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## Extension Education

# Engaged Learning: Linking Course Instruction and Extension Programming

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JEL Codes: A22, D70, J54, P13, Q13

Keywords: Cooperatives, engaged learning, Extension programming, undergraduate teaching

### Abstract

Engaged learning projects can effectively complement Extension programming goals and course learning objectives that enrich outcomes for both components. A cooperative business management class at Cornell University provides an evaluation of the fundamental principles, structure, finance, and governance associated with the cooperative business model. In so doing, students analyze contemporary issues facing modern cooperatives. In collaboration with Extension programming, contemporary issues are emphasized through projects with actual cooperative businesses. Students benefit from applying principles learned in class, while cooperatives benefit from fresh, new perspectives they receive from people outside their organization. Both value the highly interactive nature of this engagement and to which work plans and expected deliverables can and often do change throughout the course of the projects. This paper synthesizes the obstacles and benefits associated with engaged learning projects from the learned experiences of the class instructor, professional Extension staff, and cooperative industry clients. Recommended best practices are elucidated to better inform faculty interested in implementing this dynamic approach combining Extension and classroom education.

## 1 Introduction

Faculty at institutions of higher education recognize engaged learning improves student outcomes, and its implementation can distinguish academic programs (Bowen 2005; Middlecamp 2005; Hamerlinck and Plaut 2014; Avila-Linn, Rice, and Akin 2021). This pedagogy may be particularly emphasized at public institutions and land-grant universities, where engagement, service learning, and a public purpose are codified in institutional objectives (Dann and Payne 2002; Jacoby and Musascio 2010; Mehta et al. 2015). Arguably, Extension program delivery is as much out-of-classroom teaching as it is an engaged learning activity. The ability to connect Extension programming and student instruction provides an opportunity for enhancing the mutuality of teaching and Extension.

Despite an emerging emphasis on engaged learning, it is interpreted differently depending on the focus of engagement; that is, engagement with whom or with what and in what context (Bowen 2005). Utilization of business simulation software as a part of or in addition to course instruction is interpreted as engagement with a learning process or object of study. Guest speakers and case studies are another form of engaged learning, where “real-life” examples of firm decision making are illustrated, but generally occur over a relatively short time (e.g., one class period).

Community engaged learning is also a term used to describe this pedagogy, particularly when partners are defined more specifically to groups or organizations associated with various constructs of communities; that is, school boards, city councils, municipal committees or agencies, food pantries, and nonprofit organizations (Muhlestein and McCann 2019). Learning takes place in and with communities, where diverse skill sets from universities (i.e., faculty, staff, and/or students) work collaboratively with community members to address the issues of relevance to them. Regardless of the terminology, engaged learning includes working with and learning from a community partner (generally defined) that connect

and integrate community-engaged experiences with educational content (David M. Einhorn Center for Community Engagement 2021).

We define engaged learning specifically as a tool by which students take concepts learned in the classroom and apply them to “real-world” issues through ongoing and interactive engagement with a firm or community group. In this way, engaged learning projects are different from traditional student projects, more comparable to business consulting than an end-of-semester project or paper. As such, they require special attention, dedication, and mindfulness to be personally and professionally successful.

Below we describe the experiences of an ongoing engaged learning effort that combines an undergraduate course on cooperative business management with Extension programming dedicated to improving the governance and operations of farmer-owned cooperatives. We synthesize the obstacles and benefits associated with administering engaged learning projects from the learned experiences of the faculty instructor, an Extension associate, and a cooperative client. We close with recommended best practices to better inform faculty interested in implementing this dynamic approach combining Extension and classroom education.

## 2 The Class

Cooperative Business Management (AEM 3260/5260) has been taught at Cornell since 2013, with engaged learning projects commencing in 2017. The course provides an evaluation of the fundamental principles, structure, finance, and governance associated with cooperatively structured businesses, with an emphasis on agricultural cooperatives. Analyses of the cooperative business organization within the modern economy are emphasized through a mix of lectures, case study discussions, and engaged learning projects.

Learning outcomes are assessed each year based on class performance and student reflections. Specifically, students will be able to do the following by the end of the semester: (1) identify economic justifications for the cooperative as a business entity; (2) illustrate unique characteristics of the governance, finance, and management of cooperative businesses; and (3) analyze contemporary issues facing modern cooperatives. An extensive reading list is curated from academic, industry, and Extension resources, as well as texts that demonstrate the uniqueness of the business model (i.e., Cobia and Anderson 2000; Zeuli and Cropp 2004; Merrett and Walzer 2004; Boland 2017). While emphasizing agricultural cooperatives, students from across majors enroll, including both undergraduate and graduate students. Engaged learning projects contribute strongly to final course grades, not only as an incentive for students to take the work seriously, but also to the projects’ ability to contribute strongly to student learning and long-term value.

