The Macdonald Student-run Ecological Gardens’ 2013 Final Report

SP0094

Submitted January 20th, 2014

To the McGill Sustainability Projects’ Fund

The Macdonald Student-run Ecological Gardens (MSEG) has three main **objectives**:

     1.  To increase McGill’s capacity for applied ecological agriculture education and research while bridging the gaps between departments.

     2. To become an integral part of the movement reshaping our food system on Mac

donald campus.

     3. To educate the campus and local community about the importance of sustainable food systems and how they can actively take part in the process from seed to plate.

Through the details and concrete actions that will be given in this report, we will demonstrate that those objectives have been reached.

One project we developed to optimize our production was to do an **enterprise analysis** on our production. The cost of production of each vegetable was calculated and sales of each vegetable were recorded. Using the data we now know which vegetables are the most cost effective to grow and which crops have a higher return economically. This can be used in future crop plans to minimize our cost of production while maximizing revenue from sales.

On a broader scale regarding the success of MSEG, the **Board of Advisor** met in December of this season to discuss MSEG in general and our current concerns. MSEG’s team left the meeting with good advice of the advisor to improve MSEG’s operations. Among them, Ramzy Kassouf (from Les Jardins Carya) will be helping MSEG with the finances and marketing aspect of MSEG’s production during January and February. Alex Flores, the other member of Les Jardins Carya, will also be helping the production plan. Also, we discussed with Paul Meldrum about the possibility of moving some of MSEG’s operations to the Mac farm. Thus, this would help MSEG by increasing the efficiency of the operation logistics, and most importantly, would give an easier access from the campus to come to the field for education purposes.

To achieve objective 2, the work of the **Out of the Garden** (OGP) club in fall 2013 allowed us to ensure a sustainable relationship in the form of a steady clientele. OGP successfully began its operations in fall 2013 and bought many vegetables from MSEG to make meals out of campus-grown food. In 2014, by integrating their produce needs into our crop plan, we will be able to maximize production for OGP and secure a certain source of revenue in the spring, much like the CSA does.

All objectives are also being achieved via diversified duties such as markets/selling the vegetables, field operations, McGill education, community activities and funding applications. Here is a summary of all our operations this season (taken and updated from our SPF 2013 application including additional achievements distinguished in red font)

Markets/selling vegetables

* (July-September) Market sales at Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue’s Farmer’s Market.
* (July-November) Market sales at the Mac Stewart building of Macdonald Campus.
* (July-August) Summer basket sales (28 baskets sold per week for 9 weeks) at the Mac Stewart building of Mac Campus.
* (September-November) Fall basket sales (35 baskets sold per week for 9 weeks) at the Mac Stewart building.
* (July-August) Selling vegetables to the Summer café at Mac campus.
* (September-October) Market sales at the Downtown Farmer’s Market.
* Vegetable donations given to Happy Belly.
* (September-October) Sales to our client, the Out of the garden project.

Field operations

* (Winter semester) Starting transplants in the greenhouse (with the help of volunteers and students from the course PLNT 451 and AGRI 340)
* (Winter semester) PLNT 451: Crop planning of MSEG with Professor Caroline Begg and 20 student, as well as individual projects linked with some MSEG tasks, specific planning and management tasks, as well as side projects (for example, compost system implementation, new irrigation system, CSA baskets advertising, creation of a site for recipes: cookingwithmseg.weebly.com, etc.).
* (May) Preparation of the fields
* (May) The core group began working full time
* Seeding and transplanting in the field
* Field maintenance (weeding, irrigating, cultivating, trellising, seeding cover crops for a better soil quality, etc.)
* Harvests
* (September-October) Planting cover crops for a better soil quality
* (September-October) Hiring part-time students employees (total of 9 employees in the fall semester)
* (November) Field closure

