

## University of Saskatchewan: The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives

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**Abstract:** The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan was opened in 1984, through financial and in-kind collaboration between the university, the government, and the co-operative sector. A centre-scholar model brought together academics from multiple disciplines, to deliberately build an interdisciplinary approach to co-operative questions. Researchers at the centre valued academic and non-academic knowledge, offering the ability to approach questions with the strength of multiple perspectives. This paper uses historical methodology to trace the centre's deliberate stance and approach to interdisciplinarity, the work undertaken by centre faculty to conceptually wrestle with moving from multi-disciplinary to interdisciplinary research, and the resulting close connection between interdisciplinary studies and co-operative studies.

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### Introduction

The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (CSC) opened in June 1984 in the Diefenbaker Building at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Its mandate has been to study the co-operative form of enterprise and to disseminate that knowledge through teaching and publications. This chapter offers a behind-the-scenes look at the origins of the CSC as a tripartite agreement and shared contract between the co-operative sector of that province, the University of Saskatchewan, and the provincial government. It then examines how the concept of interdisciplinary studies was actioned in the hallways and into the CSC literature, deliberately developed as its foundational model. CSC's leading-edge practice would consolidate the interdisciplinary focus to create a world-renowned body of co-operative and credit union knowledge. This chapter examines how co-operative studies has been, at the CSC, intimately tied to the concept of interdisciplinarity.

Interdisciplinarity is an evolving and contested concept. One of the arguments for disciplinary studies is that it offers a way to pass information from one generation to the next, nested within a set of explicit and implicit understandings, practices, and norms [Stehr and Weingart, 2000]. With this definition, interdisciplinarity involves and describes the ways and practices in which disciplinary boundaries (explicit and implicit) are deliberately bridged, broken, or blended. Yet the practice of interdisciplinary work can result in that which is much more than the sum of its parts, and sometimes, wholly new. From a university governance perspective, the creation of deliberately interdisciplinary research centres, clusters, or schools has added complexity while rewarding the power and prestige of this new form. In co-operative studies, leading thinker Ian MacPherson regularly argued that co-operatives *required* interdisciplinarity as the only adequate methodological approach to the analysis of complex social structures; both disciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches proved limiting [MacPherson, 2007a]. This chapter is a ground-truth examination of a specific case, to consider the challenges to promoting interdisciplinary practice within a multidisciplinary structure, the importance of cohort and time to developing interdisciplinary practice, and the way in which interdisciplinarity at the CSC moved beyond academic and disciplinary questions to integrate non-academic

researchers. It will consider whether the key features of interdisciplinary studies as practiced at the CSC (sustained practice over time; the centre-scholar cohort model; academics and practitioners working together) had an effect on the practice or understanding of interdisciplinary scholarship, either within the larger co-operative community or within the University of Saskatchewan.

## Methodology

This chapter is drawn from a larger (to be published) institutional history of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives. The centre's history was undertaken in two stages by a contract Saskatchewan historian familiar with the CSC (author). The CSC has stayed rooted in place at the University and within the Diefenbaker Center. As a result, there is an institutional archive split between CSC internal files (director's reports, board meetings, internal reviews and initiatives), as well as outward-focused publications, including annual reports, newsletters, and formal CSC publications, which have included bulletins, books, project reports, and other outputs including its website. Its extensive archival and library collection is now held in the University of Saskatchewan Archives and Special Collections. In addition to the institutional documents, the author conducted a total of seventeen semi-structured interviews with contemporary and past faculty, staff, and board members, until interview saturation brought closure. The second stage of the history project involved writing a larger manuscript using a resilience theory methodology (looking at change and continuity within the Centre's history).<sup>1</sup> From that larger manuscript, this chapter – focusing on the concept of interdisciplinarity – was drawn for the purposes of this publication on co-operatives.

## Origin: The Centre-Scholar Model

In 1980, Leo Kristjanson, who was to be a key catalyst in the creation of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, became President of the University of Saskatchewan. Born in the swampy, wet farming region near Gimli, Manitoba, Kristjanson earned a PhD studying the economics of rural development, population, and co-operatives in Madison, Wisconsin. Researchers at the time were beginning to understand that issues in rural development were complex and required new ways of thinking. One of the ways to address complexity was through the lens of interdisciplinarity, a concept which grew during the 1950s and surged between 1960 and the mid-1970s [Repko, Szostak, and Buchberger 2016]. Interdisciplinary studies aimed to bridge disciplinary boundaries and bring together multiple perspectives, but in practice, the concept was not yet defined and few had a clear understanding of its potential.

