



**JOHNSON SHOYAMA**

Canadian Centre for the  
Study of Co-operatives

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# **Enquiring, Critical, and Creative Spirit**

*A History of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the  
University of Saskatchewan*

**Merle Massie**

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*“If the Co-operative Movement is to benefit from this research, it needs to encourage the enquiring, critical, and creative spirit which exists at the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives.”*

— Chris Axworthy, first director of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 1987<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Board minutes, 1987. Centre for the Study of Co-operatives Fonds (CSC Fonds), Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan. Quote from Chris Axworthy, first director of the Centre.

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## **Overview**

The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives opened in the Diefenbaker Building at the University of Saskatchewan in June 1984. During the subsequent thirty-five years, the Centre has consolidated its interdisciplinary focus to create a world-renowned body of co-operative and credit union knowledge. The following is a history of that organization to 2018. This work was commissioned by the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives and was researched and written by Merle Massie, PhD.

## **Prologue**

### **Resilience and Institutional History**

The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (CSC) is an institution created in the early 1980s at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Its mandate has been to study the co-operative form of enterprise and to disseminate that knowledge through teaching and publications. It exists as its own entity (a centre designed to promote study on co-operatives) but is embedded within other spheres, most notably academia, government, and co-operatives, all of which have local, regional, national, and international presence and power.

Compiling and writing an institutional history of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives opens the door to self-reflection and review, with one eye on the past and one on the future. The most common institutional histories present a chronological timeline from founding to the present day, with the occasional pause to reflect on the circumstances or results of a particular event. Readers take note: This is not that kind of history. Chronology remains central; by its nature, history is about change over time and this story is indeed about change over time at the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives. However, I don't think that's quite enough. For an institution, studying change over time is also a study in resilience, or how an entity has withstood or adapted to the tests of time. I have chosen to focus this history using concepts drawn from The Resilience Alliance, which studies resilience as a critical concept. While Alliance researchers focus primarily on mixed socio-ecological systems, I believe some of their concepts can be adapted as a new way to reconsider how we think about an institution, as a

social system made up of people, embedded within larger systems that have all kinds of cross-scale interactions and influences. I thought about these concepts as I worked through the history of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives.

Some of the concepts are a bit dense and require concentration. First and foremost, the Resilience Alliance defines resilience as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbances and reorganize while undergoing change so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks.” In other words, resilience is about how well something responds and adapts to pressure, be it from within or from without, but ultimately those pressures do not force a fundamental change. A lack of resilience considers the kinds of thresholds that push a system to change, to become something different from what was first created. Scientists might call that shift an alternate state with different structural and functional properties — in other words, different rules, goals, and purpose. Time, and change over time, becomes the focal point. Resilience theory also recognizes that the way a particular system works ebbs and flows: sometimes it functions well and is active and robust; at other times, it is closer to a potential critical threshold and could change into something quite different. Part of addressing and understanding resilience is identifying those points where change is more likely.

In co-operative studies, resilience and sustainability are virtually interchangeable concepts and usually refer to the resilience and sustainability not so much of the individual business, but of the co-operative model itself: Does it remain a viable model within a changing society? What are the ways co-operatives must innovate and adapt? How can we grow (or at least maintain) worldwide use of the co-operative model? How can the co-operative model adapt to work in different social environments, and are they still co-operatives? These and similar questions often drive the research agenda. Yet, there are few to no studies that investigate what it means for a co-operative, or the co-operative model, to be resilient, to consider what a resilient institution or co-operative business looks



like, and to adopt ways in which resilience can be measured or analyzed.

The question thus becomes, can the concepts developed by the Resilience Alliance and other ecological writers provide important new ways to assess and interpret co-operative institutional history? Yes. An institution (such as the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, or an individual co-operative, apex institution, or other creation) can be viewed as a focal system that contains local dynamics, set within larger-scale dynamics that contain cross-scale interactions, cascading change, thresholds, governance systems, and transitions. The focus shifts from the facts (dates, names, and so forth) to the spaces in between, where the bump and grind of history happens. In other words, it's helpful to consider things like smaller- and larger-scale circles of influence, including personalities, internal and external processes, expectations, laws, rules (written and unwritten), mandates, and goals. The concepts offered by resilience theory provide a valuable new perspective for institutional history.

The Resilience Alliance has compiled a Resilience Assessment framework workbook to help practitioners ask questions, consider multiple concepts, and assess the resilience of the system under study. The framework outlines five major components:

- describing the system
- examining system dynamics
- analyzing interactions
- exploring system governance
- acting on the assessment

The first component relates to classic institutional history, as a matter of origin stories and constructing an overall picture of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives: the legal entity, the people, the place, the issues. System dynamics, the second

component, looks at the system state, the variables that fluctuate over time, and the feedbacks that flow back into the Centre. These variables could be funding, physical space, technology, personnel change, research directions, and leadership. The third component, cross-scale interactions, looks at how the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives interacts with both smaller- and larger-scale systems within which it is embedded, particularly the University of Saskatchewan, the Government of Saskatchewan, and the co-operative world. Concepts such as adaptive cycle and panarchy are helpful here. The adaptive cycle describes four phases: rapid growth, conservation of resource, release of resources, and reorganization. Panarchy shows how cross-scale linkages affect the adaptive cycle.

System governance, the fourth component in a resilience assessment, recognizes the rules and laws and institutions, formal and informal, that guide how the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives functions. The second, third, and fourth components of this way of considering history (system dynamics, cross-scale interactions, and governance) are iterative and reflexive, which drives the analytical process of advancing understanding. While thinking, working, and writing through the history of the Centre, I was constantly backing up and rewriting or inserting things that I missed, or didn't consider. As you read through, you will bring your own experiences and observations to bear, and what is published here may trigger some thoughts and discussion points for you. You'll find holes, or places where my thought process didn't go quite far enough. At some point, though, I had to stop, publish what I had, and let you take it from here. That's how we build history over time: Let more than one voice into the conversation.

The last component of a classic resilience assessment is acting on the assessment. This is an activity not normally associated with a regular institutional history, which is mainly about capturing and recording an institution's story. It could set the ground for a robust discussion around strategies for future transformation and adaptation. It's also where those who read about the history of the Centre for the Study of Co-

operatives, who might be contemplating building a similar centre or changing the focus of their own institution, could find some useful thoughts. An easier way to think about all of this is to remember that resilience is a tool that helps us to think about two sides of a larger question: How does it work? When does it not work?

All of these ideas, strange as they may be to those expecting a classic institutional history, are helpful in writing a history of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, in that they encourage readers to think in new ways about Centre structures and functions beyond simple chronology. Institutional history, as noted by Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, can be too closely linked to biography, particularly to the biographies of institutional leaders such as directors or board chairs or presidents. Institutional history written by an institution — in the form of annual reports, eulogies written for colleagues, or anniversary commemorations — recounts achievements and self-valued successes, but offers little critical analysis of processes or problems. After all, it's important to put the best foot forward. Likewise, institutional histories produced by students during the course of their honours or master's programs, or those written by hired ghostwriters, tend to focus on origin stories and timelines and successes, which have value but lack true rigour.

One of the challenges is that institutional memory (as in, a single unified memory) is a misleading concept. Every institution contains multiple shared memories, many of which are internally inconsistent, difficult to document or corroborate, and often do not “match.” Sifting through the perspectives of researchers, staff, and funders over time produces a continuously changing kaleidoscope view, not a painting. Creating a seamless narrative that encompasses origin stories, progress, and achievement means writing an institutional history that quietly sweeps a lot of mismatched mess under the carpet or into the closet. It looks tidy, but we do know better. As a research historian, I know that some of the most important lessons to be learned happen in the brittle places, the unintended

consequences, and the mistakes — as well as the major successes.

