

The Lewis & Clark Student Cooperative: Clientelism and Autonomy

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Introduction

Nestled in the basement of the Tamarack building, the Lewis & Clark College Student Cooperative (LC Co-op) can go unnoticed by people who do not know it is there. Just a hand-lettered sign on the doors and an old couch mark the entrance. When I visit the Co-op for the first time one Wednesday evening, the brightly lit space beckons me in as I approach the doors. I walk into a large, high-ceilinged space filled with a hodgepodge of secondhand furniture, art of all kinds, bookshelves, posters advertising events on campus, a couple of computers, a small stage, and a coffee shop counter. Salmon colored walls with olive green trim fill the space between the greenish-brown carpeted floors and the black ceiling. The Co-op makes the most of its space: it houses a coffee shop, a library and art supply corner, a stage, and plenty of seating space.

The front door leads to the coffee shop; the space behind the front counter houses another counter with a coffee maker, panini grill, water boiler, and a sink. Shelves filled with an assortment of non-matching dishes and loose leaf teas in mason jars line the back wall. Above the shelves, the Co-op's menu lists the drinks and snacks for sale. The front counter has a cash register, coffee and hot water dispensers, and a grey tub holding a few dirty dishes. On one end of the front counter stands a tall, green plastic bulk food dispenser with compartments filled with dry brown rice and trail mix. Murals decorate the walls to the left side of the coffee shop—a wide array of abstract designs, portraits, handprints, and words. Some of the paintings look unfinished and they are distributed unevenly over the wall, giving the appearance of a work-in-progress. In front of the counter sits a round wooden table strewn with copies of Lewis & Clark's student newspaper.

The stage sits vacant in the front-right corner except for an upright piano, an electric keyboard, an armchair, and an end table. The performerless stage's audience consists of a yellow, velvety upholstered chair and another round wooden table. Behind the stage, two big couches make up a lounge area; both couches sag slightly under an assortment of blankets and throw pillows. A brown plaid armchair fills the space between the couches. The focal point of the lounge area is a round coffee table decorated with a collage of magazine pictures.

Lining the wall along the stage and lounge is a thin wire with artwork and posters clipped to it like clothing hanging up to dry. Some are paintings, the largest of which is a colorful impressionistic figure painting of a woman; posters advertise the merits of fair trade coffee next to photographs and posters for Co-op events. A string of prayer flags extends from the end of the art clothesline and twists around a string of decorative lights. Lamps rest on many surfaces in the Co-op and colorful floor lamps create a warm glow amidst the harsh fluorescent light coming from the ceiling fixtures.

On first glance the Co-op overwhelms me: a bright chaos of different colors, textures, and shapes. As I look closer though, it becomes almost a giant collective art project. Each decoration and piece of furniture seems to me to have a story, and everything seems to have come from a different source. Whether through a painting hanging on the wall, a sticker on the bookcase, or a Clif Bar wrapper left on the floor, it seems like each student member of the Co-op has left his or her footprint in the space—a collective décor that reflects the collective of students who run and use the space.

Lewis & Clark is a small liberal arts college located in southwestern Portland, Oregon with about 2,000 undergraduate students. All students must live on-campus for

their first four semesters, creating a demand for many on-campus student groups and spaces. Currently, LC has about seventy recognized student groups. The LC Co-op is one of the most prevalent of these organizations. Student organizations at LC receive funding from the school and the Co-op is no exception. While students do organize and run the Co-op, their funding comes almost entirely from the school. (The Co-op also brings in money from food sales, but not enough to turn a profit; making a profit is not a goal of the Co-op.)

