Cooperative Governance Research Initiative
Strong governance is essential for cooperatives to thrive. It is correlated with performance, essential for addressing members' needs, and fundamental to the cooperative DNA. Yet our sector lacks the data we need to benchmark, reflect on, and improve our governance practices. In 2021, the UW Center for Cooperatives (UWCC) launched the Cooperative Governance Research Initiative, the first systematic research to examine cooperative governance across sectors and over time. In October, over 4,400 U.S. cooperatives were invited to participate in an online survey on governance practices. The project's mixed-methods research design also includes follow-up interviews with a purposive sample of respondents that will address topics such as board selection, director training, and member participation.

Researching Factors that Promote New Rural Co-op Development
UWCC released the results of a multi-year research and outreach project titled Collective Action in Rural Communities: Mapping Opportunities for Cooperative Conversion and Start-up. The goal of this project was to enhance opportunities for rural cooperative entrepreneurship by providing decision-making tools and research-based information to cooperative and economic developers, rural entrepreneurs, and policy makers. The report delves into the many ways rural communities are using the cooperative model to meet collective needs and to strengthen local economies.

A key outcome of this project is the National Cooperative Resource Ecosystem Map, which highlights factors that contribute to new cooperative development such as the presence of cooperative development organizations, cooperative associations, co-op friendly capital and legal support.
Supporting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Trends in the Cooperative Community

UWCC provided critical support to the National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA) and the Cooperative Development Foundation’s (CDF) initiative on Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) Trends in the Cooperative Community. Laura Hanson Schlachter led the design, implementation, and analysis of a national, one-time survey in spring 2021 to learn about existing DEI efforts among cooperatives in the NCBA/CDF community. The survey asked about cooperatives’ practices related to (D)emocratic governance and empowerment; (E)quity, diversity, and inclusion; and the (F)inancial security and advancement of workers. Ultimately, the goal of the project is to catalyze and support all cooperatives in increasing their impact internally and in the communities they serve.

76% of respondents described improving DEI as very or extremely important to their co-op in the next five years.

Examining and Empowering Gender Diversity on U.S. Cooperative Boards

UWCC was awarded a Women & Wellbeing in Wisconsin & the World (4W) Innovation Grant by UW-Madison. By bringing a feminist lens to cooperative governance research, UWCC will develop educational materials about gender dynamics on cooperative boards. Materials will emphasize the relationship between gender diversity, cooperative performance, and community impacts. We hope to educate cooperators about gender gaps, encourage cooperatives to embrace gender diversity at the leadership level, and empower more women to run for their cooperative board.

Studying Tribal Cooperative Development Efforts in the U.S. and Canada

UWCC is a partner on a project funded by U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute for Food and Agriculture's Tribal College Research Grant Program. The research project includes a comparative study of Tribal cooperative development in the U.S. and Canada and analysis of the factors associated with success or failure.

Wisconsin Cooperative Directory

In 2021, UWCC staff updated the Wisconsin Cooperative Directory enhancing the ability to explore the state’s cooperatives through interactive maps and tables. Wisconsin boasts a diverse cooperative economy with cooperatives in a range of industries including but not limited to health care, agriculture, insurance, finance, education, grocery, and energy. Wisconsin is fortunate to be home to 728 cooperatives. The two most common types of cooperatives in Wisconsin are consumer-owned (56%) and producer-owned (29%).
Preserving Rural Jobs and Empowering Workers through Co-op Conversion

One of the state’s newest cooperatives, Snow River Cooperative, is located in Crandon, Wisconsin. Just northwest of Green Bay, the area has been heavily influenced by the boom and bust of the lumber and manufacturing industries. It is an area where retaining jobs is important. Snow River Cooperative is the latest iteration of a wood manufacturing company with a history that stretches back over one hundred years. Bemis Manufacturing was started in 1901 in Sheboygan Falls, WI. In 1965, Bemis established a woodworking plant in Crandon that specialized in making items such as bowling pins, parts for sleds, croquet balls, and baseball bats. Most recently, it was owned by Columbian Home Products, which manufactured home goods and kitchenware. When the owner of Columbia Home Products decided to exit the business, the employees of a profitable division of the company that focused on quality wooden bowls and cutting boards began exploring the possibility of purchasing their division and structuring it as a worker-owned cooperative.

