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# Student Cooperative Start-up Toolkit

A Guide to Creating Your Own Student-Led Agricultural Co-op

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# Introduction

*A student-led cooperative, where young people in an agricultural class, 4-H club, FFA chapter, or other group, operate an enterprise using cooperative principles, may be an opportunity to teach young people entrepreneurial skills and the unique aspects of the cooperative business model, which is an important part of American agriculture.*



A cooperative is a user-owned and controlled business that distributes benefits based on members' use of the business (Co-op Essentials: What They Are and the Role of Members, Directors, Managers, and Employees, 2014). Co-ops serve member needs and are focused on member benefit (Zueli & Cropp, 2014). About 3 million cooperatives around the world employ an estimated 280 million people (International Cooperative Alliance, 2018). In the United States, there are cooperatives operating across sectors from utilities and insurance to housing, agriculture, financial services, purchasing, and more.

In agriculture, cooperatives play important roles in the supply chains that provide our food, fuel, and fiber. As of 2019 over 1.8 million farmers, ranchers, and fishermen were members of agricultural cooperatives (Wadsworth, Lapp, & Rivera, 2021). Cooperatives market a wide range of


commodities like fruits and vegetables, cotton, grains and oilseeds, dairy, nuts, livestock, wool, and more. They help farmers purchase inputs like seed, fuel, crop protectants, and more. Financial cooperatives like credit unions and the Farm Credit System provide credit to farmers and agribusinesses across the country. If you're involved in agriculture in the United States, chances are you interact with the cooperative business model.

At the student-led cooperative farm at the Ohio Valley Career & Technical Center's Agribusiness Management program in West Union, Ohio, students gain real-world experience as they manage their school's 300-acre farm where they raise row crops, livestock, and more. The farm sells hay, freezer meat, and more to members of their community. Since 2016, students have used a student-led cooperative model in their program, an approach initiated by their instructor, Mr. Luke Rhonemus.

Students in the program can become a 'member' of the co-op and are eligible to serve on the student-elected board of directors, which helps make decisions about the farm alongside Mr. Rhonemus. Eventually, the students and Mr. Rhonemus hope alumni of the program can join the cooperative to market their locally produced farm products.

The purpose of this toolkit is to help educators and community members interested in a student-led cooperative enterprise to explore, understand, and develop the model. The toolkit includes ideas for activities, links to resources and videos, and templates that educators can make their own. It is not intended as an in-depth nor comprehensive step-by-step manual. Users will need to consider their specific circumstances, consult with advisors, and tailor their approach. This toolkit is provided for educational purposes only. It is not legal advice. It is not a substitute for the potential need to consult with competent professionals.

The College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences Center for Cooperatives at Ohio State University South Centers assists entrepreneurs, educates the community, and generates knowledge about the cooperative business model with a special focus on food, agriculture, and rural communities. Learn more at [go.osu.edu/cooperatives](https://go.osu.edu/cooperatives).



**What is a Co-op?**

<https://youtu.be/0XNpDLrIPos>

For a quick introduction to the student-led cooperative model and a few ideas for activities to help young people learn about the cooperative model, watch this video with Hannah Scott, CFAES Center for Cooperatives Program Director.

**WATCH  
LEARN**

The mission of Ohio State University South Centers is to enhance southern Ohio by assisting people with informed decision-making through responsive research, education, entrepreneurial application and collaborative partnerships. Learn more at [southcenters.osu.edu](https://southcenters.osu.edu).



# Learn

## Learning About Agricultural Cooperatives

If you're involved in agriculture in the United States, chances are you interact with the cooperative business model. Cooperatives are businesses based in values of self-help, democracy, and equity, among others, that bring people together for a common purpose. Simply put, a cooperative is a user-owned and controlled business that distributes benefits based on members' use of the business (U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Business-Cooperative Service, 2014). Co-ops serve member needs and are focused on member benefit (Zueli & Cropp, 2014).



Cooperatives play important roles in the supply chains that provide our food, fuel, and fiber. As of 2019 over 1.8 million farmers, ranchers, and fishermen were members of agricultural cooperatives in the United States. These co-ops market fruits and vegetables, cotton, grains and oilseeds, dairy, nuts, livestock, wool, and more as well as help farmers purchase inputs like seed, fuel, crop protectants, and more. Credit unions and Farm Credit System cooperatives provide financing to farmers and agribusinesses across the country.

### Learning goals:

1. Introduce students to the cooperative business model, including key aspects that make cooperatives unique from other businesses.
2. Help students recognize cooperative businesses in food and agriculture and understand the importance of cooperatives in agriculture.
3. Build students' awareness of cooperatives in their communities.

## Introduce Students to the Cooperative Business Model

**Activity:** Business Brainstorm – To help students learn about different business models or ways of doing business, help them “brainstorm” about a local business. Identify a business in your community that students are likely familiar with like a local restaurant, coffee shop, pharmacy, or other “main street” business. Brainstorm the following questions as a group:

- Who owns the business?
- Who makes decisions for the business?
- Who are the business's customers?
- What are the goals of the business?