A related and important body of work lies in institutional theory and its critical insights. W. Richard Scott of Stanford wrote in 2004 that institutional theory “attends to the deeper and more resilient aspects of social structure,” such as rules, norms, and routines, and how they influence behaviour in an institution. Much of this work is carried out by organizational sociologists and management scholars, although researchers who use institutional theory are spread across the spectrum. One of the central concepts in new institutional theory rejects the idea that organizations evolve rationally to pursue internally defined goals. Instead, institutional theory shows how organizations respond to outside forces, to show how, where, and why they are affected by external pressure, in order to gain or maintain legitimacy. Sometimes, those changes aren’t at all rational, but rather, are merely responsive to a particular problem. A related issue in institutional theory reflects on the immense impact of history: If an organization reflects too much on its origins, and its origin stories, it can then experience trouble with innovation, exhibiting a pull towards stability, even stasis. Strands of institutional theory prioritize the importance of an organization’s archival internal documents, as evidence of institutional processes, logics, and organization. Overall, institutional theory offers a number of concepts that are of great use to an institutional historian; however, there is as yet no unifying framework, nor is there a research guide or workbook that offers specific steps to producing an institutional history.

A resilience assessment with a view to writing an institutional history allows for a more rigorous examination of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, how the Centre has changed over time in response to disturbances and disruptions, and how it is regarded, and impacted, by larger-scale connections such as the University of Saskatchewan, the Government of Saskatchewan, and the co-operative sector. To build this history, I’ve had the good fortune to have been

granted full access to the Centre's excellent collection of archival documents, which include public documents such as published annual reports, newsletters, articles, and research publications, but also internal documents such as the multilateral signed agreements among funders, director's reports to the board, board meeting minutes, materials related to planning sessions and retreats, strategic plans, and the original correspondence that led to the creation of the Centre. Most of this archival record is held at the Centre itself; some is held in the University of Saskatchewan Archives in the President's Fonds and the Centre's Fonds, while a small portion was offered from one of the original founding co-operatives. In addition, I conducted a series of personal semi-structured interviews with current and previous staff, faculty, and board members, to provide a taste of the personalities and events that contributed to the Centre of the Study of Co-operatives. The list of those interviewed is by no means exhaustive, and I apologize if you would have liked to be interviewed but were not. Please consider doing so and having that interview kept as part of a larger archive of oral history on the CSC. I'm grateful for the time, energy, and thoughtful discussions shared with me. I'm also grateful to the Centre's leadership for their support during the writing of this history. My mother was stricken with terminal cancer and I was allowed to put this contract on indefinite hold while I attended to my own family. Such professional support is rare, and I remain humbled and thankful for the humanity extended to me. That story, I believe, showcases the core spirit of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives — deep generosity.

One of the reasons why classic chronological institutional history can be dry is that the author's voice is absent. The reader can easily forget who wrote it, as if it magically appeared, complete, with no struggle. But faceless history couldn't be further from the truth. If this history had been written by anyone else, the stories chosen, in what order, and which given emphasis or meaning or detail, would give you a picture as different as one artist's rendering of a flower to another. No two artists are the same; no two writers are the same; no two institutional histories, even when given access to

exactly the same documents and interviews, would be the same. In reading the following history, you will note that my voice is present, and it will change from historical description to analysis and back again, peppered with some commentary on my own struggles to make sense of the story. This is a deliberate writing device.

Full disclosure: from January 2015 to mid-2016, I was employed on contract by the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives as a research officer for the Co-operative Innovation Project. I also conducted contract research for the Centre in 2017 on the Ian MacPherson papers held by the Centre, producing an internal assessment of Dr. MacPherson's partially written manuscript and supporting research on the history of credit unions in Canada. This experience with the Centre, combined with my professional capacity as a researcher, writer, and trained historian, led to the contract work you are now reading. All opinions and editorial decisions are mine.

## **Chapter One: Origins and Organization**

### **Defining the Focal System: The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives**

#### **The University-Co-operative Task Force**

In 1980, a soft-spoken, slight but rangy, very tall man of Icelandic descent by the name of Leo Kristjanson became the president of the University of Saskatchewan. Born in the swampy, wet farming region near Gimli, Manitoba, Kristjanson went to Winnipeg to take his first steps as a scholar, earning both a bachelor's and master's degree. He then traveled into the United States, arriving at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he earned a PhD studying the economics of rural development, population, and co-operatives. In 1959, Kristjanson came to bump his head against the doorframes while working as an economist and researcher at the Centre for Community Studies, a joint Government of Canada/University partnership located at the University of Saskatchewan. That Centre had been deliberately crafted to draw from a range of academic disciplines: sociology, economics, anthropology, psychology, and history. Specializing in community change and development, the Centre for Community Studies produced copious public reports, research, and analysis on community-level issues; it also accepted commissioned work at the request of communities, businesses, and government.

Leo Kristjanson's experiences at this centre underscored a lifelong belief in the centre-scholar model, as a way to bring multiple perspectives together to work on conceptual and practical research focused on a particular topic. The Centre for

Community Studies was reformed into the Canadian Centre for Community Studies and relocated to Ottawa in 1966. Leo Kristjanson elected to stay at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of Economics and Political Science, where he soon climbed the administrative ladder: head of his department by 1969, vice-president (Planning) in 1975, and appointed president in 1980. A colleague of Leo's later noted, "People remembered you if you came up through the ranks." When you have such a long relationship with a university, it's easy to create both friends and enemies: "It [being President] was always a difficult job. He was incredibly supportive, completely committed intellectually and emotionally. A social democrat. When you have strong views, it doesn't always fit with others."<sup>22</sup>

Leo wasted no time as president. He had plans for the university, and he moved quickly to put them into action. As remains the case today, Saskatchewan in 1980 was a province where connections mattered; people from all walks of life knew each other and the degree of separation between any one Saskatchewan resident and any other was, at best, small. A population hovering around one million people meant that in practice, Saskatchewan had a strong sense of village and community. This sense of connection was even stronger for those within the co-operative sector of the province — the local wheat pool boards, the credit union boards, and the co-operative boards. If you were on one board, chances were you'd be on another, or knew the people on them, or worked with them on local or regional projects. Leo Kristjanson, a life-long co-operative member and enthusiast who studied and taught co-operatives and credit unions in his economics classes, knew first-hand the size, power, and spirit of Saskatchewan's co-operative might. Yet, he thought, something important was missing. Co-operatives and credit unions represented some of the strongest businesses in Saskatchewan; yet, knowledge about co-operatives was dropping, and there was little to no presence in the research or teaching curriculum at all at the university level. Leo led an intervention.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Chris Axworthy, 29 November 2017.



He gathered troops — Generals, actually, not troops — to discuss the problem. At Leo's personal invitation, almost as soon as he settled into his president's office, Leo established a University-Co-operative Task Force. Using personal links, he brought in leaders from both within and outside the university, from the left-leaning New Democratic Party government, to the leaders of the largest co-operatives, alongside the deans of the colleges on campus. On this task force: George Lee, head of Agricultural Economics; Doug Cherry, dean of Arts & Science; Blaine Holmlund, vice-president of Special Projects; Grant Mitchell, deputy minister of the Department of Co-operatives and Co-operative Development for the Province of Saskatchewan; Peter Hlushko, vice-president of Personnel and Service for The Co-operators and board chair of the Co-operative College of Canada (and who represented Credit Union Central of Saskatchewan); Vern Leland, president of Federated Co-operatives Limited; Ted Turner, president of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool; and Ole Turnbull, executive director of the Co-operative College of Canada.<sup>3</sup> It was a who's who of the province's co-operative community, combining decision makers from the major co-ops and the provincial government, and matching that might with university leaders.

