The Pioneer Valley has a rich history and culture of co-operative enterprises in which Mount Holyoke College has yet to actively participate. Between the seven student run co-operatives at UMass-Amherst, Hampshire College’s Mixed Nuts Co-operative, and the high density of credit unions and worker, food, and farmer co-ops within the region, co-operative businesses have proven to be both financially successful and sustainable within our larger community. Co-operative enterprises represent a “social-political-economic philosophy/ideology which explicitly and practically promotes and actualizes community health and strength”. The cooperative model is built on seven core principles: voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, autonomy and independence, education, co-operation among co-operatives, and concern for community.

This project attempts to implement these seven principles within the context of Mount Holyoke College to achieve both the practical mission of establishing a co-operative coffee shop on campus and to serve as a case study of integrating cooperation into the academy. Through this exploration, I have uncovered inherent tensions and contradictions between the academy and the co-operative model. Practically speaking there is limited ability to create an organization with fully autonomous member control within the academic context, as such an organization is inherently dependent on institutional approval and support. In creating a dependent relationship with an academic institution that utilizes non-democratic and hierarchal practices, the co-operative model is undermined through external pressure to conform to the institution’s organizational model. While the institutional relationship challenges the realization of economic co-operation, key partnerships with community stakeholders such as the Valley Alliance of Worker Cooperatives and faculty mentors have helped to drive this initiative forward. Despite the challenges of negotiating the relationship between co-operative enterprises and the academy, there are many examples of institutions that house co-operative student businesses and Mount Holyoke College is on its way to becoming one.