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines a cooperative as “an organization that is run jointly by its members, who share the profits or benefits.” The LC Co-op differs slightly from other independent co-ops as it is not financially autonomous. The members do not legally own the space; the school does. A Co-op coordinator revealed to me that she has debated whether the LC Co-op is a real co-op: “I’ve been questioning the definition . . . but I decided it is [a real co-op]” because “ideologically, we’re there. Culturally and ideologically, we’re there.” The student members participate in all of the managerial aspects of the Co-op, from cleaning the space to planning campus-wide events to designing the budget. The Co-op’s mission states, “The Lewis & Clark College Cooperative is an entirely student-run space and coffee shop. The Co-op functions as a resource for any student who wishes to host an event, gathering, or creative project and as an alternative to other campus food sources. The Co-op aims to promote political, social, artistic, and environmental awareness.”

The Co-op has a unique relationship with the school administration in that the school has the ultimate power over whether the Co-op can exist, but at the same time, students have control over the space and can decide how to run it. The Co-op and the

school each give something to the other and get something back in return. This unique collaboration made me wonder, “What is the nature of the relationship between the LC Co-op and the administration and to what extent does this relationship allow the Co-op autonomy?”

This paper investigates the relationship between the LC Co-op and LC’s administration through the lens of clientelism and evaluate what types of autonomy the Co-op has within this relationship. Clientelism deals with relationships occurring between two groups that have unequal power and act in mutually beneficial and reciprocal ways. First, I discuss my research methods and examine my own role as a researcher. Next, I analyze relevant literature on the subject, drawing from Lemarchand and Legg’s and Roniger’s studies on clientelism and Verhoest et al.’s conceptual framework of autonomy. Finally, I present data and analysis from my observations and interviews. This paper illustrates the client-patron relationship between the LC administration and the LC Co-op and assesses the extent to which the Co-op is autonomous in various respects.

Methods

My methods include participant observation and interviews with individual Co-op members. I conducted participant observation in two different settings. I attended weekly coordinator meetings every Monday evening at 6:00. Officially, they were supposed to end at 7:00 but often continued for longer than the allotted time. I attended the meetings throughout the semester, observing the leadership process and the group dynamics of the coordinators. During these meetings, I did not take full field notes but

occasionally made short jottings of important observations. I wrote my field notes after the meetings concluded so as not to be intrusive or distracting. I also spent time in the Co-op during the rest of the week. The space is open as a coffee shop and lounge space officially from Sunday through Thursday. Usually, a member works the coffee shop and students use the space to study, nap, or spend time with friends. During these times, I could overhear conversations between students and observe how people used the space. As many students do homework in the Co-op, I could take notes during these times without looking conspicuous or out-of-place.

I conducted various informal interviews during my research. Because LC is such a small school, I often saw Co-op coordinators and members outside of the Co-op which allowed me to talk with them about the Co-op and my research. I also conducted informal interviews in the Co-op, speaking with members, coordinators, and non-members who use the space. A benefit of LC's small size is that student organizations such as the Co-op are well-known by many students; because of this I was almost always doing research to some extent—both the Co-op and administration come up in conversation among students frequently so I took mental notes of relevant exchanges as well.

At the start of my research, I conducted a semi-formal interview with a coordinator in order to get some background information about the Co-op. I did not use a structured interview schedule or record a transcript during this interview; instead I took detailed notes by hand. I conducted three formal interviews: one with a senior coordinator, Anna, who has been involved with the Co-op for most of her time at LC; one with Matt, a junior coordinator who transferred this year and has been involved with the

Co-op for two semesters; and one with Cecilia, a Co-op member for two semesters. I used extremely similar interview schedules for all three interviews, only changing a few questions about leadership when I interviewed Cecilia because she is not a coordinator. I made digital recordings of all three formal interviews and transcribed them.

I began this project as both an insider and outsider. I am an insider in the sense that like the Co-op coordinators, I am an undergraduate student at LC. I also tend to have similarly liberal political and social beliefs as most of the coordinators and members. I am an outsider in the sense that I am not a member of the Co-op. My position as both an insider and outsider had its benefits and drawbacks. As a fellow student and peer, my presence at meetings was potentially not as invasive as if I were an older professional researcher. I know about people, events, and places at LC so I did not need to ask many clarifying questions and I could keep up with the discussions at meetings. I could have very casual and comfortable conversations with the coordinators because we are peers. Still, I was recognizably out-of-place at meetings because the coordinator group is such a small community. Certain seemingly insignificant factors did make me stand out—for example, I generally tend to dress in more formal or “preppy” clothing than most of the coordinators and I drink out of a plastic water bottle rather than a recycled mason jar.