For the co-ops, the size of each of the players mattered. The Saskatchewan Wheat Pool (SWP) was a farmer-owned, producer co-operative "pool" established in 1923 to commercially control the weighing, storage, and delivery of grain, particularly wheat. Farmers would commit to contracts to sell their grain to their own "pool." Once enough farmers signed on to the idea, the Pool, as it came to be called, sold the grain over time, accumulating profit by holding the grain and selling when the market was high, rather than selling right off the combine. The Pool grew to include grain-handling facilities, terminal elevators at shipping points such as Thunder Bay, and publishing activities. By the 1980s, the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool was one

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Kristjanson Fonds, RG 001 s6 Box 12.I.22.22. Minutes Co-operative–University Task Force, Meeting No. 1, January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1981. University of Saskatchewan Archives.

of Canada's largest corporations, with annual revenues of more than \$2 billion.<sup>4</sup>

Credit Union Central (Saskatchewan) (CUC)<sup>5</sup> is a second-tier credit union, owned by Saskatchewan's credit unions. Formed in 1938, it now serves as a service supplier and liquidity manager for the credit union system in the province, as well as a consulting service for local-level credit union questions. In the 1980s, some of the province's smaller credit unions experienced severe hardship as a result of high interest rates, which led to personal and corporate bankruptcies in many towns, straining local credit unions. Credit Union Central served as a clearinghouse and stabilizer for the system. By 2017, it had consolidated assets worth \$11.72 billion.<sup>6</sup>

Federated Co-operatives Limited (FCL) is also a second-tier co-operative, owned by local retail co-operatives throughout western Canada. Federated's story began in 1928, when co-operative retail stores in Manitoba and Saskatchewan identified a need for wholesaling support. Over time, provincial wholesale co-operatives and the co-operative refinery in Regina amalgamated to form Federated Co-operatives Limited. Unlike the other two major CSC partners, FCL has a cross-provincial mandate, with owners from British Columbia to Manitoba. With almost \$10 billion in sales in 2017, FCL operates in the energy, agriculture, food, and home building sectors.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, its head office is in Saskatoon and it has retained a close association with the province, the city, and the university.

The decision to support the nascent task force is particularly notable, given the financial constraints of retail co-operatives at the time. The high interest rates of the early

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<sup>4</sup> Garry Fairbairn, *From Prairie Roots: The Remarkable Story of Saskatchewan Wheat Pool* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1984). Numbers from Appendix F, p. 249.

<sup>5</sup> Its legal name, used in the CSC contracts in the early years, was Saskatchewan Co-operative Credit Society Ltd.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.saskcentral.com/Media/Pages/Quick-Facts.aspx>, accessed 17 September 2018.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.fcl.crs/our-business/overview>, accessed 17 September 2018.

1980s, which had an overall positive effect on the credit unions, placed a “serious burden” on the retail co-operatives, and by extension, FCL.<sup>8</sup> By coming to the table, each of these three major co-operative entities was showing support for what could become a significant change in the co-operative education world. Their leadership remained connected to other co-operatives that, while they weren’t part of the original contract, came on board in later iterations: Co-operative Trust, The Co-operators, CUMIS, and later again, Concentra Financial and CHS Inc.

From the co-operative sector, the last partner on the task force was the Co-operative College of Canada. The Co-op College, as it was known, had its roots in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where an idea to establish a co-operative institute and education centre to develop employee and director training came about in the early 1950s. This first seed grew, under the protective agency and financial support of Federated Co-operatives Limited. Over time, the Co-operative Institute became the Western Co-operative College in 1959, adding theoretical co-op content to the practical training. The college approached the University of Saskatchewan for affiliation but was rejected. To redirect and expand its influence, the Western Co-operative College re-incorporated as the Co-operative College of Canada in 1973. Director and employee training, as well as adult education and correspondence courses, remained central, but the college moved to more extension training on the ground rather than having people come to the college. It began to operate more like a research centre, producing studies, surveys, occasional papers, and films. Yet, for financial reasons, the college was running out of steam. It joined the task force, in part, as a way to address what college officials had never achieved: formal affiliation with the University of Saskatche-

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<sup>8</sup> Harold E. Chapman, *Sharing My Life: Building the Co-operative Movement* (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives and Harold Chapman, 2012).

wan, as a way to uphold the college idea, an academic space in which to study co-operatives.<sup>9</sup>

What was the driving force behind this particular group agreeing to carve time out of their busy schedules — they were all leaders, with competing demands, who had to look at their calendars months in advance to make this work — to get together for these discussions? At the simplest level, the co-ops felt that they were being taken for granted. They were such a huge part of the economy and society, had given money from the local to the provincial level for thousands of projects, but felt that they didn't have the respect or recognition that perhaps was deserved. It was time, they decided, to make a big play: raise the profile of co-operatives and credit unions at the university level. "You have to get a needle in, to get things started," Vern Leland, then president of Federated Co-operatives explained.<sup>10</sup> Ted Turner, president of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, remembered total commitment. The Wheat Pool, he said, "waved our co-operative banner wherever we went. We didn't hide it. We boasted about it. We had been strongly involved with the Co-op College of Canada. We felt it was very central to provide learning about co-operatives, their history and their purpose."<sup>11</sup> Despite decades of work at the local, provincial, and national level via fieldmen, second-tier co-op support organizations, the Co-operative College of Canada, and sporadic curriculum insertions, co-ops didn't have the same level of robust teaching, research, and analysis at the university level — and that, the co-ops decided, mattered. Students were entering university at an unprecedented rate; they had to be where the students were. To be taken seriously, to be studied and taught and debated, they needed to be a player at the university level.

The secondary issue was the pull factor. The group, including co-operative leaders and Leo Kristjanson, had excellent

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<sup>9</sup> Jodi Crewe, "An Educational Institute of Untold Value": The Evolution of the Co-operative College of Canada, 1953–1987, Occasional Paper Series (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Vern Leland, 20 January 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Ted Turner, 29 January 2018.

working relationships, near friendships, built on trust and mutual respect. They could all commit quickly and decisively to working together on a project. The Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, for example, was prepared to commit money, and a lot of it, because there was trust. Ted Turner later recalled, “Often it’s the little things that are more influential than the big scope. Those background personal relationships meant so much. We all think it’s the big issues that determine something, when often it’s the many smaller connections that push you in a certain direction.”<sup>12</sup> FCL’s Vern Leland spoke of the same connection: “It seems to me that we had such a good relationship, a group of individuals that really seemed to relate to one another.” The co-operative community was big enough to wield real power, but small enough to host close working relationships.

The group met at the Co-operative College of Canada boardroom on a mild day in January 1981. In handwritten notes preserved from that first meeting, Leo set out his three-part goal:

1. An interdisciplinary think tank centre — a centre for the study of innovative institutional arrangements of co-operatives
2. A place for co-op people to study, something not now available
3. Strengthening of co-op offerings at university

Into the mix of conversation at that first meeting came other voices. D.R. Cherry, then dean of Arts & Science, had been suggesting that the University of Saskatchewan create an interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary degree for people who work in what he called “the semi-public sector — co-operatives, crown corporations, hospital and health care services.” His vision was a degree-granting program with classes geared to public and co-operative service, as something different from learning about profit-oriented practices or perspectives. John Jordan of York University had been in contact with Leo Kristjanson in the fall of 1980, lamenting the state of academic studies in co-operatives. Academic *bona fides*, he noted, re-

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

quired theoretical robustness and empirical studies. In August of 1980, the Co-operative College, located in Saskatoon, had received a whopping \$100,000 government grant to pursue creating a degree program in co-operative administration. Such a grant would extend its short programs but require extensive collaboration with the university as a degree-granting institution. There were hurdles to be jumped. Ole Turnbull, head of the Co-operative College and part of the task force, was practical. The point, he argued, was to discuss the research and teaching needs of Saskatchewan co-operatives. His view emphasized the service role of the university to respond to the needs of the Saskatchewan co-operative sector in the same way that it was expected to respond to the needs of agriculture or medicine or education. He was asking for focused teaching and research, directed by questions or issues put forward by co-operatives.

The variety of voices and perspectives in that first meeting outlined a huge mandate. Right from the beginning, there were a lot of expectations in play:

- build an interdisciplinary think-tank to invigorate robust research and learning about co-operatives
- create a degree program with a co-operative focus “for co-op people to study,” which would extend the Co-operative College onto campus
- establish the academic *bona fides* of co-operatives as a subject of rigorous study
- create a cluster of experts designed to service the co-operative sector, to research and study and teach their issues

It was a big list, with divergent expectations.

As good decision makers, task force members decided that they needed an in-depth study and full report, ideally from three viewpoints: the university, the Co-operative College of Canada, and an independent body. The university did an internal canvas of people who knew about co-operatives and exist-

ing courses with co-operative content, to see what and whom might be a good fit. That didn't take long. Gerald Schuler,<sup>13</sup> then the director of the Co-op College, wrote an overview from the college, outlining its successes and challenges. Baldur Kristjanson, Leo's brother and a long-time active co-operator with the Canadian Wheat Board in Winnipeg, was hired to interview members of the task force, other leaders, and government representatives, including then-premier Allan Blakeney, and write an independent analysis of the larger processes in play.