The workers, many of whom have been with the company for over 30 years, decided to pursue the idea, knowing it was their best chance at saving their jobs. With the support of UWCC and local partners, Snow River Cooperative officially incorporated in April 2020, saving eight union jobs and retaining this successful manufacturing business in rural Wisconsin. In 2021, UWCC partnered with Northcountry Cooperative Foundation to provide management and governance support to Snow River’s manager and board.

The conversion to a worker cooperative has been good for business and for workers. The cooperative continues to break sales records, and the workers are reaping the rewards. Each worker received $10,000 in patronage in 2020, and the board decided to give workers a significant raise in 2021 and to begin covering 100 percent of their health benefits.
Meal Kit Co-op Emerges from Pandemic Challenges
When the pandemic shut down the only farm to table restaurant for miles around, the kitchen workers and producers who supplied ingredients organized to create a subscription meal kit service. The Community Kitchen Co-op provides quality, nutritious, and accessible meals created through the transparent co-ownership efforts of local farmers and workers. Its producer and worker members believe passionately in fair wages across the food supply chain, and the right of people in their communities, regardless of income, to be able to access healthy, locally produced food. Their long-term vision includes leading "a collaborative agricultural, environmental, educational, community-building, and wellness-focused movement" and supporting "the responsible positioning of our community to face climate change, from seed to table."

Worker Cooperative to Support Racial Equity Initiatives
nINA Collective is a consulting cooperative that partners with organizations on systems change initiatives so they can advance racial equity within their organization and field. The cooperative is comprised of a multi-racial team of consultants who work in the field of Racial Equity and Inclusion. While each owner in the cooperative has a different area of expertise, they all take a systemic approach to building racial equity.

Multi-stakeholder Cooperative Filling a Meat Processing Void
The Southern Wisconsin Meat Cooperative is an initiative in Dane, Grant, Green, LaFayette, Iowa, and Rock Counties that aims to serve farmers, butchers, and consumers by providing a close and transparent connection through the processing of whole carcass beef, pork, lamb, and goats. In recent years, many small producers have had difficulty getting their livestock processed in a timely manner at inspected facilities. In addition, many small producers would like to have their animals humanely dispatched on the farm and transported to the processors, but are unable to access these services. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the fragility of the meat processing industry. Highly concentrated in only a few mammoth slaughterhouses and meat plants, the existing conventional meat system lacks resilience and flexibility. The cooperative hopes to overcome these limitations, creating a regenerative system that serves farmers, consumers, and workers.
New Cooperative Structures to Address Paper Mill Closures
The Consolidated Cooperative and Park Falls Mill Cooperative, both incorporated under chapter 193, brought together stakeholders from across the forestry and timber products supply chain in an attempt to purchase and restart operations of two important pulp and paper mills that were shuttered during COVID. One of these, the Verso-owned mill in Wisconsin Rapids, used to employ 900 people and has received significant attention from state agencies, legislators, and the governor. Currently that mill project is stalled as the Verso corporation was acquired by a Swedish company, BillerudKorsnäs AB, who is still deciding on plans for the Wisconsin Rapids mill site. The Consolidated Cooperative continues to be interested in taking ownership of the mill if that is an option in the future. Unfortunately the Park Falls Mill was acquired by a company that does not intend to operate it and there may not be a way forward for the Park Falls Mill Cooperative with that particular site. Despite these uncertainties, both cooperatives, together with the Timber Professionals Cooperative, continue to look at opportunities for cooperative ownership and operations of other forest products facilities in the Great Lakes region. We would be remiss not to mention the unexpected loss of a colleague and cooperative champion in this work, Don Peterson. Don was instrumental in organizing the people and thinking around all three of these forestry cooperatives, and we will miss his dedication and persistence in these efforts.

