

Cooperative Leaders and Scholars (CLS) Fellowship FAQ

About the Fellowship

What is CLS?
CLS provides cross-sector leadership development and builds professional networks for new and emerging cooperative leaders and scholars. This eight-month fellowship provides opportunities to participate in multi-sector programming and events, and to engage with thought leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders. This community empowers and trains its fellows to build a more inclusive economy in North America, together. The CLS Fellowship features both in-person and virtual programming, a capstone project, and an optional mentorship experience.

What does CLS achieve?
CLS attracts, engages, and retains talent in the co-op business community; deepens and broadens cross-sector knowledge of cooperatives; provides leadership training for the next generation of leaders; and brings people together from across the co-op business community to foster cross-sectoral relationships, support networks, and collaboration early in their careers.

What kinds of topics will we explore during the fellowship?
CLS introduces fellows to the diversity of the cooperative movement and explores the opportunities and challenges facing cooperatives across co-op typologies and economic industries. Content is tailored to the needs and interests of the cohort. Topics may include cooperative governance and democracy, equity and community wealth building, financing and capitalization, communications and storytelling, and strategies for strengthening cooperative ecosystems.

Do I need to have experience working across different cooperative sectors?
No. CLS is designed to help fellows expand their knowledge beyond their own cooperative sector. Participants bring diverse experiences and perspectives, and much of the learning comes from sharing those experiences with one another. Whether your background is in credit unions, agriculture, worker cooperatives, housing, utilities, or another cooperative sector, CLS provides opportunities to discover connections, explore different cooperative models, and identify possibilities for collaboration.

What can I expect from the in-person gatherings?
The two in-person gatherings are immersive learning and networking experiences that bring fellows together with cooperative leaders, organizations, and communities. Activities include co-op tours, workshops, discussions with industry experts, networking events, and opportunities to explore how cooperatives contribute to local and regional economies. You can also expect dedicated time for fellows to build relationships with one another, exchange ideas, and develop connections that extend beyond the fellowship.

What happens after I complete the fellowship?
Graduating fellows join the CLS alumni network, a growing community of leaders working across sectors and geographic regions. Alumni have opportunities to stay connected through networking events, educational programming, mentorship, and other activities that support continued professional development and collaboration. Many fellows maintain relationships with their cohort and other co-op leaders long after the fellowship concludes, creating opportunities for ongoing learning, partnerships, and career growth.

Eligibility & Applications

Who is eligible to apply?
Applicants must be pursuing a career in; working with; or studying cooperatives (including credit unions and mutuals). You are eligible if you fall into at least one of the following categories:

1. you are an emerging cooperative leader (ages 18 - 35),
2. you are new to cooperatives (fewer than 5 years of experience in co-op work),
3. you are a current post-secondary student of any age with an interest in cooperatives. Applicants must live in North America.

Do I need to work for a cooperative to apply?
No! CLS welcomes individuals who are working in, studying, or pursuing careers in the cooperative movement. You do not need to be employed by a cooperative to participate. Fellows may work for cooperative businesses, credit unions, mutual insurance organizations, cooperative development organizations, or other institutions that support cooperatives. Students and individuals exploring careers in the cooperative sector are also encouraged to apply. All applicants must meet at least one of the program's eligibility criteria.

What qualities are you looking for in applicants?
CLS seeks individuals who demonstrate a commitment to the Cooperative Values, an interest in growing as a leader, and a desire to contribute to the cooperative movement. We value applicants who are curious about cooperative models beyond their own experience, eager to build relationships across sectors and industries, and interested in applying what they learn to strengthen their organizations and communities. CLS brings together fellows from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives to create a collaborative learning environment where participants can learn from and support one another.

How many people are accepted annually?
Each cohort is a maximum of 22 people subject to funding support.

Can my organization sponsor my participation?
Yes! Up to five slots are reserved for sponsored fellowships. Sponsored fellows are required to qualify under the program's eligibility criteria and must submit an application. The cost to sponsor a fellow is $5,000. Interested in sponsoring a Fellow? Contact Kirstie Boyette at kboyette@cdf.coop.

When are applications due?
Applications are due on January 11, 2027 at 11:59pm ET. Applicants will be notified of their status on February 5, 2027.

What does it mean if I am told that I am on the waiting list?
If selected for the fellowship, fellows must accept their spot by February 12, 2027. Unclaimed spots will be offered to applicants on the waiting list in order of priority determined by the selection committee.

