



# IN THEIR OWN VOICES

## COOPERATIVE LEADERS AND SCHOLARS REFLECT ON NCBA CLUSA, COOPERATIVES AND DEI

During the first week of October, the Cooperative Development Foundation and NCBA CLUSA welcomed the 2022 Cooperative Leaders and Scholars (CLS) cohort to Washington, DC. In addition to being supported with dedicated sessions, emerging cooperators from around the country—and across the cooperative spectrum—attended both the Co-op IMPACT Conference and the Cooperative Hall of Fame and also completed a new course from The International Centre for Co-operative Management at Saint Mary's University, "Taking Action on Principle 6: Leveraging our Collective Potential."

As newcomers to the NCBA CLUSA space, participants were also invited to reflect with honesty on how they see cooperatives—including, and especially, NCBA CLUSA—advancing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) as these organizations work toward a more inclusive economy.

**JOHN EDWARD DALLAS** is the coordinator of a community land trust whose development pipeline includes 11 limited-equity housing cooperatives as

part of an effort to expand permanently affordable homeownership and wealth-building opportunities for BIPOC and lower-income households in New York City.

Interestingly, while John Edward has been a credit union member for some time, he really didn't consider himself as having been in the cooperative space. "Rather, I see myself as re-entering it," he admitted, "you might say, 'reblooming as a cooperator' through my current projects. I want to be rebaptized in the cooperative space, and work to reconnect folks in my community—especially African Americans—to their cooperative roots."

Having worked with limited-equity housing cooperatives early in his career, John Edward expressed a concern that the residents of many of these co-ops are mostly focused on accessing affordably-priced housing. "I'd like to see them more connected to the big picture of the cooperatives. In New York City, the limited equity co-ops don't seem to see themselves as part of a movement, while the folks I know in NYC credit unions do," he noted.

"I keep thinking, from a personal perspective: as I'm getting older and my income will someday be limited, how can cooperatives be a part of sustaining me? So I want to get more engaged now, for many reasons."

The CLS cohort was a great place to start, he said. "My initial exposure to NCBA CLUSA and CDF was through the Cooperative Leaders and Scholars cohort, and my first impressions are: great work! Where would the cooperative space be without the efforts of these two organizations? Yet, being in this space, I've realized there is still so much more to learn.



"It's funny—a lot of people I've talked to see cooperatives as being the domain of 'yuppies in suits,' but when I thought of cooperatives, my inclination as an African American whose mother grew up in the Jim Crow South was to see images of the land, of sharecroppers in field hats. I have a desire to seek out and re-tie the African roots of cooperative structures and principles to the work of today.

"The civil rights movement, for example, I see very much as a cooperative movement," John Edward said. "Think of the way folks formed carpools when they refused to support the racist bus companies—they shared gas, helped each other with vehicle upkeep, organized the resources of the community to help them meet their needs

in a way that was fair and shared by all. That was really a cooperative effort."

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**– John Edward  
Dallas**

Despite this rich history of shared mission, John Edward notes there are gaps to full inclusivity. "I saw [at Co-op IMPACT] an emphasis on racial and ethnic diversity—which admittedly leaves others out. For example, how about the LGBTQ community? What are they doing in the cooperative space? How have cooperatives been used by the queer community to meet their needs?"

He added, "I'm not eager to see us continue to silo ourselves

into ethnic divisions. Our country and the world are more and more divided. We need something to bring us together; we're sharing a national space, natural resources... what can bring us together? How about the cooperative principles?"

John Edward sees co-ops as a point of unity; the cooperative community could be a vehicle to bring us back together. "So, why can't inclusion include everyone—and not segment people?



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As a Hispanic working as the business manager of the brewery Black Star Co-op, **MADELEINE BODDEN** notes a somewhat unusual situation. "Half of us in management are Latinx, but most of the remaining employees are not," she said.

The cooperative's name, Black Star, has an interesting backstory. The name derives from the use of the black star in Africa (and especially Ghana) to celebrate independence and a departure from colonialism. It turns out that the cooperative's (white) founder spent summers in Ghana, and associates the symbol with democratic values. The cooperative has little discernible connection to African culture or liberation, Madeleine observed, and adds that many breweries—and their staff and customers—are largely the domain of white males. The cooperative's name and logo may provide an opportunity to reflect and act more intentionally.

Madeleine remarked, "I've learned that cooperatives do have a rich history as it relates to work around diversity, equity and inclusion—for example, in the role they've played in Black liberation in the South." (Her own cooperative experience, she noted with humor, has been largely of the "crunchy granola" variety.) She observed that she would like to see greater representation of the LGBTQ+ community in cooperative conversations, and added, "There are never enough Latinx voices."

She really appreciated the NCBA CLUSA Impact conference track dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), especially the panel titled “Journey Into Action,” noting one comment in particular really resonated with her: “Before you offer help, ask what help is needed.”

