

PODCAST

Reimagining Campus Co-operatives in British Columbia for a World in Crisis

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The accompanying podcast series is available open access here:
<https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/197372>

THE PODCAST SERIES *Reimagining Campus Co-operatives in British Columbia for a World in Crisis* explores the role of the co-operative sector in responding to the challenges facing post-secondary education in British Columbia and beyond. Throughout my life, I have, some might say, fixated on why and how we rank people, knowledge, and institutions as worthy or unworthy. I have written about ableism and racism and rankings' role in amplifying education inequity and narrowing knowledge. However, it took me an embarrassing number of years to realize that my life-long interest likely emerged from growing up in a housing co-op that provided me with many opportunities for education outside the school walls, where I was generally ranked at or close to the bottom of my class. Once I figured that out, I started to search for work by co-operators and academics focused on co-operatives as an alternative to corporatized post-secondary education.

This podcast series emerged from a working group comprising academics, students, and activists in the co-operative sector and interactions with students interested in starting co-ops.¹ The students I spoke with were often incredulous because they had not learned anything about co-operatives in their schooling. They spoke about the lack of resources for students who wanted to get co-operatives going on campuses. I also talked to faculty interested in campus co-operatives who asked me if I could suggest resources for classes; however, I could not find resources that focused on the connection between co-operatives and education in British Columbia.

¹ The working group was funded by a grant from the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of British Columbia.

Co-operators told me that they could not gain access to academic publications about co-ops because they are behind paywalls. They also mentioned that existing scholarship often does not include their experiences despite the leading role that scholars from equity-denied groups play in developing co-operative praxis. I see this series as a form of action in academic and co-operative culture.² I hope this podcast will be used by the co-op movement, which is increasingly interested in connecting with the post-secondary sector and academics and students looking for models of living, learning, and working together beyond corporatization.

MAINTAINING AND CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Universities play a dual role in perpetuating the status quo while serving as spaces for debate and for exploring new ideas. Much research has demonstrated how today's crises are grounded in capitalism and intertwined with structures that reinforce geopolitical, racialized, ableist, and gendered hierarchies of knowledge.³ Sometimes, these critiques have facilitated changes towards more equitable post-secondary institutions. Universities in British Columbia, for example, have committed to implementing recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and have created equity and accessibility offices. However, equity-denied groups remain excluded or are often among the lowest-paid staff and faculty.⁴ Poor and working-class students and many campus staff living in British Columbia work more than one job to make ends meet and, given the high cost of housing on campus and in the surrounding areas, live far away from the university. When I raised the disconnect between commitments to equity and how universities decide who and what is important through media-driven rankings, university leaders often agreed with me and said, "Yes, that's true, but we have no choice but to play the game." Regardless of university leaders' personal commitments regarding equity, progress will be tenuous when what drives decision making are industry dollars, donors with strings attached, media-driven rankings, and the categorizing of students as customers.

² Thank you to the anonymous reviewers, who made many helpful suggestions, including that I write about the podcast series as a form of action.

³ J. Dolmange, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), Open Access, <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/1c18dg49d>.

⁴ F. Henry, E. Dua, C.E. James, A. Kobayashi, P. Li, H. Ramos, and M.S. Smith, *The Equity Myth: Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian Universities* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017).

While working to edit my second book on university rankings, I was working on a short documentary on the housing co-operative I grew up in. As I interviewed people, I realized that many had been students with young families when they started housing, food, worker, and educational co-operatives. From there, I began to search for information about post-secondary co-operative institutions and to explore co-operative universities as an alternative to the corporatization of higher education. During this research, I asked the following question:

Could a co-operative model facilitate post-secondary institutions to enact their stated commitment to equitable universities? Could learning more about co-operatives during their time in post-secondary education prepare students to live, work, and play in ways that dismantle inequities that have led to the multiple crises we face as a planet?

CO-OPERATIVES AND EDUCATION

Co-operatives are based on the principles of democratic governance: one member—one vote, education, economic participation, mutual aid, commitment to the larger community, autonomy and independence, and education and training for members. Approximately 10 percent of the world's population are employed by co-operatives.⁵ In this series, guests discuss the role of co-operatives in Truth and Reconciliation and in challenging ableism and racism. Guests also discuss the history of co-operatives in British Columbia, the types of co-ops, how people learn to become co-operators, and the role of credit unions in co-op development.

Co-ops frequently started during periods of economic and social unrest; for example, they grew in popularity during the Great Depression and again during the 1970s. The federal government invested in housing co-operatives in the 1970s; however, the 1990s saw massive government cuts in support for housing co-operatives. The last five years have seen financial support for co-operatives at both the federal and provincial levels in British Columbia and a resurgence of interest across Canada.