Introduce the concept of a cooperative business and how it differs from the business students brainstormed. Talk with students about examples of farmer, consumer, financial, purchasing, social and public service, as well as worker cooperatives.

If you are in Ohio, use the interactive map of cooperative business locations in Ohio available at [go.osu.edu/ohiocooperatives](http://go.osu.edu/ohiocooperatives) to find a co-op in your area to discuss. Alternatively, students can view [a video tour of Heritage Cooperative or Casa Nueva](#), both Ohio based cooperatives, as a model for discussion.

### ***What is a cooperative? A business owned and controlled by the people who use its services.***

Explore the cooperative model in more detail using the presentation “Introducing the Cooperative Model” from the CFAES Center for Cooperatives or the online learning platform at [go.osu.edu/coopmastery](http://go.osu.edu/coopmastery). The publication “[Cooperative Farming: Frameworks for Farming Together](#)” available from Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education is also a publicly available introduction to cooperatives and the ways the business model can help farmers and food systems.

Download additional resources:  
[Introducing the Cooperative Model](#)



## Help Students Recognize Food and Ag Cooperatives and Their Importance

**Activity:** Wait, That's A Co-op? - Introduce students to agricultural cooperatives by sharing products from cooperatives they are used to seeing on the grocery store shelf! Gather products from leading national farmer-owned cooperatives that market branded consumer-packaged goods. Let students enjoy the products. Talk with students about who owns the cooperative represented by the product and how farmers may benefit from working together to sell the product. For ideas of farmer-owned cooperative brands, the website [Farmer Owned](https://www.farmerowned.com) shares recipes featuring some of America's farmer-owned cooperative brands.

**Activity:** Connect with a Farmer-Member of a Cooperative – There are about 1.8 million members of farmer, rancher, and fisher cooperatives across the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Cooperative Services Branch, 2022). If you have the ability, ask a farmer in your network or community whether they are members of a cooperative and invite them to speak with students about their experiences.

If you do not have an opportunity for in-person activities or the ability to network with farmers,



short videos with farmer-leaders of Ohio-based cooperatives United Producers, Inc., Nationwide Insurance, and Buckeye Valley Beef Cooperative are available at [go.osu.edu/ycle](https://go.osu.edu/ycle).

### Consider asking farmers about:

- When did they become a member of their cooperative?
- Are they involved in leadership at their cooperative through the board of directors or member committees?
- How does being a member of a cooperative help their farm?



## Build Students' Awareness of Cooperatives in their Communities

**Activity:** Explore Cooperative Principles in your Community – Cooperatives are unique because they incorporate a set of globally recognized “cooperative principles” into the ways they do business. The ways that cooperatives embody the seven cooperative principles are as unique and diverse as the cooperative community. Help students learn more about cooperative principles by discussing each of the co-op principles using the [Cooperative Benefits and Principles](#) materials available via the CFAES Center for Cooperatives Co-op Mastery: Beyond Cooperatives 101 online learning platform.

As a group, identify an agricultural cooperative in your community or one that students may recognize from grocery store shelves. Find that cooperative’s website, social media presence, and other press information about the cooperative like publications or news articles about the cooperative, exploring how the cooperative applies one or more of the seven cooperative principles. Discuss what you learn as a group.

For example, students may be familiar with some of the community activities of local cooperatives like support of local youth organizations, scholarship programs, and more. These kinds of activities embody the cooperative principle of “concern for community.”

**Activity:** Connect with a Cooperative Leader – There are an estimated 1,699 farmer, rancher, and fishery cooperatives in the United States (U.S.

Department of Agriculture Rural Development Cooperative Services Branch, 2022). If you have the ability, ask a leader of a local cooperative like a general manager, local branch manager, or member relations professional, to speak with students about their cooperative or about taking students on a visit to a local cooperative.

If you do not have an opportunity for in-person activities, a short video-tour of Heritage Cooperative, an Ohio-based agricultural cooperative with over 500 employees and business divisions including grain, agronomy, energy, feed, and retail, is available at [go.osu.edu/yycle](https://go.osu.edu/yycle).

**WATCH  
LEARN** Tour Heritage Cooperative: Youth Cooperative Leadership Experience



<https://youtu.be/znG50oL7tbs>

## The 7 Cooperative Principles



Consider asking cooperative leaders about:

- How being a member of their cooperative helps local farmers?
- When was their cooperative created and why?
- What kinds of careers are available at their cooperative?

# Learning About Sustainable Agriculture

Sustainability is an important part of agriculture and the cooperative business model. One simple definition of sustainable agriculture includes, “producing enough food and fiber to satisfy today’s needs without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same” (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, 2023). Other more complex definitions of sustainable agriculture incorporate concepts like meeting food and fiber needs, enhancing environmental quality, efficient use of resources, economic viability, and quality of life for farmers and communities (U.S. Department of Agriculture , n.d.)