I had very little knowledge about the LC Co-op, and co-ops in general, when I started my research; for instance, on my first couple visits I was unsure of how to act—was it normal to go in and sit on the couch to read for an hour? Was I supposed to buy a drink if I was using the space? How much was I expected to converse with other people in the Co-op? I did not know much about how the Co-op was run, who was in charge, and what the space was usually used for. The stereotype at LC is that the Co-op is a

space used primarily by students who fall into the student-defined “hippie” or “hipster” category, which is all I had heard about the group before I met them. At LC, I do not fall into the hippie or hipster category nor do I self-identify as either, but I do share many of the same liberal political opinions as the Co-op coordinators. While I could relate with them in most cases, some of their views tended to be further left on the political and social spectrum than my own. For example, while I do care about food ethics, for convenience or price reasons I still eat food that some Co-op members may consider unethical. My being more moderate relative to the coordinators creates the potential for bias in my perception or portrayal of the coordinators and the Co-op.

Logistically, my research was weakened because I often had to leave coordinator meetings slightly early because of another commitment I had. In order to make up for this in part, I read meeting minutes to supplement my field notes. As my research consisted primarily of sitting in on weekly meetings with the same group of coordinators, I was able to introduce myself and my research at the beginning so my respondents knew who I was and had the opportunity to ask me questions. This allowed me to avoid ethical problems because my respondents knew about my project. During my interviews, I obtained permission from respondents to record. All student names are changed in my written assignments, but LC staff names remain unchanged because they are well-known figures in the school community.

Literature Review

Through my research, I found that the LC Co-op and the LC administration have a client-patron relationship. I analyze this relationship using Lemarchand and Legg’s and

Roniger's theories on clientelism as my theoretical framework. Within this framework, I will also investigate to what extent clientelism allows for autonomy based on Verhoest, Peters, Bouckaert, and Verschuere's conceptual review of autonomy.

Clientelism consists of a give-and-take relationship between two entities; the relationships are "asymmetric but mutually beneficial relationships of power and exchange—a non-universalistic quid pro quo between individuals or groups of unequal standing" (Roniger 2004: 2). Clientelism is "a personalized, affective, and reciprocal relationship between actors, or sets of actors, commanding unequal resources and involving mutually beneficial transactions that have political ramifications beyond the immediate sphere of dyadic relationships" (Lemarchand and Legg 1972: 151). In other words, two parties, one of which holds more power or influence than the other have a "lopsided friendship" of sorts (Lemarchand and Legg 1972: 152).

According to the literature, the defining characteristics of clientelism include an asymmetrical distribution of power and reciprocal transactions between the two parties. Most of the literature on clientelism falls within the context of politics. The literature discusses governments' relationships with organizations and the political ramifications of clientelism. I translate the theory into a non-political setting to demonstrate its wider applicability. I also expand the idea of clientelism to examine what types of autonomy a client-patron relationship allows the inferior party.

Four types of autonomy described by Verhoest et al. apply to the Co-op: managerial, policy, financial, and legal. Managerial autonomy gives a group autonomy in managing finances (while still keeping to a budget fixed by the governing body), managing hiring and firing practices, and organization and logistics of operations

(Verhoest et al. 2004: 105). Policy autonomy allows an agency to determine its own processes of running, the quality and quantity of production, and the objectives of policies or processes (105). An agency has financial autonomy if it does not depend on funding from the governing body and if it “is responsible for its own losses” and risks (106). Legal autonomy depends on the extent to which an agency remains immune to the governing body modifying the agency and its activities (106).

These concepts of autonomy are also applied only in political and governmental situations in the literature. The literature also applies these concepts only to political and governmental situations. While LC is comparable to a governmental institution, it is not the same and I will supplement the existing literature by applying the concepts of autonomy to a non-governmental situation.

