

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CO-OPERATIVES (CCSC)

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# Exploring the Impact of Co-operative Youth Education Programs in Canada: The Perspectives of Alumni

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**Authors:** **Stan Yu**, CCSC Research and Communications Coordinator  
**Dr. Marc-André Pigeon**, Director and Strategic Research Fellow, Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives and Assistant Professor, Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan

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## Abstract

Co-operative youth education programs (CYEPs) have been offered across Canada for decades, providing experiential learning through day camps and weeklong retreats. These programs aim to build leadership, teamwork, confidence, and communication skills while introducing youth to co-operative values and principles. Across Canada, it is estimated that thousands of youth have participated in these programs, such as Camp Kindling (formerly the Saskatchewan Co-operative Youth Camp) in Saskatchewan and Co-operative Young Leaders in Ontario. However, since the 1990s, CYEPs have experienced decreasing participation levels. Over recent years, faced with declining enrolment, CYEPs in Saskatchewan and Alberta have put their programs on hiatus, and the future sustainability of CYEPs is uncertain. And yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that these programs have been successful in realizing their mission, producing generations of graduates who value the co-operative model. Nevertheless, there has been little systematic research on their long-term impact. To address this gap, in 2025, the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives partnered with several CYEP organizations and surveyed 312 alumni of these programs to explore the outcome of CYEPs from three vantage points: 1) Do we find any evidence that co-operative camp alumni work (or have worked) for a co-operative?, 2) Do camp alumni regularly shop, bank, volunteer, and/or are members of co-operatives? and 3) What are some lasting impacts from their participation in their co-operative youth education programs? This report shares the findings from that survey.

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### Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives

101 Diefenbaker Place

University of Saskatchewan

Saskatoon SK Canada S7N 5B8

Treaty 6 Territory and Homeland of the Métis

t: (306) 966-8509

e: [coop.studies@usask.ca](mailto:coop.studies@usask.ca)

w: <http://www.usaskstudies.coop>





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## Introduction and Context

Co-operative youth education programs (CYEP) have been delivered across Canada for decades. Saskatchewan's Camp Kindling (formerly the Saskatchewan Co-operative Youth Program) for example was active from 1928 – 2023 (Puchala and Heggie 2008; Saskatchewan Co-operative Association 2026); Alberta's equivalent, the Co-operative Youth Leadership Program, has been active for 63 years; Ontario's Co-operative Young Leaders Program has been active for 48 years; and Camp Wannakumbac in Manitoba has been active since 1948 (Camp Wannakumbac 2026; Friesen and Parsey 1951).

These programs operate similarly. They typically take the form of day camps or weeklong camping retreats that provide an experiential learning experience for youth. The goals of these programs are also similar. They help youth to develop leadership, teamwork, cooperation, confidence, and communication skills, while introducing them to the co-operative model and its values and principles (Puchala and Heggie 2008). Across Canada, it is estimated that thousands upon thousands of youth have participated in these programs.

However, since the 1990s, CYEPs have experienced decreasing participation levels (Pachala and Heggie 2008). For instance, enrollment in the Saskatchewan Co-operative Youth Leadership Program fell to 200 in 2007 from 450 in 1991 (Puchala and Heggie 2008, 112), an outcome attributed to growing competition from theme-based camps ranging from sports and religious-based camps along with the dissolution of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool who had been a strong supporter of the program since its inception (Pachala and Heggie 2008, 80). Faced with declining enrolment, Saskatchewan put their longstanding program on indefinite hiatus in 2024 (Saskatchewan Co-operative Association 2026). In Alberta, while the Co-operative Youth Leadership camps were paused from 2023 – 2025, camp will be offered in 2026 thanks to support from the UFA Agricultural Community Foundation (Goldeye Lake Mountain

Resort 2026). In short, CYEPs are currently undergoing a period of uncertainty.

And yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that these programs have been successful in realizing their mission, producing generations of graduates who value the co-operative model (Prince Albert Daily Herald 2018). But do we know for sure that the camps have generated these outcomes?

This report shares the results of a national survey that aims to answer this question. In partnership with The Youth Excellence Society, Alberta Community and Co-operatives Association, Saskatchewan Co-operative Association, Manitoba Co-operative Association, and the Co-operative Young Leaders Program, the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives developed and administered a survey from February to June 2025 to alumni of these co-operative youth education programs. The survey aimed to explore the “outcome of the co-op camps” question from three vantage points:

1. Do we find any evidence that co-operative camp alumni currently work - or have worked - for a co-operative?
2. Do camp alumni regularly shop, bank, volunteer, and/or are members of co-operatives?
3. What are some lasting impacts from their participation in their co-operative youth education programs?