As member-owned and controlled businesses, cooperatives are built around principles that can align with concepts of sustainability. For example, cooperative members participate economically in the business and receive surplus

distributions from the business, which can help contribute to members’ financial stability and wealth-building. The cooperative principle of “concern for community” encourages cooperatives to “work for the sustainable development of their communities...” (International Cooperative Alliance, 2018).



## Learning goals:

1. Introduce students to concepts of sustainability related to agriculture and cooperatives and build their awareness of resources in their community to assist with incorporating sustainable practices into farms and agricultural businesses.
2. Help students apply concepts of sustainability to real-world production practices in agriculture.

## Build Students’ Awareness of Sustainable Agriculture Concepts and Resources

**Activity:** Ask an Expert – Various community-embedded resource providers help agricultural producers and community members explore and implement practices that enhance sustainability, from environmental or conservation practices to using unbiased, research-based information to improve their productivity and more.

Invite a panel of experts to talk with students about the ways they help farmers and community members improve their operations. If an expert has a specific area of knowledge, like water management or soil health, ask them to give a talk for students focused on technical aspects of that area or to share photos, videos, or other materials about projects in that area.



**Activity: Cooperating for Sustainability** – Explore some ways farmer-owned cooperatives in the United States are working to improve their environmental stewardship, enhance community well-being, and improve their cooperative and members’ economic viability – three concepts embedded in the way the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives defines sustainability (National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, 2017).

Select one of the following publications discussing the sustainability efforts of a nationally recognizable farmer cooperative. Explore the report or a single section of the report with students and discuss the types of sustainability the cooperative is working to improve – environmental, community, economic, or another type.

- [Blue Diamond Growers, Growing a Better Tomorrow 2022 Sustainability Report](#)
  - Blue Diamond Growers is an agricultural cooperative founded in 1910 by 230 almond farmers (Blue Diamond Growers, 2023).
- [Welch’s, 2022 Corporate Responsibility Report](#)
  - Welch’s is a consumer brand of products like grape juice owned by about 700 family farms in four different regions of the United States (Welch’s, 2023).
- [Organic Valley, 2023 Impact Report](#)
  - Organic Valley is known for organic consumer brands and products like milk; the cooperative is owned by more than 1,600 family farms that produce more than 30% of the organic milk sold in the United States (CROPP Cooperative, 2023).

The National Council of Farmer Cooperatives’ Sustainability Working Group has developed [resources for farmer cooperatives](#) to implement and communicate about sustainability programs. The Council’s “[Field Guide for Co-op Sustainability Programs](#)” and “[Sustainability Field Guide: Progress Checklist](#)” may offer ideas to educators, advisors, and community members who want to help students dive deeper into sustainability-based activities in a co-op enterprise.



## **Local Sources of Expertise**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) mission is to “deliver conservation solutions so agricultural producers can protect natural resources and feed a growing world” (U.S. Department of Agriculture National Resources Conservation Service, n.d.). Connect with an NRCS representative through your local USDA Service Center, which you can locate at [offices.usda.gov](https://www.usda.gov/offices).

In Ohio, county Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) provide technical, financial, and education resources to help local land users protect and conserve soil, water, farmland, woodland, wildlife, and urban areas (Ohio Department of Agriculture, 2018). The National Association of Conservation Districts represents 3,000 conservation districts across the United States; other areas may have different names for their conservation districts (National Association of Conservation Districts, 2023). In Ohio, connect with a local SWCD by finding their [contact information online here](#).

Local Extension professionals across the country provide education and assistance to community members in areas like agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, youth development, and community development. Connect with a local Extension professional, often affiliated with the Land-Grant University System across the country, by finding your local partner via the [U.S. Department of Agriculture College Partners Directory](#). In Ohio, you can locate a local [Ohio State University Extension office](#) and [Central State University Extension office](#) online.

Watch a recording of a November 2020 online learning session, “Cooperating for Sustainable Development,” in which Dr. Kip Curtis of Ohio State University and founding members of the Richland Gro-Op (RGO) cooperative in Richland County, Ohio, share how they worked to build a farmer cooperative to grow new farmers in their community and build a more just and sustainable food system. The webinar was co-hosted by the [CFAES Center for Cooperatives at Ohio State](#) with the [OSU School of Environment and Natural Resources Environmental Professionals Network](#) and [OSU Sustainability Institute](#).

## WATCH LEARN



<https://youtu.be/Gjl-118aBJ4>

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### Help Students Apply Concepts of Sustainability to Real-World Ag Production

**Activity:** Connect with a Farmer Leader in Sustainability – Chances are there are farmers in your community or area who are learning about and incorporating new production techniques, marketing activities, or ways of engaging the community that enhance sustainability.

For example, do you know farmers in your area who are using specific practices like cover cropping to improve their soil health? Do you know of farmers trying direct marketing techniques like subscription boxes or Community Supported Agriculture models to grow their bottom line? Are your students interested in a specific type of agricultural production like vegetables or livestock? Try to locate a farmer with an innovative or sustainable approach in those areas like a farmer using a high tunnel for season extension or a farmer using rotational grazing for pasture management.