Data and Analysis

Part I: Clientelism as Applied to the LC Co-op

This section illustrates the give-and-take nature of the Co-op’s relationship with the LC administration. Each entity makes reciprocally beneficial contributions to the other. The general relationship can be summarized by the exchange of resources and power for cultural capital. The administration allocates money, space, and other resources to the Co-op and gives coordinators leadership roles on campus. With these resources and empowerment, the Co-op gives LC symbolic capital in the form of the presentation of a sense of community and a successful student body.

As a private institution of higher learning, LC depends on students to function and stay “in business.” LC needs to project a certain image to appeal to prospective students.

In looking at admissions materials, one of the most common images LC presents is that of a small, close-knit community. Whether these images are true can be (and often is) debated, but it is not mistake that the school supports the Co-op as a method to reinforce the idea of community. Anna observed, “I think a part of the college’s image that is projected toward new students, prospective students, is one of campus community where students can get really involved. And a co-op spells just that: community.” Many of the Co-op’s events turn into what Anna calls “community traditions.” Every year, the Co-op hosts numerous DIY (do-it-yourself) Bazaars where students can buy and sell crafts, art, food, and other homemade goods. In the spring, the Co-op hosts a Naked Mile run around campus as well as Critical Blas, an end-of-semester party with food and performances by student musicians. Many LC students attend these traditions, even those who are not members of the Co-op. The school gives the Co-op the money and resources to put on these events while the Co-op gives LC the symbolic capital of a concrete foundation of community to advertise to prospective students.

Working as a Co-op coordinator gives students real-world skills they may not get to learn as part of the liberal arts education LC offers. For example, the coordinators learn to make business models and plan their budget while working cooperatively as a team. These skills prepare students for future careers, and this is an aspect of working as a coordinator that Matt particularly appreciates: one of the reasons he joined the Co-op was “from a business standpoint, which [he] might be considering getting into after school . . . it would be a great experience.” The Co-op also gives students power and agency they would not necessarily have in another setting. Anna felt especially empowered by her leadership role in the Co-op because, “for me, as a female-bodied

person, a queer person, a person of color—I’ve been in the powerless role a few times in my life. As a young person, as a student, as someone who leans politically left in a family [with a lot of people] leaning conservatively. So yeah, I’ve felt powerless. It’s a contradiction for me to have a powerful role. It’s really meaningful for me.” When describing Celestino Limas, LC’s Dean of Students who has been a strong advocate for the Co-op, Luke said, “Part of his power is being inspiring, to really show trust in people.” By empowering and inspiring students through the Co-op, the LC administration creates students who can make LC a better place through leadership. While giving students an opportunity to develop real-world skills and empowering them through leadership roles, LC prepares Co-op coordinators for success—something that LC can benefit from as well. Successful students point to a successful school, which gives LC symbolic capital that later translates into monetary capital from tuition.

Part II: Managerial Autonomy

The three most important aspects of managerial autonomy are a group’s freedom to hire and fire workers, organize logistics of operations, and manage finances within a budget determined by the governing body. I argue that the LC Co-op has autonomy in this respect.

The school does not determine any of the Co-op coordinators or members. Any student can be a member as long as they sign up to work a shift in the coffee shop. In order to be a coordinator, a student must apply to a specific coordinator position and the preexisting coordinators select applicants for the upcoming semester. This method of

human resources management allows the students to have control over who manages the Co-op rather than the administration.

A series of bylaws written by the Co-op's founding members make up its organizational foundation. These rules can be changed through group consensus of coordinators and members. The bylaws are not in any way created by LC nor do they necessarily reflect the ideals of the school.

The coordinators also have the freedom to allocate their funding to the projects and events of their choosing. The Co-op, like all LC student groups, receives a total budget amount from the school. Within this limit, the Co-op can use the funds for any projects. Based on Verhoest et al.'s definition, the LC Co-op has managerial autonomy through its human resources, policy development, and budgeting independence.

