

vision  
2020

a companion to the Vision 2020  
Impact Report

# FAILURE REPORT

CREATING A SUSTAINABLE MCGILL



- Winton  
Marsalis

# INTRODUCTION

If there's one thing McGill doesn't do, it's fail.

McGill is consistently ranked as one of the best universities in the world, and “excellence” is an important part of the McGill identity. In the consultations for *Vision 2020: Creating a Sustainable McGill*, we have often heard McGill's culture of excellence described as a positive force that can move us closer to our sustainability vision. The sheer quantity of talent, curiosity, ambition and knowledge on our campuses is a huge asset in addressing one of the most complex and systemic challenges of our time.

And yet, we have also—far more often than we anticipated—heard McGill's culture of excellence described as a barrier to change. It is so easy to make the mental shift from “we value excellence” to “we value success” to “we frown on failure”. Equating excellence with perfection, however, discourages risk-taking and stifles innovation and learning.

In order to improve, you have to be willing to screw up. On the one hand, this is so self-evident that it hardly needs to be said. And yet, in a community like this one, maybe it bears repeating, because knowing something and really believing it are two different things.

Through Vision 2020 we hope to redefine excellence at McGill—building a culture where creativity thrives and people aren't afraid to run with big, risky ideas. The world is facing environmental and economic crises of historic proportions—there is no time for timidity. We believe that, as one of the foremost institutions of higher learning on the planet, McGill has not only an opportunity but a responsibility to take the lead in seeking solutions to sustainability challenges.

Redefining excellence in this way will involve making room for failure—taking the stigma out of doing it, and making a habit of learning from it. During one of the Vision 2020 consultations, a student brought up the idea of [Engineers Without Borders \(EWB\) Failure Reports](#). EWB has been publishing public failure reports since 2008 in order to document and learn from their failures as a launch point for organizational change. Intrigued, the Vision 2020 team went back to the office, googled “failure reports,” and came across a wealth of resources, particularly by an organization called [Fail Forward](#). Publishing failure reports, it seems, is an emerging best practice, and one that the Vision 2020 team is glad to embrace.

This report, sharing some of Vision 2020's own missteps, oversights, and dropped balls, is our humble contribution to building an organizational culture that encourages the risk-taking, creativity, and continuous adaptation required for innovation. We hope that the lessons here will ring true for a broad spectrum of people with interests in community engagement, organizational change or sustainability. If you're unfamiliar with the Vision 2020 process, or want a quick recap, please check out [this video](#) summarizing the engagement process.

To our biggest fans, who have said that “failure” is too harsh a word to describe the Vision 2020 process, thank you. We don't see Vision 2020 as a failure and we hope that readers of this report won't either. In spite of—and because of—the many things we have learned along the way, we are actually immensely proud of what we have collectively accomplished over the past year. For those who would like to look at the process through a rosier lens, we have also documented many of our successes in a companion [Vision 2020 Impact Report](#).

Many thanks to all who have supported and participated in Vision 2020 so far. We look forward to continuing to work and learn with you.

Sincerely,  
The Vision 2020 Team



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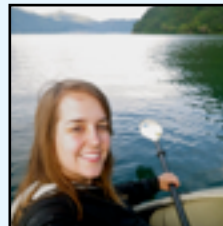
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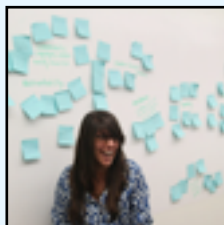
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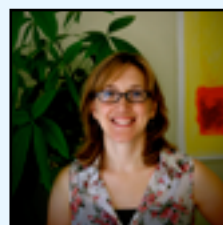
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# “WHAT IS VISION 2020, ANYWAY?” A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

**Julia Solomon**

Senior Communications Specialist, University Services

First, a confession: throughout most of the past year, I've felt pretty good about Vision 2020 on the communications front. We've been everywhere — in campus media, on listservs, on social media, on the web, on meeting agendas, and even in sidewalk chalkings on campus before our big events (Shhh! It's not allowed, and I'll never tell who did it...). Judging by the mental “project promotion checklist” that I keep in my head, we're doing pretty well. Turnout at our events has been decent (and growing) and most people we've talked to have indicated that yes, of course they have heard about Vision 2020 — how could they not, it's everywhere? Success, right?

Except that, with disturbing frequency the affirmative “yeah, I've heard of Vision 2020” is followed by a baffled admission that they have no idea what it's all about. Oops.