McGill education

* Meeting with the board of advisors in January and December 2013. It was valuable to ask our questions to the board of advisor. We Discussed options of new subsidies and changing some of the structure of our markets.
* Volunteer days
* Community lunch with Les Jardins Carya once a week.
* Exchange of 6 labor hours of one MSEG member per week in exchange of all the great service and advice provided by les Jardins Carya (cold room, washing station, mentorship, etc.)
* Links between McGill courses and MSEG, see the list in the education section below
* Participation in the tomato and garlic festival of the Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue farmer’s market
* Activities with the Farm-to-School project:
  + Summer: 1st and 2rd graders took field trip to Mac campus and we taught agricultural topics alongside MAA (McGill Apiculture Association) and Farm to School
  + Fall: Activity day canning, field harvesting, planting, and educational workshops about entomology, local foods, and gardening with the elementary school
* Tours of the fields with McGill students through courses and volunteering
* MSEG organized the harvest week with the participation of other clubs and students (canning workshop, potluck, movie screening on food security, mushroom cultivation workshop, vermi-compost workshop, mead workshop and volunteering days)

Community activities

* Organization of contra dancing event at the end of the semester to celebrate springtime
* Volunteer days

Funding applications

* SPF
* MCSS and AESUS
* Dean

Some goals we set out to achieve at the beginning of the season did not happen. One of those goals was having an open forum with the student community to get feedback on our operations. We also wanted to host a second contra dance in the fall semester; unfortunately, the local band we usually hired were not available for a gig during this time

**A new field in 2014**

Before getting further in our analysis of the season, we want to inform you about a big change for MSEG in 2014 that will help us in many of our challenges for next year. It is strongly possible that we will have a new field of about 0.75 to 1 acre at the Mac farm with access to water, cold room and a spot for a new washing station and a structure (either a high tunnel, caterpillar tunnel or unheated greenhouse).

With this new field, we would drop the horticultural center field (0.25 acre) as it would only make things more complicated to have fields at 3 different locations and that we would have access to all necessary facilities at the mac farm. We would keep the field in the arboretum, as we would not have enough space only at the Mac farm and that we want to keep our relationship with the other organic vegetable farms in this field, which are in a way our mentors. More than having benefits for the operation itself, the new field will have a great impact on our educational aspect. Details will be provided in the challenge section below.

**What we learned and our challenges**

Markets:

Having a market table doesn’t consist of simply selling vegetables. It needs a good preparation of the market table. In farmer’s market, we are often in competition with others vegetables growers, so we need to arrange our table so that it attracts customers. This can be done through how we display the vegetables, providing recipes to the clients, and also talking to them about how MSEG is different from other farms including our educational outreach and student-run organization.

One challenge we had with the markets year was meeting our sales goals. Our market sales were lower than the target we set. We learned the challenges of trying to understand the larger produce market and our niche within the McGill and Montreal community. The Macdonald-Stewart building market at Macdonald campus and the McGill farmer’s market downtown are important because they directly reach the McGill community. However these markets have not been generating enough sales to cover the cost to staff and run them. There exists a duality of reaching the McGill community and generating enough sales to sustain the project. This requires us to think about innovative ways to be able to reach both goals.  As the season has finished we have had time to reflect and plan our markets more strategically for next season.

Below are some ideas and changes for 2014, that we think would help us attain our financial goals:

Summer:

* Market table and basket sales at John Abbott College (JAC).
  + Would replace the Macdonald-Stewart lobby market at Mac campus, but the table would still be walking distance from Mac, so that the McGill community could still access our produce.
  + Would add a significant number of customers: families from the kid’s day camp renting JAC facilities and the JAC staff working in the summer.
* Dietetics Summer café
* Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue farmer’s market
* Adding an additional farmers market in Ile Perrot during the months of July and August
  + The majority of our sales are in the fall when the students return to campus, however the peak growing season is in the summer so adding an additional market for the summer months would be beneficial to our production and income.

