



Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance
Plenary Summit November 10th, Drexel University, 2012
AORTA's summit overview report

::Mission Accomplished::

We set out to convene a diverse assembly of cooperators from throughout the Delaware Valley, to formalize the organizing that has been taking place for over a year, to bring new energy into the leadership of PACA, and to engage our constituency of local cooperators in crowd-sourcing what the benefits, outreach, coordination, and fundamental purpose of PACA could be. The joint efforts of the PACA organizational development committee, the communications committee, and the task force working with AORTA for summit organizing and facilitation were a resounding success. Throughout the day we had over 85 cooperators participating in lively discussion and getting to know one another in small groups and a plenary session that, against many odds, did not drag or deflate over the course of five hours. We have come out the other end of our first big summit as one of the strongest cross-sector cooperative organizing regions in the country, and with a clearer purpose for pushing PACA to the next level.

Below we will distill some essentials of what was accomplished through each part of the day, and highlight some notes from the more exhaustive minutes of the plenary. Attached separately is a summary of the small group work from the World Café activity.

Welcome and Framing of the Summit

We heard a roll-call of the many different co-ops in the room- and this was tremendous. This activity established the space as one that valued everyone's voice, by inviting participants to introduce their co-op and explain where they were from and the nature of their business. Many of us were surprised and inspired by the turnout. The opportunity for all members of any given co-op to raise their hands gave us a visual impression of how many folks were involved in multiple co-ops and how strong the participation was from certain groups. While people traditionally identify strongly with their food and housing co-ops, it was powerful to witness so many hands as members of the Energy Co-op (more than half of the room) and of various credit unions (nearly everybody).

World Café

(small group discussion)

The World Café format served us well for our goals for the morning. Small group sessions were a triumph in democratizing facilitation duties for the day and maximizing interaction and idea generation. We had the perfect distribution of people in each room, and participants were so adept at following directions (which seemed for a moment like they may be a bit complicated) that we had plenty of time for discussion in each World Café station (about 20 minutes each). This helped the café time feel not rushed. AORTA facilitation tricks helped to mix up the tables so that each round was a new combination of people both for networking and for not getting stuck in particular group dynamics. We heard about a handful of dominating personalities which affected the small groups, but for the most part discussion seemed generative and inclusive.

- **Ready Set Grow!** (*outreach and start ups*)

These small groups included: Technical Assistance and Finance, Marketing & Branding, and Cooperation Among Co-ops (Principle 6)

- **Our Co-ops, Our Selves** (*member services*)

These groups discussed: Start-ups, Public Policy, and Education & Research

See AORTA's World Café notes (attached separately) for the full list of ideas...

Mission and Vision

We returned to the large plenary to discuss the Mission and Vision. Our plan for sourcing information during the break by having participants write comments did not work. It would have helped to jump-start conversation once we were re-convened, however nobody walked past the statements which were posted in the hallway (there was a door directly linking the two rooms, including the snacks and refreshments).

Nevertheless, as the discussion went on, the importance of having this conversation in a plenary forum became increasingly clear. The quality of engagement with these abstract statements was impressive. We have more complete minutes of the conversation, but overall, a general sense emerged that people want to see more "active verbs" in the mission statement so that what PACA does is more apparent (and enticing). In terms of values, participants voiced wanting a stronger sense of the "democratizing" powers of co-ops in the vision and mission, and to emphasize cooperative structures and values more explicitly. Ultimately the charge from the group was to take the bones of the existing statement and give it some inspirational flesh that articulates a vision of how we are improving the lives of people and communities. The example was given of taking a cue from the ICA's statement about "building a better world."

Governance & Membership Structure

Though we lacked a formal voting structure, there was board-based alignment with the proposed structure as written- for membership to be limited to co-ops, with affiliate status of some sort available to "allies." That affords the Steering Committee with some great momentum for finalizing a membership basis for PACA, though the question of how representation, votes, and dues might be assessed clearly needs more thought. On this latter question there was a bit of a split in the room, with a clear majority favoring some type of

“equal” voting (one member-co-op, one vote). There was strong, minority support for proportional voting in PACA based on dues contributed or time invested (volunteered) in PACA, or even membership size (though this latter seemed woefully unpopular given the incomparable meaning of membership from sector to sector- where membership in a housing co-op might be a big deal- its literally where you live and sleep at night, and membership in a credit union might have little bearing on everyday participation).

Something AORTA noted, but did not share at the time, is that having a system based on dues might not need to mean strict dollar amounts, but could be based on a percentage that is assessed based on gross revenue or number of roofs or beds in a housing co-op. A small co-op in that situation, might actually still achieve an “equal” or even higher number of votes proportionally, if they paid 5% of their budget while a credit union might only pay less than 1%. As PACA develops it seems crucial that this conversation is shaped by broad and diverse input, be that in PACA meetings, through focus groups, or in a (prospective) membership survey.

Beyond this there were great surprises in thinking about membership! The conversation took two interesting turns in raising important issues for the Steering Committee to address in drafting PACA's membership category structure.

1. One was a strong feeling that membership include start-up groups. This would probably require a set of metrics, such that someone in the early “idea phase” of starting a co-op would probably not be eligible, but a group further along with a proper organizing group should be able to join.
2. Another was the question of “cooperatives” that are not entirely autonomous, specifically ones that are housed on, within, or technically owned by universities (but still run by students). Most felt that groups in this category should qualify as members.

From AORTA's perspective, the structure of these campus-bound co-ops along with any other applicants to membership should be reviewed by a membership committee; this is typical for cross-sector and multi-sector cooperative organizations.

Appoint Official Steering Committee

Success! We got a wonderful roster of volunteers to be on the steering committee, including previous, returning, and newbie leaders. The moment of hearing everyone's testimony of their interest and experience was powerful for the plenary. It was clear that there is now a mandate for this group of people to take PACA forward.

Announcements and Reflections

We thought that it would be nice to have some open agenda time at the end of the day to hear whatever was on people's minds. Mostly we received a lot of positive feedback on the day and the achievement of convening such an important and successful kick-off for PACA and our local cooperative movement (as well as all the tremendous work that has been done by PACA in the past year). Additionally many groups offered resources to PACA and others in the movement (a list of highlights appears in the minutes of the Summit). Though there was some degree of attrition (we were down to 50% of our high-water mark), the day ended on a triumphant note and we adjourned ahead of schedule to boot.