Some of the confusion has stemmed from elements that were intentional and/or inevitable—sustainability is by nature a very broad topic, and we chose to frame both sustainability and the Vision 2020 process in an open way to elicit a wide scope of future visions from people across the McGill community. That's no excuse, though, for the level of confusion we're encountering. I think there were at least three specific things we could have done better:

**1. Be clear about process vs. end goal** — We've used the “Vision 2020” handle to refer to both the *process* (“a year of conversation and planning”) and our *final deliverable* (“a sustainability strategy for and from the McGill community”). Because we've put a lot of emphasis on the process, when we say “Vision 2020” it's not clear to people if we're just talking about our engagement events, or if we mean the nuts and bolts of what's inside the final document.

We're inconsistent about this terminology even within the team, so it's no wonder it is not clear on the outside. In practice, this has meant that while Vision 2020 exists in the zeitgeist as a cool process with some game-changing potential, the (potentially game-changing) ideas we're proposing have gotten less play.

**2. Be clear about where you fit** — Because Vision 2020 bubbled up from some mysterious place within the organism that is McGill, people have never been clear on what kind of change to expect from this process. Is this a grassroots process that is going to mobilize tons of passionate individuals and bring about change from the ground up? Is it a high-level process with the support of the senior administration, with the implicit promise of changes from the top? This confusion stems from the fact that the Vision 2020 project team has hoped to be both, when the truth is that we are not entirely either one. Within this context, though, we could and should have been clearer about exactly where our mandate came from and what types of change we were hoping for, at what scales and over what time period.

**3. Promotion is never enough** — We got a little bit caught up in being a campus darling. People *had* heard about us, we *were* doing a good job getting our name out there, and people's impressions of us were generally positive. We let all of this distract us from the more basic questions: do people get it? Are we taking advantage of this moment in the spotlight to communicate clearly about *why* sustainability, this process, and the vision and goals built through it are important? Are we clearly framing the change that is needed to get from where we are today to where we want to be? My mental promotion checklist skimmed the surface of how we ought to have measured the success of our communications, and as a result we missed an opportunity to advance a deeper understanding of sustainability in the McGill community.

**LESSON: SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION GOES WAY BEYOND PROMOTION AND REQUIRES YOU TO HAVE CLARITY ABOUT YOUR PROJECT.**

# DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY: THE DISCUSSION CONTINUES...

**Josée Méthot**

Vision 2020 Coordinator

**Lilith Wyatt**

Sustainability Officer

In setting out to develop a Sustainability Strategy from and for the McGill community, it was clear that the concept of “sustainability” would be central to our work.

We took two approaches to defining sustainability. First, we started by adopting the language included in McGill’s Sustainability Policy, where sustainability is described as (we are paraphrasing here) ‘a future orientation: working together toward a shared vision for a better future in a manner that integrates social, economic, and environmental dimensions’. However, we quickly realized that this one-sentence definition doesn’t really mean much to people – it was both loose and weak, and didn’t reflect our campus context. To improve our approach, we decided to “crowd-source” a more complete understanding of what sustainability means for McGill by asking the campus community “What does a sustainable McGill in 2020 look and feel like?” In doing so, we essentially created a new lexicon for sustainability at McGill, and this lexicon is made up of many elements important to becoming more sustainable. Issues like the sustainability impacts of research, experiential & applied learning, energy and food systems, community gathering spaces, and community engagement (in and around Montreal and beyond) were very important elements of sustainability, and the list goes on. (See the Vision & Goals report for the whole picture!)

Toward the end of the year of conversation and planning it became clear that we failed to clearly and consistently articulate our approach to describing sustainability. This failure is reflected in the questions and criticisms we have received about Vision 2020. On the one hand, while we still view the one-sen-

tence definition as insufficient, we often failed to communicate why it was useful starting place and reference point. On the other hand, while we view the crowd-sourced description as an improvement, it includes so many elements that it sometimes confuses people. We therefore failed to convey the complexity of sustainability in an accessible way.

How can people be expected to live more sustainable lives if they don’t know the most basic terms and principles that make up sustainability? Sure, sustainability can be ambiguous. But, it is also grounded in some pretty basic tenets, like the need to live within the carrying capacity of the planet.

This conceptual ambiguity had three major implications for the Vision 2020 process:

1. We had difficulty describing sustainability to those less familiar with sustainability as a holistic concept encompassing three dimensions (social, economic, environmental).
2. We continue to face criticism that, in trying to be inclusive of so many ideas across the three dimensions of sustainability, our conceptualization lacks a solid grounding in environmental principles.
3. It has been a challenge to address some of the interacting elements of sustainability in a rigorous way that doesn’t appear tokenistic to some.