In 1959, Kristjanson came as an economist and researcher to the brand-new Centre for Community Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. A joint Government of Canada/University partnership, the Centre for Community Studies adopted the "centre-scholar" model, to deliberately bring in scholars from varied backgrounds to create a team drawn from a range of academic disciplines: sociology, economics, anthropology, psychology and history. Bringing in diverse scholars with deep disciplinary training is a multidisciplinary method, but its goal was ultimately a form of interdisciplinary thinking, to bring perspectives together to work on conceptual and practical research together, focused as a team around a given topic.

Specializing in community change and development, the Centre for Community Studies produced copious public reports, research, and analysis on community-level issues. It also accepted commissioned work at the request of communities, government departments, and businesses, reinforcing the connection between the university and its community partners. The co-operative sector in Saskatchewan was a regular patron of these services. When this Centre re-formed and relocated to Ottawa in 1966, Leo Kristjanson elected to stay in Saskatoon and moved up the academic ranks as an agricultural economist, teaching classes on co-operatives and entering higher administrative positions. By 1980, he became President of the University of Saskatchewan. Yet, he hadn't forgotten the role and purpose of the centre-scholar model, believing that it held important keys to unlocking new ways to collaboratively search for new perspectives.

## The University-Co-operative Task Force

A life-long co-operative member and enthusiast, Kristjanson studied and taught co-operatives and credit unions in his agricultural economics classes. He also knew first-hand the size, power, and spirit of Saskatchewan's co-operative might. Yet he thought something important was missing. Co-operatives and credit unions represented some of the

strongest businesses in Saskatchewan; however, knowledge about co-operatives was dropping, and there was little to no presence in the research or teaching curriculum at the university level, outside of his own courses [CSC files, RG001.S6.Box12.I.22.22.1980-82, University of Saskatchewan Archives]. To address this problem, soon after Kristjanson took the reigns as president, he tapped into the provincial and regional co-operative network.

As remains the case today, Saskatchewan in 1980 was a province where connections mattered. A population hovering around one million people meant that in practice, there was a sense of village and community. Kristjanson drew on his co-operative connections to establish a University – Co-operative Task Force to study the connection between co-operatives and universities. He used personal links to bring in leaders from both within and outside the university, from the left-leaning New Democratic Party government, to the leaders of the largest co-operatives, alongside the deans of the colleges on campus. On this task force: George Lee as the head of Agricultural Economics; Doug Cherry, Dean of Arts & Science; Blaine Holmlund, Vice President of Special Projects; Grant Mitchell, Deputy Minister of the Department of Co-operatives and Co-operative Development for the Province of Saskatchewan; Peter Hlushko, Vice President Personnel and Service for The Co-operators and Chair of the Co-operative College of Canada (and who also worked closely with Credit Union Central of Saskatchewan); Vern Leland, President of Federated Co-operatives Limited; Ted Turner, President of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool; and Ole Turnbull, Executive Director of the Co-operative College of Canada [CSC files, RG001.S6.Box12.I.22.22.1980-82, University of Saskatchewan Archives]. It was a who's who of the province's co-operative community, combining decision-makers from the major co-ops and the provincial government, and matching that might with the leaders at the University.

These leaders had excellent mutual working relationships, near friendships, built on trust and mutual respect. They committed quickly and decisively to working together on the project. Ted Turner later recalled, "Often it's the little things that are more influential than the big scope. Those background personal relationships meant so much. We all think it's the big issues that determine something, when often it's the many smaller connections that push you in a certain direction" [Turner interview with author, 2018]. Vern Leland spoke of the same connection: "It seems to me that we had such a good relationship, a group of individuals that really seemed to relate to one another" [Leland interview with author, 2018].

Their goal was simple: raise the profile of co-operatives and credit unions at the university level. "You have to get a needle in, to get things started," Vern Leland explained [2018]. Ted Turner [2018] remembered total commitment to the idea. Students were entering university at an unprecedented rate – co-operatives had to be where the students were. To be taken seriously, to be studied and taught and debated, co-operatives needed to be a player at the university level. "The University of Saskatchewan, for example, must be seen to take its responsibilities toward the cooperative movement seriously in addition to putting its house in order for the effective delivery of instruction and research appropriate to the needs of cooperatives. By the same token, leadership within the cooperative movement must be seen equally to support University cooperative efforts" [CSC files, RG001.S6.Box12.I.22.22.1980-82, University of Saskatchewan Archives].

