



Virginia Cooperative Council

P.O. Box 25202 • Richmond, VA 23260 • (804) 281-1211 • Fax: (804) 281-7719 • Email: allen.melton@sscoop.com

VIRGINIA INSTITUTE ON COOPERATIVE EDUCATION

Each spring, the Virginia Cooperative Council (VCC) sponsors an Institute on Cooperative Education, a youth leadership conference for up to 64 Virginia high school youth. The primary objective of this conference is to educate youth about the unique cooperative form of business. Through an interactive, educational, and entertaining conference, students will enhance their teamwork, leadership, and communication skills.

Before arriving at the conference, youth participants are required to visit the sponsoring cooperative business and complete an interview form. This allows them to learn about the size and operation of a cooperative in their community. Participants are also provided with a booklet on cooperatives, which they will reference at the conference.

Day one activities begin with an overview of the conference and its format. Since many of the weekend's activities are interactive, icebreakers are utilized to help the students learn more about each other. They then attend an opening session on the history and importance of cooperatives and how cooperatives differ from other forms of business. Following the introductory overview, students are divided into four groups to learn about different types of cooperative businesses: supply, marketing, electric, and credit. At one point during the day, students are quizzed on the information that has been presented to them.

(Over)

Day two and three activities center on small work groups. Participants are put in the position of managing their own cooperative business through their participation in a computer-based business simulation game titled **“Who’s Minding the Store.”**

Each group represents a separate co-op business, each attempting to make pricing, inventory, advertising, credit, and personnel decisions to increase their co-op’s net worth in a competitive market setting. Students are first presented with basic business concepts and are then allowed to make their first set of management decisions.

When the results of their decisions are returned, they learn how to interpret the results and how to adjust their decision-making to yield more desirable results. In addition, they learn how to read balance sheets and income statements, and how to use values from the statements to calculate ratios that indicate the financial well being of the business. At least four management decisions, representing four quarterly decisions, are made during the conference. Participants are also placed in role-play situations where they can act out responses to personnel issues within the business. Through their decision- making and role-play, participants have opportunities to enhance their leadership and teamwork skills, and to improve communication skills.

On the final day, students take their second quiz, covering the material learned during days two and three. Adult team leaders provide assessment on each participant’s participation throughout the conference. All of the weekend’s scores are tabulated, leading to the conference culmination, an awards luncheon. All attendees are provided with a certificate of participation and the overall winners are announced. A final wrap-up session summarizes the conference’s activities and reemphasizes important lessons learned.

Conference evaluations consistently indicate that students find the conference to be both educational and fun. They often state that they came to the conference knowing nothing about the cooperative way of doing business and leave with an understanding and appreciation of this unique business form. They also provide positive feedback on the opportunity to meet new people, enjoy fine food, and visit a scenic rural setting. For the past few years, one hundred percent of participants have indicated they would recommend the conference to a friend.