The lesson we’ve learned from all of this is that it is important not to shy away from grappling with definitions and concepts early on in engagement processes. In fact, convening discussions around broad concepts and definitions may actually be a huge opportunity for engagement at a university, sparking enthusiastic discussions and promoting community learning.

**LESSON: PROVIDE REAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE TO GRAPPLE WITH CORE CONCEPTS, ESPECIALLY AT A UNIVERSITY, AND BE PREPARED TO PLAY A ROLE AS BOTH EDUCATOR AND FACILITATOR.**



# YOU CAN'T PLEASE ALL OF THE PEOPLE ALL OF THE TIME...

## A LESSON IN REALISM

**Julia Solomon**

Senior Communications Specialist, University Services

To start, you have to understand that the Vision 2020 project team is a little bit delusional. We talk a good line about the importance of a balance between ambition and realism, but when it comes down to it we all personally swing hard toward the ambition side. We truly believe that Vision 2020 has the potential to bring about big changes in the McGill community. All of which is to say that the failure here is a deep one, but rooted in the best of intentions.

As we've described elsewhere in this report, Vision 2020 bubbled up from within the organism that is McGill, neither quite a grassroots movement nor a top-down process with a mandate from the administration, but something in between. Though it sounds a bit absurd when you put it on paper, the Vision 2020 team has been proceeding on the assumption that we can simultaneously be both of those things.

In many ways, our ability to ride the inside/outside line is an asset. We have connections with student groups and activists and feel at home strategizing with them over drinks. We also know how to work within the system, framing our project in ways McGill's decision-makers understand and value. But working at this interface involves a great deal of careful diplomacy, and can be a recipe for unmet expectations and disappointment. After a year of this, I am left with a sense of unfulfilled potential—a feeling that trying to be everything to everyone may have undermined our power and authenticity. In spite of our efforts, Vision 2020 is neither a full-fledged grassroots movement nor a core administrative priority for McGill.

I'm not sure there is a clear solution to this. Vision 2020 never had the option of being other than what it is — an ambitious change process working from the margins with strong connections but limited influence. What we could have done better is to be candid—first with ourselves, then with our partners—about the kind of change to expect from this process, at what scales, and over what timeframe. We also should have been bolder in following the advice of one of the Vision 2020 Steering Committee members, given at our very first Steering Committee meeting — “You will inevitably piss off some people through this process. You'll just need to decide how to do it strategically.”

In choosing which allies to court and which to alienate, it is important to be wary of the pressures toward institutionalization. Vision 2020 did not fail here, per se, but we did learn to tread carefully. Vision 2020 existed at the interface between the McGill administration and the McGill community at a time when the administration was eager to highlight positive, collaborative stories. This meant that the administration often used Vision 2020 as an example—in reports, media, speeches, etc. Mostly we were grateful for this coverage and saw it as a sign of increasing commitment to sustainability, but there was some concern that the spin might get out ahead of the substance.

Grappling with the extent to which Vision 2020 was comfortable being part of the “McGill brand” reminded me how important it is for all of us doing change work to be cautious of the ways our projects are used to improve the reputations of others and to be sure that messages are backed up by action. Promotion backed up by commitment is great, but promotion without commitment is green-washing.

**LESSON: WORKING AT THE BOUNDARIES OF SYSTEMS IS INHERENTLY CHALLENGING. BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF AND PARTNERS, DON'T OVERPROMISE, AND DON'T LET YOUR PROJECT BE CO-OPTED.**

# SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: GETTING THE VOICES IN THE ROOM

**David Gray-Donald**  
SSMU Sustainability Coordinator

**Amara Possian**  
Vision 2020 Project Manager

One day, while casually browsing Facebook, one of our team members stumbled across this comment:

*“Vision 2020 is a huge joke when it comes to creating non-oppressive and accessible spaces for environmental work, and has continued to only pay lip-service to equity or social sustainability.”*

This comment, made near the end of the process, really struck a nerve with the Vision 2020 team. Was Vision 2020 really a huge joke? Had we failed in being inclusive and accessible? The Facebook comment and the subsequent questions we asked ourselves served as a reminder that we may have bitten off more than we could chew in the scope and approach of Vision 2020. Sustainability work, which is often environment-heavy in its focus, was being called out in the context of Vision 2020 for not having been designed with an anti-oppressive lens. The process, which aimed to be a true community-wide consultation about sustainability, broadly inclusive of environmental, economic and social issues, needed to make all people in the community feel comfortable and confident in participating.