Madison Worker Cooperative Development
UWCC is also a key partner in the Madison Cooperative Development Coalition (MCDC), the City of Madison's program to develop worker cooperatives. The program has an emphasis on engaging low-income communities and people of color in cooperative education, co-op development, and strengthening the local co-op ecosystem. In 2021, MCDC helped four co-ops to incorporate. MCDC awarded four $10,000 grants to cooperatives in development (CIDs) and provided four $30,000 grants and one $15,000 grant to community-based organizations (CBOs) engaged in co-op development work. MCDC provides ongoing technical assistance to these CIDs and CBOs. MCDC was directly engaged with at least 36 community organizations, nine university entities, and two major media outlets throughout the year.

Worker cooperators gathered virtually in May 2021 for the second annual Regional Rendezvous. Co-hosted by Madison Worker Cooperatives (MadWorC) and Grassroots Economic Organizing (GEO), the event brought together 80 cooperators to share knowledge and solutions for their cooperatives and communities. Both MadWorC and GEO have strong histories of worker-owner-directed community-building and realized the value in bringing their communities together through this event. In 2021, two UWCC staff served as directors on the MadWorC board of directors.

Training Cooperative and Economic Developers
UWCC is a member of a national network of cooperative development centers called CooperationWorks! through which we provide training for cooperative development professionals based on our resources and research findings. In 2021, we provided training on cooperative governance for start-ups, fundamentals of producer and worker cooperatives, our Latinx cooperative report, and a case study on immigrant farmer cooperative development. We also have supported a variety of different small business and economic development organizations with education on the cooperative model.
Annual Farmer Cooperatives Conference
This year's Farmer Cooperatives Conference welcomed nearly 180 cooperators from across the country to explore the current issues impacting farmer cooperatives and share innovative solutions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the event was held virtually for the second time. Conference sessions highlighted topics such as competitive strategies using alternative business models, management structure innovations, and cybersecurity and ransomware.

Consumer Cooperative Management Association Conference
In 2021, UWCC hosted the Consumer Cooperative Management Association (CCMA) conference virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual format and generosity of sponsors made CCMA 2021 accessible to a larger group of cooperators, attracting 509 attendees from 77 grocery cooperatives across the U.S. and Canada. CCMA 2021 featured engaging plenaries, peer-led breakout sessions, discussion groups, and social events. Participants were able to self-organize around topics of interest such as e-commerce, relocation and expansion, or by affinity group or role such as BIPOC, LGBTQ+ cooperators, food access coordinators, or those focused on member and community engagement. The program also included a virtual road trip that enabled attendees to virtually visit six off-the-beaten-path co-ops from the comfort of their own homes.

Cooperative Director Education
UWCC is a leader in delivering training and education on cooperative governance topics. In 2021, UWCC offered three Cooperative Director Trainings in a webinar format. Webinar topics included cooperative board self-evaluation, decision-making tools for the board room, and director onboarding. A total of 141 directors from across the country attended the webinars. UWCC also offered customized governance support to five Wisconsin cooperatives in 2021.

UWCC participated in the creation of an online training series for new agricultural cooperative directors called “Foundations: Director Training.” UWCC’s Executive Director contributed two modules to the program, which consists of 23 modules covering a range of cooperative governance and finance topics. The curriculum was the result of a collaborative effort by 14 professionals from ten U.S. universities.
EDUCATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF COOPERATORS

UWCC prepares future cooperative leaders through undergraduate and graduate courses, scholarship programs, and internships. We also collaborate with various UW-Madison based campus organizations and faculty.