Expectations & Logistics

What is the duration of the fellowship?
CLS is an eight-month fellowship that begins in April and concludes in December. Programming includes monthly webinars and two in-person events held in April and October.

How much time should I expect to commit to CLS?
CLS includes monthly two-hour webinars, two in-person gatherings lasting approximately one week each, and a capstone project. The program also offers up to five hours of individual, one on one mentorship with CLS alumni (optional). Fellows should also anticipate spending time outside of scheduled programming preparing for sessions, engaging with other CLS Fellows, and developing their capstone projects. The monthly time commitment outside of the in-person events is approximately five hours.

When are webinars scheduled and for how long?
Webinars are two hours long and typically fall on the third Wednesday of each month except for the kickoff webinar. Webinar dates include: April 7, May 19, June 16, July 21, August 18, September 15, November 17, and December 1. The webinar on May 19 is a joint workshop with CLS alumni.

When are the in-person events scheduled and where?
The in-person events will be held in Louisiana (New Orleans and surrounding rural communities) from April 19 - 23, 2027 and in Washington, DC from October 4 - 8, 2027.

Can I participate if I can't attend the in-person events?
Building community with each other is an important component of CLS. We require all applicants to participate in both in-person events.

Who is invited to webinars and in-person events?
Some webinars will be exclusively for the fellows, and some sessions will include CLS alumni. In-person events may also include CLS alumni participation.

What is the cost of the program?
CDF provides funding to CLS Fellows. Funding includes:

- U.S. Co-ops' Co-op IMPACT Conference registration
- CDF's Cooperative Hall of Fame event
- International Centre for Co-operative Management at Saint Mary's University one-day short course
- Access to exclusive online networking events, workshops, and webinars from industry experts
- For the two in-person gatherings, CLS Fellows are provided with:
  - shared accommodation with another fellow
  - most meals
  - up to $1,000 total travel stipend via reimbursement for transportation expenses (total for both trips)

What expenses aren't covered?
- Any travel expenses over the $1,000 stipend
- Some meals on travel days
- Optional single room surcharge for fellows who choose a single occupancy room (CLS provides shared hotel accommodation for the two in-person gatherings).

Will there be an opportunity to ask questions about CLS before or while applying?
Yes! CLS staff will host a virtual information session on November 30, 2026. If you can't make it, register and we'll send you the recording. Potential applicants are also welcome to contact Kirstie Boyette at kboyette@cdf.coop.

Capstones & Professional Development

What is a capstone project?
The culmination of the CLS fellowship is a capstone project that gives fellows an opportunity to apply what they've learned, explore an issue or opportunity within the cooperative community, and contribute to strengthening the cooperative movement. Projects can be completed individually or in small groups and are designed to be relevant to fellows' professional interests and goals.

Capstones can take many forms, including research projects, case studies, educational resources, storytelling initiatives, or plans for new programs, partnerships, or cooperative development efforts. For example, a fellow might document lessons learned from a cooperative's development, explore opportunities for collaboration among cooperatives in their region, develop educational materials for an underserved audience, or investigate strategies for addressing a challenge facing their cooperative sector. Projects do not need to result in a fully implemented initiative but should produce something tangible that can inform future work, share knowledge, or advance co-op development.

Fellows select projects based on several parameters, including alignment with CDF's strategic framework and relevance to their own cooperative work and personal interests. Throughout the fellowship, CLS staff help fellows refine their ideas, establish a manageable scope, and connect with cooperative experts, organizations, and resources—both within and beyond their sectors and geographic regions—that can provide critical insight and valuable connections to enhance project success and advance fellows' networks and professional development.

Will I have opportunities to connect with experienced cooperative leaders?
Absolutely! Building relationships across the cooperative movement is a central part of CLS. Throughout the fellowship, participants engage with cooperative executives, developers, educators, policymakers, and other industry leaders through webinars, site visits, networking events, and informal conversations. These connections expose fellows to different career paths, leadership perspectives, and opportunities for collaboration while helping them build professional networks that can support their continued growth.

Does CLS offer mentorship opportunities?
Yes! CLS offers mentorship opportunities that connect current fellows with CLS alumni to support their personal and professional growth. Through a structured mentorship program, fellows are matched with experienced cooperative leaders who can offer guidance on career development, organizational challenges, capstone projects, and navigating the cooperative movement.

Fellows have the opportunity to participate in a virtual networking session to meet potential mentors and identify connections that align with their interests and goals. Once matched, fellows can engage in up to five hours of one-on-one mentorship, either with a single mentor or across multiple mentors.