There are no co-operative universities in Canada; however, there are

⁵ C. Karakas, *Co-operatives: Characteristics, Activities, Status, Challenges* (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635541/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635541_EN.pdf#:~:text=There%20are%203%20million%20cooperatives%20worldwide%3B%20together%2C%20they,to%2010%20%25%20of%20the%20world%27s%20employed%20population.](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635541/EPRS_BRI(2019)635541_EN.pdf#:~:text=There%20are%203%20million%20cooperatives%20worldwide%3B%20together%2C%20they,to%2010%20%25%20of%20the%20world%27s%20employed%20population.)

models from which to draw. Mondragon in Spain, for example, is famous among those in the co-operative sector for not laying off any employees during the 2008 recession and contributing to the economic and social well-being of the larger community. Mondragon University is part of the Mondragon Corporation, which includes a network of co-operatives with over 80,818 employees in various areas, including banking, retail, and knowledge. At Mondragon University, for example, the Faculty of Education is a co-operative but acts as a federated network that shares resources. Profits remain in the co-op, and, in order to ensure member engagement, each co-op is small. The average salary differential between workers and leadership is much smaller here than in other universities. Students work at a Mondragon co-op and can live in co-ops on campus. Students are a central part of governance, as are staff and faculty. We can also look to Tanzania, Kenya, Brazil, Trinidad, Tobago, and many other places to find co-operative educational institutions.

There is much to learn from co-operatives serving campus communities, including housing, food, bookstores, and worker co-operatives, often providing affordable financing and training through credit unions. For example, the Neill-Wycik Co-operative College in Toronto, founded in 1969, offers affordable housing to over 750 members studying at colleges and universities in the Greater Toronto Area.⁶ And the Campus Residence Co-operative Association at Simon Fraser University includes families, with members ranging from infants to elders. Co-operatives can provide more affordable housing, food, and services because members volunteer to maintain them and circulate resources back to the members rather than having it go out to large corporate providers.

Co-ops also have a shadow history. They created jobs, housing, and food security but often did so on lands stolen from Indigenous Peoples. The development of co-operatives in Canada occurred within the context of colonization, and many co-ops are now being challenged to think about the truth of dispossession and what this means for reconciliation.⁷ Central to these efforts is having respect for the long histories of co-operative structures and practices developed by Indigenous Peoples over centuries – structures and practices based on honouring kinship and familial ties, including the relationship to land and waterways, viewed as life-giving forces.

Future podcasts will look more closely at the work of de-growth,

⁶ North American Students of Cooperation, <https://www.nasco.coop/>.

⁷ U. Sengupta, "Indigenous Co-operatives in Canada: The Complex Relationship between Co-operatives, Community Economic Development, Colonization, and Culture," *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Diversity* 4 (2015): 121–52, <https://doi.org/10.5947/jeod.2015.007>.

social solidarity, economies, activists, and academics. Caroline Shenaz Hossein and P.J. Christabell (2022)⁸ show how, in the Global South and diaspora communities throughout Canada, innovative models for developing economically sustainable communities are often developed and led by women. They point to the use of rotating operating saving credit organizations as forms of solidarity, which, as Ogunfeibo Oladipupo (the research assistant working with me on a co-operatives and campuses project) explained to me, are common throughout universities in Nigeria.

This submission encompasses the first three podcasts in this series.

THE PODCASTS

Michelle Cooper Iverson

Michelle Cooper Iverson was surprised to realize that her grandmother belonged to a co-operative called a SuSu, which she discovered after watching Dr. Caroline Hossein Shenaz's documentary *Banker Ladies*. She explains, "Co-ops didn't just start in the UK," and they have a rich and long history, particularly in racialized and marginalized communities from which BC co-operatives can learn. Michelle is the chief operating officer at the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC (CHF BC), COHO Management Services, and the Community Land Trust. She points to the educational work that, as part of decolonizing, co-operatives are doing to address the lands on which they are situated. Michelle also explains how housing co-operatives are working towards the greater inclusion of disabled people. She provides an overview of the types of co-operatives in British Columbia and how people learn to become co-operators.

Relevant Resources

Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, *Building Better Relationships: A Reconciliation Toolkit*, 2022, https://fhcc.coop/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Reconciliation-Toolkit_Eng_final.pdf.

J. Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Co-operative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).

⁸ C. Shenaz-Hossein and P.J. Christabell, eds. *Community Economies in the Global South: Case Studies of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations and Economic Cooperation* (Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/97801988865629.001.0001>.

Caroline Hossein, dir., *The Banker Ladies*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXMYRtLTYP0>.