Baldur Kristjanson was a good choice. The task force needed someone experienced in government relations, higher education, and co-operatives. Baldur's thirty-page report aimed to "examine seriously the shortfall in research and education *for* [emphasis added] co-operatives and credit unions, its causes and potential remedies."<sup>14</sup> Embedded in the report are three critical underlying issues:

1. a perception that co-operatives were "endangered," becoming "more akin" to non-co-operative businesses all the time
2. that the kind of education initiatives within co-operatives was about maintaining status quo, not about supporting (or even allowing) innovation and change
3. that universities had drifted away from their mandate to study issues of importance to Saskatchewan, and more particularly, had not been studying issues of concern to co-operatives and credit unions

The first issue was noticeable at the board tables of co-ops and credit unions, which reported a growing gap between their experiences and training, and those of their hired company leadership. It was either a failure in curriculum, or a gap in experience, but it was noticeable. The second issue, it was thought, was a result of stasis. It was hard enough to get co-ops to address or support education initiatives for their members;

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<sup>13</sup> I found Gerald Schuler's last name spelled four different ways in various public and private documents; I have standardized it to Schuler.

<sup>14</sup> Leo Kristjanson Fonds, Box 12.1.22.22. "Co-operatives University of Saskatchewan Task Force," report by Baldur Kristjanson, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1981, p. 1, Foreword.

it was a much larger expectation for individual co-ops to consider any kind of shakeup or change. The third issue recognized that perhaps co-operatives themselves should share some blame if universities hadn't accorded them enough attention. They warranted it by virtue of numbers, but had they asked or demanded it in a concerted or united way?<sup>15</sup>

A related concern, recognized and discussed in Baldur's report, is the existence and scope of the Co-operative College of Canada. After all, its mandate was co-operative education, and it was right there in Saskatchewan. The college needed to be a part of any discussion that changed the nature of co-operative education, including expanding or adding to it. In the same vein, the Government of Saskatchewan, through the Department of Co-operatives and Co-operative Development, was both represented on the task force and clearly in support of a new and "fuller collaboration" regarding co-operative education.<sup>16</sup> It was responsible for co-operative development at the provincial level, and it too was worried about co-op knowledge at the individual and community level. What was needed, Baldur wrote, was "bold initiatives" to "seek matching funds" from governments, led by co-operative "leadership of a high order."<sup>17</sup>

An issue that Baldur Kristjanson hit head-on is the fact that the Co-operative College drew much of its financing and support from the large co-operatives and credit unions, while at the same time, those same institutions were moving towards increased in-house training for both personnel and management. Yet, smaller co-ops still needed the services of the Co-operative College. It was a conundrum then, as now — the ideologies of the co-operative movement created an expectation of "co-ops helping co-ops." The on-the-ground application meant larger co-operatives financially supporting initiatives that, in some ways, were of little use to their own co-op business, but would help smaller, distant, nascent, or struggling co-operatives. At some point, the disconnect between large and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 20–21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 24.



small might cause trouble. In the case of the Co-op College, the technical training it provided was still viewed as necessary, especially for smaller co-ops; what was needed was a new infusion of instruction and research geared towards larger co-operative problems, or problems that faced all co-ops, large and small. In other words, the focus of research taken on by any new co-operative research initiative would be to study issues and ideas that could, in some way, cross co-operatives and provide higher-order thinking on co-op advantages and problems. In addition, Baldur Kristjanson noted that university-based research should not be geared towards solving the issues of only those co-operatives that provided finances. Both the University of Saskatchewan and the government had commitments to *all* Saskatchewan people; so the university, with its government partnership, should also study co-operative enterprises (health, daycare, worker, and so forth) “on the fringe” and different from the large producer, consumer, and credit co-operatives.<sup>18</sup> Again, studying all kinds of co-operatives is a massive mandate.

Even with its wide-ranging questions, the Baldur Kristjanson report did not go very far. Given the prominence of the task force members and the clear mandate to think big, its recommendations were meagre: make a big public announcement of collaboration between the co-operatives, university, and government; and establish “an identifiable and respected group for teaching and research for those interested within co-operatives, credit unions, and for members of other public service boards.”<sup>19</sup> In no place did he call for anything new. Instead, he seemed to suggest little more than drawing together and focusing existing teaching and research at the university, and potentially drawing in a group from the co-operative sector. It sounded good, but it needed structure.

While Baldur’s report was circulating to the task force, Leo Kristjanson received a fascinating story from University College Cork in Ireland. There, a steering committee of combined university and co-operative/credit union representatives

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

launched the Bank of Ireland Centre for Co-operative Studies in 1980. Reading this two-page magazine article, Kristjanson took out his pen and went to work, marking all the points he thought were significant. The new centre at Cork was built:

- in close association with the Co-operative Movement, at home and abroad
- within a university campus
- on interdisciplinary lines
- with a high level of postgraduate research
- with a high output of educational materials

Combining recruited academic staff and research fellows, the new co-operative research centre would deliberately draw from “relevant faculties” across the campus, including agriculture, law, economics, history, and sociology. It’s clear, given the negotiations and subsequent structure of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, that the model used at University College Cork had a major influence. In many ways, Kristjanson’s own experience with the centre-scholar model at the defunct Centre for Community Studies was reflected in the structure of the centre at Cork. Both were clearly on his mind as he worked with the task force to craft the outline for the new Centre for the Study of Co-operatives.

If Baldur’s report was great on considering big questions but lacking in nitty gritty detail, Gerald Schuler of the Co-operative College of Canada began to shape the aims and interests of the task force into a structure with bones, meat, bark, and bite. By September of 1981, he had crafted an outline for a “University of Saskatchewan Co-operative Centre” that had coalesced from Baldur’s loose affiliation into a brand new institution within the university. He took the discussion from generalities to specifics: They would create a wholly new entity. His draft was comprehensive, with details including:

- a list of the six supporting organizations represented by the task force members — the university, the Government of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool,

Credit Union Central of Saskatchewan, Federated Co-operatives Limited, and the Co-op College

- the objectives of the new entity
- its administrative structure with board, academic, and support staff
- an overview of expected financial support, costs, and division of those costs, including agreeing to a five-year commitment

In essence, this document gives the first framework for what would become the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives.

## **The Diefenbaker Centre**

The University–Co-operative Task Force wasn't the only group vying for the attention of the president. One of Kristjanson's other files, left over from his time as VP Planning, was the building and operation of the Diefenbaker Centre on university grounds. Saskatchewan-born, Conservative Prime Minister John George Diefenbaker wished to have his personal and professional papers housed in a centre, to provide access for the general public. To accommodate such a request, the university entered negotiations to locate, plan, and build the Diefenbaker Centre. After much discussion, university planners located the new building near the South Saskatchewan River, with one of the most spectacular views on campus. Its final placement was on campus, but separate and distinct in its own building, signifying connection without domination. The Diefenbaker Centre could thereby define its own path.

Completed and opened to much fanfare in 1980, the building was virtually empty by 1981. The early rush of tourists had waned, and only a few of the offices had been filled or used. The Diefenbaker Centre, in fact, didn't have enough funds to pay its own director. With alacrity, Leo Kristjanson matched the nascent Centre for the Study of Co-operatives with the struggling Diefenbaker Centre. The task force shifted its meeting place from the Co-op College to on campus at the Diefenbaker Centre on 29 October 1981. This move signaled both intent

and purpose. The choice of the Diefenbaker Centre allowed for connection to the university, but not overwhelming ownership. There remained room for government and co-operative interests to assert sway. There was a certain cachet, as well, to being located within the Diefenbaker Centre, FCL President Vern Leland noted. Maybe, he suggested, it got more attention because it established that physical connection to power — and to Conservative power, at that. Having a Saskatchewan-born prime minister was quite an accomplishment for the province. Locating the new centre within that space, he would later suggest, helped its profile.<sup>20</sup> It was at that October meeting that Gerald Schuler's robust outline was expanded and hammered into a version that satisfied all parties — the co-operative sector, the provincial government, and the university. In essence, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives coalesced within the Diefenbaker Centre, and the two entities have shared space ever since.

