

Xavier University's "Ethics/Religion, and Society" Program
The Cooperative Economy: Building a Sustainable Future
Quarterly Grant Proposal

1. What do you plan to do?

Xavier University's humanities program "Ethics/Religion, and Society" (E/RS) will host a conference, *The Cooperative Economy: Building a Sustainable Future*, to engage Cincinnati's blossoming cooperative movement to promote a humanities (primarily historical, philosophical, and ethical) perspective on cooperatives.

A cooperative organization can be defined as an "autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise" (International Co-operative Alliance). Cooperatives include organizations or businesses that are organized by community members or worker owners according to democratic principles that emphasize participation and autonomy.

The twofold purpose of the conference is to 1) reflect upon the history of cooperative movements, and 2) promote dialogue about their contemporary social and economic significance. The conference will be held April 21 and April 22 at Xavier University's Cintas Center.

The conference will take place over two days and is not primarily designed to be an "academic conference," but rather a summit meant to convene and engage various members of the Cincinnati community. To secure broad public participation, events will be held during the day and the evening, and we will have two keynotes, 1) a humanities based keynote Thursday evening (Jessica Gordon Nembhard) who will speak about the history of African-American cooperatives and 2) a leader in the national cooperative movement (Melissa Hoover) who will speak about cooperatives and democracy. The conference will also consist in a series of panel sessions (involving academics, co-op workers, and students). The panels will be dedicated to the historical narratives of cooperatives and democratic principles of cooperatives.

The following two speakers will deliver evening keynote addresses:

Jessica Gordon Nembhard, Associate Professor of Community Justice and Social Economic Development in the Department of Africana Studies at John Jay College, City University of New York.

Melissa Hoover, Executive Director of Democracy at Work Institute.

Since the conference will host a number of experts and leaders in the cooperative movement, it is important that community members are able to engage each other informally with the aim of building valuable connections and sharing information. The conference will host a lunch and reception designed to facilitate the building of connections and information sharing.

The keynotes and panels will raise a number of socially significant questions: What role have cooperatives played historically in African-American communities? Do cooperatives offer ways for communities to practically address issues of racial injustice and inequality? How do cooperatives embody humanistic and democratic principles often lacking in other business models? Are worker owned and community based cooperatives economically and environmentally sustainable and resilient?

We are asking Ohio Humanities to help underwrite the honoraria and expenses of the main humanities professional of the conference —Jessica Gordon Nembhard—as well as promotion costs for the conference.

2. How do the humanities inform this project?

A. The Need for Historical Perspective: The humanities inform this conference by providing a much needed historical perspective on cooperative movements in the United States, especially among African American communities, as well as a philosophical and ethical perspective.

To many individuals in marginalized and non-marginalized communities cooperatives are unknown, untested, and seemingly risky ventures. However, as the historical work of Jessica Gordon Nembhard shows cooperatives have a long history in African-American communities and have been central in their struggle for equality, economic justice, and self-determination during the days of slavery and up through the twentieth-century. Placing cooperatives in their authentic historical lineage is essential to bucking the skeptical attitude many first entertain when introduced to the idea of worker owned and community based cooperatives. For this reason, the humanities discipline that primarily informs this conference is history, and one of the primary goals of the conference is to provide a historical context for cooperatives in economic and racially marginalized communities.

This historical context is important since many of the cooperative businesses that are emerging in Cincinnati are located in communities with significant marginalized populations. Cooperatives, by pooling local resources, democratic participation, and profit sharing, contribute to anti-poverty and community building strategies, especially when mainstream market approaches fail to provide the necessary economic stability for communities in need.

While history is the central humanities discipline, the conference will also be informed by the humanities discipline of philosophy. The conference organizers and hosts, Gabriel Gottlieb and Adam Konopka, are both philosophers at Xavier University. Their teaching and scholarship focuses on ethics and political philosophy. The conference will be framed by their introductory and concluding talks and contributions, which will not only highlight the historical lineage of cooperatives, but will also reflectively examine the underlying democratic values operative in the cooperative movement, and how these values remain distinct when examining other social and entrepreneurial models.

