should aim to have a system-wide impact by high-profile partnerships that have wide influence.

Partnerships between universities are as difficult as partnerships between co-operatives. Formal partnerships involving multiple partners of each type will be difficult but especially beneficial where feasible — inter-university networks, centres, or consortia.

More generally, academic disciplines are shaped by high-quality outputs, both in terms of high-impact publications and high-impact academics. Quality matters — quality as esteemed by peers. In the long run, one of the best ways to influence universities is through the dissemination within academia of new ideas in highly regarded forms: prominent peer-reviewed publications and grants, innovative teaching materials or approaches, prestigious academic conferences, and so on. Co-ops should be glad to see high-quality, peer-reviewed publications about co-ops — likely should *insist* on seeing such — because these will be read by students in many universities for years to come.

Like other businesses, co-ops have made donations to scholarships, buildings, and other purposes within universities. These kinds of sponsorships do help keep co-ops visible in the campus environment. Given the mismatch in funding power between the co-op sector and the for-profit sector, co-ops probably have to be more targeted and strategic when they make donations — to make sure their donations reinforce each other in ways that make sense, given the interests of co-operatives. In my own university and more widely, there are numerous individual, small scholarships related to co-ops, often with idiosyncratic criteria. There are no prominent programs of such scholarships. Co-ops could be much more effective in their giving if they knew what they wanted and aimed to develop a long-term relationship using their donations.

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17. Conference Board of Canada, “What is the Impact of PSE Business Education in Canada?” [http://www.conferenceboard.ca/topics/education/commentaries/15-08-21/what\\_is\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_pse\\_business\\_education\\_in\\_canada.aspx](http://www.conferenceboard.ca/topics/education/commentaries/15-08-21/what_is_the_impact_of_pse_business_education_in_canada.aspx) (accessed 7 January 2016).

If the goal is the systemic transformation of universities to appropriately address the realities of co-operatives, then co-ops need to take a long view — just as for-profit businesses do. This does leave room for fee-for-service contracts, consulting arrangements in certain fields, and the like — activities with easily identifiable deliverables — but that is not the core of a desirable relationship, just as it is not for for-profit businesses.

**VII. Finally, each side will benefit from a sectoral approach** that as much as possible looks beyond narrow organizational interests. Both co-ops and universities can ask, what's in it for us? What is the value proposition, not for co-ops or for academia, but just for our one organization? Asking this too narrowly will lead to fragmented and siloed activities that fall short of their potential. In the long run, co-ops don't want to partner with only one university, and universities don't want to partner with only one co-op. There are bigger gains — more knowledge, more skilled people, more interesting ideas — to be achieved in a broader, sectoral scope of interaction.

Arguably, co-ops should lead the way in this broader conversation, given that co-operation among co-operatives is a guiding principle, whereas no similar principle exists among universities. In practice, however, faculty and students in universities can act in ways that are much less tied to institutional self-interest than is often the case for co-operative employees — so there are opportunities for leadership from both sides. Apex organizations of co-ops and of co-op academics are places where such leadership can emerge, which will limit the tendency of any particular partners to be overly self-interested.

Partnerships between co-ops and universities have historically been small in scope. I have mentioned that there are about one hundred universities in Canada, of which I might estimate perhaps 10 percent have well-developed co-op partnerships such as a full-time chair for at least one faculty member or a long-term program for a certain number of students. These partnerships are small. There are tens of thousands of

faculty in total, among whom fewer than 1 percent are likely involved in well-developed partnerships.<sup>18</sup> And of two million postsecondary students, the number involved in substantial co-op-specific experiences as part of their programs is probably more like 0.1 percent.

There is, in other words, considerable room for growth. Studies specific to co-operatives are not a crowded field.

I have argued in these personal reflections that opportunities for partnership begin with clear appreciation of the partner — of what they offer and of what limitations and incentives they work under. The massive expansion of higher education and the enormous scope of co-operatives in Canada make it natural for the two to intersect more than they have in the past. Generations ago, only a small minority of co-op leaders and staff were university-educated, but as the most highly educated generation in the history of Canada moves into leadership positions across society, this must certainly change. Co-operatives need universities and colleges, need them to shape the world views, skills, and knowledge of people in ways that are compatible with co-operative missions and values, not only with those of for-profit businesses. Universities include many who would gladly go beyond collaboration with for-profit business alone, who would be happy to have other partners and access to the fascinating educational and research opportunities presented by co-operatives. The basis exists for mutually beneficial partnerships in much greater numbers than in the past. As always, wherever a few leaders who want to make a difference sit down together, there is an opportunity for a new beginning.

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18. The Canadian Association of University Teachers reports 68,000 members, but this includes not only teachers, librarians, and researchers but also “general staff and other academic professionals,” <http://www.caut.ca/about-us> (accessed 7 January 2016).

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