If you have the ability, ask one of these farmers in your community to speak with students virtually or in-person about their activities. If possible, a visit to a farm could be a unique opportunity for students to see how sustainable practices are implemented on the farm.

If you're not already connected to farmers in your community to share an invitation, consider connecting with the resource providers listed in “Local Sources of Expertise” to ask for help making connections.

Consider asking farmers about:

- How did the farmer learn about the sustainable practice they are using? What motivated them to try it for themselves?
- What have they learned about or changed based on using the sustainable practice?
- What tips would the farmer have for others who want to try a similar approach?

# Learning About Agricultural Marketing

According to Google, marketing is “the activity or business of promoting and selling products or services, including market research and advertising” (Google Marketing Meaning, 2023) Marketing is an important part of operating any business, including agricultural cooperatives. While there are full courses and even higher education degrees focusing on marketing, for the purpose of this toolkit we will provide a brief overview and some ideas for activities relevant for high school aged students involved in a student-led cooperative enterprise.



Some farmer-owned cooperatives are focused primarily on serving their members’ marketing needs. In the United States, there are an estimated 931 farmer, rancher, or fisher cooperatives focused on marketing food and farm products from grains and oilseeds to fish, livestock, sugar, dairy, cotton, and more. (Wadsworth, Lapp, & Rivera, 2021) For example, cooperative grain elevators help farmers access regional, national, and international markets through infrastructure and access to markets. Other farmer-owned cooperatives may help their members with marketing by helping with activities across the supply chain, from developing new products to distributing and marketing products made with members’ produce all the way through the supply chain to the grocery store shelf.

## Introduce Students to Agricultural Marketing Concepts

### **Activity:** “Marketing 101”

Review the basic foundations of small business marketing, including the “four p’s of marketing” -- product, price, place, and promotion. Explore agricultural marketing concepts in more detail using the presentation “Market Planning for a New Venture” from the Ohio State University Extension Direct Agricultural Marketing Team.

### **Learning goals:**

1. Introduce students to concepts in business marketing and raise students’ awareness of why marketing concepts are important for agricultural cooperatives.
2. Help students understand how to develop a brand identity, develop a customer profile, and explore and evaluate product packaging to apply marketing concepts in the real-world.



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Download additional resources:  
[Market Planning for a New Venture](#)



This activity can be led by an instructor/ advisor, or in collaboration with a community-based partner with expertise in small business or agricultural marketing. For example, local Extension professionals may have expertise in food and farm marketing, or local chambers of commerce may have someone on staff with small business marketing expertise or be connected to local small business marketing professionals.

If you do not have an opportunity for in-person activities or are not connected to a marketing professional, students can learn about some of the basic foundations of agricultural marketing in the video “How to identify your target market” with Ohio State University Direct Food and Agricultural Marketing Specialist, Christie Welch.

**Activity:** Connect with an Ag Marketer - To help students develop a foundation for understanding marketing and the ways those concepts are applied in the real-world, consider inviting a local marketing professional to speak with students about their work and the key marketing concepts they use in their work or inviting a local farmer or agricultural business who markets their food and farm products directly to consumers.

Consider asking a farmer or marketing professional:

- How do they identify their customers? What do they do to try to reach those customers with their message?
- What is something about marketing they wish they had known sooner?
- How did they learn about marketing concepts and how to apply them in their business?

## WATCH LEARN

Direct Marketing Specialist  
Christie Welch tells us how to  
identify your target market.

<https://youtu.be/cSsAqvMNY08>

If the opportunity is available to you, consider visiting a local farm market or farmers’ market to see how local farmers are direct marketing their food and farm products. Note the signage being used, whether the businesses are using brands or logos, whether they offer specials or sales, and other aspects of the “four P’s of marketing.”

Visit the Ohio Department of Agriculture’s Ohio Proud website to locate a [farm market](#) or [farmer’s market](#) in Ohio. Nationally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Local Food Directories include listings for agritourism farms, farmer’s markets, on-farm markets, and more at [usdalocalfoodportal.com/](https://usdalocalfoodportal.com/)

## Apply Ag Marketing Concepts in the Real World

**Activity:** Creating a Co-op Brand Identity – Developing a brand for a cooperative or other business is critical to helping make customers and the community aware of the co-op and its products or services. Large businesses invest significant resources and time to ensure they are consistently and thoughtfully displaying their brand in all their customer interactions. Branding includes a logo, but also color scheme, fonts, photography, and other elements and a business uses each time a customer encounters the business or their products.

Have students select one of nationally recognizable farmer cooperative brands listed below. Using the worksheet “Your Branding: Reaching Customers Through Consistent Use of Your Brand,” help students explore how the cooperative uses their brand assets to attract and interact with customers by answering the worksheet questions. Explore the cooperative’s website, social media sites, and relevant review sites. Discuss whether the cooperative is consistent in their branding and messaging.

