

## Conclusion

### History and Future of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives

The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan was created in 1982 and launched in 1984 as a partnership among three core spheres of influence — the University of Saskatchewan, the co-operative community, and the Government of Saskatchewan. Its purpose has been to find new ways and places to have critical conversations and explore new learning about co-operative enterprises. That concerted effort has resulted, to date, in six contract renewals among groups who believed that the Centre was an important player within its spheres of influence, fulfilling a mandate built by multiple partner perspectives.

Why write a history of the Centre? In large part, writing and reading this history allows all of us to think about and renew our understanding of and relationship to the Centre. The CSC is more than the sum of its activities: it is the ongoing result of a continuing relationship among supporting entities with shared goals. But as time passes, we have an opportunity — perhaps a duty — to revisit that relationship, examine it, and pass on what has been learned. As Murray Fulton noted, “It’s a constant reinventing ... each group or cohort has to rediscover the elements of the arrangement. They don’t pass from one cohort to the next. That transfer is imperfect, and each group has to come to its own understanding of how the relationship works.”<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Interview with Murray Fulton, 12 December 2017.

The Centre is strongly tied to a distinct sense of place, which moves in circles outward: the Diefenbaker Building, which has always been its physical home; the University of Saskatchewan, its institutional home and support; and the Province of Saskatchewan and the partner co-operatives based here that have funded the Centre and provided much of its subject matter. The CSC operates as well within a western Canadian and pan-Canadian sense of place, which brings a bit of Saskatchewan to the larger international co-operative community. The academic, public, and co-op world have all benefitted from the massive amount of research, publication, resource, and collaborative work pursued with vigour by the staff and faculty associated with the Centre. Originally built on the strength of personal relationships and trust, the CSC has fostered not only its reputation but the resilience of its research and collaboration on continued social networks. If there is one thing to be learned from the institutional history of the Centre, it is this: Relationships matter.

Those founding relationships have been built into the Centre's ongoing stewardship model: the co-op funders, the university, and the provincial government. Of these, critical support has come from the co-operatives and the university, which carry the heft of responsibility for its continuance. The CSC has twice survived the withdrawal of guidance and funding from the provincial government, with little major change to its operating output or governance model. But the Centre would not survive the withdrawal of either the university or the co-op sector. These two parties, and their relationship to one another, are key.

This somewhat unorthodox institutional history has considered and assessed the Centre through the concept of resilience. Through its structure, operations, and governance, as well as its simple longevity, the CSC has displayed a remarkable ability to not only bounce back, but to bounce forward. Its structure and operations made it possible for the Centre to grow or shrink depending on both internal and external funding, pulsing larger and adding people to conduct research projects, moving back to a steady state once a project was finished. During times of growth and increased output, op-

erations expanded and shifted into high gear, focussing on student teaching and training, communications and publications, and collaboration with research partners. The governance structure of living five-year contracts, board, and director provided for continual renewal and checkpoints. Within this tripartite governance model, change was malleable, not brittle. Funders could grow or shift the size of their contributions or withdraw from the Centre, which changed the contract signatories and internal funding model, but the CSC itself continued. The contracts were revisited and renewed within terms sufficient to allow for real growth, but short enough to maintain an ongoing level of supervision. Five directors have led the Centre through seven contract periods, which both cultivated change and fostered continuity.

The CSC is, in essence, a cohort of interdisciplinary researchers brought together to form a nucleus for co-operative ideas, knowledge, research, and their dissemination. It has been the hub of a larger panoply of energy and creativity, which includes other academic research chairs and institutes, co-operatives, co-op apex organizations, and government-based co-ops and co-op development departments. With a mandate to introduce co-ops to new audiences on and off campus and to reflect on co-operative issues, the Centre has been a major player working to solidify co-operatives as a legitimate field of study for both the academic community and the broader co-op sector. Its work has shifted co-operative research from the kind of in-house activity required by a company seeking to build its business or raise the bottom line, to addressing larger issues and problems specific to co-operative enterprises. In doing so, it has leveraged these concerns into new ways of thinking that benefit co-op theory, philosophy, *and* practice. In producing and mobilizing accessible publications, the CSC has created a new vocabulary around co-operatives: what they are, what they do, and how they fit into the larger society.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

Autonomy has been integral, indeed critical, to these studies. As a university-based research and teaching centre, the CSC has used its independence to augment research practice. Autonomy allows Centre researchers to ask tough questions and consider and express answers that may be uncomfortable or unwelcome to particular co-operatives or to the larger co-op community. Negative results and critical opinions are parts of a healthy research relationship. Autonomy does not mean criticism for its own sake, or a vendetta; any commentary, be it positive or negative, must be the result of judicious applied research. Academic rigour and autonomy build legitimacy, from which all co-ops can benefit, whether they are asking the Centre to conduct in-house research or using its publications or quotations in annual reports, annual general meetings, or as part of policy papers. In truth, autonomy at the CSC has been a dance between academic integrity and investing in resilience by keeping good relationships with funders. There are ways to mitigate the impact of negative results — such as limited public communication — that can offset problematic changes in professional working relationships. But overall, autonomy and legitimacy have been positive contributors to the strength of the relationship between the broader co-op community and the specific funders of the Centre.

But history is not only about the past; history can also guide the future. A proper resilience assessment considers the question, What next? The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan is at a crossroads. With core funding and the current contract set to expire at the end of June 2019, the Centre once again sits at a moment of truth: Will the relationships that have built and sustained it for the past thirty-five years support its continuation? What might a creative renewal or new iteration look like? How would that fit the goals of the co-operative community, whose vision and support have been the Centre's lifeblood? How would it fit university needs? What will be missed if the Centre has reached the end of its lifecycle?