## Methods

To answer our research questions, we worked closely with the provincial associations to formulate and fine-tune the survey questions. For example, our partner associations shaped the list of goods and services that can be found at a co-operative retailer in each province (see Table 2) and provided advice on how to evaluate the long-term impact of their programs (see Table 6 and Figure 7). The provincial co-operative associations further helped with recruitment.

Ontario’s provincial association was able to share the survey with a contact list of alumni dating back to 2012 and British Columbia’s YES Camp shared the survey with a contact list of around two thousand alumni from the past ten years and around two hundred alumni from before 2010. In other provinces, however, records were either non-existent or sparse. Even where contacts were available, they were often dated, with non-existent or expired email addresses. All our partners noted that they lacked the capacity to maintain detailed up-to-date alumni contact lists.

As a result, we used a blend of (incomplete) contact lists and outreach efforts (supported by our partners) through digital newsletters, social media promotions, and word-of-mouth to distribute our survey. These efforts varied by province as follows:

- British Columbia’s YES Camp: mailing list and social media promotions
- Alberta: digital newsletter and social media promotions
- Saskatchewan: mailing list, digital newsletter, and social media promotions
- Manitoba: digital newsletter and social media promotions
- Ontario: mailing list, digital newsletter and social media promotions

We obtained further assistance from co-operatives like the Saskatoon Co-operative Association, which promoted the survey through its digital newsletter; Affinity Credit Union, which hung up posters in their member centres; and the Co-operators, which flagged the survey in its staff digital newsletter.

Through these efforts, we obtained 312 responses in what is probably best described as a convenience sample. Indeed, given the nature of the participant recruitment, we cannot make

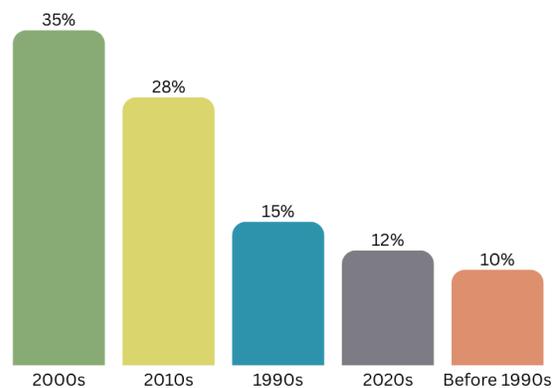
any strong claims about the generalizability of our findings. With this important limitation in mind, the next section describes our participants, providing information on where they went to camp, when, and their gender.

### Respondent Profile



**Figure 1:** Distribution of Respondents based on CYEP participation

Figure 1 shows that 29% of our alumni respondents were from Saskatchewan, followed by 28% from Alberta, 21% from Ontario, 17% from British Columbia and only 3% from Manitoba (Camp Wannakumbac); 3% reported participating in other camps/programs, including the defunct Atlantic Co-operative Youth Leadership program. The average time respondents spent participating in co-op camps was 3 years.



**Figure 2:** Camp attendance by decade

Most respondents (63%) attended their camp/program in the 2000’s and 2010’s, another 25% attended before the year 2000, and 12% participated in their camp/program in the 2020’s.

Figure 2 shows that the survey had limited success reaching older participants, an outcome we suspect is due to limited access to alumni lists and heavy reliance on promoting the survey through digital channels.

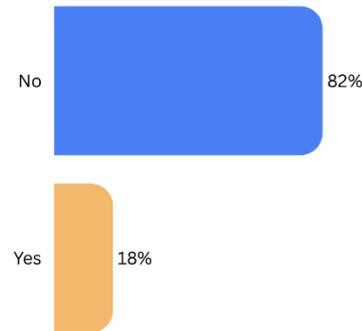
**Table 1: CYEP Alumni Demographic Information**

Demographics	
Women	71%
Men	23%
Non-binary	5%
<b>Median age</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Employee Type</b>	
Casual/Part-Time	25%
Full-time	75%
<b>Highest level of education</b>	
Some or completed secondary/high school	13%
Some or completed technical or community college	19%
Some university or completed a bachelor degree	47%
Completed a graduate or professional degree	20%
<b>Employment type</b>	
Staff	32%
Specialists and Consultants	15%
Supervisors/Management	29%
Other	19%

From a gender perspective, 71% of respondents were women, 23% men, and 5% were non-binary. The median respondent age was 34. Three quarters of respondents were employed full-time, with 32% describing themselves as ‘staff,’ 29% as supervisors, 19% as other, and 15% as specialists or consultants. In terms of educational attainment, most respondents (67%) reported having completed some university, obtained a university degree, or obtained a graduate or professional degree; another 19% had completed technical or community college and 13% had attended or completed high school.