As the Task Force met in 1980 and 1981, fleshing out problems with the current system and putting forth reports, Leo Kristjanson received a fascinating story from University College Cork, in Ireland. There, a steering committee of combined University and co-operative/credit union representatives launched the Bank of Ireland Centre for Co-operative Studies. Reading this two-page magazine article, Leo took pen in hand and went to work, marking significant points. The new Centre at Cork aimed to be/was built:

- In close association with the Co-operative Movement, at home and abroad
- Within a university campus
- On interdisciplinary lines
- With a high level of postgraduate research
- With a high output of educational materials

Combining recruited academic staff and research fellows, the new co-operative research centre would deliberately draw from "relevant faculties" across the campus, including agriculture, law, economics, history and sociology. The Cork structure looked very like the centre-scholar model Kristjanson had worked with while at the Centre for

Community Studies, modified to draw from existing relevant faculties across campus. It is clear that the interdisciplinary model used at University County Cork had a major influence on building the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan [CSC files, RG001.S6.Box12.I.22.22.1980-82, University of Saskatchewan Archives].

Gerald Shuyler, then director of the Co-operative College of Canada, began to shape the aims and interests of the Task Force into a recognizable (yet still on paper) structure. By September of 1981, he had crafted an outline for a “University of Saskatchewan Co-operative Centre” that coalesced into a brand-new entity within the University [CSC files, RG001.S6.Box12.I.22.22.1980-82, University of Saskatchewan Archives]. His draft captured the six supporting organizations represented by Task Force members (the University, the government of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, Credit Union Central Saskatchewan, and Federated Co-operatives Ltd., as well as the Co-operative College of Canada), the objectives of the new entity, its administrative structure with board, academic, and support staff, and an overview of expected financial support, costs, and division of those costs, including a built-in five-year commitment from each of the players. In essence, this document gives the first framework for what would become the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives. Task Force members worked through Schuyler’s outline to negotiate a final agreement [CSC files, RG001.S6.Box12.I.22.22.1980-82, University of Saskatchewan Archives].

The objectives of the new Centre were: to establish a program of studies at the undergraduate and graduate level with classes available to students across campus; undertake off-campus program collaboration with the Co-operative College; undertake research and publication of those results including textbooks and curriculum; and to conduct research concerning the legislation governing co-operatives and credit unions. Governance flowed from a ten-member board: five from the co-operative and government side, and five from the University. It set out provisions for four academic staff (one director and three faculty) from different campus departments and colleges, and three support staff. Finances were split between the provincial government at 40% and the co-operative sector at 60%. The University of Saskatchewan, in the first agreement, carried minimal financial responsibility, mainly relating to accounting oversight, office and classroom space, and money towards building library resources. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1982, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives was signed into paper existence [CSC files, CSC office, original signed agreement, 1982].

### University-Centre Relationships

The origins of the Centre, as a shared agreement hammered out between the University, the provincial government, and the co-operative sector, with each clearly laying out financial and other obligations, seems quite clear. But there is a cover of secrecy over its origins that bears noting, as it had repercussions for the nascent centre as it settled into the university milieu. Other than the selected Deans on the Task Force, few others at the university knew about the negotiations surrounding the creation of the centre – and that mattered. Leo Kristjanson used the powers of his office as President of the University to deliberately bypass and ignore a number of university precedents. The Centre was, it has since been suggested, “illegitimately conceived” [Fairbairn, 2017]. President Kristjanson never went to the University Council or Senate to ask permission or gain approval or assent for pursuing, then signing into legal being, the new Centre.

Why did discussion and approval matter? Wouldn’t the colleges welcome the opportunity to vie for one of the four new incoming academics, whose salaries would be paid out of the new funding and not come from their own departmental budgets? Yes, and no, it turned out. The fact that Kristjanson did not ask permission of the broader faculty set up a culture of animosity within some sectors of the University. It was a blatant expression of a President’s power that did not go through proper channels or explore basic interest in such an idea. A whole Centre devoted to co-operatives and credit unions? Surely there were more important issues to consider. There was even a strain of concern around University research autonomy: if this new Centre was funded from outside the University, who was calling the shots and setting its research priorities and directions? The Centre, created with such celebration from the co-operative community, experienced a much colder reception in some parts of its home university [Fairbairn 2017; Fulton 2017; Hammond Ketilson 2017].

But the secrecy embedded in the origin story carried a positive spin. Those who became part of the CSC could choose to view themselves as ‘maverick’, less bound by convention and path dependency, with a willingness not just to

embrace, but to instigate change. An origin story based on blasting through the walls of the academy, starting something new, and doing so despite opposition, with the support of groups outside (and not beholden to) academia, mattered. Such an origin story gave the nascent centre a heightened sense that what they were doing, and what they were meant to be doing, was different [Fulton 2017; Axworthy 2017].

