

# The Saint Mary's Master of Management: Co-operatives and Credit Unions Programme

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The MMCCU programme at Saint Mary's University in Halifax took in its first students in 2003 and celebrated its first graduates in 2007. As the only graduate level programme in management of co-operatives and credit unions, it has attracted students, faculty and financial support from around the English-speaking world. This paper describes the rationale for the programme and how it has been developed over time.

## The Genesis

During the 1990s, a group of co-operative managers and directors gave voice to the often-remarked need for co-operative managers who combined solid business skills with sensitivity to co-operative values and principles. This is a need for every co-operative, but perhaps becomes more acute with growth and with a progressively more competitive environment. On the one hand, co-operators with solid philosophical credentials but little in the way of business training had trouble ensuring the business success of the co-operative. On the other hand, an exclusively business orientation for management risked losing the competitive strength of the co-operative form of enterprise ownership.

There was at the time no obvious solution for this problem since management training as exemplified in B Comm, BBA, MBA, and EMBA programmes contain almost no information on co-operatives (except perhaps sketchy negative comments). Thus as the need for management skill increases, the skills available for hire are, more and more, either based on non- (or even anti-) co-operative academic programmes and/or experience in the for-profit sector.

Little wonder then the not-uncommon co-operative managers comment, "I'll run the business side, you Board Members handle the co-op."

What the concerned co-operative managers and board members realised was that unless co-operative values and principles inform all aspects of the operation of the co-operative, there is no reason to have a co-operative. Indeed, the logical outcome of making a co-operative more and more like its for-profit competitors is demutualisation/privatisation. So the managers/directors searched for a mechanism to help pull together the co-operative and 'business' sides of co-operatives.

The obvious answer was to develop or plug into some post-secondary education programme.

What they quickly discovered was that there was no existing programme that covered both the necessary management skills and the vital co-operative values and principles. A new programme would have to be developed, and this would require money. That is, any provider of academic programme would need financial support to develop and operate the programme.

They hit on an inspired way of providing this support. The Co-operative Management Education Co-operative (CMEC) was formed, initially with eight members, now with fifty-five members spread across Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand. CMEC is a second tier co-operative that accepts contributions and channels them to CMEC's academic partner in the endeavour, Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

## The Programme

The Saint Mary's home for the new programme was and is the Management Department of the Sobey School of Business. In discussion with CMEC it was decided to create a masters-level programme in order to attract management-level candidates. The programme was to be taught using distance education technology (WebCT as it turned out) and scheduled in a way that would permit co-operative managers from around the world to continue to work while moving through the programme. Thus the equivalent of seven full courses (42 semester hours in US parlance) are taken over 3 to 3½ years.

Three additional design features were agreed upon between CMEC and Saint Mary's. First, those admitted to the programme would be sponsored by their employer co-operative/credit unions who would assure the candidates of access to their organisations as 'living labs'. Second, the cohort admitted each year would move through the programme together. This would allow relationships to develop across national and sectoral lines and would broaden

the perspective of all concerned. Finally, all of the courses were to be developed as blends of co-operative values/principles and management skills. Thus there is no 'marketing' course or 'HRM' course in the programme. But there is a course on how the competitive advantage of being a co-operative can best be marketed and one on how staff should be treated in a co-operative. The result is a constant concern about how a co-operative should be managed differently from a for-profit business venture.

## Challenges

This last point presented significant challenges.

In the first place, each course had to be purpose built. There was no way to retread, for example, an MBA course to fit within the new Master of Management: Co-operatives and Credit Unions programme. This implied the need for instructor/course developers who could bridge management and co-operation, a rare blend and one not found in great abundance in any one location. Finally, it implied the creation of new teaching materials, since little material exists that relates to management of co-operatives.

We handled this challenge in two ways. The first was to cast a wide net for instructors/course developers. Faculty come from New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the US and Canada. Saint Mary's faculty teach well under half them programme. This geographic diversity of faculty is obviously made much easier by the use of WebCT. The second was to begin a series of summer symposia that would bring together an international group of academics and practitioners to discuss specific topic areas. The first such symposium was held in 2005 on the topic of accounting for co-operatives. Proceedings were published and have led to the creation of a Centre of Excellence in Accounting and Reporting for Co-operatives. The Centre is supported financially by a variety of donors including the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants. Proceedings for the 2006 symposium on staff management in co-operatives are currently in process. The most important outcome from the symposia has been materials that are used in the programme's courses.

A challenge inherent in any distance education programme is minimising the drop out rate. This is particularly important in a cohort system since a drop out cannot be replaced in the cohort. It is particularly difficult when students are also working full time and coping with family obligations (the age range of candidates is 28-58, with most between 35 and 45). When distance education work goes on in the middle of the night or on weekends, the sore temptation betimes is to reduce stress by dropping out of the programme. We address this problem in a number of ways. First we discuss the programme with students' employers and emphasise that while they should remain fully employed, they might be cut some slack when it comes to extra assignments during their enrolment in the programme. Second, we structure the programme around co-operative learning, which is to say, almost all learning activities are group activities that require working together. This allows some sharing of workload and help when the day job is very intense. Moreover, dropping out of the programme is seen as penalising other group members who have become friends as well as colleagues. Finally, we bring together the cohort twice during their studies. The first time is at an orientation held in Halifax before the first course. The second is for a field trip to either Mondragon or Bologna to learn from others' co-operative experience. The 'soft' content of both of these activities is to build cohesion among the cohort group, thus discouraging drop outs.

## Next Steps

Over the next year or so we plan to examine each course in some detail with a view to significant revisions as needed. We will also be extending the the symposium series to include consideration of governance issues and public policy towards co-operatives and credit unions. We will be developing and disseminating a significant body of knowledge through the Centre of Excellence in Accounting and Reporting for Co-operatives. Finally, we will be developing improved mechanisms for keeping all of our stakeholders (students, alumni, faculty, employers, CMEC members and other supporters) in touch with one another and with the programme.

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