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Download additional resources:  
[Your Branding Worksheet](#)



Using a consumer-packaged goods brand that is owned by a farmer cooperative may help students relate and engage with this activity. Below are a few examples of nationally available consumer packaged good brands owned by farmer cooperatives. For more ideas of farmer-owned cooperative brands, the website [Farmer Owned](#) shares recipes featuring some of America's farmer-owned cooperative brands.

- [Ocean Spray](#) is an agricultural cooperative owned by about 700 farmer families with an average farm size of 18 acres (Ocean Spray, 2023).
- [Florida's Natural](#) is a brand of orange juice owned by one of the largest co-ops of citrus growers in the world (Florida's Natural Growers, Inc., 2023).
- [Sunkist](#), a cooperative owned by citrus growers in California and Arizona, is approximately 130 years old (Sunkist Growers Inc, USA., 2023).
- [Sun-Maid](#), a brand known for raisins, is an agricultural cooperative of grape raisin growers in central California (Sun-Maid Growers of California, 2023).

**Activity:** Getting to Know the Customer - An important part of marketing for any business is clearly identifying the customer the business is trying to reach. Identifying the customer who is a fit for a business's product often includes understanding elements of demographic and psychographic information as well as buying motivations.

To help students understand how a business learns about, identifies, and reaches potential customers, review the presentation "Identify your Target Market" from the Ohio State University Extension Direct Agricultural Marketing Team and review the video "How to identify your target market" with Ohio State University Direct Food and Agricultural Marketing Specialist, Christie Welch referenced on page 12.

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Download additional resources:  
[Identify Your Target Market](#)



After reviewing the presentation, select a product from one of the consumer-packaged good brands owned by a farmer cooperative and identified in the "Creating a Co-op Brand Identity" activity. Work with students to complete the worksheet

"Developing Your Customer Profile" in the "Identify Your Target Market" presentation for that product and brand based on the customers they think the cooperative is trying to reach.

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Download additional resources:  
[Developing Your Customer Profiles](#)



**Activity:** Getting Picky About Packaging - Packaging has many functions, including protecting the product to ensure safety and quality, educating customers on what product is and how to store or use it, and adhering to regulations, among others. The type of packaging used for a product depends on lots of factors, including the market channel where the product is sold. For example, vegetables sold in bulk to a restaurant will be packaged differently than vegetables sold directly to the end consumer at a farmer's market. To learn more about packaging for food and agriculture products, review the presentation "Getting Picky About Packaging" from Ohio State University Direct Food and Agricultural Marketing Specialist, Christie Welch.

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Download additional resources:  
[Getting Picky About Packaging](#)



Gather products from leading national farmer-owned cooperatives that market branded consumer-packaged goods or invite your students to bring a favorite food product to class or your next learning session. Let students enjoy the products, if possible, while discussing the packaging.

Consider the following questions:

- Does the packaging reflect the business brand?
- How does the packaging try to attract the brand's target customer?
- Does the packaging protect the product?
- What characteristics of the product are important to consider in decisions about packaging?

Examples of nationally available consumer packaged good brands owned by farmer cooperatives are available throughout this publication. For more ideas of farmer-owned cooperative brands, the website [Farmer Owned](#) shares recipes featuring some of America's farmer-owned cooperative brands.

# Develop and Do



## Student-Led Cooperative Model

In a student-led cooperative, as we are using the term, young people in an agricultural class, 4-H club, FFA chapter, or other group, lead an enterprise using co-op principles, which could be as simple as growing holiday flowers and selling them to the community or as complex as operating a farm with both crops and livestock.

### What is your Enterprise?

Depending on the group's interests and resources, the enterprise will vary. Clearly identify and plan for the enterprise, which will include consulting with administrators or other stakeholders. Perhaps students already grow flowers or raise small animals as part of a class. Could the activity be restructured to be student-led and informed by cooperative principles?

At the Ohio Valley Career & Technical Center in southern Ohio, as part of the Agribusiness Management curriculum, students and their instructor operate a 300-acre farm, raising cattle, hogs, goats, sheep, bees, corn, soybeans, and hay. The school farm is decades old, but the inclusion of student-led co-op concepts was spearheaded by the instructor beginning in 2016.

First, identify what you will grow and sell. Later, you will fully explore marketing aspects of the enterprise, so focus at this point on identifying what you will grow. Brainstorm cropping or

livestock systems, or other opportunities, and explore their feasibility within your circumstances.

### Define your Co-op's Mission

A cooperative's purpose or mission statement outlines its *why* – what purpose does the co-op serve? The mission or purpose statement can be a guide for the co-op's activities and growth. For example, when 320 farmers formed the Minnesota Cooperative Creameries Association it was to “join together to effectively market and distribute members' dairy production across the country.” (Land O'Lakes, Inc., 2023) That co-op has grown to become Land O'Lakes, Inc., one of the largest cooperatives in the United States (National Cooperative Bank, 2023), which now shares their purpose as “feeding human progress.” (Land O'Lakes, Inc., 2023)

What is your co-op's purpose? Develop a mission statement using brainstorming questions based on the purpose of your co-op.