## **The First Agreement**

It took some time before the vision of the Centre, as envisioned by the co-operative and government perspective, could find a way to fit within the University of Saskatchewan. The difference between Gerald Schuler's outline and the final, signed contract that created the CSC was minimal, but perhaps significant. The Schuler outline listed four objectives for the Centre:

- to establish a program of studies at the undergraduate and graduate level with classes available to students across campus
- to undertake off-campus program collaboration with the Co-operative College
- to undertake research and publication of those results, including textbooks and curriculum

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Vern Leland, 20 January 2018.

- to “review and recommend changes in the laws governing co-operatives and credit unions”

The Centre’s governance structure called for nine board members, with the majority (five) from off-campus — a combination of co-operative and government representatives — with the other four from on-campus, to be appointed by the president. It also called for three academic staff (one director and two others), two clerk/stenographers, and one research assistant. The document calculated the financial commitment using existing university wage structures, splitting those costs 60 percent for the co-operative sector and 40 percent for the government. The university would provide office accommodation (aiming for the Diefenbaker Centre), \$3,000 annually for library accruals “to be maintained by the University Library,” general accounting, and other needed services.<sup>21</sup>

In the final negotiations, the university, via Leo Kristjanson and his deans on the task force, made some modifications. The first three objectives for the Centre remained virtually unchanged, while the fourth pulled back significantly from active recommendation of legal changes to simply undertaking “research concerning the legislation governing co-operatives and credit unions.” Policy or legal recommendations smacked of lobbying, which could muddy the waters of university autonomy or research integrity. The board would consist of ten people, not nine: five from the co-operative and government side and five from the university. This is a small but significant difference. After all, the majority of the money for this new venture was coming from outside the university, and the old saying, “He who pays the piper calls the tune” perhaps should

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<sup>21</sup> Leo Kristjanson Fonds, Box 12.I.22.22. “University of Saskatchewan Co-operative Centre.” Redrafted by Gerald Schuler, 14 September 1981. This document also outlined a sliding scale financial structure where, over the course of the five-year commitment, the Saskatchewan Department of Education would assume an increasing amount of the cost and the Co-operative College of Canada would assume a decreased contribution. This plan was rejected by the government and the university. The money from the co-operative sector partners was further split: the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool and Credit Union Central each contributed 40 percent of the sector’s financial obligation and Federated Co-operatives Limited assumed 20 percent. The Co-operative College of Canada had a flat-rate financial obligation of \$3,000 per year.

have had more weight. The change increased the voting power and persuasive authority of the university on the Centre's management board, swaying the pendulum towards the university, even though its contributions at first were minimal: office accommodation, classrooms, accounting supervision, and \$3,000 per year for the library. The final major change was in academic staff: the university wanted four, not three — a director plus three other academics. This change would cost more but, it was argued, it would spread Centre influence across more colleges, raising its profile in the campus community. The sector and the government agreed, and the first five-year operating agreement to create the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives was signed on 24 March 1982.

## **Power and Secrets**

The origins of the Centre, as a shared agreement hammered out among the university, the provincial government, and the co-operative sector — each clearly laying out its financial and other obligations — seem quite clear. But there is a cover of secrecy over its origins that bears noting because it had repercussions for the nascent Centre as it settled into the university milieu. Other than the selected deans on the task force, few others at the university knew about the negotiations surrounding the creation of the Centre — and that mattered. Leo Kristjanson used the powers of his office as president of the university to deliberately bypass and ignore a number of university precedents. The Centre was, it has since been suggested, “illegitimately conceived.”<sup>22</sup> President Kristjanson never went to the University Council, or Senate, to ask permission or gain approval or assent for pursuing, then signing into legal being, the new Centre.

Why did this discussion and approval matter? Wouldn't the colleges welcome the opportunity to vie for one of the four new incoming academics, whose salaries would be paid out of the new funding and not come from their own departmental

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Murray Fulton, 19 November 2017.

budgets? Yes, and no, it turned out. The fact that Leo did not ask permission of the broader faculty set up a culture of animosity within some sectors of the university. It was a blatant expression of a president's power that did not go through proper channels or explore basic interest in such an idea. A whole centre devoted to co-operatives and credit unions? Surely there were more important issues to consider. There was even a strain of concern around university research autonomy: If this new Centre was funded from outside the university, who was calling the shots and setting its research priorities and directions? It is clear that Leo anticipated at least some of these concerns, which led him to negotiate more board power for the university within the new Centre, and to ask the co-operative sector and the government to lavish more money into hiring new academics. But if he thought those actions would be enough to stem the anger, he was wrong.

But the secrecy embedded in the origin story carried a positive spin, too. Those who became part of the CSC could choose to view the CSC as "maverick," less bound by convention and path dependency, with a willingness not just to embrace, but to instigate change. An origin story based on blasting through the walls of the academy, starting something new — and doing so despite opposition, with the support of groups outside (and not beholden to) academia — mattered. Such an origin story gave the nascent Centre and its fledgling faculty a heightened sense that what they were doing, and what they were meant to be doing, was different.

## **First Director and Faculty**

Although the first five-year contract did not stipulate exactly how incoming new academics would fit into the university, Leo Kristjanson's goal and vision was to create an interdisciplinary centre somewhat like a spider's web — weaving strands from disparate points across campus colleges and faculties to create something new and unique. That meant that each of the four Centre academics would be hired into home departments and colleges, whether that was in law, commerce,

agriculture, arts and science, or education. This design gave enormous power to the home department, which could accept or reject the Centre's hiring recommendations. It also gave the home department a clear say in whether or not the incoming academic's research agenda, or personality, was an acceptable fit for the direction of the department.

If the department accepted the position and person, it became that department's responsibility to award merit, including tenure decisions and advancement through the steps from assistant through associate to full professor — but the salary costs of those advances would, at least in the first years, fall to the Centre. There were both advantages and disadvantages to this arrangement, from the perspective of the professors hired into the Centre. It gave academics access to their disciplinary homes and colleagues, a familiarity and a sense of community that would also provide challenges and set expectations. But it also meant that, in some cases, the pull between the disciplinary research and expectations of individual departments versus those of the Centre would create a dual research program far beyond what strictly disciplinary colleagues were expected to undertake.<sup>23</sup> Instead of having to publish in one area, some ended up trying to do research and publish in two distinct areas, with little overlap. As a result, in some cases, advancement never went beyond the associate professor level, if the home department chose not to value work done at the Centre.

In an interview on the origins of the Centre, Lou Hammond Ketilson noted: "Some of the things that came back to haunt us was the way he [Leo Kristjanson] ran with it. He created it but did not go through proper procedures. There was no support from some of the colleges that we were affiliated with."<sup>24</sup> Brett Fairbairn echoed that comment, even going so far as to charge that the faculty union "hated" the new Centre.

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<sup>23</sup> The problem of "having two masters" in both a disciplinary home and interdisciplinary centre has been discussed elsewhere. See Sam Garrett-Jones, Tim Turpin, and Kieren Diment, "Managing Competition between Individual and Organizational Goals in Cross-Sector Research and Development Centres," *Journal of Technology Transfer* 35, no. 5 (2010): 527–46, doi: 10.1007/s10961-009-9139-x.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Lou Hammond Ketilson, 4 December 2017.



Lack of support from the college level manifested in various ways, from promotion problems to not approving course offerings. Course teaching loads were also uneven; some colleges allowed teaching release for faculty who were part of the Centre, but others did not, or only reluctantly, or only if the Centre paid for sessional faculty to teach those courses.