Campus Education and Partnerships
Every year, UWCC offers a comprehensive class on cooperatives. The course, Cooperatives and Alternative Forms of Enterprise Ownership, explores why cooperatives and other user-owned enterprises emerge, who they serve, how they differ from other forms of enterprise, and the ways in which they can be used to address social, economic, and environmental challenges. Since 2010, 250 students have completed UWCC's Co-ops class.

While there is no formal degree program on cooperatives at UW-Madison, UWCC has supported graduate and postdoctoral fellows with an interest in cooperatives with academic guidance, mentorship, access to cooperative documents and data, and industry connections to facilitate graduate research. Additionally, UWCC staff have supported students from the UW Law School who are interested in the cooperative model, and have worked directly with the Law & Entrepreneurship Clinic to support cooperative clients and develop cooperative legal resources.

UWCC is fortunate to partner with affiliate faculty across campus that are conducting research initiatives relevant to cooperatives and the cooperative economy. In 2021, UWCC collaborated with UW-Madison's Innovate Network which serves as a hub for campus-based organizations to foster a strong culture of innovation and entrepreneurship; and to strengthen the connection between campus and the entrepreneurial network in the Greater Madison community.

Scholarships for Future Cooperators
The Barbara and Thomas Lyon Scholarship Fund was established in 2013 to support graduate students with an expressed interest in cooperatives. The award provides $4,000 annually to fund study and research materials, travel, or other expenses.

The Farmer Cooperatives Young Leaders Scholarship Program provides Farmer Cooperatives Conference scholarships to students with an interest in agribusiness and cooperatives. Since 2018, 36 scholarship recipients have attended the conference to learn about and interact with leaders from agricultural cooperatives. The program is made possible through the generous support of the Renk Agribusiness Institute, the Ralph K. Morris Foundation, and the William and Harold Moy Young Leaders Scholarship Fund.
UWCC is a trusted and unbiased voice on the cooperative business model serving the needs of cooperatives in Wisconsin and beyond. With a strong public service orientation and access to world-class university resources, we leverage research, education, and outreach capabilities to foster critical thinking and understanding about cooperatives. As the only U.S. university-based center that studies and supports all forms of cooperative business, UWCC provides valued education and research to a diverse range of communities.

Advisory Committee
UWCC benefits from the guidance of an advisory committee. Comprised of cooperative and university leaders, the committee members provide valued counsel on UWCC's education, outreach, and research initiatives.

- Margaret Bau, USDA Rural Development
- Matthew Brandrup, Rural Electric Supply Cooperative
- Terri Dallas, Genex
- Jim Dell, Alcivia
- Elizabeth Drame, Derute Consulting Cooperative
- Anya Firszt, Willy Street Co-op
- Kimberly Frederickson, CROPP Cooperative/Organic Valley
- Mark Huth, MD, Group Health Cooperative of South Central Wisconsin
- Jaimes Johnson, UW Credit Union
- Jeff Lyon, FarmFirst Dairy Cooperative
- Ronald D. McFall, Stoel Rives LLP
- Pam Mehnert, Outpost Natural Foods
- William Nelson, Ralph K. Morris Foundation
- Ole Olson, Isthmus Engineering and Manufacturing
- Daniel Planeuf, UW-Madison
- Doug Reinemann, UW-Madison
- Daniel Smith, Cooperative Network
- Mike Wade, Central Wisconsin Electric Cooperative
- Monica White, UW-Madison

Strategic Vision
In July 2021, UWCC staff gathered for a strategic planning retreat and identified the following goals for 2022-2024:

- Build and sustain mutually beneficial partnerships with targeted UW affiliates to further education, outreach, and research initiatives that strengthen the cooperative community.
- Grow and leverage our specialized skills and highly curated tools and resources to strengthen existing cooperatives and facilitate the creation of viable cooperatives that meet emerging community needs.
- Develop a research agenda that is tightly integrated with the Center's outreach, education, and cooperative development work and that positions the Center as a leader in cooperative thought and practice.
- Challenge ourselves and others to advance equity and justice through internal practices and in the communities we all serve.