- Who does the cooperative serve?
- What is most important to the cooperative?
- What does success look like for your co-op?

## Develop your Co-op's Structure

A cooperative is a user-owned and controlled business that distributes benefits to members based on their use of the business (Co-op Essentials: What They Are and the Role of Members, Directors, Managers, and Employees, 2014) In a student-led cooperative, students who work in the enterprise make up the membership. In this guide, we refer to an informal membership, effectively a group of students who opt to be involved in the co-op activities that are organized through an organization like a school, 4-H club, or community organization, rather than membership in a formal cooperative. Students sit on an informal board of directors to guide and oversee the enterprise alongside an instructor, advisor, or other leader. The goal is to incorporate cooperative principles and concepts into the setup and activities of an existing program.

Consider developing the following areas to embed cooperative concepts and principles into an enterprise or program.

1. Outline the cooperative's membership, including who will be involved, how they get involved, and what is expected of them if they decide to get involved. For example, cooperative members generally vote on major issues using a one-member, one-vote system, including to elect a board of directors (Co-op Essentials: What They Are and the Role of Members, Directors, Managers, and Employees, 2014). Consider setting a schedule for regular member meetings and holding time and space for the meetings.
2. Develop the cooperative's board of directors, including how many directors will serve on the board, when and where the board meets, and what is expected of board members. Generally, the board of directors in a cooperative has oversight and decision-making functions and is elected from and by the co-op's members (Co-op Essentials: What They Are and the Role of Members, Directors, Managers, and Employees, 2014). Consider whether students need to complete certain activities to be eligible to serve on the board of directors.

To outline how you will set up the cooperative's membership and board of directors, use the worksheet "Setting Up Your Co-op's Membership and Leadership."

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Download additional resources:

[Setting Up Your Co-op's Membership and Leadership](#)



3. Begin tracking the finances of the enterprise and engaging students in financial reviews, including developing a start-up or annual budget, creating a simple spreadsheet to track income and expenses and reviewing with students on a regular basis such as monthly, setting financial goals like a sales goal or even involving students in evaluating purchases for the enterprise like a new piece of equipment. One of the key responsibilities of a cooperative board of directors is overseeing the financial health of the cooperative. Consider incorporating a review of the enterprise's income and expenses as part of regular student board meetings.

To develop a start-up budget for a new enterprise, you can use the simplified budget worksheet "Co-op Start-Up Budget." To develop students' understanding of an income statement, a common financial tool used by cooperatives, you can use the worksheet "Cooperative Income Statement."

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Download additional resources:

[Co-op Startup Budget](#)  
[Cooperative Income Statement](#)



## Board Leadership in a Cooperative

The role of a board member in a cooperative is vital. Co-op board members have responsibilities ranging from hiring and supervising the general manager to overseeing the financial health of the co-op, setting policies, distributing year-end financial benefits, and more. (Co-op Essentials: What They Are and the Role of Members, Directors, Managers, and Employees, 2014)

Once you have set up a structure for a student board of directors and student members have elected a board, consider the following activities to help student directors learn about and grow their leadership skills in a co-op.

- Set a schedule for regular board meetings and hold time and space for the meetings. Perhaps the meetings are held during class time or time reserved for special activities. Many co-op boards meet monthly, but timing can vary based on needs.
- Develop an agenda for board meetings. Agendas can help meetings run more efficiently and effectively and a standard agenda might be used for every board meeting. Standard agenda items might include a financial report, board committee reports from special committees, old business, and new business.
- Take minutes at board meetings. Meeting minutes help create a record of what was discussed and what decisions were made during a meeting and can be an important way for the board to keep track of their activities. Provide minutes of prior meetings to student board members before each meeting so they can pick up where they left off at the last meeting.
- Engage a local cooperative leader or director to talk with student board members about the responsibilities of a co-op board, key board activities, skills that are important for directors, and their real-world experiences with a co-op board of directors.





## Agribusiness Marketing Plan

To assist students in developing a marketing plan for their student-led co-op enterprise, start with helping them learn about marketing plans; what is it, why is it important, and how is a plan developed?

### Understanding a Marketing Plan

A marketing plan is a document that details a business's product, who is likely to purchase the product, where the product can be purchased, and why customers will purchase from the business rather than a competitor. It also details how a business will “get the

word out” about the products they have for sale. Many marketing plans include the “four P’s of marketing,” -- product, place, price, and promotion. Defining these concepts will help develop the information needed to develop a marketing plan for the student-led cooperative enterprise.

As with any plan, the goal is for the plan to inform your activities, including the marketing efforts of the co-op enterprise. To learn more about small business marketing, [visit the Small Business Administration’s website “Marketing and Sales”](#) (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2023), which provides a brief description of the various elements of a marketing plan.