There were two major turning points in the relationship between the university and the co-op funders:

1. the decision to migrate tenured faculty salaries over to the university, which left staff salaries essentially a co-op funding responsibility
2. the more recent decision to formally report to the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy

The first move created an operating structure that built strength and professional longevity for the faculty (via tenure in home departments), supporting a cohesive cohort that could grow together on a professional journey. This also meant, however, that staff and related research professionals bore the brunt of changes in co-op funding supports, including short-term contracts, adjustments to positions, or cuts. The university, with four faculty tied to the CSC, had a vested interest in continuing its support, albeit leaving those decisions primarily at the department or college level. The co-op sector leveraged the work of those faculty members by building a cohesive home base with administrative, research, resource, and publications support, which allowed faculty to be incredibly productive. It was a win-win situation for everyone, but only because one side leveraged the other: the Centre was the faculty, and the Centre was the staff, and both had a major role to play.

The second significant change was the alignment with the JSGS, which allowed the Centre to build a new advisory board that was not limited to the funders and the university, but went beyond Saskatchewan to the national and international community, bringing in new co-operative thought and advice. It also gave the Centre the opportunity to offer its own classes towards a degree, a goal that the co-ops have always sought but that never fit the previous scatter-shot model of teaching classes across the university. Students at the policy school now have the chance to learn about and research co-operatives in-depth.

Alignment with the policy school was advantageous in some respects, but it has left the Centre even more vulnerable than after the migration of faculty salaries. If, in the interest of efficiency, funding

marked for Centre administration is paid to the policy school — which already has a large and growing staff component who could handle administrative tasks such as budget and accounting — how will the CSC maintain its separate identity, policies, relationships, and institutional memory? What are the new mechanisms by which the CSC will remain involved in the larger co-op community? Traditionally, Centre faculty and staff have participated in the governance of other co-operative entities such as the Canadian Association for Studies in Co-operation, the provincial and national co-op apex associations, and the International Co-operative Alliance. This has included board meeting attendance, organizing conferences, workshops, and meetings, making presentations, and travel. Will the policy school's administrative staff be willing to devote evenings or weekends to this kind of work? In other words, how co-operatively minded is the policy school, and will it extend its participation into these places, where co-operative relationships are built? If there isn't a separate and visible administrative staff accountable *only* to the Centre's director and board, will the co-op sector financially support such an entity? The Centre already reports directly to the School of Public Policy; if administration migrates to the policy school as well, how can the CSC define itself as a separate entity? The advisory board and director must consider these questions. Since there has not been a contract renewal since the major governance changes brought about in 2014, it's unknown if those transformations have fundamentally altered the longstanding relationship between the university and the co-op sector.

Both current and future funders in the co-operative sector must build a cohesive vision of what they need from a nucleus centre such as the CSC. In the 1980s, co-op leaders were looking to insert co-operative content into the university curriculum and to build a clearer understanding of the co-op model in the larger public sphere via research and publications. Do those same goals resonate today? If so, are educational expectations currently being met by other Canadian or international centres, or is it important to retain a place for co-operative education in western Canada? Does the Graduate Certificate in the Social Economy and Co-operatives offered through

the policy school meet the educational component? Does the co-op sector maintain its support for academic research and publications, or is it looking for something different? Co-ops may now prefer a more transactional relationship, similar to what the provincial government once wanted — a place that offered high-quality cooperative research services. There have been numerous professionals trained in co-operative knowledge and rigorous research practices, many through the Centre. This cadre of experts could be drawn together as a wholly new research and think tank dedicated to solving co-operative issues. It's possible that such an entity would win back support from provincial or even federal governments, but funding would be more costly. Without the university as a partner, co-operatives would bear the brunt of both core and research funding. The trickiest problem would be credibility and legitimacy. Without the power of academic autonomy, how would this type of unit navigate the minefield of producing critical research that may not be acceptable to a funder? How would it find its way across the existing co-op landscape — terrain already divided between those who support co-ops for practical purposes and those who believe in them for moral or philosophical reasons?

One potential innovative solution would be to build an entity that retains some academic ties via a senior research leader, but is run by a research staff that is not tied to the university or the university-driven model of tenure-track publications. Canada has produced far more senior graduates with MA- and PhD-level training than can be accommodated into university-based tenure research. This pool of individuals could build a new centre based on research and service rather than teaching. Non-faculty research, in fact, has always been central to CSC publications output — including this history — so that change would be seamless. This type of solution would remove the requirement for direct ties to the policy school, though any PhD researchers could retain adjunct positions with the university in order to supervise new graduate student training and research projects.



As I noted at the outset, this study is more than a history. It is an analysis that aims for assessment rather than simple recounting. Readers know more about the history of the Centre, but are consistently allowed, even expected, via questions and prompts, to think about some of the larger issues at play. It is an interactive document — sometimes you might nod your head in agreement, other times yell about something I've misrepresented or missed — a document that does more than provide information. It invites discussion and reflection.

The history of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives is really a history of relationships, and relationships result from building dialogue. Throughout its history, the Centre has created relationships within itself via interdisciplinary, inclusive engagement with a team approach to a shared goal — increasing overall understanding of what co-operatives are, who builds them, how they are constructed, how they operate, when a co-op is the right model, and why they are different. The Centre's relationships with larger circles such as those encompassed by the university, the government, and the co-op sector have led to numerous small and a few large changes to its operations, personnel, governance, funding, and mandate. Through it all, the enquiring, critical, and creative spirit developed at the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives has had an enormous impact on the broader co-operative and university communities. That impact will resonate for many years to come.