Khalif nunnally-rivera is a cooperative business developer in Queens, New York, with a passion for history, government and social justice issues. He applauded NCBA CLUSA for bringing up the DEI conversation. “There was good representation at the Co-op IMPACT event—all different backgrounds, including international,” he said. “There is diversity in their leadership, and especially in the CLS cohort. In cooperatives, diversity, equity and inclusion is definitely something people are thinking about and engaging in—more so than in other sectors.”

As part of a nonprofit consultancy under democratic governance, Khalif’s organization is revamping its plan to uphold those values and create an anti-racist organization, work that started just shortly before he joined the organization last May. “The DEI committee created a long-term plan, with a focus on racism, but including all issues around DEI,” he said. “They are working with the community as well as increasing diversity amongst their staff, being more intentional, and keeping the plan at the forefront.”

What felt awkward to him at Co-op IMPACT? He noted the term BIPOC is often used, but it really is an umbrella term. “There is a lot of diversity even within the Black community,” he noted. He’d encourage organizations like NCBA CLUSA to be more intentional about what group they are speaking about, to make it more direct. And if the message is for a particular community, be sure the moderator is from that community. In terms of the language used, acknowledgement and transparency is key.

Khalif would like to see more efforts to create coalitions and affinity groups around diversity, equity and inclusion; he noted that NCBA CLUSA doesn’t necessarily need to host these, but the

organization can play a role to open the door to them.

He adds, “It can be hard to address DEI without also addressing the economic issues—how do we raise capital for Black or Latinx groups, how best can we understand the community [we’re] working with, whether rural or urban, and how can we take a holistic view of these barriers to access?”

Finally, Khalif emphasized that when people say they want to champion DEI, they need to step up and support the financial aspect. Echoing a point made by Hey Kinfolk’s Nirva Boursiquot during one of the DEI Track sessions at IMPACT, he said, “If the opportunity is there, financial support—even a modest amount—can have a big impact.”

**WALLY GRAEBER** has led—and lived in—cooperatives, and has a passion for land stewardship. In a cooperative he’d worked with previously, he was dismayed to see a wide range of direct challenges to an attempt to engage in DEI work, and was troubled by the anti-Semitism that was historically common in the organization. “As the organization was consensus-based, it was challenging to come to full agreement on policy changes which had a focus on discrimination and bias; I found it very frustrating,” he said. “Initial resistance came from all sides—management, board and members.”

Whenever anyone took a new job with his organization, he made every effort to create an environment to dive into the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion. “Sometimes it







was difficult,” he said, “because I’d be dismissed as a white male. But I recognized that some community members wouldn’t be willing to hear the voices of those excluded, and I had an opportunity to be an advocate.” He also found it challenging that he couldn’t get the organization to set goals—noting, wryly, “Because then we’d have to be accountable to them.”

After that experience, he was thrilled to see time dedicated to the topic of DEI at Co-op IMPACT. Since the CLS cohort was already so diverse, he acknowledges that its members may not have gotten that much out of it, but he believes the larger conference audience probably did. “Panelists and speakers took a risk, speaking honestly, and I really appreciated that. I hope the seeds planted by the presentations grow when people are back in their workplaces.”

In addition to appreciating the programming, Wally enjoyed being in the NCBA CLUSA conference space. “I felt cared for,” he said.

Wally noted that he’d like to see an organization like NCBA CLUSA articulate the vision and standard for DEI, and create a timeline of work. “Organizations can apply the same goals they might articulate in financial planning,” he offered, “and use those goals to hold themselves accountable.” As an example of how to move DEI efforts along, he proposed that perhaps dedicated funding could help an organization become more inclusive: “Leadership could develop a plan to document their work and growth in DEI, and be supported financially in achieving it.” Critically, he noted that if we are only relying on volunteers to move DEI along, those efforts are less likely to be successful and sustainable. “I don’t want to be continuously asking folks to show up and donate their time, especially those least in a position to do so,” he added.

Wally concluded, “The work I hope to do in the future is to ensure that organizations don’t just look like their communities, but that they actively listen to those communities. For me, this is really

important: a staff may look more diverse, but do they actually have active decision-making roles in the organization? If NCBA CLUSA is seen as making strides in this regard, I think member organizations will follow suit."

**MIKE SEO**, a community organizing professional and portfolio analyst for a community development financial institution (CDFI), felt very welcomed in the NCBA CLUSA conference space, and noted this as a real strength. "The organization brought together all these different types of cooperatives harmoniously; people seemed genuinely appreciative of the various co-ops and their stories," he observed. "They were embracing, warm and welcoming."

Working with a CDFI, he's observed that often when he talks to credit union people, they don't always see themselves as cooperatives, but NCBA CLUSA has found a way to bring credit unions into the space. "In fact," he added, "they bring all kinds of practitioners into the conversation."

