

McGill University

Category: Student Engagement

Catalyzing a Culture of Sustainability at McGill University with the Sustainability Projects Fund (SPF)

About the project

Summary

The Sustainability Projects Fund (SPF) is a crown jewel of McGill University's sustainability efforts and a best-practice model for universities. The SPF's main goal is to build a culture of sustainability on McGill's campuses through the development and seed-funding of interdisciplinary projects. With an annual value of \$885,000* in 2016, the SPF is the largest dedicated campus sustainability funds of its kind in North America among McGill peer institutions, and is uniquely committed to collaboration between students and staff in its financing, decision-making, and project implementation. Since its creation in 2010, the Fund has awarded over \$5 million to 155 projects, which have yielded dramatic and lasting improvements to McGill's social, economic, and environmental sustainability performance. Every significant sustainability achievement at McGill over the past several years—from local and sustainable food sourcing to emissions reduction to Indigenous engagement—has been facilitated to some degree by SPF funding.

**All amounts listed in this document are in Canadian dollars.*

Project partners

The SPF partners with students, faculty and staff at McGill in both the governance of the fund and the implementation of projects. Specifically, the Working Group that governs the fund is made up of four students and four staff/faculty representatives. Also, 90% of project teams involve collaborations between students and staff. Alumni and community stakeholders are often included in project teams depending on the nature of the project.

The results

The problem

Like many universities, McGill has been active on environmental topics since the late 1990s, beginning with the low-hanging fruit such as energy savings and waste reduction. As the sustainability movement at McGill evolved and grew, there was increasing desire from both students and staff to adopt a broader definition of sustainability, integrate the academic and operational sides of the university, and transform the campus in profound ways that were not possible within existing funding constraints. In Quebec, universities are by law public, but with tuition fees frozen and chronic underfunding, campus administrators had begun to compensate by charging highly unpopular ancillary fees to students.



Sustainability Projects Fund
of McGill University

McGill University Profile

- A public research university in Montreal, Quebec that includes agricultural, law and medical schools
- 31,755 full-time equivalent student enrolment
- 6,979 full-time equivalent employees
- Encompasses an urban campus with satellite campuses including suburban/agricultural campus and research stations (including Mont St-Hilaire, a UNESCO reserve; Bellairs Research Institute, Barbados.)

The approach

Students felt that a sustainability fee would be acceptable should the university match funds raised. Thanks to intense lobbying, referenda were passed by all three student associations to approve the new ancillary fee that would fund the SPF, with historic turnout and approval rates. The SPF was and continues to be governed by a working group of staff/faculty and student representatives, who are involved in the iterative development of the fund governance, application criteria, and the review/approval of projects submitted for funding. Finally, staff and students, as mentioned above, are those who are using SPF funds to affect the sustainability transition, with ripple effects on our campus and beyond.

Our goals

The SPF's main goal is to build a culture of sustainability on McGill's campuses through the development and seed-funding of interdisciplinary projects.

Obstacles and solutions

A lack of funds for sustainability initiatives on campus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student activism and collaboration with administration led to the creation of the SPF: a \$0.50/credit fee for students, matched dollar-for-dollar by the McGill administration.
Creating and administering a fund that would be inclusive to all McGill stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instituting student/staff parity on the SPF working group that decides which projects are funded (4 student representatives and 4 staff representatives). Encouraging project teams to be diverse and inclusive through the project evaluation criteria, the application form, and supporting documents.
Community trust and buy-in: creating a fund that is administered transparently.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both the criteria and the overall process for deciding on projects are explained fully and publically on the SPF website. All project teams are given detailed feedback on their project proposals as part of the application process.
Groups often lacked project management skills to put ideas into action.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Fund provides a result-based management framework for effective project management (e.g., vision, goal, desired impacts, outcomes, outputs, success indicators, GANTT chart, and open questions that challenge silo thinking). The SPF connects teams to different stakeholders across the university to have skills and expertise that they need.