Course faculty and Extension staff work with cooperative industry stakeholders prior to the beginning of the semester to develop general project parameters and proposed deliverables. Students self-select into projects, subject to reallocation by the instructor emphasizing the value of diversity across several characteristics (e.g., class year, background, major, gender, career interests, etc.). Students work directly with their cooperative client to develop a timeline of work, set up meeting schedules, and formulate specific project deliverables.

Students must sign and adhere to a *Student Engagement Agreement* that establishes minimum expectations and emphasizes respectful discourse, active listening, confidentiality, and leadership. In addition to the course instructor, an Extension Associate and two student teaching assistants (TAs) provide significant human capital resources to help the students and clients navigate the journey.<sup>1</sup> Regular meetings with the students’ assigned TA and instructor are required. The cooperative client also receives *Client Guidelines* that clarifies their expected time commitment, roles, and tips to successful

<sup>1</sup> In Spring 2022, the class had 40 students enrolled: 33 undergraduates and 7 graduate students, and 10 cooperative industry clients.

student collaborations.<sup>2</sup>

Given the nature of these projects, final project grades are not assigned based on the specific deliverables they develop with their client. While the general scope of deliverables is established up front, the specific content and format of deliverables are developed collaboratively between the client and students throughout the semester. The scope and format of deliverables can and often do change through refined focus and/or pivoting of effort based on consensus with their client. Accordingly, grades are largely process-based; that is, how well students work with their client and with other students, and the level of attention, leadership, and contributions they make to defined deadlines. Formally, grading is based on the quality of their final written report and class presentation (rubrics available), peer assessments, and client feedback. The written report and presentation comprehensively describe the client's issues and how the specific deliverables they developed best address them for ongoing use by their client once the semester is over. Individual grades for students within groups are adjusted by peer and client assessments of them.

## 3 The Extension Program

Cornell's Cooperative Enterprise Program (CEP) was founded in 1982 as an Extension program in response to the financial stress of agricultural cooperatives during the 1980s farm crisis. Today, the mission of the CEP is to enhance the performance of existing cooperative businesses and facilitate the development of emerging cooperative enterprise through teaching, research, and Extension programming. Specifically, the objectives of the CEP are to:

1. Develop effective, action-oriented, knowledgeable, and ethical directors, managers, and members of cooperatives who can help their organizations grow,
2. Assure access to program participation by all groups of individuals interested in the cooperative form of business, including those interested in starting new organizations,
3. Offer learning experiences that emphasize current and future needs and solutions to the business issues facing cooperatives, and
4. Provide undergraduate and graduate student educational opportunities on the cooperative business model through interaction with cooperative industry firms.

The third and fourth objectives of the CEP align seamlessly with engaged learning projects involving students and cooperative partners. CEP staff include a full-time Executive Director (Extension Associate), Faculty Director, Administrative Assistant, and undergraduate and graduate student research, Extension, and teaching assistants.

## 4 Learned Experiences

Since 2017, 28 projects have been completed involving 19 different cooperative, cooperative development, and cooperative professional service firms. Cooperatives have included farmer-owned, customer-owned, and worker-owned businesses. Local and national cooperatives have participated, including five listed on the National Cooperative Bank's 100 largest cooperatives in the United States (National Cooperative Bank 2021). Project topics have ranged from cooperative development feasibility analyses, financial analyses of equity management and patronage refund programs, member education, director education, and governance issues of all flavors.<sup>3</sup> We summarize the projects, by year, below and highlight the evolution of curating and facilitating the projects from ongoing learned experiences.

The first year of projects (2017) started relatively small—three projects with one food

<sup>2</sup> Current versions of the course syllabus, *Student Learning Agreement* and *Client Guidelines* are available from the authors upon request.

<sup>3</sup> Project descriptions and general deliverables for each year are available from the authors upon request.

cooperative business (Table 1). The cooperative assigned separate staff to work with each of the student groups based on their association with the business. Deliverables presented to clients at the end of the semester included focused written reports, member fact sheets, and Excel-based financial modeling tools.

