



What is the Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education?

Each spring, the Virginia Cooperative Council (VCC) sponsors the Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education (VICE), a youth leadership conference for up to 64 Virginia high school students from ages 16 to 19 held at Graves Mountain Lodge in Syria, VA. VICE's primary objective is to educate participants about the unique cooperative form of business. Using interactive and engaging exercises, youth leaders will help students develop teamwork, leadership, and communication skills.

Before arriving at VICE, participants are required to visit their sponsoring cooperative business and complete an interview form that helps them learn about the size and operation of this cooperative in their community. They also receive a "Co-op 101" booklet, which will be a primary reference during the conference.

Day One activities begin with an overview of the VICE format. Since many activities are interactive, icebreakers are used to help the students get to know each other. The opening session covers the history and importance of cooperatives and they differ from other forms of business. Students are then divided into four groups to learn about four major types of cooperative businesses: credit, supply, marketing and electric.

Each group is presented with basic business concepts and make a first set of management decisions. When the results of these decisions are returned, the students learn how to interpret the results and adjust their decision-making to yield more desirable results. In addition, they learn how to read and interpret balance sheets and income statements, and use values from the statements to calculate ratios that indicate their co-op's financial well-being. Each group makes at least four management decisions, representing four quarters of a year, and participants are also placed in role-play situations where they can act out responses to personnel issues within the business.

At one point during the day, students are quizzed on the information that has been presented to them and make personnel decisions intended to help increase their co-op's net worth in a competitive market setting. Through this role-play exercise, called "Minding the Store," students develop leadership, teamwork and communication skills.

On Day Three, students take a final quiz and adult team leaders assess each student's participation throughout the conference. All of the weekend's scores are tabulated and during the awards luncheon, each attendee is presented a certificate of completion, with three overall winners are announced. The final wrap-up session summarizes the VICE conference's activities and reemphasizes important lessons.

VICE evaluations consistently indicate that students find this conference to be both educational and fun. Students often state that they came to the conference knowing nothing about the cooperative way of doing business but leave with both an understanding and appreciation of this unique business form. They also provide positive feedback on the opportunity to make new friends and enjoy delicious food in a scenic rural setting. Nearly 100% of participants indicate they would recommend the Virginia Institute on Cooperative Education conference to their friends.