Despite the secrecy and some negative backlash from university departments, the task force — whose membership stayed on to become the first advisory board — kept to its plan, aiming for an interdisciplinary faculty membership. Once the ink was dry on the contract, the board had two jobs: send the money to the university to solidify the Centre financially and get it ready for operation; and appoint an interim director to advertise for, and hire, the first director of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives. Only then would the Centre be officially “started.” The new advisory board faced a province-wide challenge almost immediately. A Saskatchewan general election in April 1982 swept the ruling Allan Blakeney New Democratic Party government out of power, ushering in the Progressive Conservative era led by Grant Devine. But, while the connections between co-operatives and leftist-leaning political parties such as the NDP were strong, they were not formalized in Saskatchewan. As a major driver of the provincial economy, co-operatives employed and were owned by people from all sides of the political spectrum. It may have been that the task force rushed to sign the first five-year agreement before the election was called; some later suggested that the timing of the signing was “a trick.”<sup>25</sup> But they need not have worried; the new Progressive Conservative Minister of Co-operatives and Co-operative Development, Jack Sandberg, never missed a beat. A teacher, broadcaster, and former media manager for Federated Co-operatives,<sup>26</sup> Sandberg became a strong supporter of the Centre. Almost as soon as he took office, he asked for an order-in-council to allow the provincial government to start sending cheques to the University of Saskatchewan, which would hold

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Chris Axworthy, 29 November 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Jack Sandberg (John Sven “Jack” Sandberg) represented Saskatoon Centre as a Progressive Conservative MLA from 1982 to 1986. See [https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack\\_Sandberg](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Sandberg), accessed 7 February 2018.

them in trust against the assumed immediate opening of the Centre.<sup>27</sup> Even as the government changed, it honoured the first five-year financial commitment.

The commitment was substantial. The original operating agreement called for a total of \$284,731 in the first year, with co-operatives giving 60 percent of the funding and the provincial government laying out 40 percent. Those numbers would rise each year to address inflation and anticipated increases in the cost-of-living, as well as in salary and expenses. In the second year, the co-op sector put in \$213,550 and the provincial government \$130,975. Over the first five-year agreement, the provincial government put more than half a million dollars into the Centre (\$503,967), while the co-operative sector invested well over three-quarters of a million (\$824, 280). These investments came at a time of financial crisis and restructuring, particularly for Federated Co-operatives. But where the inflation rates worked against some of the co-operative's business practices and most certainly for their customers, the high interest rates worked in favour of the new Centre. As the cheques came into the university — in trust until the Centre was staffed and opened — the funds grew, garnering massive interest.

It's important to note that the Centre, while operating under a legal agreement signed by the university, the provincial government, and members of the co-operative sector, was not formally incorporated as its own entity (such as a corporation, co-operative, not-for-profit, or charity) with its own legal status. It was created, and remains, a body subsumed within the existing legal entity of the University of Saskatchewan. At the time, the university had few formal policies around creating or approving new Centres, but that oversight has since been rectified. For most of its years of operation, the CSC was viewed as a Type B Research Centre; faculty were drawn from across the campus and its activities involved significant resources (staff,

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<sup>27</sup> Leo Kristjanson forgot to let the university controller know about the agreement. The controller contacted the President's Office in confusion and consternation, unsure of what to do with the sizeable cheques coming in. See Leo Kristjanson Fonds.

faculty, research, space, technology, and so forth). For oversight and administrative purposes, its funding flows through the larger university accounting structure, though its budget and decision making remain at the Centre, guided by the director.

The second job for the board in 1982 was to hire the first director. Roger Carter, a professor in the College of Law, became acting director, responsible for advertising and coordinating applications and interviews on behalf of the CSC board. And board members were delighted: they received an application for the directorship from one of the most prestigious academics in Canada, whose work crossed history, agriculture, and co-operatives — Ian MacPherson. They didn't hesitate. In a unanimous decision, the board (and the History Department) offered Ian, via telex memo, the first directorship of the new Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan, with automatic tenure and a healthy salary. But Ian turned down the offer. It wasn't that he didn't want it — he did, and he had applied for the position, had not been headhunted or coerced — but due to family circumstances, he could not accept. His regret is palpable in the letter he sent to Leo Kristjanson as chair of the CSC board of directors and president of the university. Leo tried persuasion; the answer was still no.

Sifting through the applications, the university looked again, advertised again. Clear academic credentials and certain research characteristics were the most important attributes, which meant that co-operative practitioners were not considered. The co-op sector was dismayed, even outraged: "People are being turned down if the person lacks recent research and publication credentials."<sup>28</sup> The board of the Co-operative College of Canada was stern in rebuke to the university: "We believe co-operative knowledge and experience to be at least as valuable as recent experience in academic research."<sup>29</sup> It was the first major indication of the difference between co-op sec-

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<sup>28</sup> Leo Kristjanson Fonds, Box 12.I.22.2. Letter, Co-operative College of Canada to Leo Kristjanson, 1983.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

tor expectations and academic demands. Knowing co-ops should have been the key. But the university was adamant. The incoming director, and the academic staff positions, would be housed in highly competitive disciplinary departments. Without extensive and recent academic training and experience in research, the departments would reject the candidates, so the university couldn't consider different standards. In desperation, Leo called Ian to cajole, one more time. It was a firm no.

Yet the cheques continued to roll in from the co-operative sector and the provincial government, building a war chest of funding even while the hiring process stalled. The advisory board admitted, "Progress ... has been slower than anticipated," but, they assured one and all, "delays in order to assure high quality staff are better than rushing the matter."<sup>30</sup> Nineteen eighty-two, then 1983, ticked away. Then the College of Law stepped up. They knew someone who researched and wrote about co-operatives — Chris Axworthy, then a professor at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. On his way for a sabbatical at Stanford, Chris assessed the opportunity, then applied. The board interviewed and offered the position. Chris noted, "At the time, there were not very many senior positions in universities across the country. People weren't moving, there were few job openings. The opportunity to start a research centre came along, and it soon became clear that this was an opportunity that I shouldn't pass by. It was a significant opportunity."<sup>31</sup> Axworthy accepted the position in February of 1984, setting a target start date in June. Thoughtfully, Axworthy asked Kristjanson to have two items ready when he arrived: a parking spot on campus and good clerical support for the new Centre in place. Lynn Murphy became the first support staff at the Centre, creating its original working processes and policies.

The simple act of moving to Saskatchewan from Halifax hummed down the lines of Axworthy's memories years later. "I arrived in June," he remembered. "It was hot and dry, and then it rained. I complained about the rain and it was as if I had em-

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<sup>30</sup> Leo Kristjanson Fonds, Box 12.I.22.2. Report, Centre for the Study of Co-operatives Management Advisory Board, 1983.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Chris Axworthy, 29 November 2017.

barrassed myself at church. I was complaining about rain in June? In a farm community? What was I saying?”<sup>32</sup> To get oriented not only to the job and the new university but to Saskatchewan’s culture and ways of thinking, Axworthy started reading. Prairie populism, and the peculiar brand of 1980s Saskatchewan politics, which mixed right-wing conservatism with left-wing voting, left him flabbergasted. But he jumped into his new role as director, ready to carve out its distinct place in both the university and co-operative circles.

The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives opened to much fanfare with a luncheon, guest speakers — including the president of the university (of course — he was also the board chair), Jack Sandberg from the government, and R.G. Klombies from the university Board of Governors — and the introduction of the new director, Chris Axworthy. The opening coincided with the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of both the University of Saskatchewan and the Co-operative Union of Canada, which was holding its annual general meeting in Saskatoon and had members there in full force to celebrate the opening. Minister Jack Sandberg identified the Centre as a way to “provide better research and consulting assistance to co-operatives in future planning and development,” as well as to support co-operative education. Leo Kristjanson identified both research and teaching as mandates for the Centre, with an aim to “generate new ideas for the next seventy-five years at least” for co-operative growth and development across Canada.<sup>33</sup> Sandberg’s viewpoint at the opening — of the Centre as a research and consulting service — was not quite the perspective of the university, or the Centre’s new director.

Despite the ongoing support of Minister Jack Sandberg, new director Chris Axworthy saw that the provincial government was shifting priorities even as the cheques continued to arrive. Getting attention and support for the CSC’s co-operative research agenda was, he noted, “a challenge,” given the new

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Leo Kristjanson Fonds, Box 12.I.22.22. General 1983–84. Remarks to Opening of Co-operative Centre. Remarks by Dr. L.F. Kristjanson and Honourable Jack Sandberg.

economic conservatism that led to the election of Grant Devine and his Conservative government. That economic conservatism, Axworthy pointed out, could be seen in co-ops: “You had people ... becoming directors of local credit unions and co-ops and the Wheat Pool who weren’t as committed to social changes in a progressive way. They were free-enterprise oriented, and co-ops came to reflect that perspective.”<sup>34</sup> Ideology, in other words, was the difference between *knowing* about co-operatives and *being* co-operative, this divide remaining, in fact, an understudied issue in co-operatives. In a way, opening the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives with a conservative provincial government in power was both a coup and a misfit. The misfit would be felt once more, when a conservative-oriented government cycled through again later.