Fall:

* Market table in the Macdonald-Stewart lobby of Mac campus.
* Market table and basket sales in the Laird Hall building on Mac campus.
  + Potentially adding a basket pickup location in Laird hall to reach more students who live on campus. A shuttle bus runs once a week to take Laird hall residence to the grocery store. We would try reaching them at that time so that they buy their vegetables at our market table instead of the supermarket
* Out of the Garden Project (our sales to them would be significantly bigger than 2013)
* Creating market shares where students have a prepaid account they can use to buy our vegetables. One problem we have noticed is many students on campus do not have cash, which limits their ability to purchase. If they have a prepaid account then they would not need cash and this could increase our sales.
* Downtown farmer’s market CSA basket pickup point
  + We have a constituency of customers who live downtown and this could encourage them to buy a CSA share so they can easily pick it up downtown instead of having to carry it on the shuttle or bus

Field operations:

This year, MSEG has been able to obtain many new material and equipment for its operation, the purpose being to increase the efficiency of the operations.

The fact of being the first year using this new equipment was itself a challenge because of a few reasons. First, many **benefits will be seen on the long term**. Among other things, we spent a lot of time building permanent raised beds with the BCS walking behind tractor to assure a good soil quality in the future. In the next years, those will be already done and will need less time to be maintained, at the same time as increasing crop quality.

Another challenge in efficiency was the time it took us to **get used to this equipment**. Seeding correctly can save a lot of time and money. If seeded correctly you will not have to come back to thin the surplus of seedlings if you seeded too densely, or avoiding empty spots in the beds if seeded too thin. One way to overcome this problem in the future is to allocate certain crops to certain people. Even if only one person will be seeding carrots during the whole season, this person will be able to follow his or her crop through the season, and develop the appropriate seeding technique for the future. Each seed has a unique shape so having someone consistently familiar with that seed would be advantageous.

Another challenge encountered this year was the **weeding**, the famous most time consuming operation of any organic vegetable farm. Despite the new tools obtained, the weeds spread faster on our planted beds than what we we could weed. This was particularly true when we began the sales in July. Indeed, two days in the week were allocated for harvest, as half of the team was busy with the 2 markets of the week. Then, only half of the week was remaining for the field operations. Prioritizing the preparation of the beds and the seeding/transplanting, the remaining time was on the weeding, which was often not enough.

For the future years, we would suggest to consider the weeding on the same level of priority than the seeding and transplanting. Indeed, a good weeding is all about timing. The fact that you weed a bed a bit too late will mean that the weeds will be bigger and more resistant to the fast weeding tools (hoes and flame weeder). Thus, you are obliged to hand weed, which requires way more time, which put you in a vicious circle as, while you are hand weeding the worst weeded beds, the small weeds in other beds get bigger and need to be hand weeded too. And so on.

Another technique that we could utilize in future seasons is called  “faux-semis”. It consists on preparing a bed, waiting for the first weeds to emerge, kill them and then seed or transplant in the bed. Removing this first emergence of weeds help a lot in the weed pressure. Unfortunately, the lack of time didn’t allow us to do this as we were always in a rush to get the operations done week per week. We know that for next year this operation will be crucial as many weed seeds have been produced. To overcome that challenge, we will integrate those operations in a pre-made calendar, similar to those made in the crop planning course for the seeding and transplanting. This next season we have designated new employees to develop a weed management plan before we begin work in the field so we are better prepared and organized in our battle against the weeds.

Finally, black ensiling tarps are really helpful in controlling weeds, especially in areas waiting to be planted or that just finished to be harvested. Those have only been obtained in fall. We are pretty sure that their use will be really helpful for next year as they cover large areas.

The **Irrigation** management was another challenge for us this year. We were four farms sharing the water of the well owned by les Jardins Carya. Les Jardins Carya and La ferme du Zephyr were sharing the water from 8:00 to 17:00, which made water accessibility pretty hard for us and les jardins du Santropol Roulant, who were sharing the water for the remaining time. We had to stay later in the day during hot and dry periods to irrigate after 17:00, but irrigating perfectly would have required us to stay very late, we sometimes had to irrigate for a shorter time than would have been ideal. Fortunately, the rain this year was frequent, which didn’t require us to always irrigate, like the 2012 dry summer. That being said, the situation isn’t changing for next year, and the fields of les Jardins Carya might even increase, meaning more water use.

