

Roots

In 2009, an ambitious group of undergraduate students was leading the charge to examine and revitalize the University's relationship with the food it consumed. Using student research and community engagement, the McGill Food Systems Management Project vowed to maximize the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the food system on the University's two Campuses.

In 2010, to encourage distributed leadership and collaboration, McGill created the Sustainability Projects Fund (SPF). The fund connected people and projects with complementary goals to ensure long-term impact both at McGill and in the greater community.

Student Housing and Hospitality Services was challenged to review its services as a whole, initiate consultations within the McGill community and develop a strategic plan.

The Macdonald Campus Farm was supporting teaching and research activities in the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

Shoots

The coming together of the McGill Food Systems Management Project, the Sustainability Projects Fund, McGill Food and Dining Services and the Macdonald Campus Farm was the beginning of a movement which has allowed the University to completely reform its approach to sustainability, food and dining services.

"Uniquely among sustainable approaches to institutional food, MFDS simultaneously seeks to nurture in students an appetite for learning about and connecting with the food they eat. For many students, University is an opportunity to develop a new independence in making their own food choices. At this critical time, MFDS strives to promote the development of healthy relationships with food and farming, with a focus on sustainability and nutrition."²

Activities include:

Local Food Days

Monthly local food weeks are held in the University's five residential dining halls. The events introduce diners to locally sourced foods and are an opportunity to teach, share and empower students to engage in the sustainable activities at the university.

Meatless Mondays

Every first Monday of the month, students in residence dining halls are encouraged to become aware of the benefits of a meatless diet.

Culinary Workshops

Basic cooking skills taught to students living in residence makes a positive difference in their lives; students are empowered to make healthy, sustainable and flavourful food choices for the rest of their lives.

Teaching & Research – a few examples:

- GEOG 302: Best Practices for Sustainable Food Purchasing at McGill
- Resulted in SHHS hiring a Food Systems Administrator in charge of sustainable food sourcing
- Environmental Research (ENV401) course
- Students undertook a Sustainable Fish purchasing project
- SHHS adopted the project recommendations
- SHHS provides placements for the Professional Practice (Stage) in the School of Dietetics and Human Nutrition

What started off as a pilot project between MFDS and the Macdonald Farm has grown into one of our signature programs. The SPF granted seed money to the Macdonald Farm to scale up operations and the “McGill Feeding McGill” project was born. The Macdonald Farm has become SHHS' largest supplier of fruits and vegetables in season. The success of the McGill Feeding McGill partnership has brought new opportunities to Macdonald (*funded by the SPF):

- Installation of a 10,000 square foot high bay tunnel to undertake research on extending the growing season
- A rainwater collection project*. Water is used in greenhouses and on farm fields
- Large scale leaf composting program to reduce the need for fertilizer on farm fields
- Course work and student research projects on control methods to reduce fruit and vegetable pests
- The McGill Sustainability Projects Fund is the largest of its kind in North America. McGill Feeding McGill is one of the many projects that moved from the idea stage to implementation, thanks to the SPF. To date, over 80 projects³ have been funded.

Results

All of the projects we've highlighted have added value not only to our operations, but to those of our many stakeholder groups.

Some success is measurable and tangible:

- 40,000 kg of fresh produce grown on the Mac Farm for students in McGill residences; 2 food suppliers, including Mac Farm, certified Local Foods Plus
- 20,000 litres of rainwater captured at Mac Farm used for field and greenhouse irrigation

- 28,000 kg of compostable waste diverted from landfill; leaf composting on Mac Farm fields replaces most fertilizers
- 20 academic courses use SHHS and Mac Farm for training and practicums; 20 culinary workshops on basic cooking skills, healthy meal choices and preparation; 7,500+ students reached through Local Food Days
- 30+ sustainability-related student research projects from diverse faculties
- In SPF projects 482+ volunteers and 100+ sustainability-related student jobs created; 12000+ hours of labour at Mac Farm
- Other things are immeasurable but are simply the right thing to do
- Create opportunities for hands-on learning in real-life situations
- Optimize land and resources in the FAES
- Reduce the university's carbon footprint
- Create more sustainable agriculture systems
- Improve the quality of produce
- Promote healthier food choices and lifestyles
- Value employee contribution in the change process
- Contribute to building local economy
- Become better corporate citizens
- Turning roadblocks into hurdles

There have been many challenges in this project.

We've weathered challenging growing conditions, attacks on the crops by hungry crows and a lengthy labour disruption which threatened food production, harvest and delivery. We have had to work within the limitations imposed through the labour agreements and in an environment where resources, both human and financial, are limited and dwindling.

We have demonstrated that challenges can be overcome when good people are doing good work, together.

Learning is Constant

Here are some of the lessons we have learned so far:

- Sometimes you need to think outside of the box; the projects we have undertaken could have been done years ago had we been dreaming a little bigger
- Innovation requires action. All it takes is one idea and a little support to start a movement
- Sometimes you will need to act before you have everything figured out
- Success breeds enthusiasm
- Involve stakeholders in the decision making process. Transparent and regular communication

has allowed us to align mutual goals. Informed participation and decision making has built capacity within trusting, cooperative and adaptable relationships

- Engage all levels of your community. Ask them to share their ideas. Listen. Empower and support them
- Take some risk
- Celebrate your successes; reward and recognize achievements

For More Info:

[Principal's Report 2010-2011: The Sustainability Projects Fund http://www.mcgill.ca/sustainability/spf](http://www.mcgill.ca/sustainability/spf)