## The Four P’s of Marketing

# 1

**Product** – What is your product? What sets your product apart from competitors? How much product are you able to produce? What are the benefits of your product? When working with youth to produce a product and provide education and experience to those students, potential customers will likely value the product because it is produced by the students. The educational component of your enterprise may be an important message to share with potential customers.

# 2

**Place** – Where will you offer your product for sale? This not only includes the physical location but also the attributes of your product. For example, do you plan to be the cheapest option for potential customers to buy your product? Or do you plan to be the best-value? Do you plan to be in the luxury or “high-end” market? How you define your product will help determine its “place” in the market.

# 3

**Price** – How you price your product sends a message to potential customers. Are you the highest priced product or the best-value product? Of course, profitability should be considered when determining the price for a product but how customers will perceive the value of the product should also be considered.

# 4

**Promotion** – Understanding who your target market is and how they gather information and make purchasing decisions is critical to ensuring you are reaching the correct customer with the correct message at the correct time. Although this aspect of the marketing plan often receives the most attention by many businesses, the information considered as a part of “product,” “place,” and “price” will be vital; without these pieces, promotion activities may fall short of your marketing goals.

If your program already operates an enterprise, use the “Marketing Audit Handout” worksheet to analyze your current marketing efforts and how you can improve them. Alternatively, select an agricultural cooperative students identified in learning activities earlier in this guide and complete the worksheet after exploring the cooperative’s website and social media outlets.

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Download additional resources:  
[Marketing Audit Handout](#)



## **Craft your Co-op Brand Identity**

Consider developing a brand identity for your student-led cooperative enterprise. If you already have an existing logo or brand identity, it may be helpful to review the elements to ensure they are conveying the message you want.

Working with a graphic designer or branding specialist can help bring clarity and consistency to your brand identity; you may want to reach out to professionals in your community to see if they would be willing to work with your students to develop a logo or brand identity elements. Students with a particular interest in art or design may be great leaders for this activity.

Elements of brand identity include the colors, designs, fonts, logos, and other visual elements that identify your products in the mind of customers. Consider identifying and selecting the following elements to use in communications about your co-op and products: 3-4 specific colors, 2-3 specific fonts, 3-5 relevant icons or small graphics in your brand colors, a selection of high-quality stock images that convey your brand values, and a primary and secondary logo that use your brand colors and fonts.

**For a resource reviewing the elements of a brand identity and an example of a mock food business brand identity summary, explore the presentation “Branding: More Than a Logo,” by Melanie Sherman, OSU South Centers Business Development Specialist.**

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Download additional resources:  
[Branding: More Than A Logo](#)



Consider the following questions to help guide your selection of brand identity elements:

What key words describe your brand or cooperative?

What colors or images come to mind when you think about your cooperative?

What kinds of brands are appealing to your target customer audience?

As a part of your brand identity, you may consider developing a short phrase or “tag line” to use alongside other brand elements. Brainstorm short phrases with students that convey the main message of your brand. Select 5-10 taglines and solicit feedback from your stakeholders to select the one you will use.

Once you have a well-established brand identity, you can work to consistently use it in all your potential customer touch points like websites, signage, apparel, social media posts, print materials, and more.

## **Draft a Marketing Plan for Your Agribusiness Cooperative**

A marketing plan can help your cooperative identify opportunities and resource needs as well as help prioritize and time marketing activities.

Using the fillable “Marketing Plan Template” document available below, work with students in small groups on the each section of the plan. Help students conduct online research to gather information or consult with local resources to help fill in elements of the plan. Assisting students with researching and drafting a marketing plan can help them develop a better understanding of the elements necessary for an effective marketing plan. The template shares additional information and prompts to help you understand what information should be included in the various sections of the plan.

To assist students with drafting a marketing plan, access a fillable ‘Marketing Plan Template’ here:

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Download additional resources:  
[Marketing Plan](#)



This activity can be led by an instructor/ advisor, or in partnership with a community-based partner with expertise in agricultural or small business marketing. For local sources of expertise and assistance with developing a marketing plan, reach out to local Extension professionals, chambers of commerce, or a Small Business Development Center (SBDC), which are located throughout the United States and provide education and assistance about business development and growth to entrepreneurs. (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2023) There may be eligibility requirements for assistance. Instructors or advisors can [locate a local SBDC online](#).

For instructors and advisors who want to take a deeper dive into agricultural marketing, the following resources may be helpful.

- [U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Service](#)
- [Agricultural Marketing Resource Center](#)
- State departments of agriculture
- State Extension service



## Cooperative Sustainability Plan

To help your student-led cooperative enterprise consider and implement practices to promote environmental, social, and economic sustainability, consider working with students to define sustainability for your cooperative, conducting a sustainability walk-through, and developing a sustainability or conservation plan.

### Define Sustainability for Your Cooperative

There are many ways to define “sustainability” and many more ways to implement sustainable practices in an agricultural enterprise. Below are three aspects of sustainability to consider for your student led cooperative inspired by the [National Council of Farmer Cooperatives \(NCFC\) Sustainability Field Guide](#).