Fortunately, because of our new field at the Mac farm, this will mostly resolve this problem. We are working on doing a rotation of dry tolerant crops in the arboretum field (because of the lack of water accessibility), while putting the remaining of our crops at the Mac farm field, as we don’t have any water limitation there, if only the irrigation pipes and material that will need to be bought. We also are in discussion with new MSEG team members about creating a rainwater harvest system so we have some water stored in case we do not have access to the irrigation system.

In 2013, every MSEG member was specialized in some tasks. This **task specialization** was good, but can be improved. For future years, we suggest the members to be assigned the tasks they already are good with (even if they want to learn something else), to set the base of the tasks management in the best way possible. Indeed, most of the tasks need to be thought of at the beginning and improved on the way. Thus, the best way to do is to set the base right and then, the members can be taught by the others, and even change their task responsibility. But having set the base right at the beginning will save a lot of time and energy.

Labour management:

Every year, we need to have a discussion about the labour: how many people will/can work at MSEG this year? How many part/full time? Why?

This year, we had 4 full-time, 2 part-time and the help from the MAA students. We observed that for the learning process, the full-time students learned a lot more by managing all the operations. This is understandable, as the part-time could not really manage anything, as they were not there all week to know what was going on all over the farm. This is why we would suggest future teams to focus on having more full-time members than part-time. This permit to spread the management tasks to more students, who learn more, while avoiding having students that learn only the basic manual operations and do not participate as much in the decision making process of all the challenge we encounter, which is one of the most valuable experience someone can have at MSEG.

However, if MSEG have part-time students, we would suggest MSEG to hire those who would be managing another project on the campus related to MSEG but that can’t work on that project full-time because it simply doesn’t requires that much time (ex. MAA students). I would suggest a minimum of 3 days per week, so that the person can follow a minimum of the evolution of the farm. Also, this year, we decided to have our meetings with only our full-time members, as it makes it easier to find a time to meet and makes the meeting less long. However, we are considering including the part-time members as most as possible so that they can learn more. We would only need to make sure to have proper procedures so that the meetings don’t get endless because of all the people around the table!

This year, two employees were working full-time during the fall semester. They were students that finished their degree in the 2013 winter semester. We strongly suggest MSEG to have, if possible, at least one member that will be able to be full-time during the fall semester. Indeed, school begins and this is the priority for students. Managing a farm is itself a full-time job, so it is just impossible to do both. Having one person full-time permits to do most of the management, which allows to many other students (up to ten) to work a few hours per week (10-15h) mainly for manual operations such as the harvest, washing and market sales. The full-time person is then assuring the fluidity of the operation, having an eye on everything that needs to be done and by sharing the tasks to the other members, that can worry less about all of this and have more time for their studies.

In terms of task specialization for 2014 we have created four executive positions within the administrative/management side of MSEG: VP Human Resources, VP Communication, VP Finance, and VP Marketing. Each position has certain responsibilities assigned to it so it will be much clearer what your role and responsibility is within MSEG. These specializations will make it easier to ensure MSEG’s continuity into future years. This set-up is commonly utilized within other student clubs and organizations like MCSS, SSMU, and AESUS who have been student-run for many years. The original idea of MSEG was to have everyone involved with every aspect of operations to get a holistic idea of what it is like to manage a farm. However as full time students managing everything as well as school has proven extremely difficult. If each student has a defined role within MSEG it will increase the efficiency and quality of our work as each member will have his or her specialty. This in no way limits or confines anyone involved with the project to a particular position. Everyone is allowed to help with every aspect from planning to production and finally to market.   
  
Define better schedule for MAA people when they come, and when we go there.

Another asset to our labor force was our partnership with the McGill Apicultural Association. MAA and MSEG have 2 different structures in term of workflow throughout the season. MSEG has a more structured defined timeline to follow as planting and harvesting while MAA has a less time sensitive schedule. The MAA team would come to the garden two times a week to help with operations. MSEG would in exchange come and help MAA when necessary, which happened about six times in the season. Perhaps, for next season MSEG would like to come with a better schedule so both groups benefit from the exchange and gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between agriculture and pollinators.

