

Cooperatives on Campuses

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Leaders of agricultural cooperatives often worry that young people do not understand cooperatives and are less likely to be involved in a cooperatives. Cooperatives are actually alive and well on college campuses. The University of Massachusetts in Amherst boasts of a multitude of student run cooperatives on its campus. Cooperatives like “Earthfoods”, “People’s Market”, “Campus Design and Copy”, “Greeno’s Subs”, “Bike Coop”, “Sylvan Snack Bar”, and “Sweets and More” are all operated by UMass students under the UMass Cooperative Enterprise Collaborative. The university states that the UMass Cooperative Enterprise Collaborative gives its students invaluable business training and experience. Students learn the responsibilities of democratic self-management and how to handle business finances. The university also hopes the program will expand the number of worker cooperatives in the community.

Other examples of student owned cooperatives include “The Flaming Eggplant Café” in Evergreen State College, Olympia WA (an ethnic food cooperative), the “Food Co-op” at the University of California, San Diego specializes in bulk food purchases while the “Che Café” is a non-hierarchical worker cooperative. In lieu of a membership fee, students have to agree to a minimum of two hours of volunteer work each week. The student members enjoy discounts and voting rights.

The majority of student run cooperatives are on the west coast. Most are food cooperatives.. Surprisingly, none of the universities listed as having an abundance of student cooperatives are traditional agricultural schools. All of the student owned cooperatives I listed operate under the open membership model. Several stated that their goal is to “develop an on-campus alternative culture to corporate capitalism.” Their mission statements also state goals to give student members better value and more options in products and services that they need and to give back and support the local community.

Student owned cooperatives are putting the cooperative business model to good use. They provide economies of scale and pool resources to accomplish collectively what their members could not do on their own. Their presence helps keep markets competitive and they are giving back to their local communities. They are, however, owned and governed by members with different goals relative to those of agricultural producers. Despite many areas of commonality I doubt that leaders of traditional agricultural cooperatives see student cooperatives as sister organizations. Perhaps we should work harder to acknowledge and support all forms of the cooperative business model. The cooperative umbrella is big enough for all of us! In today’s increasing urban dominated political environment, we may need all the friends we can get!

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