**Table 1. Engaged Learning Projects: Clients, Topics, and Deliverables, 2017**

| Client              | Co-op Type | Topic(s)                             | Products Delivered to Clients (Format)  |
|---------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| GreenStar Project 1 | Consumer   | Community solar                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review of alternative community solar models (case study write ups)</li> <li>Cost estimation and funding options (Excel-based financial model)</li> <li>Enumerating timeline of important events and potential obstacles (written report)</li> </ul> |
| GreenStar Project 2 | Consumer   | Revisions to patronage refund policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Member information flyer (paper handout)</li> <li>Financial modeling spreadsheet (Excel-based financial model)</li> <li><a href="#">YouTube promotional video</a> on policy changes.</li> </ul>  |
| GreenStar Project 3 | Consumer   | Cooperative business expansion       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial projections of alternative scenarios (Excel-based financial model)</li> <li>Financing options (written report)</li> <li>Recommended next steps (written report)</li> </ul>   |

Student learning agreements were not yet established, nor were there written client guidelines. Initial project descriptions were relatively short (4–5 sentences), leaving students much liberty in envisioning project deliverables with their client. Too little direction likely contributed to slow initial progress; however, the largest barrier to project advancement accrued to the high number of students assigned to each project group (8) and difficulty in finding common meeting times. Project mentoring was limited to the instructor (i.e., no Extension Associate nor TAs were yet involved). Particularly advantageous to project progress was the cooperative's local location and the ability of clients to visit the business and meet in person, as necessary.

Growing course enrollments and a desire to reduce group size resulted in six projects in 2018 (Table 2). Improved outreach by course staff increased the number of cooperatives participating and an Extension Associate and a TA took on mentoring roles and client communications in collaboration with the instructor. With assistance of the University's Office for Engagement Initiatives, a *Student Learning Agreement* was developed.

Projects involved member participation in leadership roles, communications, and financial management. The format of products presented to clients increased in variety from not only written reports and financial spreadsheet tools but also videos, detailed product guides, and suggested by-laws and member agreement revisions. In-person meetings with clients were preferred, and for clients more distant, course staff worked with clients and students to arrange at least one in-person meeting on campus during the semester.

**Table 2. Engaged Learning Projects: Clients, Topics, and Deliverables, 2018**

| Client                       | Co-op Type | Topic(s)                            | Products Delivered to Client (Format)  |
|------------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| GreenStar                    | Consumer   | Member engagement, leadership       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board and member surveys on leadership (survey and analysis of it)</li> <li>• Infographic on self-awareness and leadership (fact sheets)</li> <li>• Promotional materials on member involvement (flyers)</li> </ul>               |
| Ocean Spray                  | Farmer     | Member education, board trust       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry analysis (written report)</li> <li>• Member education governance materials (written documents)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Rap video on cooperative governance (You Tube video)</a></li> </ul>                                |
| Upstate Niagara              | Farmer     | Equity management                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparative peer analysis (financial written report)</li> <li>• Board educational handout (written reports)</li> <li>• Recommendations to board of directors (written report)</li> </ul>  |
| Upstate NY Growers & Packers | Farmer     | Member communications               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marketing agreement revisions (revised written agreements)</li> <li>• Online inventory and member communications (web-based communication platform for members)</li> <li>• By-laws revisions (revised written by-laws)</li> </ul> |
| Eden Valley Growers          | Farmer     | Pricing, participation requirements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By-laws revisions (revised written by-laws)</li> <li>• Non-member business protocols (written marketing agreements)</li> <li>• Member participation, equity requirements (written report)</li> </ul>                              |
| National Grape/ Welch's      | Farmer     | Member participation, leadership    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member informational brochure (flyers)</li> <li>• Educational video and program series outline (detailed written guide)</li> <li>• Member education stipend proposal (written report)</li> </ul>                                  |

Interest of cooperatives to take part in engaged learning grew further in 2019 (Table 3). By this time, some cooperatives had participated more than once providing sound empirical evidence of the value to them. Student enrollments also increased in large part to student enjoyment of the projects as a new way to learn. Two TAs and the Extension Associate now provided project support. Member education and governance efforts continued to be important topics, but issues of risk management, supply control, and feasibility of new cooperative efforts were gaining traction. Formats of client products included written reports, survey analysis, interactive PowerPoints, and specific suggestions on by-laws and member revisions. Improving time management skills to the projects was emphasized during the semester, and students were increasingly utilizing distance communication methods. Project numbers were maintaining group sizes to no more than four students and reducing (albeit not eliminating) conflicts for students in assembling group meetings.