A. Roulstone and S.K. Hwang, "Disabled People, Choices and Collective Organisation: Examining the Potential of Co-operatives in Future Social Support," *Disability and Society* 30 (2015): 849–64.

Bill Engleson

Bill Engleson was an early Campus Residence Co-operative Association (CRCA) member at Simon Fraser University, which was founded in 1967. Bill recalled debates about whether there should be doors on washrooms and how some labelled him as a conservative because he voted for privacy when doing his business. He also told me about a mother who applied to live in the co-op and was not accepted, but her teenage sons became members and spent years as active residents. Bill and his partner lived in the co-op for years but eventually moved out. He told me a story of someone who lived in the co-op after retirement and died there. He thinks he might like to do the same. "We had seniors there. My friend's mother lived there for several years. She was in her seventies. There were a fair number of children, and they would sometimes come back and live there as adults. I think most of the people are life-long learners."

Relevant Resources

I. MacPherson, *Each for All: A History of the Co-operative Movement in English Canada, 1900–1945* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1979).

I. MacPherson, "The Co-operative Movement and the Social Economy Traditions: Reflections on the Mingling of Broad Visions," *Annals of Public and Co-operative Economics* 79, nos. 3–4 (2008): 625–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8292.2008.00373.x>.

M. Stack, "With Campus Cooperatives, Universities Could Model New Ways of Living after COVID-19," *The Conversation*, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/with-campus-co-operatives-universities-could-model-new-ways-of-living-after-covid-19-139022>.

Elvy Del Bianco

For over ten years, Elvy Del Bianco ran a study tour of the Emilia Romagna region of Italy for policymakers, community activists, and Vancity employees. The region is famous for its rich and interconnected co-operative economy. The connections formed led to the development of co-ops in British Columbia. Early in the interview, he explains that when

he first got the job with Vancity to help with the tour, his dad asked, “What’s the big deal? We were a member of a wine-growing co-op. We were a member of a grain production co-op.” Elvy continues: “I had no idea. This history was hidden to me. I’m a third-generation co-operator, apparently.” He provides practical advice for BC co-operators based on his experience as a co-operative boot camp instructor for Vancity. Elvy is currently the director of co-operative and government relations for the BC Co-operative Association.

Relevant Resources

- F. Duguid and M. Vieta, “Canada’s Co-operatives: Helping Communities during and after the Coronavirus,” *The Conversation*, 19 April 2020, <http://theconversation.com/canadas-co-operatives-helping-communities-during-and-after-the-coronavirus-135477>.
- M. Noble and C. Ross, eds., *Reclaiming the University for the Public Good: Experiments and Futures in Co-operative Higher Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21625-2>. P. Ranis, *Co-operatives Confront Capitalism: Challenging the Neoliberal Economy* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

OTHER PODCASTS ABOUT CO-OPERATIVES

The goal of the *Campus Co-operatives in British Columbia for a World in Crisis* series is to integrate discussions about the significance of co-operatives with ongoing debates about higher education. The series seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of co-operatives, emphasizing their shared objectives with education regarding equity, sustainability, and democracy. Additionally, it explores the challenges both sectors face in living up to their goals.

- B. Fairbairn and D. Pohler, *The Common Share Podcast*, <https://cooperativesfirst.com/common-share-podcast/>.
- R. Puga, host and executive producer, *Each for All: The Co-operative Connection*. Vancouver Co-op Radio.

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- Gordon Nembhard, J. *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2014.

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- . "Racialized People, Women, and Social Enterprises: Politicized Economic Solidarity in Toronto." *Feminist Economics* 27, no. 3 (2021): 21–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2020.1821078>.
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- Sanders, R. "Good Job: The Growth of Co-operative Business in British Columbia." *The Tyee*. 3 April 2018. <https://thetyee.ca/News/2018/04/03/Growth-Co-operative-Business-BC/>.
- Winn, J. "The Co-operative University: Labour, Property and Pedagogy." *Power and Education* 7, no. 1: 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743814567386>.
- Woodin, T., and L. Shaw. *Learning for a Co-operative World: Education, Social Change and the Co-Operative College*. London: Trentham Books, 2019.

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- Vicari, S., dir. Aroundtheworld. Coop Series. Retrieved 21 July 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcKPCevcx1rcZYics0u6-g>.

Podcasts

- Stack, M. "Dr. Caroline Hossein and Cooperatives and Campuses." Podcast audio. 2022. <https://www.caroline-shenaz-hossein.com/news-and-events/2021/6/29/radio-interview>.
- . "The Possibilities of the Co-op University with Dr. Cilla Ross." 2022. <https://pwias.ubc.ca/ideas/podcasts/s02e05-the-possibilities-of-the-co-op-university-with-dr-cilla-ross/>.