He acknowledged that some members of the CLS cohort thought there should be more worker cooperatives present at Co-op IMPACT, but he felt the representation of the group was actually quite good. "It was more diverse than I expected—so many sizes and sectors," he noted. "I was so inspired! The makeup of the group was more than perfect—big enough for good diversity and small enough for great conversation and engagement."

One aspect that Mike found challenging was the high cost of the conference; he wondered if this might be a barrier for some individuals and groups to participate. "Maybe the Cooperative Hall of Fame doesn't need to be so luxurious, not a gala format, so more people could participate," he offered. "And while I appreciated seeing Ella Jo Baker be recognized by induction into the Hall of Fame, I was disappointed that the first Unsung Hero was not a living person. I really wanted to hear more about the work of using cooperatives to correct the power imbalance in a Cooperative Hero's own voice."

An opportunity to increase accessibility for

diverse audiences, Mike suggested, is to continue and increase the number of online events and webinars. It might take a variety of strategies and platforms—a co-op listserv, for example, which reaches people a bit more directly and is easier to engage with. He noted that the Opportunity Finance Network has an excellent online ecosystem and good community forum, and recommended it as an example.

Finally, Mike noted, "I think NCBA CLUSA is really good at solidifying existing cooperatives, but I wonder if there's an opportunity to reach out more to the general public—especially marginalized communities—as a way to increase awareness and understanding, and to enable greater access to the co-op space."

As someone working with minority and women enterprises at a large university's small business development center, **ISA FERNÁNDEZ**, MPA, had been interested in DEI for a long time, but noted the topic definitely became more prominent after the murder of George Floyd. "I hope it isn't just PR," she said. "At the university level, there are still a lot of inequities... sometimes [DEI] is just talk."

Isa appreciated the DEI Track at the Co-op IMPACT Conference, and noted she'd love to learn even more about how the co-op model can be made more accessible for those in the working class. "Sometimes it seems like a luxury that those with more social and financial capital can afford," she said.

The conference itself, she felt, was a very welcoming space. "It was great to meet others



actively working in and interested in supporting cooperatives," she said. "It was a breath of fresh air." She's hoping to take what she learned to inspire her colleagues back home to learn more about the cooperative model in business development.

In her work with small business development, Isa feels that more awareness of cooperatives can add value and life to her work—and to the ideas and visions of others. "I don't want clients to just get a loan," she said, "but to see the value in the cooperative model, to see their role as business owner as more than just making money, but being a part of building a more equitable community." She added, "The co-op space offers so much opportunity, and I want to help give my clients the support to start co-ops, and my colleagues the information to promote this business model to their colleagues. The model needs to be more widespread across the entire economic development community, and I'm happy to be a part of helping to shed light on this unique model that I feel can be especially useful to those who—alone—aren't able to access capital and form the networks needed to sustain and grow a business alone. I'm hoping to bring people together to build a sustainable, democratic community where workers have ownership in their environment."

**GABRIEL MUÑOZ** is a program coordinator at a cooperative and community development center in North Carolina. He was pleased to share that DEI efforts have made strides in his workplace. "Since I served as an intern just a few years ago, our board has grown, and become more diverse at the same time." The projects he works on regionally are inclusive. "I've been working with a childcare cooperative in which the staff and the kids are diverse," he said, "and another in which Hispanic women are converting herbs to soaps and fragrance products. This is a side business now, but we'd like it to grow."

"It was really great to be back in person at a conference again," he said of the NCBA CLUSA Co-op IMPACT event. "The worker cooperative space has been very COVID-cautious, so it was nice to be

back together again, to hear from everyone, share culture, and learn from each other."

Gabriel said he really appreciated the International Track at the Co-op IMPACT Conference, but would have loved to see more Latinx co-ops in the domestic tracks, to hear those voices. "I was really glad that Rudy Arredondo, President and CEO of the National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association, was on the program, but that was just a small part," he said.

Language justice is another area of interest to Gabriel. "Perhaps these spaces would be more accessible if interpretation was more available?" he wondered. "It might help people to better find their way around the conference."

As a result of participating in the Cooperatives Leaders and Scholars program, Gabriel is now much more aware of the Cooperative Development Foundation, and is curious to learn more about what it is capable of, to see how it may be a resource in his area of work with Hispanic and other diverse groups. "My passion is development," he said, "helping those in marginalized groups find success in their lives—and in their communities."

He did note, with mild bemusement, that in his home country of Bolivia, he is in the dominant class—Hispanics—and it is the indigenous community that is marginalized. "But here in the U.S.," he said, "I'm now a 'person of color.' That's an interesting shift to experience."