**Table 3. Engaged Learning Projects: Clients, Topics, and Deliverables, 2019**

| Client                       | Co-op Type   | Topic(s)                       | Products Delivered to Clients (Format)  |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Upstate NY Growers & Packers | Farmer       | Marketing agreement, risk mgt. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Member supply survey and analysis (written report)</li> <li>Governance changes, capital plan (written report)</li> <li>Member marketing requirements (marketing agreements)</li> </ul>     |
| National Grape, Welch's      | Farmer       | Supply control, heterogeneity  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Industry analysis (written report)</li> <li>Comparative peer assessment (written report)</li> <li>Addressing member heterogeneity issues (written report, suggested next steps)</li> </ul> |
| Railroad Ave. Supply Company | Worker (new) | Governance, worker education   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employee handbook (written guide)</li> <li>Director responsibilities handout (fact sheets)</li> <li>Governance scenario exercises (scripted scenarios)</li> </ul>                          |
| Dairy Farmers of America     | Farmer       | Board size and composition     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Member and management interviews (written report)</li> <li>Comparative peer assessment (written report)</li> <li>Proposed board changes (by-laws revisions)</li> </ul>                     |
| Ocean Spray Co-op            | Farmer       | Equity mgt., member education  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comparative peer assessment (written report)</li> <li>Interactive member equity training guide (interactive PowerPoint)</li> <li>FAQ guide/glossary for members (member guide)</li> </ul>  |
| Capital District Co-op       | Farmer       | Cooperative marketing          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Institutional customer assessment (written report)</li> <li>Membership survey and analysis (written report)</li> <li>Member communication recommendations (written guide)</li> </ul>       |

Specific issues of member heterogeneity surfaced in the 2020 projects, along with projects focused on new cooperative development; that is, worker and farmer cooperatives (Table 4). Unfortunately, by early March, issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic were growing, students were sent home, and classes were paused as instruction shifted to online. Adding in the abrupt change to business operations of our clients necessitated substantial revision and downsizing of deliverables. Surveys planned to be administered were instead delivered to clients, along with instructions to administer them; however, fact sheets and member guides continued to be preferred products by clients. The need to enhance effective communication and project progress through virtual means was apparent.

**Table 4. Engaged Learning Projects: Clients, Topics, and Deliverables, 2020**

| Client                       | Co-op Type     | Topic(s)                            | Products Delivered to Clients (Format)  |
|------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Eden Valley Growers          | Farmer         | Member heterogeneity                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member survey (analysis and reporting)</li> <li>• Capital management (financial model)</li> <li>• Proposed governance changes (by-laws revisions)</li> </ul>   |
| Ithaca Farmers Market        | Farmer, Vendor | Member engagement, communication    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member interviews—full and associate (written summary report)</li> <li>• Communication platforms (member guide)</li> <li>• Social media, brochure, websites (brochures, web)</li> </ul>                |
| OWN Rochester                | Worker (new)   | Organization planning               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee handbook (written report)</li> <li>• Employee Stock Ownership Plan roles/responsibilities of worker-owners (handbook/guide)</li> <li>• Governance exercises (scripted exercises)</li> </ul>   |
| Tongore Brook Farm           | Farmer (new)   | Feasibility assessment              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperative needs assessment and analysis (survey administration and written report)</li> <li>• Paths to consensus (practitioners guide)</li> <li>• Recommended next steps (written report)</li> </ul> |
| Upstate NY Growers & Packers | Farmer         | Marketing agreements, heterogeneity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry analysis (written report)</li> <li>• Member survey and analysis (written report)</li> <li>• Draft marketing agreements, by-laws revisions (written)</li> </ul>                                |

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and online-only instruction, the 2021 engaged learning projects focused internally on developing online learning modules for the CEP useful for Extension programming delivery (Table 5). While students were disappointed in not being able to work directly with an external client, the focus to direct engagement with an existing Extension program showcases flexibility of the engaged learning model through Extension efforts.

Each student group was tasked to develop a learning module to inform members, directors, and employees of cooperatives. An industry mentor (i.e., a cooperative director, manager, or service provider) was assigned to each group to help guide their project, provide insight, and ground truth their outputs. Since all students were working with one client (i.e., the CEP) on a set of learning modules, coordination both within and across the project teams was important (and challenging). Dedicated class time and office hours were used to share project progress, address common linkages, and provide consistency across groups. The deliverables from these projects are currently in editing for use in an aggregate online delivery platform in 2023. Modules will be used, in whole or in part, in ongoing in-person and online Extension programming.

## 5 Obstacles

Figure 1 enumerates the obstacles to engaged learning, unique to but related among, students, faculty, and industry clients. The primary obstacles are importantly informed by student reflections and client feedback on the projects each year; that is, what worked well, what didn't, and recommendations for improvement.