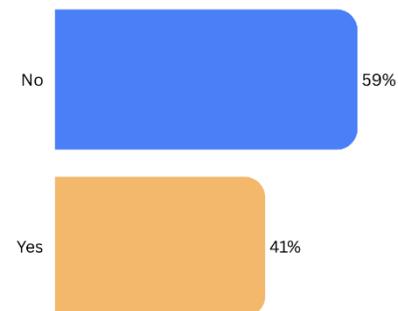
### Professional Engagement with the Co-operative Sector

To understand the degree to which alumni were engaged in some professional capacity with the co-operative sector, the survey asked respondents to indicate whether they currently work in the co-operative sector or had in the past.



**Figure 3: Percentage of CYEP Alumni that Work in the Co-operative Sector**

Figure 3 shows that 18% of respondents responded in affirmation. On average, these individuals had been employed by their co-operative/credit union for close to 11 years. Of these respondents, the vast majority (84%) believe that working for a co-operative/credit union is important to very important to them, while 5% said it was unimportant to very unimportant.



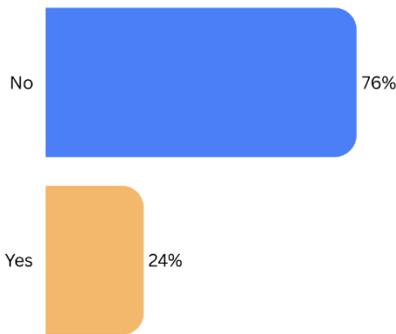
**Figure 4: Percentage of CYEP Alumni that have previously worked in the Co-operative Sector**

Looking further back in time, 41% of respondents said they had previously worked for co-operatives or credit unions over the course of their adult lives. Of these alums, half had worked for a single

co-operative or credit union, 30% had worked at two co-operatives and/or credit unions, and 20% had worked at three or more co-operatives/credit unions.

### Volunteer Engagement with the Co-operative Sector

In addition to working for a co-operative/credit union, CYEP alumni can also demonstrate professional engagement with the co-operative sector through volunteering their time to advance the mission of a co-operative or credit union. The survey asked respondents whether they had ever served on a board of directors or a committee(s) of a co-operative or credit union.



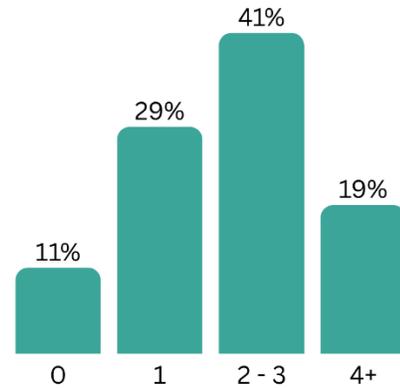
**Figure 4:** Percentage of CYEP Alumni that have served on a Co-op/Credit Union Committee/Board of Directors

Figure 4 shows that almost 25% reported having done so in the past. Of these, 45% had served on one committee or board, 24% had served on two committees and/or boards, and 31% had served on three or more committees/boards of directors. The survey also found that these alums served on their respective co-operative/credit union committee(s)/board(s) for an average of 9 years.

### Personal Engagement with the Co-operative Sector

The survey gauged the extent to which alumni of co-operative youth education programs engaged with the co-operative sector in their personal lives through either holding a membership in a co-operative(s) and/or credit union(s) or shopping

for co-operative or credit union provided goods and services.



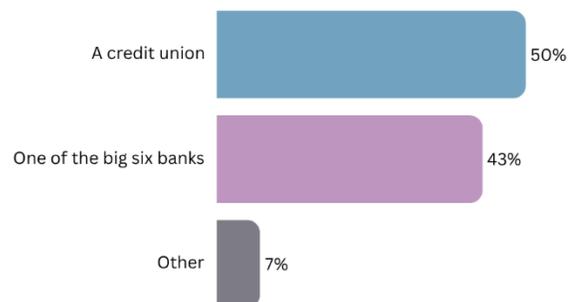
**Figure 5:** Number of co-operatives CYEP alumni have memberships with

Figure 5 shows that 41% of respondents were members of 2 – 3 co-operatives/credit unions, 29% were members of 1 co-operative/credit union; 19% were members of four or more co-operatives/credit unions; and 11% were not currently a member of any co-operative or credit union.

