

Co-ops Collaborate to Open More Stores

UCUR conference 2014

BY ELLEN MICHEL

As food co-ops have visible impact in their communities, more and more people are involved in the effort of bringing a co-op to the place where they live. How can new cooperators move from discussions with friends around a kitchen table to actually opening and managing a grocery store? Up and Coming Up and Running (or UCUR—it sounds like “euchre”) is an annual conference designed to give such people the tools and the working community they need.

“Up and Coming, Up and Running 2014” took place in Bloomington, Ind., from February 28–March 1, offering two days of workshops and store networking. Groups from across the country, including those in the first years of operation, shared co-op mentoring, education, and training.

The conference is organized by Debbie Trocha of the Indiana Cooperative Development Center, with planning and financial support from Food Co-op Initiative (FCI), CDS Consulting Co-op, Cooperative Grocer Network (CGN), Bloomingfoods, National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA), the Howard Bowers Fund, and other sponsors.

New this year, and launched in advance of the conference, is a website (upandcoming.coop), a portal for information about registration, scholarships, workshop sessions, presenters, sponsors, and resources.

“UCUR draws its structure from the Four Cornerstones in Three Stages model developed by Bill Gessner of CDS Consulting Co-op,” Trocha explains. “Attendees have the opportunity to work through the model in two in-depth workshops with Bill. They can also sign up for sessions with the presenters. These personalized consultations are one of the most productive features of the conference, according to the feedback we receive.”

The conference received high marks in evaluations, as it has during each of the previous four years. Attendees represented projects from across the country: California, Colorado, and New Mexico to Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Virginia. Midwestern attendees came from Illinois, Indiana, North and South Dakota, Kentucky, Ohio,



Conference attendees from over 40 co-ops were raring to go.

Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

UCUR workshop tracks follow the three stages (Organizing, Feasibility and Planning, Implementation), with a fourth track, Up and Running, focused on the needs of stores that have opened their doors. The conference also offers assistance to smaller established co-ops planning to build membership, expand, and improve their operational performance.

Membership recruitment and store tours

Additional opportunities were offered on February 27, when Suzi Carter of FCI led participants in an intensive member-recruitment workshop.

Carter shared a beta training and membership planning activity from the FCI membership campaign toolkit she recently developed with CDS CC consultant Ben Sandel.

“It was thrilling to watch organizers actually use [the toolkit], get frustrated, inspired, and organized because of it,” Carter recalls. “My favorite moments were watching the organizers and listening to their ‘aha!’ moments. Some great moments included the shift from the negative concept of the ‘plateau’ to the more positive ‘planning period,’ and the realization that it’s better to have multiple campaigns with

small achievable goals instead of one big, never-ending membership campaign.”

Bloomingfoods General Manager George Huntington focused on operational and store design insights during tours of the five Bloomingfoods locations. UCUR is held within walking distance of three Bloomingfoods stores; the co-op deli team catered meals for the conference.

Collaborative service continuum

The conference opened with a panel explaining how various organizations offer services to startups. Debbie Trocha described the support offered by co-op development centers. Stuart Reid talked about no-cost point-of-entry resources available through FCI. Ben Sandel outlined services offered by CDS Consulting Co-op.

Dan Nordley gave an overview of CGN. Ann Hoyt described the CCMA conference, which also features a track for startups. Dave Blackburn discussed the work of the NCGA Development Co-op, engaging stores directly to assist them in improving business performance.

Noting that the panel represented “the long tail of food co-op perseverance and collaboration, over the last 40-some years,” Nordley reminded the audience that “We are here to

offer you motivation, support, and expertise. I have to say, you folks are also rejuvenating our work.”

The resources panel inspired a conversation about food access, a theme that continued throughout the two days. One of the most popular workshops, “Affordability—Food for All,” featured Common Ground Food Co-op General Manager Jacqueline Hannah and Marketing Manager Joy Rust. They shared the six-component program designed by their co-op to make healthy, affordable food more available to everyone.

Case studies and project stories

Hannah also gave a presentation with Common Ground Operations Manager Jessy Ruddell, revealing strategies they have used to take their store (in Champaign-Urbana, Ill.) from under-performance to its current status as one of the nation’s five fastest-growing co-ops during each of the past five years.

Mary Christensen talked about the evolution of the only food co-op in Alaska, Co-op Market Grocery and Deli in Fairbanks, where she is general manager. In a session called “The Agony and the Ecstasy,” Stuart Reid shared stories of both failure and success, acknowledging potential alignment challenges when engaging stakeholders in projects requiring coordination of vision, talent, capital, and systems.

“This is always one of my favorite events and one of the most valuable opportunities for new co-op organizers to get a jump start of knowledge and enthusiasm,” Reid noted. “UCUR brings together some of the most experienced food co-op developers in the country for unprecedented access to their knowledge and advice. Attendees experience firsthand that they are not out there alone, reinventing the wheel. It’s tremendously empowering.”

From organizing teams to operating systems

“I had an opportunity to share my successes and failures with other co-op organizers,” says Heidi Demars from the BisMan Community Food Co-op in Bismarck, N.D. “It was an enriching experience to connect with others around the nation doing the same work.”

Workshops covered such diverse topics as board and general manager relations, building a management team, mentoring, setting up human resource systems, and cooperative strategic leadership. There were sessions on financial ratios, creative financing solutions, legal issues, member loan drives, and using the



Heidi Demars (BisMan Co-op, Bismarck, N.D.); Susan Hill and Michelle Lord (Richmond Food Co-op, Richmond, Va.)

cooperative principles to guide marketing.

“The presenters also had rich, real-life experiences with their respective co-ops, which I loved,” Demars observes. “It was less theory and more experiential knowledge, which can prove to be very useful for those of us in the trenches of startups.”

Groups moving from planning to implementation attended sessions on site selection, interior design and branding, key performance

indicators, and fresh and prepared foods. A vendor panel included both regional and national companies. In a session called “Round the Bend—Transitioning from Startup to Governance,” Leslie Watson and Ben Sandel worked with groups who are reorienting their steering committees to the board job of governing the co-op.

“This was my second year attending UCUR, and the difference was palpable,” Jacqueline Hannah says. “Not in the quality of the conference, which was excellent both times, but in the understanding of what it takes to successfully open a food co-op. At this conference, I am watching the passion and vision of new cooperators as they build a network of support that would

usually take months, if not years, to set them on the road to success.”

The 2015 Up and Coming Food Co-op Conference is scheduled for February 27–28, with an optional intensive workshop day on February 26. Contact Debbie Trocha at icdc.coop for more information or to become involved. More information can also be found at upandcoming.coop. ■

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