

*1. Could you briefly present and describe la Table de Quartier Peter-McGill, your role within it, as well the mission and projects your organization prioritizes?*

The work of the Table is to bring Peter McGill residents and groups together around initiatives to improve quality of life, services and sense of belonging. We are one of many Tables and “Corporations de développement communautaire” (CDCs) under the Coalition though and we don’t all work in exactly the same way. We’ll adapt our roles to suit the needs of our populations within our given capacities.

The major difference between at Table and a CDC is that individual residents, as well as local businesses, institutions and community groups, can be voting members of the organization. In a CDC the contacts are with the last 3. As a resident of the plateau, I cannot register with my local CDC but I could as the Table. There are advantages and disadvantages to both structures. It’s true that there is more diversity and inclusion in allowing individuals to participate but, speaking from experience, you can wind up having to deal with very homogeneous groups of residents, or individuals who just don’t understand the process of community development and just want someone to complain to which can make it very long and difficult to come to an agreement.

My role specifically is to coordinate our food security and cohabitation mandates, and to work with the city on the new proposed “community-led” governance structure of the upcoming community centre. Because of the nature of my work, I tend to function a lot more like a CDC than some of my other colleagues. We are working on some fairly intense infrastructural things in food security and due to the time limits and really nuanced complications in funding

applications it's very difficult to include people who don't have experience in the field (not to say we don't seek the opinions of the public, but it will be more through things like surveys). In cohabitation I work mostly with homeless services. While I do try to hold the occasional meetings with their clients, it is difficult for them to see the point in committee participation when they're worried about the next cold snap and their next meal.

The priorities of the Table are based on the employees and we have doing different mandates. In the past 3 years we have grown from a team of 6 to a team of 10 and our mandates include: family services (especially for families with small children/expectant mothers), youth engagement, seniors de-isolation and engagement, social housing/ housing rights, indoor and outdoor community spaces (community centers, sports/recreation facilities increased parks and green spaces) community outreach, mobilization and advocacy, Immigration and refugee services, cohabitation and homeless services, and food security

*2. How long has la Table de Quartier Peter-McGill been partnering with the Quebec Studies department in McGill? Additionally, how has it been like to be part of the EXCELR component and to welcome new student interns into your organization every semester?*

As far as I am aware we only started taking on students when I started with the table in 2021. It was a bit of a learning curve at first, especially the way to approach the student work to understand the difference between the pacing of work between being a university student where everything was due yesterday and working in the community sector where reports and grant application happen at lightning speed but actual decision making and projects are glacially slow.

Overall though I have really enjoyed having the students around. I have always thought that there is a wealth of knowledge and interest that exists on university campuses. There is also a certain will to take bigger risks because there are fewer experiences with failures. It injects a degree of really hopeful and positive energy into a field that can get jaded from time to time.

3. *Could you describe what kind of tasks a student might expect to take on while volunteering at your organization? What would a typical day of work look like?*

That really depends on the volunteering. At the moment the students from the program are primarily working on our food security mandate so they are helping with our solidarity and mobile markets on market days, community kitchen/food transformation activities, getting MAPAQ training, etc. This is mostly work done with our network partners. With us we have had students help with funding and grant research, data filtering, approaching local food businesses to determine interest in community engagement, helping to map/evaluate resources, and assisting with research for social economy/resource guide documents for the neighbourhood.

4. *EXCELR is one of the only programs of its kind in Montreal that offers students opportunities to get directly involved in civic engagement, and to apply knowledge from their courses to contribute to local community organizations, such as your own. What do you think is the value of offering more hands-on alternatives to students as opposed to more traditional academic approaches?*

I would have loved this opportunity as a student and it would have significantly reduced my learning curve after graduation. Theoretical work is all well and good because it is bite-sized and manageable within the time limits of a semester but it winds up lacking in a lot of context that

only practical experience can provide. The pacing of the work, the problematic parameters you have to creatively finagle and work around to get funding and resources. Most importantly, it's practice in how to think flexibly and be able to pivot plans around inevitable blind spots. It's understanding that we all have biases and prejudices that will impact how we work, and when they are brought to light, to be able to absorb them, learn from them and modify how we work...I found there was little room for this kind of evaluated shifting in university given the nature of the work.

5. *For many students participating in EXCELR, this is their first exposure to working so closely with organizations that serve local, marginalized communities in very practical ways. When discussing with students, they shared with me some of the more surprising takeaways from their experiences, such as developing a deeper and richer understanding of Montreal's diverse peoples, and understanding the tiresome logistical and sometimes menial efforts that must be done in order to concretize the more theoretical notions they had previously learned.*

*Could you share some of your own most surprising moments or rewarding takeaways from interacting and working with the student participants you've been able to meet through the EXCELR program?*

My most rewarding takeaway is that there is something cathartic to almost actually see students shift their thinking. Getting the wheels turning, seeing them experience something unexpected (both good and bad) and process that into a learning experience. I wouldn't say any moments were particularly surprising, though I am always delighted when students display their own initiative and want to test out their own things (with guidance) alongside the work that is already planned. I like to give the students the impression that nothing is fixed and they are at liberty to

make changes to ways other students were working before them, because that's what happens when you get hired to take on a pre-existing mandate in the real world it's all about building off what came before.

6. *Would you have any advice for any current students who are looking into a future of working in community organizations such as your own?*

When you do research papers for any of these kinds of courses, either save yourself a paragraph in the paper, or write it on the side for yourself, but take the time to reread yourself and identify where you may have applied biases to your findings/conclusions. It is vital to understand that we are the culmination of thousands of years of inherited prejudices (sexism, racism, religious/cultural prejudice, etc.). The vast majority of this is subtle things you don't notice/aren't immediately aware of. To suggest that any one of our fundamentally weak and impressionable human minds is capable of countering *all* of that by simply saying "I am not X-ist" comes from a degree of hubris. What it does fundamentally is make us feel like we are already this thing and so we don't have to do much, or any, work on it, *and* when we do slip up and we get called out on it, we take it *that* much more personally (especially working in the community sector where we literally have defined our lives around "being a good person"). You will slip up, it is almost inevitable, but it is how you confront these situations with humility, self reflection, responsibility and proactive change (over guilt, defensiveness and exasperation) that will determine how inclusive, effective, and intentional you are at your job.

7. *Could you share any words of advice for any students who are considering applying to take the EXCELR program and potentially working with you at la Table de Quartier Peter-McGill?*

Temper your expectations of success. As much as I love students coming into the work with all of the positivity and optimism I mentioned in question 2, it can be a bit of a disheartening “whomp” to the system to see just how hard it is in reality (and just how stupid some of the red tape can be). It is not impossible but it’s kinda like the feeling of getting to what you think was a really hard climb and then the mist clears and you realize you’re only a third of the way and the rest of the way is increasingly steeper. Again, brace yourself to absorb that reality and pace yourself...you’ll get there and you aren’t climbing the mountain alone.