We can put these findings in some perspective. According to a 2025 survey by Abacus Data for Co-operatives and Mutuels Canada and the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, 1 in 3 Canadian adults were members of a co-operative (Kishchuk 2026) compared with 60% of respondents to our survey who are members of two or more co-operatives/credit unions.

### Shopping

We might also infer influence of co-op camps by looking at alumni shopping behaviour.



**Figure 6:** Banking behaviours of CYEP alumni

Consider banking. Figure 6 shows that half of respondents bank with a credit union, well above the estimated share of Canadians who are credit union members (about 15% but reaching as high as 50% in Saskatchewan and Manitoba). Table 2 itemizes goods and services that can be purchased through co-operatives but note that the availability of goods offered by co-operatives varies from province to province.

**Table 2:** Shopping behaviours of CYEP alumni

	% Purchase most or all from a co-op	n
Banking services	49%	297
Gasoline/diesel	44%	271
Farm Supplies	38%	94
Liquor	37%	178
Groceries	29%	300
Insurance	29%	263
Home, garden, and/or agriculture products	26%	249
Prepared foods	10%	186
TV/Internet services	9%	149
Housing	5%	206
Services (e.g. from worker co-ops, consultants, etc.)	2%	204

Table 2 shows that respondents were most likely to say that they bank (49%) and purchase their gasoline/diesel (44%) from a co-operative most or all of the time, followed by 37% of respondents who said they purchased all or most of their liquor at a co-operative, 29% who purchased all or most of their groceries at a co-op, and another 29% who purchased all or most of their insurance from a co-operative. Meanwhile, the majority of respondents either purchased none to very little of their TV/Internet services, housing, prepared foods, and services from co-operatives.

In interpreting these findings, we note that our research partners told us that items like groceries and gasoline were more readily available in co-

operatives located in the Prairie provinces. Additional analyses were conducted to measure whether the availability of the goods and services affected the findings from Table 3.

**Table 3:** Shopping behaviours of CYEP alumni – provincial comparisons

	Prairie Provinces	Rest of Canada
	% Purchase most or all from a co-op	
Gasoline/diesel	63%***	9%
Banking services	49%	47%
Farm Supplies	48%	23%
Groceries	46%***	4%
Liquor	43%***	9%
Home, garden, and/or agriculture products	32%***	16%
Insurance	25%	34%
Prepared foods	13%***	9%
TV/Internet services	12%	6%
Housing	5%	6%
Services	3%	1%

\* =  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$

Comparing the responses of alumni that currently reside in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, with those that reside in the other Canadian provinces reveals some notable differences. Using chi-square tests of significance, we find that responding alums in the prairie provinces were significantly (indicated by the asterisks) more likely to purchase most or all of their gasoline/diesel and groceries at a co-operative when compared with alumni living in other provinces.

They were also more likely to purchase home, garden, and/or agriculture products; liquor; and prepared foods from a co-operative when compared to alums in the other provinces. There was no statistically significant difference between provinces when we compared respondent use of banking services across the two regions. While respondents from B.C.,

Ontario, and others appear to be more likely to purchase most or all of their insurance from a co-operative than alumni in the Prairie Provinces, we cannot rule out the possibility that this difference is due to chance.

### Affinity for the Co-operative Sector

In addition to shopping behaviours, the survey also asked CYEP alumni about their affinity towards the co-operative sector and the importance they place on shopping for goods and services at a co-operative.

**Table 4:** Importance of shopping for goods and services at a co-operative

	% Important or very important	n
Groceries	61%	300
Gasoline/diesel	61%	273
Banking services	60%	290
Home, garden, and/or agriculture products	57%	249
Farm Supplies	57%	96
Insurance	44%	252
Prepared foods	43%	192
Services (e.g. from worker co-ops, consultants, etc.)	42%	210
Liquor	41%	177
Housing	29%	192
TV/Internet services	23%	134

Table 4 shows that respondents tended to believe that shopping for goods and services at a co-operative/credit union was important to very important. For example, 61% said it was “important” or “very important” that they purchase groceries and gasoline/diesel from a co-operative, while 60% echoed this sentiment when it came to shopping for banking services from a credit union. More than 50% of CYEP alumni also indicated that it was important or very important to shop for home, garden, and/or

agricultural products (57%) and farm supplies (57%), while just under 50% said the same for insurance (44%).