### Building Interdisciplinarity

The pivotal first job: hiring a director of the new centre. The board was delighted to receive an application from one of the most prestigious academics in Canada, whose work crossed history, agriculture, and co-operatives: Ian MacPherson. They didn't hesitate: in a unanimous decision, the board offered Ian, via telex memo, the first directorship. But MacPherson changed his mind and turned it down. Due to family circumstances, he could not accept. With MacPherson's sudden refusal, the hiring process stalled. Although there were a multitude of applicants, many with direct practical experience from the co-operative sector, university credentials were critical and non-negotiable. The incoming director, leading an academic unit embedded within the university, must have a PhD, as well as a stellar research, teaching, and publication record within academia [RG001.S6.Box12.I.22.22.1983-84]. The solution came in early 1984 with the hiring of Chris Axworthy, a law professor from Dalhousie in Halifax. It was, Axworthy would later note, "a significant opportunity" to lead a new, well-funded centre, one that straddled university and the co-operative community, and set its own direction and character [Axworthy, 2017]. With Axworthy's arrival, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives opened on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1984.

Axworthy lost no time. Leo Kristjanson's goal and vision was to create a centre-scholar model that would work like a spider's web: weaving strands from disparate points across campus to create something new and unique. That meant that each of the four centre academics would be hired into home departments and colleges, whether that was in law, commerce, agriculture, arts and science, or education. Kristjanson's vision foreshadowed what Ian MacPherson would later argue: "no single discipline within the academy can adequately comprehend co-operatives." Almost all disciplines had an important perspective [MacPherson, 2007a: 387].

The concept of building an interdisciplinary centre was not particularly embraced within the University of Saskatchewan. In the 1980s, interdisciplinary work was not well understood – and, in some cases, caused snorts of derision and even outright revulsion and contempt. Professors who came to join the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives during the 1980s faced "great suspicion." Was a position within an interdisciplinary centre a real academic job? Was the centre actually a good home for a true academic? Would connection to the centre hinder the academic path? There was a stagnation, even a falling off, of the use of the word 'interdisciplinary' during the 1980s. The concept was "strange and off-putting" for many University of Saskatchewan faculty – a problem which, no doubt, contributed to its uneven acceptance on campus [Fairbairn, 2017].

Nonetheless, scholars came. Lou Hammond Ketilson joined the centre first as a research associate, later as a Centre Fellow when she accepted a position in Commerce. Murray Fulton came to the centre in 1985, joining the department of Agricultural Economics, following Kristjanson's footsteps. The full faculty complement rounded out with Brett Fairbairn, who joined the centre and the department of History in 1986. At that point, energy fully shifted from the CSC board to its faculty, and to its cognate staff. The CSC had accrued unexpected capital, via good investments in the early 1980s with high interest rates, while waiting during the lag time to find a director and officially open. As a result, in addition to faculty, the CSC was built around a core staff component, which included office management, communications leadership, and extra research expertise via associate research positions. While the board retained its management style, approving budgets and providing general direction, they would meet only three times per year. The CSC identity became enmeshed with the Diefenbaker Centre and the faculty and staff who became the 'face' of the CSC [RG001.S6.Box12.I.22.22.General.1985].

While Leo Kristjanson might have envisioned a centre-scholar model, pulling from different departments is, in fact, multidisciplinary, not interdisciplinary. Multidisciplinary simply means making sure that the issue at hand is being studied from multiple viewpoints, such as economics, law, or business. The Centre has produced many such publications, where each faculty member and other invitees contributed chapters, researched and written from their own disciplinary perspective. Trying to find links and points of connection to weave a single story was not always easy; in fact, one faculty member called such multidisciplinary books "a painful experience" [Hammond Ketilson,



2017]. But the process led to the first glimmers of what interdisciplinarity could mean. Chris Axworthy reported to the CSC board in 1987: “Our lively debates have given rise to suggestions for a wide array of joint, interdisciplinary projects to be attacked in the future ... each member of the staff has learned a good deal about their colleagues' disciplines as a result of the close working relationship.” [CSC Director Report, 1987].

The CSC scholars discovered that the act of being interdisciplinary is complex. There is a level of integration, of deliberately choosing to listen to another point of view and looking at something with more than one lens at the same time. Yet the practice of interdisciplinarity was fairly new, and at the time, few descriptions of *how to do it* existed. Chris Axworthy [2017] noted that interdisciplinary work was “Not all that common at the time. We did a lot of that, which was in a sense ground-breaking.” But, he admitted, it was messy, and it did take concerted energy and commitment.

What they needed to do, faculty realized, was teach each other how their disciplines thought and what mattered to each. Starting informally in the late 1980s and continuing formally under the guidance of second CSC director Dan Ish, faculty scholars set out to teach each other about their disciplinary training. Each wrote overviews from their disciplinary perspective on how they would approach a topic, what they would do and what tools they would use. These documents formed the basis for deep discussion, debate and intellectual arguments about the models and their underlying assumptions. “We wanted to be formal about this,” Murray Fulton [2017] noted, “because we were bumping heads as we were having conversations about our research. We needed to understand the depth of our assumptions. That was an exciting time intellectually, we were all learning a tremendous amount. We had to figure out how we could coexist and operate together with other disciplinary perspectives.” It wasn't enough to build a group from different disciplinary backgrounds, throw them together and expect interdisciplinary outcomes. The act of being, or becoming, interdisciplinary required the faculty and staff at the Centre to focus on disciplines, debate and understand differences and how they could work together. Lou Hammond Ketilson [2017] explained, “we started doing seminars for each other, so we could help others to see what each discipline brought to the table. That was a good exercise. That is what built a sense of community within the centre.”