B. The History of African American Cooperatives: Jessica Gordon Nembhard is a leading economic historian that has chronicled the cooperative movements in African American history. In her recently published *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and*

Practice, Nembhard weaves together archival research to tell the story of black cooperatives. African Americans have a long but hidden history of cooperative thought and practice in the last two centuries that represents a critical aspect of black history in general and cooperative history in particular. Nembhard documents, for example, how free and enslaved African-Americans pooled their money to buy freedom. “Freedmen” established mutual aid societies to contribute to the health care costs of illness and death. In the 1930s educational efforts emerged in African-American communities leading *The Journal of Negro Education* to publish throughout the 1930s numerous articles sharing information about cooperatives and cooperative economics. Harlem became in the 1930s and 40s a center for the development of cooperatives. A cooperative grocery store The Modern Co-op appeared there during the summer of 1941; it serviced community members by not only meeting their nutritional needs, but by also offering educational opportunities. African-American women were particularly important to the development and growth of the cooperative movement. As Nembhard explains, “They saw their efforts as part of the larger Black liberation and economic justice movements.”

Nembhard’s historical study offers a unique perspective on cooperatives by arguing on the basis of her historical synthesis that cooperatives can once again offer social and economic opportunities to communities in need. Not since W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1907 *Economic Co-operation Among Negro Americans* has there been a comprehensive study of African American cooperatives. Nembhard extends Du Bois’ approach to racial economic development in the 21st century.

C. Contemporary Relevance: Reflection on the economic history of cooperatives illustrates how humanities disciplines can practically engage concrete social issues like racial injustice and wealth inequality. Xavier University is embedded in the Evanston neighborhood, a struggling low-income African American community that has been affected by informal racial segregation and increased rates of unemployment. While these issues are not foreign to other neighborhoods in Cincinnati, community members in Evanston formed a worker-owned cooperative coffee shop called Community Blend. The appeal of the cooperative model for these workers is not simply economic, but also value-driven. Through the practice of workplace democracy and cooperative ownership, they are self-determining workers who now have sustainable jobs. Community Blend is just one example of a successful co-op in Cincinnati – others include the Cooperative Janitorial Services, Our Harvest (a farm-based co-op), Sustainergy Retrofitting Co-op, and two newly emerging cooperative grocery stores – Apple Street Market and Clifton Market.

D. Conclusion: By putting the humanities into practice, the conference on The Cooperative Economy will promote sustained reflection on race, the history of the cooperative movement, economic thought, and the underlying democratic, philosophical, and humanistic values of cooperative practice.

3. Who are the humanities professionals and what are their roles on the project?

A. Humanities Professionals: There are three humanities professionals that will play prominent roles in the conference:

Jessica Gordon Nembhard is an associate professor in John Jay College's Africana Studies Department in New York City and specializes in racial injustice, wealth inequality, and the African-American Cooperative movement. She is the author of *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*. She received a B.A. in literature and Afro-American Studies at Yale University and her Ph.D. in economics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Role: Jessica Gordon Nembhard will deliver a keynote address on the history of African-American cooperatives. She will also hold a workshop on how cooperatives can develop their own histories. Additionally, she will be an active participant and resource during the conference. After the conference she will visit local cooperatives.

Gabriel Gottlieb is an assistant professor in Xavier's Philosophy Department and specializes in social and political philosophy. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy from the New School for Social Research. He is the director of Xavier's humanities program "Ethics/Religion, and Society."

Role: Gabriel Gottlieb will provide an introductory talk to frame the conference and provide an ethical and philosophical perspective on the importance of cooperatives. He will serve as the conference host and will moderate a panel on ethics, democracy, and cooperatives.

Adam Konopka currently holds the Besl Chair (2014-2017) in the "Ethics/Religion, Society" program and specializes in environmental ethics. He received his M.A. from Boston College and his Ph.D. from Fordham University in philosophy.

Role: Adam Konopka will provide closing remarks that will synthesize the historical, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of the conference. He will host a panel on cooperatives and history.

4. How will you publicize the project?

We have already started promoting the conference with the help of Xavier University's E/RS program, Brueggeman Center for Dialogue, Eigel Center for Community Engagement, Economics of Compassion Initiative and various Cincinnati based cooperative organizations such as Interfaith Business Builders and the Cincinnati Union Cooperative Initiative. These publicity outlets include robust websites and social media presence, as well as extensive electronic and traditional mailing lists. Our publicity campaign will come in three stages.