Axworthy’s first goal was to hire and put into place the remaining academic faculty and Centre staff, and to work with the new faculty to set the research priorities for the Centre. The Centre also spent time in the fall of 1984 and into 1985 reaching out to the larger co-operative community, both funders and others. It was a period of connection, introduction, and liaison. After all, the CSC was a big play within the Saskatchewan co-operative community and could potentially have an effect on regional, national, or even international co-operative education. Reaching out to the broad co-op community was important to establish the Centre, create research and teaching connections, garner research ideas and partnerships, and potentially interest other funders.

Generous original funding plus accrued interest from almost two years of holding the payments in trust meant that Axworthy had some leeway in hiring. If a promising researcher came into the Centre, he or she could be hired directly into a research assistant or associate position.<sup>35</sup> It was only when the Centre was negotiating with a department to hire a full-time, tenure-track faculty member that delicate negotiations mattered. Right off the hop, the Centre hired Lou Hammond Ketil-

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Chris Axworthy, 29 November 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Another research associate hire was sociologist Skip McCarthy, who stayed with the Centre through the first year.

son as a research associate. At the time, she was a graduate student in management and marketing and taking courses from Leo Kristjanson.<sup>36</sup> While the College of Graduate Studies balked at the idea of a graduate student taking a research associate position, the President's Office helped ease the decision. Later, Hammond Ketilson accepted a position with the College of Commerce as a marketing professor, and her CSC appointment changed from research associate to full faculty member Centre Fellow, a dual appointment with Commerce.

Promising negotiations with the Department of Agricultural Economics led to the hiring of Rhodes Scholar Murray Fulton, who joined the university and the Centre in 1985. "It was partly my decision to come back [to Saskatchewan] and do something new that was being created from scratch with an exciting potential, unique thinking about a research centre devoted to a topic that I didn't know that much about. We did our shopping at the co-op, but I had never done any co-op research."<sup>37</sup> As an agricultural economist, though, Fulton had some familiarity with co-ops and liked being part of setting up and expanding a relatively new field. The hiring negotiations preserved in the archival record reveal a fascinating technical aspect of the relationship between the Centre and the home department. Incoming faculty usually had a broader set of research interests than just co-operatives, or western Canadian co-operatives. How would the service, teaching, and research obligations be split? The Centre's view was simple: as long as the CSC "obligations to the Co-operative Movement are satisfied, academic staff members should be entitled to conduct research on other topics."<sup>38</sup> In other words, as long as there was abundant productivity to satisfy the contract with the co-operatives, researchers could pursue their own interests as well. With that reassurance, Fulton joined the CSC in 1985.

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<sup>36</sup> Some of Hammond Ketilson's research papers from these courses can be found in Kristjanson's Fonds in the university archives.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Murray Fulton, 12 December 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Leo Kristjanson Fonds, Letter exchange, Leo Kristjanson and Chris Axworthy, winter 1985.

Other promising appointments ran into roadblocks. In part, the roadblocks were retaliation at the department and college level for the way Leo Kristjanson “did not go through proper procedures.”<sup>39</sup> Some of the colleges the Centre had hoped would provide support and affiliation (such as the behemoth College of Arts and Science) refused to go along with the initiative. Prairie political scientist David Laycock had worked for three years as a lecturer in political science; at that point, the University of Saskatchewan faculty contract stipulated, it was time to offer a permanent position, or be let go.<sup>40</sup> Let go, he cast around for another position on campus and found the Centre. There, his own research interests in Prairie populism and his abilities as a researcher led to a research associate position. The Centre, delighted, asked Political Studies to take him on as faculty; his salary would be paid for through the Centre, but his position would be in Political Studies. The department voted the notion down. They didn’t see a relationship between political studies and co-operatives; they weren’t interested in such a research project; they hadn’t chosen co-operatives as a subject of research; and they did not want to be imposed upon to enter into any kind of working relationship with Leo Kristjanson’s special project. Stung, the Centre regrouped. Laycock’s productivity and interests as a research associate were of considerable benefit to the Centre, but the lack of a faculty appointment was a problem. Laycock won a professorship at Simon Fraser University three years later and the CSC — and the university — lost a prominent thinker.

With Chris Axworthy, Murray Fulton, and Lou Hammond Ketilson in three of the four faculty positions, and David Laycock as a research associate, there was room to “carry out a wider and more thorough search” for a candidate, opening the door to many possible disciplines, including history. The search drew Brett Fairbairn, another Saskatchewan-born Rhodes Scholar, after a colleague sent a clipping of the advertisement to Oxford. Even as he interviewed and was accepted by both the Centre and the Department of History, his supervi-

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Lou Hammond Ketilson, 4 December 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with David Laycock, 8 December 2017.



sor in Oxford was “really disappointed. He said, ‘You don’t have to take the first job that’s offered, you know.’”<sup>41</sup> Taking a cross-appointed position between a disciplinary home department and a new, untried and untested interdisciplinary centre was, from his supervisor’s point of view, an unprofessional leap. Nonetheless, Fairbairn wanted to be back home in Saskatchewan and joined the CSC in 1986. With Brett on board, the Centre finally had its full complement of scholars, backed and anchored by the professional expertise of Lynn Murphy and Jo-Anne Andre. A cadre of summer students, research officers, and visiting scholars rounded out the Centre’s new, busy life. With this last faculty hire, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives was at full working capacity.

## **Reflection: Origins and Resilience**

This is a good point at which to pause and reflect. Does this story about the origins of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives give us clues about its resilience over the following thirty-five years? What were the main issues? The discussion, creation, and consolidation of the Centre set forth the critical system components, both visible and invisible. Visible components included the founding legal document — the first five-year agreement — which included specific stakeholders (co-operative sector, provincial government, and university, as well as outlining staff and faculty components) and outlined governance, reporting, mandate, funding, and expectations. The Diefenbaker Centre became the physical setting. The resilience of this original outline remains: The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives still operates within those same general visible components.

Many of the invisible but tangible issues that would confront the Centre can clearly be seen in the origin story. At the top of the heap: Relationships mattered. Funded by a tripartite partnership of government, co-operative sector, and university, the Centre became a connecting piece among the three. Yet

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Brett Fairbairn, 23 November 2017.

those connections, at first, were based on clear linkages and personal levels of trust exhibited by the task force and the first board leadership, which worked together to create the CSC. How would or could those linkages be effectively passed to the faculty and staff, some of whom — admittedly at the time — were not yet co-op scholars, nor particularly well known in the industry? What would be the new mechanisms to draw the Centre close with funding decision makers? With faculty, staff, and a director in place, whose job would it be to manage those relationships, to ensure they remained strong? How and when would relationship power shift from the board to the staff and faculty, and what would be the ramifications?

The CSC had to follow its mandate — which, as the origin documents and later interviews clearly show, was very large and not particularly well defined. Brett Fairbairn remembered the mandate as being open ended. High teaching expectations combined with collecting, building, and codifying a body of co-operative knowledge through research and dissemination were key; but these expectations were cross-cut by a push towards making the CSC a consulting centre for government and co-ops, a resource centre of knowledge and expertise from which to draw, and the mechanism by which students could earn a degree with a specialization in co-operatives. All of these have risen and fallen with greater or lesser force throughout the Centre's existence. Researching and teaching co-operatives meant studying the very sector from which funding flowed. How would the CSC manage those aspects? Would it study just those co-operatives that provided funding, or all types of co-operatives? Who would set the research agenda: the funders, or the academics? Defining the mandate and managing competing expectations would crop up again and again.