Education:

Relating to objectives 1 and 3, MSEG had many links with several departments regarding the use of MSEG as a tool for many courses. We wanted students from those courses to come in the field and learn more about ecological agriculture in many ways, depending on the purpose of their courses.

Here are the lists of the courses that successfully included MSEG in their curriculum, or where some students included MSEG in their course project (courses that were not initially in our application under “current faculty links” in appendix C but that have been added are in red font):

**NUTR 200 -** Contemporary Nutrition--Maureen Rose, Mary Hendrickson-Nelson (3 credits, Summer)

MSEG gave a lecture about sustainable farming.

**NUTR 209 -** Professional Practice Stage 1B--Joanne Routhier (2 credits, Summer)

For the first time, students from this class came to our fields twice during the summer to learn about local ecological vegetable production.

**NUTR 311 -** Professional Practice stage 2B--Mary Hendrickson-Nelson, Angel Ong (5 credits, Summer)

The students in this stage worked with the Summer Café, which we provided fresh produce throughout the summer

**NUTR 614 -** Graduate Professional Practice 4, Community Nutrition—Maureen Rose, Sandy Phillips (9 credits, Fall or Winter)

The students in this stage worked with the Summer Café, which we provided fresh produce throughout the summer

**NUTR 510 -** Professional Practice Stage 4—Sandy Phillips, Heidi Ritter (14 credits, Fall)

Canning workshops with MSEG’s produce. This course has been transferred to the Out of the Garden project, as we thought the cooking part of the food system was better filled by this student group that is focused on processing MSEG’s food.

**ENVR 495 -** Honors thesis (6 credits)

A research project named “Does spider silk reduce insect herbivory in kale?” has been done this summer (2013) in MSEG’s field by Margot Charette, with professor Christopher Buddle.

**ENVB 222** - St. Lawrence Ecosystems - Christopher Buddle (3 credits, Fall)

The students from this course came in our main field for a discussion on ecological agriculture, helped for the harvest and one group from the class took our field in their experiment on worms.

**ENVB 210** - Biophysical Environment with Caroline Begg (3 credits, fall)

The students from this course used soil samples from our field to analyze pH, texture, organic matter, parent material, and ability to hold/retain water.

**BREE 490 -** Engineering design 2 - Grant Clark (3 credits, Fall or Winter)

and **BREE 495 -** Engineering design 3 - Grant Clark (3 credits, Fall or Winter)

A group of bioresource engineering students have undertaken the construction of a root washer for MSEG through the engineering design courses.

**AGRI 340 -** Principles of Ecological Agriculture - Caroline Begg (3 credits, intensive summer course)

The students of these courses went in their lab period to help and learn with MSEG on planting seedlings in the greenhouse. They went in the field to help us with many field operations, such as using the walking-behind tractor to make permanent raised beds, weeding, planting onions, green onions and other transplants, etc. Finally, as half of the class was in bioresource engineering, we decided to design a multi-use cart and begin to build it with them.

**FAES 200** - Internship 1 Lindsay O’Connell (3 credits, summer)

A student in agricultural economics made an internship and worked with MSEG the whole summer. She helped with the finances, accounting and production.

**AGEC 491** - Research and Methodology (3 credits, fall)

Capstone Agricultural Economics major course. A student designed an enterprise analysis and linear programming model to create an economical crop plan for MSEG.

**PLNT 451** - Special topic: Crop planning—Dr. Caroline Begg (3 credits, Winter)

A few courses mentioned in our application are not listed above. This is due to a few reasons:

* Some courses are internships and it is not every year that students involved with MSEG need or choose to be credited for this (AGRI 310)
* Some courses involve doing a project. Those projects chosen can be linked with MSEG, but it’s not every year that a student choose to do so. (AGRI 490)
* Some courses use MSEG fields for their laboratory period. Even if those courses used MSEG in the past year, they frequently change their laboratory experiments and won’t use MSEG field necessarily every year (SOIL 315)