Stage 1: Summer and Fall 2015

As a lead into the conference, E/RS will host in its fall 2015 lecture series an event that will introduce the idea of cooperatives to the Xavier community and the Cincinnati public with the aim of drawing interest and attention to the spring conference. For the fall lead-in panel, E/RS has purchased radio ads on the NPR affiliate that will run in November to advertise the fall panel and the related spring conference.

Over the summer 2015, we began an email advertising campaign, using promotional outlets supplied by our sponsors. These advertisements alert individuals and organizations to the conference and fall lead-in panel.

Stage 2: Fall and Winter 2015-2016

In November and December we will roll out our conference website. During these months we also will begin a series of email blasts out to the community through our partners.

In January and February we will send out posters and fliers to participating and relevant organizations, local universities, and place them in key public locations to promote the event. During November and December we also will begin a series of email blasts out to the community through our partners, which will continue up until the event.

Stage 3: Winter and Spring 2016

In addition to continuing with promotion via social media, email and a web presence, in March, as a lead up to the conference, we will roll out our second radio advertisement campaign on local National Public Radio affiliates. We will purchase 20 radio spots that will broadcast the conference information and website to listeners in and around Cincinnati.

5. Who is the intended audience?

The growing interest in Cincinnati's cooperative movement and its rapid expansion with the development of new worker owned and community-based cooperatives means that there is a broad audience for such a conference, one that includes workers, community organizers, co-op members, educators, students, and the broader Cincinnati public. We are particularly interested in engaging communities with active co-ops like Evanston, Norwood, and Northside as well and the general Cincinnati public.

We are planning for the following number of participants:

- A) Neighborhood community members (150 participants)
- B) Co-op organizations (100 participants)
- C) City and community development actors (50 participants)
- D) National cooperative business developers and scholars (10-20 participants)
- E) Xavier students, faculty, and staff (150 participants)

In total, we expect approximately 500 total participants.

6. What are the goals and outcomes of the project and how will it be evaluated?

There are several conference goals and outcomes:

- 1) Provide a historical and philosophical context for the growing cooperative movement in Cincinnati.
- 2) Provide exposure to the national discourse regarding cooperative businesses and economic sustainability, including scholarship on cooperative economic practice in the African-American community.
- 3) Promote dialogue and understanding within Cincinnati's cooperative movement.
- 4) Promote awareness among students and faculty about the philosophical values and importance of cooperatives.

We will have a twofold process of evaluation. First, we will create an evaluation form for the public and invite them to share their responses. The questions will be designed to assess the audience's learning experience, particularly with respect to what they learned about the values of worker owned and community based cooperatives.

Secondly, we will have an outside evaluator, Dr. Tim Lynch, professor and chairperson of the history department at Mount St. Joseph University, who will be asked to assess the conference in a report to Ohio Humanities. Dr. Lynch has published extensively on the history of labor movements.

7. Who is the sponsoring organization?

Founded in 1831, Xavier University is a private, coeducational institution. Xavier is the third largest independent institution in Ohio, the sixth oldest Catholic university in the nation, and one of 28 Jesuit colleges and universities nationwide. The University serves approximately 4,500 undergraduates and 2,200 graduate students each year. Rooted in the liberal arts tradition, Xavier's mission is to educate each student intellectually, morally, and spiritually. The University creates learning opportunities through rigorous academic and professional programs integrated with co-curricular engagement. Xavier alumni total more than 71,000 with approximately 34,000 currently residing in the Greater Cincinnati area.

The conference is primarily sponsored by the Ethics, Religion, and Society program. The Ethics/Religion and Society program endeavors to realize Xavier University's mission and philosophy of education by providing substantive opportunities for the ethical and/or religious analysis of socially significant issues, particularly from the humanities perspectives of philosophy, theology, and literature.

Other sponsors include: Xavier's Edward B. Brueggeman Center for Dialogue; Eigel Center for Community Engaged Learning; the university's Senior Administrative Fellow for Sustainability; Cincinnati's Interfaith Business Builders (IBB), an interfaith community organization that focuses on the development and promotion of worker-owned cooperatives; the Community Building Institute (CBI), which supports community redevelopment; and Cincinnati Union Cooperative Initiative (CUCI), a leading cooperative organization based in Northside.