Part III: Policy Autonomy

Policy autonomy gives a group the freedom to independently determine procedures, the quality and quantity of production, and their overall objectives (Verhoest et al. 2004: 105). I argue that the LC Co-op does have policy autonomy as shown through the development of their food policy.

The Co-op prides itself on being a group of people dedicated to social justice activism. One area where this activism manifests itself is through ethical food policies. Over the course of the spring semester, Anna worked on creating a food policy for the Co-op in response to previous tensions and misunderstandings between coordinators regarding food ethics. She took on this project because, "we need to decide what kind of

ethics we want to have in having business relations with other companies. We don't want to ever buy from Fred Meyer."

At one coordinator meeting, the group discussed the bulk food they sell to students:

Molly asks if they can start to sell quinoa because it is popular with students and a healthy alternative to rice. Luke replies that quinoa prices are currently very high because of political unrest in areas where quinoa is produced. He says that they shouldn't pay the high prices because it is coming from areas of unrest and they are unsure of who the money will go to—they cannot guarantee that the quinoa was grown, produced, and sold ethically. The coordinators all seem to agree with Luke (nodding, spoken agreement) and they decide not to sell quinoa at this time. (Field note 14 Feb 2011)

These ethical decisions separate the Co-op from LC in terms of policy. While the school's catering company, Bon Appétit, does appear to make efforts to use ethical food, their policy is not as extreme as the Co-op's policy. During the week when Luke mentioned the questionable ethics of quinoa, LC's main dining hall served dishes that included quinoa.

At a meeting with Jason Feiner, the Director of Student Affairs, he suggested that the Co-op order food with Bon Appétit to cut prices. The coordinators hesitated before responding to his idea and a few responded in vague terms, but overall they did not seem enthusiastic about his idea. Since then, the coordinators have found a few local food sellers and other co-ops that adhere to the Co-op's newly developed food policies in terms of ethics and local and organic production.

The Co-op can project a certain image through food policy. By selling organic, free-range, and other forms of ethical food, the members present the Co-op as a space of progressiveness and social activism, which appeals to LC's largely politically left-leaning

student body. The Co-op determines the processes by which they purchase their food, the quality of their food, and the image they project through their food policy. For these reasons, the Co-op can be said to have policy autonomy.

Part IV: Financial Autonomy

I argue that the Co-op does not in fact have financial autonomy from LC. Financial autonomy includes being independent from external funding and being accountable for losses and risks; the LC Co-op holds neither of these responsibilities. As a student group, the Co-op receives funding for their activities and projects. Because of this, the Co-op does not have to take responsibility for losses.

In a conversation with Matt, we discussed how the Co-op has a financial “safety net” provided by the school. He said the Co-op is “basically like a little business, but it’s in this magical land where we don’t have to . . . worry about anything.” The coordinators can take risks and experiment with budgeting and business planning and, in Matt’s words, “there’s no liability. I don’t have to pay for any of it myself; if it totally tanks and fails all that’s gonna happen is Celestino [Limas] will be like, ‘Well, that’s too bad.’” Anna says that through mistakes, she sees “a lot of learning happening.” Although the Co-op is not autonomous with regard to finance, the members have a safe environment in which they can learn important skills that are potentially applicable to future careers.

A benefit of the lack of financial autonomy is that the Co-op can offer incredibly low prices because they do not have to make a profit; they are not responsible for monetary losses. The price of a cup of coffee at the Co-op is a third of the price at Bon Appétit locations on campus.

Part V: Legal Autonomy

Legal autonomy is a group's immunity from the governing body controlling the group's activities and existence. The LC Co-op does not have legal autonomy. Because LC is an institution and LC effectively "owns" the Co-op, the school has the final say as to whether the Co-op exists or not.