Aside from the courses linked with MSEG, what we want to do is also teach and learn with volunteers coming from anywhere, especially Mac campus. It was hard to get volunteers to the main field in Senneville (where we spend most of our time), mainly due to the distance and accessibility (can access only by bike or by car, and it still is hard to find alone, as you know). During the fall semester (when all the undergraduate are on campus), a lot of work was required at the main field for harvest, but due to the field site, volunteers were only coming in the afternoon to help with the washing and packaging. This is unfortunate because being in the field would benefit a lot more to the students than being at the washing station. A lot more could be discussed, shown and taught to the volunteers, having the crops and the field just under their eyes. With our situation, more complex transportation strategies could have been adopted to bring the volunteers at the main field, but it’s hard to say if we would really had benefits for the trouble.

We are really happy about the main field site change for next year because of the reasons mentioned above, and also because the field will be easier for the volunteers to access. The field will now be at a walkable distance from the campus, so everyone will be able to come whenever they want. It will be simple, and simple is needed on a farm. We will have the field and the washing station close by, which will permit an easier way of sharing tasks for everyone.

Finances:

The plan for this year was to implement a better production system, with tools and equipment adapted to small-scale agriculture that would allow MSEG to be financially self-sufficient by saving labour and by increasing our yields.

In 2013, the additional funding from the SPF was only used for equipment and operation costs and all the sales revenue was used to pay salaries. However market sales fell short of the goal this year and the salary costs were under budgeted which has caused the season to close $13,455 over budget. Table 1 below outlines the planned budget for the 2013 season:

**2013**

**Table 1**

**2013 estimated budget**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Expected** |  | **Actual** |
| **Expense** |  | **Expenses** |
| Tools & equipment, operational material | 22811.00 | 21517.57 |
| Summer salaries | 32320.00 | 30938.75 |
| Fall salaries | 10800.00 | 11618.66 |
| Payroll expenses (taxes & insurance) | 0 | 7744.22 |
| **TOTAL** | 65931.00 | 71819.2 |
|  |  |  |
| **2013 estimated revenue** |  |  |
| Basket sale | 10800.00 | 10800.00 |
| Market sale | 31950.00 | 19223.46 |
| Sustainability project funds | 22811.00 | 22811.00 |
| MCSS | 518.00 | 518.00 |
| Dean | 5000.00 | 5000.00 |
| **TOTAL** | 71079.00 | 58363.46 |
| BALANCE |  | 13455.74 |

Two main factors led to the deficit. The first was that payroll expenses such as QPP, EI, Vacation pay out (4% salaries), CSST, QPIP, CNT, and QHSF were not budgeted because this was the first year MSEG paid salaries from our own account. In previous years SPF paid the salary expenses. The second factor was that our market sales fell $12, 726.54 short of the planned goal. Given this financial picture the question arises what would financial self-sufficiency at MSEG look like and is it attainable in the future? There were two main factors to consider in attaining this goal: marketing and production efficiency.   
  
As mentioned above, our revenues were less than expected because we did not reach our market sales goals. At the beginning of the season, we decided the quantity to produce based on the revenue we needed (of our market sales) to cover all of our labor costs, operational expenses plus additional buffer money for emergencies or unforeseen expenses. However we struggled with selling that quantity at the market table. We have been actively researching and learning ways to increase our sales. This can be done in a combination of ways: finding new clientele, finding and creating effective marketing strategies, and learning how to be better salespeople. We have been gaining mentorship and advice from fellow farmer Ramzy Kassouf who is an expert on the business and marketing aspects of small-diversified vegetable production operations. It is clear from the production side we have the capacity to grow enough food to meet these sales goals.  We will need to focus on the marketing aspect and developing a strong clientele and presence among the McGill, Macdonald, and Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue community. As discussed earlier in the marketing sections further details are provided on how we will increase our sales.  
  
We already discussed the impact of our marketing strategy and the field operations. Here’s a third factor that had an impact and that we would like to bring up: the balance between the production and the education aspects of MSEG.