- Economic Viability – Providing safe and affordable products or goods while supporting the long-term financial viability of the cooperative.
- Environmental Stewardship – Responsibly and efficiently managing natural resources to ensure the integrity of the environment now and in the future.
- Community Well-Being – Conducting business in a way that is safe, healthy, and respectful of workers and the community.

**Use the worksheet “Sustainability Priorities for Our Cooperative” to work with students or a small group of student leaders to identify practices your enterprise currently follows or wants to implement to improve sustainability. Try to identify 1-2 practices in each area of sustainability.**

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Download additional resources:  
[Sustainability Priorities for Our Cooperative](#)



## Conduct a Sustainability Walk-Through

If students already operate an agricultural enterprise, conduct a walking assessment of your agricultural enterprise to identify areas where you can improve management practices to contribute to sustainability goals. This activity can be led by an instructor/advisor, or in partnership with a community-based partner with expertise in sustainability or conservation.

Plan a walking route throughout your enterprise so that you visit each major area or aspect of the enterprise. For example, if you operate a greenhouse where you grow flowers or vegetables, plan to walk around the outside of the structure, any water catchment systems, areas where you discard or compost organic material, the indoor growing area, and any other areas relevant to the operation. As you walk, pause at each area, and discuss with students and the expert whether there are ways you can make updates to improve economic viability, environmental stewardship, or community well-being. If so, make notes about the idea and take photos of the area. If you have the resources, consider conducting a simple soil or water test as appropriate. Compile ideas into a digital file or a binder and discuss changes that are feasible as a group.

If students do not currently operate an enterprise, perhaps a local farmer may allow your group to complete a similar activity at their farm. Alternatively, brainstorm with students the kinds of issues or opportunities that may arise with the type of enterprise they are considering.



Use the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Concerns Tool](#) to learn about the types of challenges an agricultural operation can face related to environmental management. Have students select one or more of the six main areas in the Conservation Concerns Tool (soil, plants, energy, water, animals, or air) and explore the issues listed under the topics. Identify one or two issues to explore in more detail and encourage students to conduct additional research as needed, focusing especially on concerns that may be relevant for your agricultural enterprise or proposed enterprise.



Consider the following questions to help guide your exploration of each conservation concern:

- Describe the potential environmental issue.
- What generally causes the issue?
- What kinds of solutions can help address the issue?
- What resources and knowledge would you need to implement these solutions?



## Develop a Sustainability or Conservation Plan for your Co-op

Using the Sustainability Priorities for Our Cooperative worksheet or ideas generated by the sustainability walk-through activity, develop a sustainability or conservation plan for your cooperative enterprise. As you start or grow an enterprise, a plan may help you operationalize and work toward goals in an efficient and systematic way, especially as students involved with the co-op change over time.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) can provide farm and forest landowners no-cost assistance with developing a [conservation plan](#). There may be eligibility requirements for assistance. Instructors or advisors can contact an NRCS representative through their local USDA Service Center. Find locations at [offices.usda.gov](https://www.usda.gov/offices).

A conservation plan may include:

- Maps, diagrams, or photographs of a property or enterprise.
- Information about the resources available to the operation like soil characteristics, water resources, or livestock stocking rates based on pasture size.
- Details about the type of conservation management practices that will be implemented, including location, schedule, and operational or maintenance considerations.
- Objectives and goals for conservation activities.

(U.S. Department of Agriculture NRCS Alaska, 2020)

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**“A conservation plan is a written record of resource concerns and conservation practices and systems you plan to implement and maintain on your property.”**

- U.S. Department of Agriculture NRCS

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For educators or advisors interested in a deeper dive into conservation planning, [Conservation Planning Workbook: Helping People Help the Land](#) from NRCS provides detailed worksheets to kickstart the conservation planning process. The workbook could be completed as a student activity.

Alternatively, using ideas generated by the Sustainability Priorities for Our Cooperative worksheet or sustainability walk-through activity, make a list of ideas students would like to implement in the operation. If feasible, set a time goal for implementation and list the resources the group will need to implement the idea. Post the priorities and goals in a place where students can regularly view them, perhaps on an oversize sticky-note on the wall of a classroom or regular meeting room. This list can be a kind of informal sustainability plan to guide co-op activities. Return to the list as you meet to plan for the enterprise, review finances, or engage with community stakeholders.



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Mr. Luke Rhonemus and students in Ohio Valley Career & Technical Center Agribusiness Management program's Agribusiness Co-op hosted community members at their school farm to showcase their student co-op model and school farm. October 24, 2023. From left are Mr. Luke Rhonemus, Eric Stanfield, Garrett Emerson, David Raines, Grant McClanahan, Caleb DeAtley, Carsen Shiveley, Hannah Hauke, MaRhea Unger, Isabella Crum, and Kayla Hawes. (Beth Rigsby/photo)



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