The other categories received more of a mixed response. For instance, when it came to liquor, 41% of respondents said it was important or very important to purchase liquor at a co-operative while 47% felt that it was neither important nor unimportant. Similar trends were found when asked about prepared foods, such as co-op bakeries, cafés, and restaurants, and services from worker co-ops, bicycle co-ops, solar co-ops, etc.

**Table 5:** Importance of shopping of goods and services at a co-operative – provincial comparisons

	Prairie Provinces	Rest of Canada
	% Important or very important	
Gasoline/diesel	72%***	42%
Groceries	66%**	55%
Home, garden, and/or agriculture products	60%	54%
Farm Supplies	58%	57%
Banking services	57%	64%
Liquor	43%	34%
Prepared foods	41%	45%
Services	40%	46%
Insurance	39%	51%
Housing	25%	33%
TV/Internet services	23%	24%

\* = p < 0.05; \*\* = p < 0.01; \*\*\* = p < 0.001

As above, we conducted further analysis to determine whether there were differences in attitudes between respondents currently residing in the prairie provinces in relation to those residing in the other Canadian provinces that took part in the survey. Table 5 shows that respondents from the Prairie Provinces were significantly more likely to report that purchasing groceries and gasoline/diesel from a co-operative was important or very important compared with respondents residing in the other provinces in Canada. Additional statistical tests found these

differences to be statistically significant. The other differences were not statistically significant.

### Evaluation of CYEP

The CYEP survey also asked alums to reflect on their experience with their CYEP and assess the extent to which their camp/program was effective in developing the core skills within the CYEP curriculum, including leadership, communications and teamwork.

Table 6 outlines the findings. It shows that more than 90% of respondents said their camp/program was effective to very effective in helping them learn about leadership (96%), communication (94%), teamwork (93%), connecting meaningfully with peers (92%), and personal growth (90%). Some 80% of respondents described their camp/program as effective to very effective in helping them to learn about the co-operative model (88%) and public speaking (86%). Finally, 74% reported that their camp/program was effective to very effective in helping to learn about conflict resolution; 70% said the same with regards to learning about social justice.

CYEP alums were also asked about the perceived long-term professional and/or educational impacts from participating in their CYEP.



**Figure 7:** Perceived Long-term Professional and Educational Impact of CYEP

Figure 7 shows that 84% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that Camp inspired them to pursue leadership roles, 61% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Camp influenced their career path, and 50% believed that Camp influenced their educational path. Finally, 2 in 5 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Camp influenced their decision to work with or at a co-operative. This last finding corresponds with the number of participants who stated they had previously worked at a co-operative.

**Table 6:** Effectiveness of Skills Learned at CYEP

	Not effective at all	Slightly effective	Moderately effective	Effective	Very Effective	n
<b>Connecting Meaningfully with Peers</b>	1%	2%	5%	13%	79%	309
<b>Teamwork</b>	1%	1%	5%	17%	76%	310
<b>Leadership</b>	1%	2%	2%	20%	76%	310
<b>Communication</b>	0%	3%	3%	22%	72%	310
<b>Personal Growth</b>	1%	3%	6%	19%	71%	310
<b>The Co-operative Model</b>	0%	2%	9%	23%	65%	310
<b>Public Speaking</b>	2%	3%	8%	23%	63%	310
<b>Conflict Resolution</b>	2%	6%	17%	29%	45%	309
<b>Social Justice</b>	3%	6%	18%	30%	40%	309

### **Open-ended comments/suggestions for program improvement**

The survey also provided a space for CYEP alumni to provide suggestions to further improve future co-operative education programs. The most common suggestion was to revive shuttered co-op camps. As one CYEP alumni noted:

*These programs are indescribably valuable for teaching youth about community leadership, government, and cooperatives, and provide information most youth will never receive in their public education. I cannot understate how beneficial providing these hands-on and peer-led learning opportunities are to our young people, and how much we have to lose if we do not fund and support our young leaders with programs such as these.*

Similar sentiments were found in one third of the 199 open text survey comments. CYEP respondents also suggested that co-operative education programs need to continue to be made relevant for 21<sup>st</sup> Century youth, suggesting that those who deliver the camp content need to wrestle with showing how the co-operative model is relevant in our hyper digital era.