Focusing on building an interdisciplinary cohort with shared goals allowed the Centre to coalesce and grow. In early co-operatives, there was a concept called “associative intelligence” which Ian MacPherson defined as “a special kind of knowing that emerges when people work together effectively.” He went on to argue that associative intelligence involves “dispensing of information, providing training, encouraging reflection, creating knowledge, and facilitating learning” [MacPherson, 2007a: 372-3]. It is, in fact, the *work* that creates associative intelligence, just as the *work* of building bridges between disciplines sets the stage for being or becoming interdisciplinary.

Almost immediately, CSC faculty and staff could see the difference. A call came out from the national co-operative organization to do a study on the role of co-ops in Canada. The Centre, fresh from months of concerted effort to share and integrate disciplinary perspectives and work toward a new interdisciplinarity, bid on the contract, but it was awarded to a private research firm. “To put it bluntly,” Murray Fulton [2017] noted, “we were pissed off.” Centre faculty and staff quickly pulled together what was to become ‘the little green book,’ *Co-operatives and Community Development: Economics in Social Perspective*. Published in 1991, the book was a runaway best-seller, used in classrooms worldwide. Its authors are a who's who of the CSC at the time: Brett Fairbairn, June Bold, Murray Fulton, Lou Hammond Ketilson, and Daniel Ish. June Bold, the CSC communications officer, was an active contributor and listed as second author, suggesting the inclusion of perspectives beyond faculty as interdisciplinarity in action at the CSC.

The book touched a nerve and drove much of the discussion around the role of co-ops at the community level. It was used in classrooms and in community economic development as a resource and strategy support. It was also timely: the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) was revising its principles to add the 7th principle, concern for community. The green book, while not responsible for the ICA addition, was a factor in the discussion. During the interview process to collect CSC history, faculty remembered this book as a definitive event not for its success, but for its deliberate interdisciplinarity. It showed the way the Centre had moved from its multidisciplinary origins to a new interdisciplinarity – and one step further. The process of sharing, arguing and understanding each others' disciplinary perspectives and norms was deliberately blended with a practitioner focus, using June Bold's expertise

in writing for a non-academic audience and bringing a fresh, non-biased look at the group's interdisciplinary work. The new model of combining faculty and staff created something unique.

It took some time for the board to understand what faculty were doing. Peter MacKinnon, then dean of the college of Law, called the CSC work "cross-disciplinary" while Vern Leland, co-chair of the board, referred to the approach as "multidisciplinary" [Annual Report, 1991-1992]. By 1995, faculty scholars had coached the co-operative board members through a clear understanding of interdisciplinarity, and the annual report lauds the concept: "[The Centre] provides an example of interdisciplinary teaching and research needed to tackle the complex issues in contemporary society...[and] to enhance the future welfare of members and their communities..." [CSC Annual Report, 1995]. Interestingly, the university-based board members clung to the term "cross-disciplinary." Perhaps the larger university community still had reservations about interdisciplinarity as a concept, but those were swept aside by the year 2000. That year, the university commentary in the CSC annual report embraced interdisciplinarity and celebrated the CSC as "one of the most successful interdisciplinary programs on campus." Interdisciplinary teaching, research, and publication had, it seemed, found its voice [CSC Annual Report, 2000-2001].

For some faculty, the pull between disciplinary research expectations of a home department combined with those of the Centre created a dual research program far beyond what strictly disciplinary colleagues were expected to undertake. As has been found in studies of institute or centre-based academics around the world, the tension between disciplinary and multi or inter-disciplinary research centres created a new viewpoint on "individual-level research capacity and how it may be affected by professional linkages and network ties, including but not limited to linkages and ties made by way of affiliation with a university research center" [Ponomariov and Boardman 2010: 614]. For some, such as faculty from business and sociology, the relationship to the centre brought not synergy but competition and an increased workload [Hammond Ketilson 2017; Gertler 2018]. Ian MacPherson noted that "researchers have had to 'make their careers' in traditional disciplines, where the study of co-operatives is rarely acknowledged as important" [2007b: 41], a point which doubly constrained some of the CSC academics. If their co-operative research did not 'count' in their home discipline, they faced a career needing *two* trajectories, one within the home discipline, one at the CSC. While the CSC provided a place where interdisciplinarity was valued, each faculty member was bound by promotion and tenure expectations of home departments and as such, disciplinary-bound publication records remained primary. The interdisciplinary nature of some Centre publications, with multiple authors, caused consternation: evaluators "can't tell what percentage of that work is yours," Hammond Ketilson [2017] noted bluntly. She strongly suggested that the interdisciplinary publishing path, so valued by co-operative and community collaborators, caused individual hardship for some of the faculty, who never achieved full professorship or, chose to leave the University of Saskatchewan to seek opportunities elsewhere [Laycock 2017]. Other faculty, however, found that interdisciplinary thought and learning acted to revitalize and strengthen disciplinary work [Fairbairn and Fulton, 2000].