**Table 5. Engaged Learning Projects: Clients, Topics, and Deliverables, 2021**

| Client                         | Mentor                                     | Topic  | Content Areas of Learning Module  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Cooperative Enterprise Program | Attorney, Bond, Schoeneck & King           | Choosing the right business model                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differences in business models</li> <li>• Traditional and hybrid cooperatives</li> <li>• Steps in forming a new co-op</li> </ul> |
| Cooperative Enterprise Program | Former Director, Dairy Farmers of America  | Responsibilities of members, directors, and managers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiduciary responsibilities</li> <li>• Board composition</li> <li>• Director training</li> </ul>                                  |
| Cooperative Enterprise Program | Former CEO, St. Albans Co-op Creamery      | Understanding and using financial statements         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial statements</li> <li>• Differences by co-op function</li> <li>• Financial ratios</li> </ul>                             |
| Cooperative Enterprise Program | Relations Manager, CoBank, ACB             | Choosing a member equity management plan             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sources of equity</li> <li>• Alternative equity programs</li> <li>• Choosing the right plan(s)</li> </ul>                        |
| Cooperative Enterprise Program | Certified Public Accountant, Dopkins & Co. | Managing profits (and losses) in your cooperative    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing and distributing returns</li> <li>• Member, nonmember business</li> <li>• Income taxation</li> </ul>                    |
| Cooperative Enterprise Program | Former Chair, Farm Credit East, ACA        | Board evaluation                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board alignment</li> <li>• Choosing the right Board Chair</li> <li>• Board and director evaluation tool</li> </ul>               |
| Cooperative Enterprise Program | Director, Farm Credit East, ACA            | Hiring and evaluating the CEO                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing a position description</li> <li>• Evaluating performance</li> <li>• Succession planning</li> </ul>                    |
| Cooperative Enterprise Program | Principal, Stamm Advisory Group            | Positioning the cooperative for future success       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperative life cycle</li> <li>• Strategic planning</li> <li>• Cooperative restructuring</li> </ul>                             |

**Student  
Obstacles**

- Group dynamics and mindset
- Group coordination and hesitation
- Regular communications with client
- Tractability

**Faculty  
Obstacles**

- Relevance to learning outcomes, syllabus timing
- Reasonable expectations for one semester
- Student heterogeneity and group size
- Scaleability

**Industry Client  
Obstacles**

- Timing for student meetings
- Student understanding of business and industry
- Encouraging student initiative, commentary
- Relaying firm value of participation

**Figure 1. Obstacles to Engage Learning Through Extension: Student, Faculty, and Industry Perspectives**

## 5.1 Student Obstacles

Engaged learning requires considerable interaction among fellow students and their client that emphasize active listening, respectful discourse, and student leadership. Accordingly, poor group dynamics and traditional project mindset stymie development and hinder interaction. Students are generally resistant to work through troublesome dynamics up front, preferring rather to change groups. Students often find difficulty in finding common meeting times and a resistance to adapt their current personal schedule to accommodate group work. For students, the projects represent a very different kind of group project. A student mentality of pushing things off until the last minute and then cramming to finish the project regularly surface.

Students are often nervous or hesitant to initially approach their client, commonly senior management personnel or cooperative board members. They are concerned that they don't know enough about cooperative businesses to have a conversation and don't want to look "stupid." Historically, few clients have been local enough whereby in-person interaction serves as the primary communication mode. Even with local clients, clients and students are busy such that finding frequent in-person meetings throughout a semester is, at best, difficult and, perhaps, unnecessary. Defining up front a timeline and plan of work (subject to amendment with consensus) is often unfamiliar to students, preventing proper tracking of project progress over the semester.

## 5.2 Faculty Obstacles

Projects are curated considering application of course concepts and needs of the cooperative client. While cooperative businesses have existing and emerging issues irrespective of their business type (e.g., market influences, regulatory compliance, new product development), projects developed must be "co-opy" so as to reinforce course objectives and contribute to learning outcomes. Designing projects that provide value to the client irrespective of the course are relatively easy, ensuring that the projects simultaneously reinforce learning outcomes requires additional attention.

The projects developed must also have reasonable expectations given the one-semester format. It does no good to anyone to develop a project that will realistically take a year to complete for a one-semester course. Relatedly, faculty must consider the timeline of course projects with the timeline of course concepts as defined in the syllabus. Students are often apprehensive to begin work on a project if the underlying concepts have yet to be covered in the classroom.

Heterogeneity among students assigned to groups is advantageous to bring forward multiple perspectives and accentuate the value of diversity but may also cause unnecessary disruptions and stall project progress. Differences in groups by class year, student major, and past experiences may contribute to problems with understanding of course concepts, group dynamics, and voluntary contributions of group members.

Scaling project-based courses is difficult. Assigning the same project to multiple groups increases the demand on clients that may be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate or differentiate. Increased enrollments, with a commitment to limiting the number of students per group, necessarily implies developing more projects with more clients, thereby constraining the bandwidth of faculty.

