

Learning to Manage the Ownership Model

Master of Management – Co-operatives and Credit Unions
www.smu.ca/mmccu

The only course of its kind in English, the Master's of Management – Co-operatives and Credit Union is coordinated from St. Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia by co-designer Tom Webb, an international consultant and former Director of Co-operative Extension at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, where Fathers Moses Coady and J.J. Tompkins anchored Atlantic Canada's early co-op movement. Rob Boyle, a Manager of Fredericton Direct Charge Co-op, found out about the program from another of its designers, Sid Pobihushchy. Sid was his former professor at University of New Brunswick, as well as a longtime Board member of the Fredericton co-op and one of Atlantic Canada's best loved champions of co-operative enterprise.



"Sid knew I was a young manager looking to progress, so he gave me some things to read about the master's program. It reflects a lot of what I believe, both from a business and a personal point of view. Even if you don't have all the [international co-operative] principles and values memorized when you start, there are certain key things we all are interested in like, 'How does this benefit people?'"

Rob was pleased to find that some concepts such as 'the multiple bottom lines' of co-operative accounting were already reflected in the history of his organization, which is one of the only remaining direct charge co-ops in the region. Other concepts, like 'MOCA' (Marketing Our Co-operative Advantage) he thinks are worthy of incorporating. "I think most of us thought we knew a lot about co-ops when we started, but a couple of weeks into the course we realized we didn't really know as much as we thought."

One of the strongest attractions of the program, Rob says, is the group of people he gets to work with. After the initial orientation session in Halifax, students learn and work on projects from home. They stay in touch through telecommunications. At the end of the first year they take a study tour together. For Rob's class, this was an unforgettable trip to Mondragon, Spain.

Even though they are not physically together for much of the time, they don't work in isolation. Rob elaborates, " You're doing this program with other co-op managers from other types of co-ops, and even from other countries...but you're online all the time; there are phone calls back and forth; there are clusters of students, professors, and mentors in the same region. When we get together, even though we're all quite different, we have a really great time. You develop some nice relationships."

Rob recognizes the need to create a pool of good co-op managers. "We read about the problems of co-ops that are recruiting managers from traditional business backgrounds. They're not bad people, that's just how they're trained."

He notes that, in sharp contrast to this, the MMCCU program teaches the basics of good business practices first. "Then we say, 'That's how it works in a traditional business. How do you apply this principle so that it reflects the nature of the ownership model?' It's about serving the members, the community, the employees, and the environment. There are other types of businesses that do these things, but as a co-op, you're expected to do them."

The complete MMCCU program requires about 144 weeks of classes, assignments and a major project that is linked to the sponsoring employer co-op/organization. The deadline to apply for next cycle is March, 2006. Call (902) 496-8170 or (902) 863-0678 or visit www.smu.ca/mmccu.