Because the CSC had developed internal publishing capability via the *Occasional Papers* series as well as books and other publications, much of the co-operative interdisciplinary work was self-published. From an academic perspective, these publications held less merit than those published via peer-reviewed journals. From the co-operative perspective, these publications were the primary output of the CSC scholars. They were accessible to read, could be purchased through the CSC, and dealt specifically with co-operative issues. Some were simply conference proceedings or bibliographies; some were how-to books or membership training; many were histories of co-operatives or co-operative movements; while others were discussion papers or reflections to guide policy decisions or provide CSC commentary on community or public issues.

As a result, the interdisciplinary perspective, built with vigour and determination and published through the CSC, was highly valued within the co-operative community. Co-operatives, by their nature, value diversity and are a reminder that each individual brings strengths to the collective table. Interdisciplinarity as a concept fit with co-operative values. As well, the CSC shared governance structure between university, co-operative sector and government reflected that broader co-operative spirit, building toward a shared goal. These themes can be found in particular in board commentary in the annual reports, a language emphasizing difference as strength.

Soon after the University of Saskatchewan began to use the term “interdisciplinary” in CSC board reports, Centre-scholars Brett Fairbairn and Murray Fulton published a CSC booklet on the concept of interdisciplinarity. Using their experiences at the CSC as an example, they argued that interdisciplinarity is a team-based approach to solving complex problems. The focus is around the common goal (looking at a problem, topic, or issue, for example) and to build a team where the work of solving the problem requires an integration of disciplines, deliberately crossing boundaries. The work of interdisciplinarity is not becoming adept in multiple disciplines, but to “interpret one’s own discipline to others” and to apply one’s familiar discipline in an unfamiliar setting. Moreover, they argue, true interdisciplinarity encompasses a broader range of people, where “the nonacademic members of it are more equal and more fully integrated into a team outlook” [Fairbairn and Fulton, 2000].

Writing a booklet on the concept of interdisciplinarity as practiced at the CSC was critical: Fulton was part of a cross-university contingent that was working to develop an interdisciplinary program at the university. Fairbairn and Fulton’s comments read at times like a position paper, showcasing the CSC as a successful interdisciplinary centre in the heart of a university somewhat averse to the concept. The first audience for that booklet was not the co-operative sector, but their University of Saskatchewan colleagues. It’s a fascinating use of CSC resources to self-publish an opinion paper to influence university direction. The results mattered: the new interdisciplinary PhD program was approved. Students could directly enter the new program and were no longer confined to a single college or department, but could take classes from across the university toward their degree. Once this program was in operation, the CSC could finally craft an interdisciplinary PhD concentration course on co-operatives, offered not just at the individual department level (as previous classes had been) but to students across campus. The interdisciplinary studies program officially launched in 2004.

At the same time, CSC scholars leveraged their interdisciplinary expertise and large co-operative connection into great success in landing and leading large grant projects which were built using an interdisciplinary collaborative perspective. In 2001, Brett Fairbairn led a major \$589,000.00 SSHRC project on social cohesion, the largest project to that date in Canada on co-operatives. On its heels in 2005, Lou Hammond Ketilson led a multi-year \$1.75 million-dollar SSHRC grant to study co-operatives as part of the larger social economy. These two grants solidified the CSC as a major centre for interdisciplinary study, funding multiple masters and PhD level students, all of whom could then take the new interdisciplinary co-op concentration course. These large grants carried a high administrative and facilitative component, leveraging the CSC’s staff base to extend research practice beyond faculty. At points of expansion, CSC staff and students carried a high productive load, producing publications and carrying out the main body of research. Such times brought “great energy” to the CSC, reported several staff and faculty during interviews [for example Scheidl 2018].

These grants grew the CSC reputation within the university community. By 2012, the International Year of Co-operatives, CSC board chair Beth Bilson, acting dean of the College of Law, noted: “In many ways, the Centre was a pioneer in types of research that now have a high priority in the academic world – research that is interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary, rooted in partnerships with the wider community, and focussing on questions of immediate significance to society” [CSC Annual Report 2012]. Its interdisciplinary strength and community partnerships meant that the CSC fared well during external review processes, and became a Centre of Excellence for the university.