## 5.3 Industry Client Obstacles

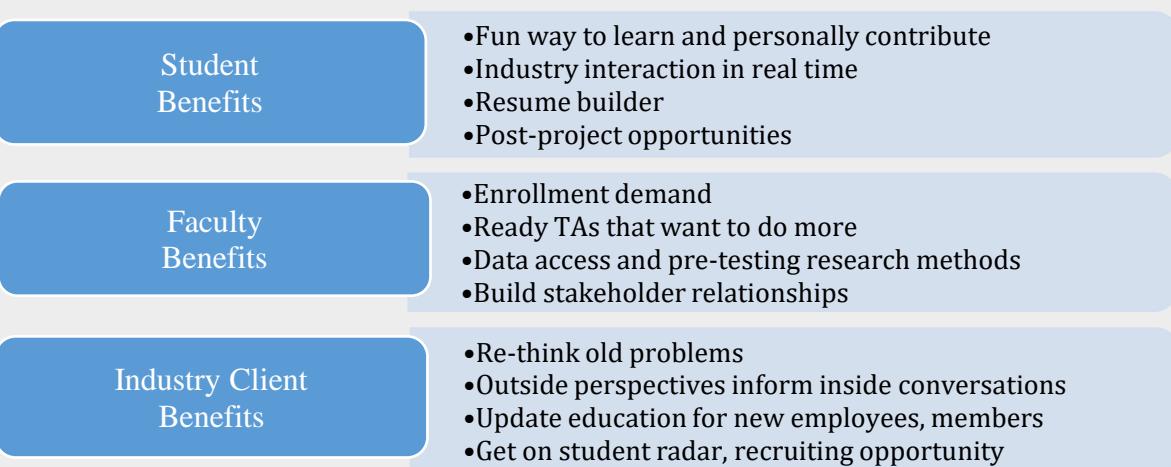
Finding time for clients beyond their already full workday to participate in engaged learning can be challenging. Some clients have more time than others, and some projects require more time than others. Failure of clients to constructively respond to student inquiries and in a timely fashion necessarily delays project progress and diminishes the value of engagement. Often the only time students can get together for a group call or video session with their client is at night or on the weekends. Those are prime times for students to work and collaborate but not for the client.

Clients have expressed frustration with the lack of beginning knowledge students have of their

business and/or the industry it operates in. In so doing, clients focus considerable time at the beginning of the projects getting students “up to speed” on who they are. Relatedly, students’ hesitation in communicating with them early on leaves the client uncertain if they should provide more or less details in establishing the baseline of information before moving on to the objectives and proposed deliverables of the project. Finally, clients may perceive their participation as merely support to student learning but not to creating outcomes of value to their business. Indeed, relaying the value to the business of their time committed to these projects is essential in promoting continued interaction and involvement.

## 6 Benefits

Figure 2 highlights the benefits of engaged learning, unique to but related among students, faculty, and industry clients. As with the obstacles identified above, they are importantly informed by student reflections and client feedback received each year.



**Figure 2. Benefits of Engaged Learning Through Extension: Students, Faculty, and Industry Perspectives**

### 6.1 Student Benefits

Students regularly find engaged learning projects to be the best part of the class; they appreciate mutual learning through peer interaction. In short, they find this is a fun way to learn. They also appreciate the ability to provide their own personal contributions to a group effort. Students are open to explore their own ideas, as encouraged by their peers and client, in addressing project objectives. Delineating responsibilities and contributing to the group’s collective efforts is rewarding to students. Affirmation by their client to their individual and collective efforts is doubly rewarding.

Without question, students appreciate applying concepts in real time with real-world implications. They particularly appreciate that the deliverables they bring to their clients will inform decision making and/or be implemented in the firm’s operations going forward. Interactions with industry leaders through an engaging experience contributes to long-lasting learning and application.

It is not uncommon for students to include project work on their resumes to emphasize specific firm/industry interactions and products they developed for their clients. On occasion, post-project opportunities have emerged through continued work after the class has finished. The experience also gives students a unique advantage when applying for future internship and employment opportunities.

## 6.2 Faculty Benefits

Engaged learning opportunities are appreciated and increasingly sought out by students. In so doing, conversations among students of engaged learning experiences promote continued enrollment. Positive experiences by nongraduating students also present informed, experienced TAs for the following year. Requests for TA openings are quickly satisfied by prior students interested in participating in more engaged learning experiences, albeit in a different role.

Engaged learning projects are designed around contemporary issues and needs faced by cooperative businesses (i.e., see topics and products delivered in Tables 1–3). As such, they allow for pre-testing of industry/firm surveys and applied research methods. They also provide access to firm data not available from other sources. Confidentiality and nondisclosure agreements are utilized, where necessary, but for most projects, confidentiality disclosures through the *Student Learning Agreement* are sufficient.

Finally, and most importantly, integrating engaged learning projects with extension stakeholders supports and builds relationships. Extension faculty find out, firsthand, the most pressing needs and issues of their priority stakeholders. The projects are also a unique way to bring new stakeholders into Extension programming that complement existing programming goals and industry outreach. Class projects can advance larger applied research initiatives that are known relevant to Extension audiences based on prior engaged learning experiences. Accordingly, engaged learning projects in the classroom both inform and are informed by Extension priorities and ongoing programming activities.