Relevance to the larger co-operative community beyond the core funders also mattered. As soon as his office was set up, Chris Axworthy set out to create introductions, linkages, and connections to other co-operative researchers across Canada, the US, and around the world. Soon, CSC staff and faculty became known on the conference circuit as carriers of new co-operative knowledge and representatives of a centre that was worth cultivating. Creating relevance to smaller co-operatives,

engaging them and contributing to their local success, was a more difficult endeavour and never as successful for the CSC. High academic interest in large-scale questions on co-operative law reform or stories of co-operative impact on society lacked the immediacy required by a local co-operative struggling to get through to the end of the year in the black. As founders Vern Leland and Ted Turner pointed out, studying co-ops at the university level loses relevance and resonance at the member level. Supporting something like the CSC required a specific commitment to the co-operative philosophy, to something larger than the give-and-take of specific reports or contracted research. The challenge would be maintaining that commitment to the philosophical underpinnings of the Centre and not allowing the relationship to change, to become transactional — money paid for services rendered.

As a Class B Centre within the University of Saskatchewan's operating structure, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives also had to manage relationships with the university. These ran the gamut from administrative matters of budget, funding formulas, and staff payments, to working with departments and colleges on teaching and tenure issues, to negotiating space and equipment, to continuing the relationship with the President's Office. As Leo Kristjanson was both president of the university and chair of the CSC board of directors, that association was strong for the first several years. Once Leo retired in 1989, that relationship changed. Managing individual connections between core faculty and their home departments is also part of the picture. The two main challenges within this working relationship have been visibility and relevance. What activities or successes would address these challenges? Within academia, major funding awards and peer-reviewed publications are the primary vehicles for measuring success. As we will see, large grant success is a *pulse* disturbance for the CSC, a singular event that would change the dynamics of the Centre, growing a sudden cohort of students and staff to manage large projects. Once a project was complete, the CSC would return to a more steady, recognizable state.

Funding renewal through the five-year contracts is also a pulse issue for the CSC, an event that occurs with regular fre-

quency, can be anticipated and planned for, but still has the ability to create system disturbance from minor to severe. At first the responsibility of the task force and the initial board, reviewing and renewing the five-year operating agreements fell quickly to the director. Planning for and managing the five-year agreements was part and parcel of managing the working relationship to each of the three groups involved in the original funding agreement — the provincial government, the university, and the co-operative sector. During the negotiating process to sign a new agreement, CSC staff and faculty would have to prove their relevance with each partner. It wasn't enough that the board representative thought that the CSC was doing a good job. The board member and CSC staff and faculty had, in turn, to convince each funder that the Centre was an important investment. In terms of the relationship with the provincial government, relevance could be viewed through the lens of consulting service to the co-operative sector — a viewpoint almost directly at odds with the autonomous expectations of a university research centre. In addition, "government" is not a stable, unchanging entity. The Saskatchewan government shifted from the left-wing NDP through to the right-wing Progressive Conservatives while the Centre was in strategic development. Managing a working relationship across a changing political landscape takes concerted energy. Through the years, as we will see, the five-year agreement negotiations produced different results and brought about changes in both the funders and the contract.

Faculty and staff hiring and renewal have been both a success and an ongoing challenge. This is what is called a *press* issue in a resilience assessment — an issue that occurs continuously. The attempt to hire Ian MacPherson as the first director or David Laycock as a faculty member are examples. Within the context of finding faculty and staff suitable and acceptable to *both* the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives board as well as the university, staffing the CSC could be a site of contention and dissent. For those who may have known Ian MacPherson for his enormous body of national and international work on co-operatives, it should be asked: Would the CSC have developed differently under his leadership? The fact that MacPherson

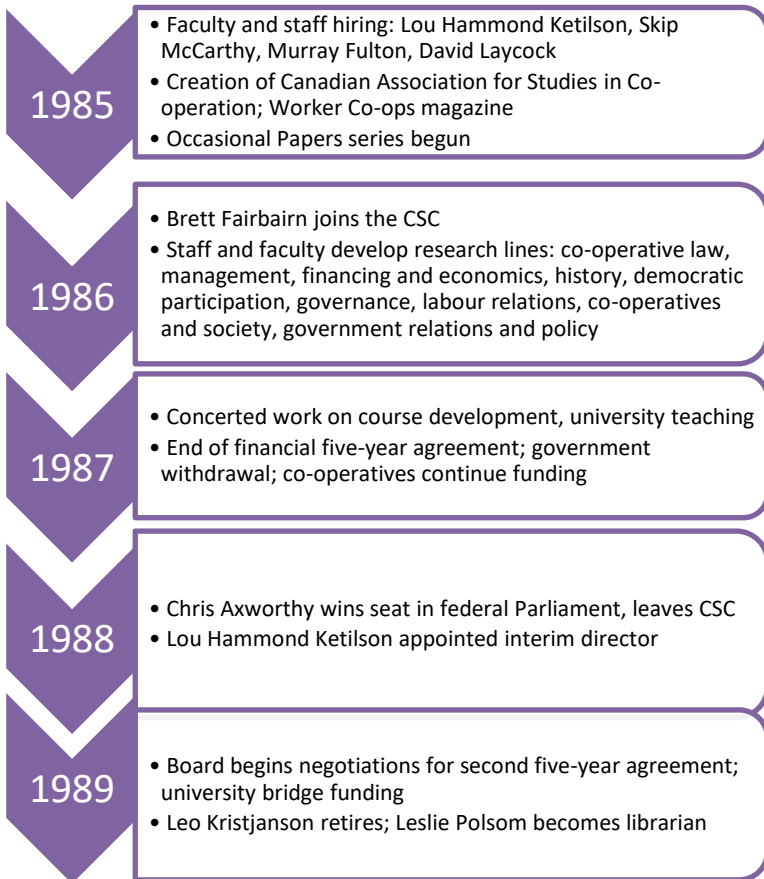
son would later go on to create his own centre for co-operative study showcases the complexity of co-op studies itself: It can be done, and done successfully, in a number of different ways and in a number of different places. While some might consider multiple centres of co-op studies to be duplication, others point out that each has its own role and expertise. More, in this view, is better.

Throughout the next few chapters, I will continue to build a timeline for the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, going forward from the mid-1980s. But I will use that timeline to reflect on issues that had a direct effect on the CSC's ongoing resilience and think about how some of those changes fundamentally shifted the Centre. Join me for the journey.

## Interlude One: Timelines



**Figure 1: Origin of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 1950s to 1984**



**Figure 2: Centre timeline, 1984–1989**

Leo Kristjanson	• President, University of Saskatchewan (chair)
Vern Leland	• President, Federated Co-operatives Limited (vice-chair)
A.D. McLeod	• Saskatchewan Wheat Pool
Norm Bromberger	• Credit Union Central
Myrna Barclay [Hewitt]	• Canadian Co-operative Association
Tom Wishart	• Dean, College of Arts & Science
W.J. Brennan	• Dean, College of Commerce
W.J. Furtan	• Head, Department of Agricultural Economics
R.P. MacKinnon	• Dean, College of Law
V. Kaisler	• Saskatchewan Department of Economic Development and Tourism

**Figure 3: First board of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives**

**Source:** “The First Five Years 1984–1989”.

**Note:** all board members could be represented at a meeting by an alternate from the same institution. L. Hillier was the alternate for Norm Bromberger. Ted Turner was the original board member for the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, with J. Derbowka as alternate. A. McLeod became the representative in 1987. Gerald Schuler was on the board from the Co-operative College, replaced in 1987 by J.A. Salomons, then Myrna Barclay after the merger to form the Canadian Co-operative Association. M.A. Brown, Dan Ish, and G.E. Lee all served terms on behalf of the university to 1987.

<i>Christopher Axworthy</i>	<b>Director/Faculty</b>
<i>E. Lynn Murphy</i>	Administration
<i>Jo-Anne Andre</i>	Financial and Publishing
<i>Skip McCarthy</i>	Research Associate
<i>Lou Hammond Ketilson</i>	Research Associate/ Faculty
<i>Lars Apland</i>	Research Officer
<i>Murray Fulton</i>	Faculty
<i>Brett Fairbairn</i>	Faculty
<i>David Laycock</i>	Research Associate

**Figure 4: Faculty and staff during the first three years**

**Source:** "The First Five Years 1984–1989" and "The First Three Years," unpublished report.