**CHYNNA ROSS** is a business capital attorney in Chicago with a focus on Black women entrepreneurs and the barriers they face in raising capital. She appreciated the way the NCBA CLUSA Impact Conference shared space—and time at the microphone. "I enjoyed the fact that so many co-op leaders were able to be on stage and add their voices to the conversation," she said, "especially Black women in agriculture, and Black and Brown leaders in cooperative finance. People need to see people like themselves, sharing their ideas."

"And funding is key," Chynna added, in regards



to CDF's support of the Cooperative Leaders and Scholars cohort. "In so many other small business settings, they'll say, 'Oh, we'll mentor you,' but the funding to actually get to the IMPACT Conference was critical—it is fantastic that the money is there, and actually being used to get more folks into these spaces."

While she applauded that the program's presenters were diverse, Chynna did note the audience—other than the CLS cohort—was somewhat less so. "A lot of the co-ops we work with are Black and Brown," she noted, "and have never heard of NCBA CLUSA. There is so much to learn, and it would be good to see more connection to the average cooperator. So, how can we find ways to work with the organizations whose main work is around DEI?" Chynna wondered. "How can the CLS cohort play a role in contributing to, and being an active part of it?"

NCBA CLUSA's IMPACT Conference opened Chynna's eyes to the power and potential of the organization's work. "Since I've come back, I've been sharing what I've learned," she said. "How can we all collaborate? NCBA CLUSA, CDF, attorneys, those in finance, people on the ground in co-ops... for us all to be successful, it will be important to figure out and develop a bigger cooperative ecosystem."

**JOSÉ ARMANDO MUNGUÍA**, a rural organizer and cooperative developer who is Mexican-American, bicultural and bilingual (Spanish and English), shared a concern that the DEI Track at the IMPACT Conference felt awkward to him because, like others have noted, the audience itself was not diverse enough to give equal respect and authority to the conversation. "If you're going to have the conversation," he pointed out, "you should have the people in the room—LGBTQ+, women, and more. The dialogue around diversity is good," he added, "but you should always consider: who is not yet included? Gay, lesbian, trans, disabled... these voices are not yet present enough in the cooperative space."

"We heard from a lot of speakers with titles," he noted, "but can we hear more from the folks doing the work on the ground? It would be impactful—in a

different way. What happens with leadership is they tend to talk to each other—they are looking out for other leaders—and it can go over the heads of those working at the practitioner level."

The international involvement at the NCBA CLUSA IMPACT Conference was impressive, he felt. "It makes a difference to Americans who frankly don't travel much. It's a game changer to see that co-ops work—with different governments, for different colors, in different walks of life." He wondered, by extension, if there was an opportunity for the international community to have greater representation as conference attendees.

Regarding the CLS cohort, José Armando had a thought-provoking observation. "The effusiveness and warmth of the group actually revealed the lack of spaces [for us] to exist, to share our humanity, in other parts of our lives," he said. "We knew we had limited time, so we really needed to soak up the experiences and stories."

He appreciated the facilitation the cohort received. "Those stewarding the CLS group—the CDF executive director, assistant director, and coordinator—understood what they were trying to create, the very specific environment and experience they wanted to foster for us," he said, "and they were successful in that. The partnership with St. Mary's University added so much to the experience as well."

"Overall, this event really met the needs of a diverse audience. For example, I appreciated that dietary needs were so thoughtfully considered. It is not a small thing to have food available that helps us be ourselves—and supports the small businesses and kinds of organizations we're working with in our own communities. To see that intention at the conference meant a great deal."

In the co-op sector overall, José Armando sees tremendous challenge—and opportunity. "What can we do in this space to address climate change, mass migrations, the destruction of markets... how can a sharing economy, with flattened hierarchies, help people—and countries—to manage all this?

"In graduate school, I studied the circumstances of

a lot of low-income people; one of the reasons we have a lot of migrant workers is due to the impact of climate challenges. Here, they can provide for themselves as a farmer, rather than a farm worker, through ownership, and through regenerative agriculture. So, how can we create more—and smaller—cooperative structures to support what people need? We have a lot to learn; and, let's face it, it takes more time to teach yourself than to be taught. We need access to competent individuals to help us to advance—and to give back."

And when we reach that to which we aspire? "When a co-op is running well," José Armando said, "it demonstrates the cooperative principles in a really beautiful way."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cathy Statz spent 30 years with Wisconsin Farmers Union, educating youth about the cooperative business model. Now serving as a co-coordinator for the CDF Cooperative Leaders and Scholars program and the National Farmers Union College Conference on Cooperatives (CCOC), she is past president of the Association of Cooperative Educators (ACE) and serves on the board of the Ralph K. Morris Foundation.



The Cooperative Development Foundation promotes community, economic and social development through cooperatives. CDF is a thought leader in the use of cooperatives to create resilient communities, including the housing and care needs of seniors. Through its funds, fiscal sponsorships, and fundraising, CDF provides grants and loans that foster cooperative development domestically and abroad.

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