## 6.3 Industry Client Benefits

Some issues faced by cooperatives are longstanding and/or evolving over time. As such, clients have expressed the benefits of these projects as a way to re-think old problems; e.g., enduring issues of member heterogeneity, capital constraints. They appreciate new perspectives from personnel not currently affiliated with their organization and/or without experience and background in the industry their firm operates in. In this way, outside perspectives inform inside conversations.

Another benefit cooperatives have expressed is the ability to interact with students as proxies for new members or employees of the cooperative or the next generation of members who are just learning how the cooperative works. This allows the cooperative to test drive, refine, and improve communication methods and messages to an audience that more closely represents the knowledge base of their own emerging members. As an example, one client enjoyed learning how students on their team would react when presented with a proposed cooperative policy and compared them to that of their own members.

Finally, clients see the interaction with students as an easy way to get their business on students' radars when thinking about internship and employment opportunities. Many students in the Applied Economics and Management major at Cornell are interested in finance, accounting, and marketing but don't necessarily see cooperatives, particularly farmer cooperatives, as potential job outlets to apply these skills and advance their careers. An opportunity to both consult with students on a project of value to their firm while also expanding their recruiting net is doubly rewarding.

# 7 Recommended Best Practices

We demonstrate how combining engaged learning of students with priority Extension stakeholders advances the learning for each internally and provides additional external benefits. We close with some recommended best practices to better inform faculty interested in implementing this dynamic approach combining Extension responsibilities and classroom education.

## 7.1 Emphasize Commitment Early and Often

Throughout the projects, reinforce to students that everyone has something to contribute, regardless of their beginning knowledge of the industries represented and businesses participating. Emphasize that no

one expects them to know the answers on day one, nor is there necessarily just one right answer. New ideas, programs, or policies may surface that the client may never have thought of. From the client's perspective, treating students as new members of the cooperative and asking them to come to the group with that mindset promotes buy in from students.

The impulse to accommodate requests by students to change groups early on needs dissuasion and to a focus on what's wrong with existing group dynamics and how they can be addressed. Emphasizing to students that group projects and interactions are common in the workplace is useful to encourage them to find resolution as a career enhancing skill. Students should be reminded that one part of engaged learning is learning from each other, which includes their clients and their peer students.

Engaged learning projects require consistent and dedicated effort, so tractability and assessment of progress is essential. Recommend to students and clients to build in specific deadlines over the course of the semester to keep a consistent effort level and with implications if they are missed. Students that set up a work plan early on with their client that includes specific deadlines and presentation of initial and revised deliverables are more likely to be successful. Identifying next steps and assigned leadership of them at the end of each meeting guides progress between meetings.

Students must utilize multiple forms of communications (e.g., in person, phone, Zoom, email) regardless of client location to productively advance through their project. However, even one in-person meeting with the client (or a client representative) can be incredibly valuable to cement student understanding and engagement. Encourage a minimum of two in-person meetings (early and late in the semester) when possible. Faculty must be flexible to accommodate these interactions. Regular meetings with the client should be scheduled early and adhered to, with additional communication through written updates.

Extension clients must also understand and accept a minimum level of time commitment, responsiveness, and involvement in working with their student groups, including some meeting times outside of normal working hours. When faculty teaching responsibilities are co-mingled with Extension programming, this necessarily imparts extra attention by faculty and Extension staff in clearly communicating expectations up front.

## 7.2 Project-Course Alignment

Start early in promoting course projects with Extension audiences. Provide examples of prior projects; oftentimes the same types of projects are relevant across prospective clients. Limit cooperative businesses to one project if there is only one client representative. Multiple projects with a cooperative business work well and can be efficient for project administration, but only if different client representatives are assigned to each. Discuss the possibility of sequential projects with clients where the outputs of one project can be used as inputs to the next one the following year.

Reinforce to students that work on a project can begin even if the underlying concepts of the project have not yet been formally introduced in the classroom. All projects require understanding the cooperative business, its operations, its objectives, and the industry it operates in. Students are welcome to read ahead, get additional help from the instructor and TAs, and focus on other elements of the project until subjects are covered in class.

While one semester is a relatively short time to begin and complete an engaged learning project, resist the urge to assign students to projects right away. Allow for the natural ebb and flow of student enrollments to pass before student-client interactions begin. Abrupt changes to students in groups delays group cohesion and engagement with clients.

## 7.3 Recognize Human Resource Constraints

Engaged learning projects are incredibly rewarding when done correctly, but also require a large time commitment in and out of the classroom. If included as part of a class, progress reports facilitate feedback

for students and promote consistent progress. Additional support for instructors of engaged learning classes is essential. Extension professionals already familiar with prospective clients provide efficient facilitation of project development and candid, useful conversations with clients throughout the semester. TAs who have experienced engaged learning are seen as a valuable first resource to current students working through their own projects and provide important intel for faculty.