Performance and results

The SPF has had numerous impacts since its creation in 2010, including:

- Over \$5 million awarded in support of 155 projects (half from student fees);
- 250 student jobs created;
- 25 peer-reviewed papers published or in review;
- 310 students received course credit for contributing to SPF projects;
- 1,750 students took courses in which SPF projects have been integrated;
- 1,800+ volunteers mobilized for SPF projects;
- 14 acres of McGill land now growing food annually to feed the McGill community.

- Annual purchase of over 30,000 kilos of produce, 3,000 kilos of beef, and 135,000 eggs from the Macdonald Campus Farm to serve in dining halls, contrasted with almost no intercampus purchasing prior to SPF funding.
- Real-time online map powered by 400 energy meters tracks energy use in 70 campus buildings.

The Sustainability Projects Fund grants funding to project teams with no anticipated financial returns for the Fund itself. This distinguishes the SPF from a green revolving fund. Nevertheless, the seed-funding provided for projects has provided cost savings for the University, and in some cases, the ability to generate self-sustaining revenue for the projects. Examples include:

- Cost savings from internal reuse of IT equipment: \$16,120
- Cost savings from extending life cycle of McGill network printing devices \$1.6 million over 6 years
- Revenue from sale of sorted recyclables instead of scrapping or landfilling: \$12,000.

The SPF has enabled McGill to expand the niche of sustainability beyond the “usual suspects” to tap into a broader community of people who wished to take action but did not feel empowered to do so. Positive unexpected outcomes were many, including in operations (e.g., providing added value to agricultural products sold by the campus farm through purchase of a root vegetable washer and egg grader and enabling Marine Stewardship Council certification of McGill Food and Dining Services); social sustainability (e.g., making connections to traditionally underrepresented communities on- and off-campus through programs like Aboriginal Sustainability Week, community engagement events and anti-oppression training for our residences); education (e.g., ECOLE, a student sustainability living and learning community, and a co-operative educational venture between McGill students and a local school that provides elementary school children with hands-on learning about food production from seed to table); and campus governance (e.g., changing the campus culture to recognize how reporting and valuing lessons learned from failures can foster innovation and contribute to our mission of excellence).

The future

Lessons learned

1. Nurture engagement. We learned to empower and leverage our most invested and passionate individuals to bring ideas into reality. This included developing tools and communicating transparent and participatory processes.
2. Be unafraid. We learned to ask ‘why not?’ instead of ‘why’, allowing SPF projects to embody McGill’s sustainability ethos of ambitious realism. We choose to learn from failures instead of shying away from them; using campus as a living laboratory where knowledge is applied and learning is experiential.
3. Create a community. Instead of taking ownership of all projects, we learned to play a facilitator role, bringing together diverse persons who would normally not work together, distributing leadership, and helping them share and celebrate their successes.

Sharing your project

The process of creating and administering the SPF is well-documented on the website of the McGill Office of Sustainability, and McGill-created resources for project applicants are available in open-source format, including detailed guides for budgeting and project management. Information about the SPF is also available on the database of campus green funds maintained by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). McGill Office of Sustainability staff gave a presentation titled “Building a catalyzing

collaborative funding process: McGill's transferable lessons" at the 2010 AASHE national conference, and co-authored a 30-page How-To Guide for Campus Green Fund Implementation in 2014, available for download on the AASHE website. The SPF staff are also regularly contacted to share about their experience setting up the fund and making it the success it is today.

What has it meant to your institution to be a GUPES Green Gown Award finalist?

Being a GUPES Green Gown Award finalist has encouraged us that more courageous endeavors like the Sustainability Projects Fund are needed to shift the culture of sustainability on our campuses. Being in the company of other higher education institutions that are creating innovative sustainability initiatives strengthens our resolve to make positive change and gives us hope for the future.

Further information

Email: spfoutreach@mcgill.ca

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