Respondents also suggested that these programs need to be better marketed and promoted, possibly through partnerships with schools. Respondents noted that from their own experience, many of their peers were unaware of their CYEP. They believe that more youth would participate if the camps were better known.

Respondents also suggested that camp programmers give careful thought to the location of the camps. They noted that camps were convenient for some, but not for many others. To increase accessibility, respondents suggested having multiple shorter camps in different locations and investing in transportation options,

especially for youth in northern and remote locations. Respondents also suggested more funding options to enable low-income youth to participate in the programs.

Finally, respondents said they would like to see more financial support for CYEP from the co-operative sector.

### **Discussion**

In 2008, Puchala and Heggie produced a report called “Co-operative Youth Education in Saskatchewan”. In it, they cited a report from the July 18, 1952 edition of the Co-operative Consumer, a newspaper that circulated co-operative news in Saskatchewan from 1939 – 1982:

Records also show that considerable leadership receives its early impetus at the [co-op] schools. Already a goodly number of former students may be found as directors of co-operatives, as Wheat Pool delegates, committee men, and even field men. Many are serving as co-op employees or in other capacities. The majority of students are active co-op members and are doing their part in promoting co-operatives as a way of life throughout Saskatchewan and elsewhere. (24)

While more than seventy years old, the citation encapsulated the findings from this study. Based on our survey results, we infer that CYEP alumni are engaged with the co-operative sector in their professional and personal lives, and probably much more so than their peers who did not attend camp. About one in five respondents currently work for a co-operative/credit union, while 4 in 10 alums have worked for a co-operative or credit union in the past. Respondents who work for a co-operative/credit union have been doing so on average for almost 11 years and the vast majority find it to be

important or very important to them that they are working at a co-operative.

About one in five respondents are also engaging with the co-operative sector as leaders by serving on committee(s) and/or board(s) of directors. Of those alums, 55% have served on two or more committee(s)/board(s) and they have served for an average of 9 years.

In their personal lives, 60% of surveyed CYEP alums are members of two or more co-operatives/credit unions. Fifty percent of these alums bank with a credit union and, when access is readily available, over 60% purchase most or all of their gasoline at a co-operative. Close to 50% purchase most of all of their farm supplies, groceries, and liquor at a co-operative.

Additionally, this study found that respondents thought very highly of their camp experience, believing it was an effective way to teach them skills like leadership, teamwork, communications, connecting with peers, and public speaking, as well as learning about the co-operative model. Most respondents also said their program inspired them to pursue leadership roles, while over half agreed that their CYEP had an influence in shaping their future educational and professional paths. Lastly, most respondents urged provincial associations and the co-operative sector to invest in bringing these programs back so that they can benefit present and future youth.

Co-operative Youth Education Programs have evolved and endured challenges over time, especially over recent years. Since the 1950s, the goals of the Co-operative Youth Education Programs across Canada have largely remained unchanged. They aim to develop leadership skills and an understanding of the co-operative model

amongst youth. While our survey method limits our ability to say much about the broad sweep of camp participants, our findings are suggestive that these programs have been successful in advancing their goals.

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The Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (CCSC) is an interdisciplinary research and teaching centre located on the University of Saskatchewan campus. Established in 1984, the CCSC is supported financially by major co-operatives and credit unions from across Canada and the University of Saskatchewan (USask). Our goal is to provide practitioners and policymakers with information and conceptual tools to understand co-operatives and to develop them as solutions to the complex challenges facing

communities worldwide. We are formally affiliated with the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina. The connection strengthens the capacity of everyone involved to develop research and new course offerings dedicated to solving social and economic problems. For example, our collaborative work has resulted in a [Graduate Certificate in the Social Economy, Co-operatives, and Nonprofit Sector](#).

## OUR FUNDERS

The CCSC and USask acknowledge with gratitude the support and commitment of our funders. These organizations provide the CCSC with resources and leadership, helping us to develop the knowledge needed to construct co-operative solutions to the increasingly complex challenges

facing global communities. Since the CCSC opened its doors in 1984, our co-op and credit union sector partners have contributed nearly \$12 million to co-operative teaching, research, and outreach.

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Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives  
101 Diefenbaker Place  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon SK Canada S7N 5B8  
Treaty 6 Territory and Homeland of the Métis  
t: (306) 966-8509  
e: [coop.studies@usask.ca](mailto:coop.studies@usask.ca)  
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