One of the scholars who came to the CSC during these major grant projects was Isobel Findlay, whose perceptions on the concept of interdisciplinarity deserve attention. Findlay argues that disciplinary study is largely about consolidating power and authority. To do interdisciplinary work, it is critical to understand “that there was a history to the production of discipline, there is nothing natural, it’s about construction of authority. Interdisciplinarity is about knowing those histories and recognizing the multiple sites of knowledge production, and learning to hear and respect each of them in their appropriate ways” [Findlay interview with author 2018]. Findlay articulated the starting point of the CSC’s work on building interdisciplinarity, through deliberately sharing and teaching disciplinary perspectives to each other. Yet Findlay’s observations point to knowledge production *outside* of disciplinary boundaries, such as within corporations, communities, First Nations and other cultural spaces. The major grant projects took researchers out of the university and into community-based centres, where knowledge is produced and understood very differently. In her view, true interdisciplinary work is humble, respects different ways of knowledge production, and is deeply embedded in community engagement [Findlay, 2018]. The CSC publishing



output reflected this more encompassing view, as community-based authors were added alongside CSC faculty, staff, and student authors on publications. Adding community knowledge to interdisciplinary work is especially important for co-operative studies, placing co-operative knowledge on an equal footing with academic perspective. Interestingly, this is a full circle back to the push in 1982-83 from the co-operative sector to hire an Executive Director for the CSC who had excellent co-operative credentials but lacked the academic *bona fides*.

After 2000 and particularly with interdisciplinary grant success, the University of Saskatchewan went from a space where interdisciplinarity was met with consternation and derision, to one where it was revered and rewarded. To that end, the university launched three new interdisciplinary schools in 2012 within the university: the School of Environment and Sustainability, the School of Public Health, and the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School for Public Policy (JSGSPP). These schools mirrored much of what Fairbairn and Fulton called for in their position paper 12 years before: problem-based centres parallel to existing university structures, where interdisciplinary networked scholars work to solve complex problems [Fairbairn and Fulton, 2000]. However, unlike centres, these graduate schools had the ability to create and run their own courses and programs.

By 2013, with Murray Fulton at the helm as executive director, the CSC entered into a partnership with JSGSPP, a move that supported a more long-term solution for teaching co-operative course content than the interdisciplinary studies program. Several core CSC faculty members – Lou Hammond Ketilson, Murray Fulton, Brett Fairbairn, and later Dionne Pohler and Marc André Pigeon – took positions within JSGSPP instead of disciplinary homes. Such a move assumes that the interdisciplinarity built into the policy school would parallel the original centre-scholar model of the CSC, but replace disciplinary homes with an interdisciplinary school. The thought was that these scholars pursue an academic path with a robust interdisciplinary toolkit. Others were not convinced of the administrative change. “It’s a narrowing of interdisciplinarity now through public policy.” [Gertler 2018; see also Hammond Ketilson 2017]. While an interdisciplinary school solves some issues outlined by Fairbairn and Fulton, their own core definition of interdisciplinarity is as the site of struggle and learning between disciplines. While the policy school might continue hiring from different disciplines, what are the structures to support internal learning? Fairbairn and Fulton’s paper also argued that true interdisciplinary sites need to be “flexible and adaptive, not designed to be permanent,” rather, designed to evolve continuously while maintaining a balance [Fairbairn and Fulton, 2000]. Does a school, with its complicated administrative processes, really support interdisciplinarity? Finally, can an academic school – as opposed to the original tri-partite agreement between the university, the co-operative sector, and the provincial government – continue to value interdisciplinarity as diversity of thought inclusive of non-academic contributions? These questions, as of 2019, remain to be seen.

The process of interdisciplinarity is also a factor of time. Over the years, each of the CSC faculty have picked up perspectives, tools, and viewpoints that have broadened each of their research capabilities. Fulton recalled, “All of us at the centre went on the same journey and became more interdisciplinary, more willing to accept and be fascinated by these other perspectives, to understand perspectives and to tell stories” [Fulton 2017]. From this view, interdisciplinarity is also the product of the journey, something that remains after the work is complete. In this argument each scholar who participates in interdisciplinary work becomes, over time, an interdisciplinary specialist, and so a good candidate to become part of an interdisciplinary school or centre. Yet being individually interdisciplinary after the fact seems inimical to the CSC faculty’s own explanation of the process of being and becoming interdisciplinary. Interestingly, two of the CSC faculty whose academic training could be viewed as interdisciplinary (in that each degree came from a different discipline) were two of the strongest voices against this definition of interdisciplinarity as the end result of a journey [Hammond Ketilson 2017; Gertler 2018]. Interdisciplinarity as an end product is, at best, a secondary definition, and not one supported by all of the CSC faculty. Moreover, this concept seemingly negates the importance of retaining close ties within a discipline, to understand and use and create new disciplinary-tested concepts and practices. If a scholar, lay person or professional is expected to pursue continual growth and development within their own discipline or position or interest, then the continuing engagement and re-engagement with others in the collision of interdisciplinarity remains fresh and fruitful.