Alternatively, consider a standalone engaged learning, projects-based course. An initial, more traditional course (without projects) can be administered followed by a projects-only course where the base course is a prerequisite. This may be a useful strategy for faster, comprehensive project progress if a large proportion of students are unfamiliar with the core objectives and concepts of the baseline course. A two-class sequence does not reduce the overall effort of faculty, but it does spread out the daily workload. University administrators must also recognize the unique and beneficial learning opportunities of engaged project-based learning, particularly when combined with Extension responsibilities, and provide appropriate incentives for delivery and expansion, where feasible.

## 7.4 Reinforce Tipping Points

To enhance the value that faculty, students, and clients get out of these projects is to acknowledge and plan for “tipping points” as the semester goes on. Early on, much of the communication with the client is one sided—from the client to the student. This is necessary to understand the operations and goals of the business and why the issues students will be working on are important to them. This should take around two to three weeks of dedicated effort. In addition, background information can be provided as a pre-read to initiating the project or to joining a particular team.

From there, students provide their initial, informed feedback to the client regarding data needs, methodologies to employ, and forms of project deliverables. This is the first tipping point and, necessarily, one-sided—from the students to the client. Enough effort early in the project should get students past this tipping point within another two to three weeks. This is not the final form of their deliverables, but rather a process they propose to the client to get them there.

After suitable time for the client to consider their initial efforts and react to their proposed activities moves the project past the second tipping point to two-sided communications. At this stage, the back-and-forth exchange of ideas, pivoting of effort, and revision of deliverables through consensus propels the project to its final outcomes. Time management is crucial to allow enough time for exchange, review, feedback, and edits by the end of the semester.

## 7.5 Utilize Input and Resources for Continuous Improvement

Critical reflection by students on what worked well, what didn’t, and how they would improve the projects serve as vital information for faculty in improving learning outcomes associated with the projects and promoting meaningful interactions and value to project clients. Accordingly, require student reflections as a necessary part of the engaged learning experience. As some students may be hesitant to provide critical advice to their instructor, reflections should be delivered anonymously to the instructor. Sharing student reflections with clients also helps promote long-term client participation.

There is a delicate balance between telling students what they need to do and allowing students the freedom to develop their own deliverables consistent with project ambitions. Some prefer the directed nature of the former, but the latter promotes ownership of deliverables and student buy-in to the process of engaged learning. Provide enough direction early on to get them moving, and then stand back and let them curate deliverables through engagement with each other and their client. Provide comprehensive and timely feedback and mentoring. The limit to the form of their products rests with the extent of their own imaginations and ideas, while grounded in course concepts and client engagement.

Finally, take advantage of existing resources. There is a growing literature on engaged learning far beyond the recommended best practices developed through our learned experiences (e.g., Jacoby and

Musascio 2010; Hamerlinck and Plaut 2014; Mehta et al. 2015; Avila-Linn, Rice, and Akin 2021). Many universities are expanding institutional efforts and encouraging engaged learning opportunities for students, faculty, and staff, regardless of formal faculty appointments. For land-grant universities, utilizing campus and off-campus cooperative Extension staff and resources can effectively contribute to student and client value. Reflections from clients on the value they received from the projects and how they can be improved for them is as vital as that from students. Doing so will effectively contribute to Extension programming goals and promote long-term participation of Extension stakeholders in and out of the classroom.

When done right, engaged learning is win-win-win: clients find resolution on contemporary issues that matter to them, faculty infuse their teaching, Extension, and research with diverse perspectives and ways of knowing, and students learn in new and exciting ways that build a greater sense of belonging (David M. Einhorn Center for Community Engagement 2021). In this way, engaged learning projects can effectively complement Extension programming goals and academic course learning outcomes.

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**Acknowledgements:** This work was supported by Engaged Opportunity Grants (2018 and 2019) from the David M. Einhorn Center for Community Engagement at Cornell University. We are thankful to Anna Sims Bartel and Amanda Wittman of the Center for their helpful advice and resources over the years to engaged learning. We are also thankful to the Faculty Fellows in Engaged Scholarship (2019-2020 cohort) for their words of encouragement and recommendations to the realization of this scholarship. Finally, we are extremely grateful to all of the cooperative clients and students that participated in engaged learning projects since 2017. Their participation and reflections are instrumental to the growth and improvement of engaged learning between extension and student stakeholders. The authors have no financial interest or benefit from the direct application of this scholarship. The views expressed are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the policies or views of any sponsoring firms or agencies. All errors remain our sole responsibility.

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4(2) doi: 10.22004/ag.econ.321910

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