On the production aspect, I think the best way to see it is to compare MSEG with any other small-scale vegetable organic farm. There are many different things that can be either beneficial or to our disadvantage. The benefits are the lower expenses (free access to a field, water, cold room, certain fees that would come with a registered business). MSEG gains these advantages by being part of the McGill community and in an effort to give back we often give educational tours and have classes come to the garden to learn about our production and ecological farming practices. These activities are non-income generating activities and detract time we could be spending on efficiency of production.

However, educational outreach is essential to MSEG’s mission and philosophy. We want to be an educational platform for students and community members to learn about farming and food production. So although these activities do not generate income we need to balance our time spent farming and our community education and outreach. As a solution to this balancing act between education and business we are taking two strategies. Our first strategy is pursuing subsidies and grants from external organizations to supplement the income of the project so we can continue to operate and provide job opportunities to students. We will also be asking for additional funding from the Dean of Macdonald campus. The second strategy is changing the way we pay our employees. Labor expense is the largest expense we have as an operation. MSEG is an educational opportunity for the employees as well as the McGill and Montreal community. Most employees of MSEG have little to some experience working on a farm. Employees are constantly learning throughout the season and gaining efficiency, however because this is an educational opportunity as well as a job we have decided to pay stipends to our employees next year instead of full salaries. We are confident that if these goals and actions are taken, financial self-sufficiency can be achieved.

**Reflection and Advice for Future Project**

Some crucial aspect we have learned about our journey to self-sufficiency is how important it is to ask for help, to involve as many different people in the project who want to be involved, and most importantly planning! MCSS has given us amazing support and guidance through managing our finances and I think having another organization with experience in this field is necessary for any project to financially sustain itself. We have struggled this year balancing learning how to farm as well as learning how to run a business. This is a huge challenge with environmental and sustainability initiatives is the lack of business know-how. MSEG was not created from the business school; it came from the Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Science. The project management is a huge task to execute on its own but learning how to manage your budget and expenses is a completely different challenge. We think it would be really advantageous if SPF gave projects more financial and business guidance with managing budgets and creating an outlook plan for future years so projects know in the present what will need to be done to ensure the long term success and continuation of their project. This is where the planning comes in.

For MSEG our project is always changing and evolving. It has grown in size and production capacity almost 300% since its first year in operation. Each year when new students become involved they have the power to try new things, change old things, and direct the project wherever they see fit. This year a few major mistakes were made like not budgeting for the payroll taxes and not meeting our sales goal. Due to the changing nature of the project and how MSEG pays its employees this mistake happened. The more years MSEG exists we are discovering what works best for us, and flexibility with your operations is crucial. You should be able to respond to stimuli and change operations and management accordingly. The shortfall on our sales goal happened because we had not taken sales records before the 2013 season. Since there were no records to base our sales on we set our goal much higher than our market had the demand for. This has led us to plan better for next season to increase our clientele and marketing strategy so we can achieve these sales goals.   
  
Timing is essential to planning and students creating SPF projects will be at a huge advantage if they have created a calendar of deadlines and accomplishments along the way. Luckily farming is a very planning heavy project with necessary planting dates and market dates, which gives the flow of the project a structured outline. Plan out your budget, and do not just plan one year in the future. Plan as far ahead as you can, and make a plan for who will take over your project once you graduate. This is where involving as many people in the project as you can comes in. By linking your project with classes you gain exposure and students want to become involved in what you are doing. Organizing volunteers and outreach is also essential. You have to get the word out about what you are doing for people to even know it’s going on. Although Mac campus is small and we have our market table in the middle of campus, there are still people who come to our table halfway through the semester and have never heard of us. You should plan advertising and promotion about your project even before you get it off the ground; the earlier the better. If this is something that isn’t your specialty, ask for help! There are lots of groups and people within the McGill community that have these skills, which can only benefit your project. Take advantage of the McGill community and its vast resources and knowledge available! Finding faculty members who can advise you on the project is also very beneficial. Professors like Caroline Begg have helped MSEG since its first year in operation. For other SPF projects I would suggest they reach out to a faculty member who is doing research in that area or takes personal interest in your project to be a project advisor in some sense.