Interdisciplinarity as a product of a journey also raises the question of cohort and time. At various points in its history, the centre attempted to refresh or add new members to the original cohort, but these attempts were met with

limited success.<sup>2</sup> If interdisciplinarity is a product of a cohort journey, how do you add new people, staff, or community-based knowledge to that mix? Whose voices matter more, if time or experience is a factor? Time adds a too-problematic level of complexity to a definition of interdisciplinary studies, though it is probable that those who have undertaken an interdisciplinary journey are possibly more adept or receptive to multiple perspectives. Instead, it appears that at the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, interdisciplinary strength and its true definition remains in the active collaboration, collision and sharing of disciplinary and non-disciplinary (staff, community, cooperative) perspectives.

It is also important to remember that the primary audience for co-operative studies is a unique mix of academics interested in co-operatives, and co-operatives themselves. The larger co-operative community has been a sustained supporter of the CSC in three directions: financially, as a main supporter with the University of Saskatchewan<sup>3</sup>; via governance, with identified co-operative practitioners on the board; and as co-researchers on numerous CSC projects, many of which used co-operative or credit union data to underscore the research. Via the CSC self-publishing model, CSC scholars found a ready non-academic audience whose interests were less in the methods or theoretical underpinnings than in the outcomes and new information. This point serves to underscore the important connection between the co-operative community writ large and the CSC, as a full-scale partner in the interdisciplinary endeavour.

Co-operative scholar Ian MacPherson argued that the chief characteristic of co-operative studies is its “genuine interdisciplinarity” [MacPherson 2007a: 456]. Combined with the definition of associative intelligence, it seems clear that interdisciplinary studies are the work of co-operative and collective shared scholarship. CSC scholars continue to invest in the work itself: a number of recent publications reach for interdisciplinary ways to speak about, and to co-operatives. Fairbairn, Fulton and Pohler’s work on governance for co-operatives or design principles for credit unions are superb examples. Still, “it takes work and effort to value what interdisciplinarity means” Lou Hammond Ketilson [2017] noted. Interdisciplinary implies breadth, carries depth, is born of real work by a diverse group, is mobilized to solve complex problems, values diversity, listens with humility, and builds a legacy of expanded knowledge over time. Excellence will not come from even a dedicated scholar with interdisciplinary experience working alone. The experience of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives has shown that it is in the struggle to work *together* that scholars and community-based practitioners produce interdisciplinary co-operative studies.

## Conclusion

Interdisciplinarity was a critical component in the creation of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan. Yet, in the beginning, the concept was elusive and often fell along classic disciplinary lines with multi-disciplinary results. Truly understanding what interdisciplinary work is, what it looks like and how to do it well took serious and invested effort by both staff and faculty at the CSC. Coming together to share disciplinary perspectives and assumptions was critical in developing interdisciplinarity. Through discussing how each discipline would define a problem and set up research to investigate the issue, the CSC developed a cohort of scholars who shared knowledge and broke down disciplinary lines. They realized that interdisciplinarity is a process of the collision and explosion of thought, of teamwork with a shared goal, not an automatic product. The CSC faculty also worked alongside its co-operative partners, hand-in-hand with research and communications staff, and with incoming graduate students from across the university. The concept of interdisciplinarity expanded to include and welcome non-academic and community-based perspectives as critical problem-solving components. Co-operative studies have become interchangeably understood as, by their nature, interdisciplinary and shared. Finally, time played a role. Over time, those involved in co-operative studies at the CSC who have taken the journey to actively pursue interdisciplinary work have in turn coached and led both the University of Saskatchewan and their co-operative partners to a more clear understanding of what it means to be interdisciplinary, as something quite different from multi-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary. Those aligned with the CSC also become in and of themselves more receptive to interdisciplinary work – although it seems less clear that, in the CSC experience, interdisciplinary work automatically produces interdisciplinary scholars. That concept was contested. What is clear from this short history of the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives is that the connection between co-operative studies and interdisciplinarity is about deliberate sharing, working together through adversity and different perspectives to become or build something wholly new and different.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See key concepts from The Resilience Alliance: <https://www.resalliance.org/key-concepts>.

<sup>2</sup> A deeper investigation of this issue was developed for the book-length history. It is not reviewed here.

<sup>3</sup> The government of Saskatchewan's financial and other support waxed and waned throughout the CSC history. That information can be found in the book-length history.