LC has shut down student-run spaces and groups in the past, most recently the Rusty Nail coffee shop, the Co-op's predecessor. In a conversation with Anna, she told me the story:

Anna tells me that one of the reasons the Co-op was started in 2004 was in response to the closing of the Rusty Nail. The Rusty Nail was a student-run coffee shop/performance space in the basement of Copeland hall. One year, the students came back and the Rusty Nail had been shut down and the space was turned into new dorm rooms. The administration didn't tell the students that this was going to happen; the space was just taken away. The reason was possibly for food safety concerns, but historically there has been a lack of transparency between the administration and the students so no one can say for sure what the school's motivations were. (Field note 7 March 2011)

This happened before any of the current coordinators were students at LC, but they all know about the shutting down of the Rusty Nail and because of it, Matt told me, they are "very wary of institutional involvement" and the administration's power to potentially close the Co-op. He went on to say, "The fact that in the past, students have come back and their space has been renovated into rooms and it's just gone, disappeared, you know? That's kind of scary." This fear shows that in this regard, the LC administration has complete power over the Co-op; there is no room for legal autonomy.

Conclusion

Jason Feiner, LC's Director of Student Affairs, came to one of the coordinator meetings I observed. He brought a few pizzas for the group and they discussed the Co-op's current projects with Jason providing an administrator's point of view. Often, when a coordinator would bring up an idea or a project they were working on, Jason would seem to shoot it down, saying it would not work because of certain institutional rules.

The placement of the new Co-op menu initially elicited a negative response from Jason:

Matt has the idea to hang the new menu board from the ceiling over the counter so it is more visible to customers. The ceiling is made up of the tiles that can be pushed up and moved around, so the coordinators want to hang the menu board from the ceiling tiles. Matt asks if they are allowed to do that—this is an unusual occurrence because usually administrators are not present at meetings so the coordinators just make decisions as a group without consulting staff. Jason says that they are not allowed to hang things from the ceiling, and the coordinators all respond by saying things like “oh” and “okay.” It doesn't seem like a big deal to them; they can leave the menu in its original spot. Then, Jason continues and explains to the coordinators that because of the liability of having students climbing a ladder to hang up the menu, they aren't allowed to do it, but if the coordinators tell facilities services what they want, it can be arranged and installed by people from facilities. (Field note 14 March 2011)

Jason was careful to explain exactly what the coordinators are not allowed to do while also explaining how they can achieve the same goal by working within the bureaucracy of the school. Later in the meeting, Luke asked Jason if he had anything to add or came with any questions to ask of the coordinators. He replied, “No, I just came with pizza,” meaning that he is an asset to the Co-op community; he is at their disposal in terms of guidance and support. As an individual with a considerable amount of power over the Co-op, Jason acted in a way that would mutually benefit both parties—by advising the coordinators, he taught them how to effectively navigate within the power of the school. If the coordinators stay aware of rules in areas where they do not have autonomy, conflict

can be avoided and the highly functional client-patron relationship can continue to mutually benefit the Co-op and the school.

Clientelism stresses the dominant role of one of the two parties in a relationship. One group or individual has more power and more control than the other. However, as seen through the LC Co-op, clientelism allows for a high degree of autonomy in two regards: managerial and policy. While in a subordinate position compared to the institution of LC, the Co-op still has agency in managerial aspects such as human resources, organization, and finance management as well as in policy aspects such as procedures, quality and quantity, and objectives. The Co-op lacks, however, autonomy with regard to financial independence and risk and its own existence. Although clientelism in the context of the LC Co-op does not allow for financial and legal autonomy, it does provide the Co-op and the school with numerous benefits in addition to managerial and policy autonomy for the Co-op.

My research shows how a functional, productive, and cordial relationship between a group with considerable power and a group with lesser power can flourish and result in mutual benefits for both parties. While previously this idea has only been applied to political situations, I reveal that clientelism is applicable to a school setting with regard to relationships between administration and student organizations. If administrators and student groups understand this relationship and the benefits both can gain from it, schools can foster student organizations that give students power, teach them important leadership skills, and result in symbolic capital for the school, improving all parties involved.

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