



EXECUTIVE SECRETARY'S CORNER

Roberta M. Severson
Warren Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
Phone: 607/255-1987
Email: rmh27@cornel.edu

On behalf of the Northeast Cooperative Council, I thank Upstate Niagara Cooperative Inc. and Farm Credit East ACA for cohosting the 35th Future Cooperative Leaders Conference and thanks to the 12 cooperatives that sponsored their members. It was a great event!!

Future Leaders were put to work as soon as they walked into the meeting room. Each were given 4 stickers and allowed to vote once on 4 questions put before them mounted on the wall. The questions remained on the wall for the entire conference, which provided insight and food for thought for some of the presenters. The attitudes held by Future Leaders today will shape their cooperatives through time. Cooperatives continue to strive for ways to provide value to their members. Thirty-four people responded to the survey. The number at the end of each statement reflects the percent of people who selected that particular statement. Bolded statements reflect the highest rated choice.

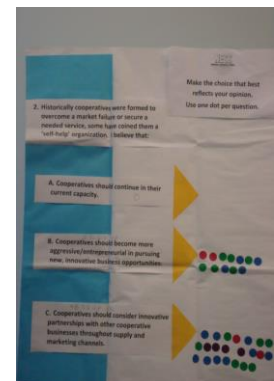
Question 1. A cooperative is important to me because:

- a. **The functions provided by my cooperative (finance, marketing, supplies, services) are critical to my business. (75%)**
- b. Membership provides a buffer to my business from threats that I have little control over. (3%)
- c. Cooperative values (member-user, member-benefits, member-control) are important to me. (22%)

Overwhelmingly, the services provided by cooperatives are very important to farmer members with other members valuing the cooperative business structure.

Question 2. Historically cooperatives were formed to overcome a market failure or secure a needed service, some have coined them a “self-help” organization. I believe that:

- a. Cooperatives should continue in their current capacity. (0%)
- b. Cooperatives should become more aggressive/entrepreneurial in pursuing new, innovative business opportunities. (35%)
- c. **Cooperatives should consider innovative partnerships with other cooperative businesses through supply and marketing channels. (65%)**



The above responses derived a few remarks from the speakers at the conference. One speaker said, “Cooperatives are conservative by nature and work to minimize risk.” Forging partnerships between cooperatives and other businesses is a way for a cooperative to spread the risk and take advantage of opportunities that will add value to cooperative membership. Future leaders support the need to change.

The final two questions focused on communication between the cooperative business and their members.

Question 3. Effective member relations and communication between member-owners and the cooperative is essential to the cooperative or any other “group-action based’ association. The most important relationship between me and my cooperative is through:

- a. **Conversation with field staff and local managers. (69%)**
- b. Conversations with the Senior Management Team. (7%)
- c. Conversations with elected directors. (14%)

This question demonstrates how important field staff is to members. Field staff is an integral link between the cooperative and its membership. For cooperative management, it suggests that on-going investment in strengthening communication skills is appropriate. The way in which a cooperative communicates with members is and will change through time as evidenced by Question 4.

Question 4. By 2018 (5 years), the most important way I will receive information from my cooperative is:

- a. Monthly (periodic) cooperative publications (hard copy). (9%)
- b. Communications with field staff, local managers, elected directors. (27%)
- c. Attending the cooperative’s annual meeting. (0%)
- d. Attending the cooperative’s regional member meetings (0%)
- e. **Cooperative website (32%)**
- f. **Social media (in whatever form it might take) (32%)**

Senior level management and directors who attended the conference were a bit surprised. Perhaps these Future Leaders are managing the business at home while senior generation business owners are attending annual and regional member meetings. Possibly a cooperative might stream the report of the President and senior level management through the cooperative website during annual meeting and allow questions to come from members outside of annual meeting. As noted in Question 3, communication with field staff and local managers is very important to Future Leaders. Electronic communication will become more critical in the future. One of the challenges will be making sure that electronic messages are accurately communicated and understood.

One of the components of the Future Cooperative Leaders Conference was the ‘Pathway to Leadership.’ Directors from Farm Credit East, ACA and Upstate Niagara Milk Cooperative, Inc. talked about why they are leaders in their cooperative and the roles of delegates and committee members. A few of the Future Leaders currently serve as delegates or committee members. Following the conference there was almost a threefold desire of Future Leaders to serve as delegates and the desire to serve on committees doubled.

Upstate Niagara Host Couple Nate and Barb Blesy stated, “In the future we will reap the benefits or the consequences of the decisions made by our cooperatives today. As young members we need to gain understanding of the cooperatives that we are a part of.” The conference helped member-owners build their understanding of cooperatives and the questions they answered provided insight into their attitudes for the future.



Conference host couple,
Nate and Barb Blesy,
Upstate Niagara Cooperative, Inc.