The degree to which inclusivity was a priority in the process was unclear from the start. This was a big problem. While we frequently cited inclusivity as a principle for Vision 2020, we weren't clear about how to really be inclusive. In the end, we fell short. Our biggest failure was that equity-minded community members were not consciously brought in from the outset and therefore weren't represented in the conversations of the Vision 2020 core team. For instance, the event “Making It Real” was not wheelchair accessible, and while this was completely un-

intentional, if there had been a stronger voice for equity within our process this issue would have been noticed, discussed and remedied. Instead, because social justice was one of the purported goals of Vision 2020, to some it felt as if the project was co-opting the equity movement to make itself look good while neglecting to build the relationships that mattered. This caused some tensions and led to criticisms of the process.

We learned the importance of being clear about the scope of a process – both what it is and what it is not. We also learned that really incorporating social sustainability into a big community process requires building relationships with people doing that work. This means meeting them where they are and taking the time to talk about the challenges being faced in that arena. Future processes would benefit greatly from mindful engagement with those who have a keen understanding of all potential barriers to participation.

**LESSON: BUILD RELATIONSHIPS EARLY ON WITH THE PEOPLE WHO ARE ALREADY WORKING TOWARD RELATED GOALS. LISTEN TO AND INCORPORATE WHAT THEY HAVE TO SHARE.**



# DESIGNING AN ENGAGEMENT PROCESS: ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

**Josée Méthot**

Vision 2020 Coordinator

**Lilith Wyatt**

Sustainability Officer

From the get-go, Vision 2020 set out to develop a Sustainability Strategy “for and from the community.” Our process was designed to reach out to as many people as possible, trying to generate ideas across a broad cross-section of McGill students, staff, and faculty. We talked a lot about the importance of both “breadth” and “depth”. To achieve “breadth”, we held a bunch of open events designed to attract as many people as possible. To achieve “depth”, we convened several smaller events designed around bringing community members with different areas of expertise together to discuss a particular topic (e.g., Sustainability in Research).

Importantly, most of our events were a case of people *coming* to Vision 2020 events, rather than Vision 2020 *going* to meet people where they were. While this difference may seem trivial, it actually turned out to be a major failing of the Vision 2020 process. We did not adequately target events and outreach according to specific stakeholder needs. Though we planned for an ambitious series of parallel engagement processes targeted to students, faculty, staff, and senior administration, we ended up focusing heavily on events that tried to do it all: (a) bring the entire community together, (b) take the time to explain the history, context, goals, and process of the project, and (c) generate and collect input and feedback from participants. This meant many events were 3-hours long, held during the day, and brought together large groups. These were best for students and administrative staff, and often inaccessible for faculty, senior administration, and union staff.

Through our processes, we missed opportunities to engage with important groups and individuals. In some cases, engaging with Vision 2020 was just too inconvenient. For example, not very many professors have 3 hours to devote to an afternoon event. In other cases, Vision 2020 failed to reach out to those who would feel more comfortable participating in other ways or in different venues (e.g., voices that are seldom heard, marginalized groups).

What is the overall lesson? We should have paid special attention to the particular needs of different stakeholder groups. How much time can they devote? Where do they feel most comfortable? How can we meet them where they are? For example, academic engagement needs to involve quick, casual, directly relevant, academically interesting conversations that go to faculty members, and are possibly co-hosted by a network of research institutes and faculty champions (peer-to-peer outreach).

Overall, while we tried to design from both a “data perspective” and a “stakeholder perspective”, it is now clear that we ended up focusing too much on the “data”, thus failing to appropriately consider the needs of diverse stakeholders. Different types of events and outreach are needed to reach different groups, and the onus was really on us to reach out. In general, it’s important to remember that the burden of accessibility is on the people who do the engagement (in this case, us). Meet people where they are. One size doesn’t fit all.

**LESSON: BROAD AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REQUIRES TARGETED STRATEGIES DESIGNED AROUND THE NEEDS OF DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS.**



# TALKING TUESDAYS, SUSTAINABILITY FRIDAYS... WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL THESE EVENTS, ANYWAY?

**David Gray-Donald**  
SSMU Sustainability Coordinator

It is important for any engagement process to spark conversations in the broader community, and to provide informal opportunities for people to gather, get to know each other, and brainstorm. To this end, in summer and fall 2012, Vision 2020 decided to hold "Talking Tuesdays", a weekly outdoor event at a busy intersection on campus. Our goal was to create a fun, comfortable space where people from all walks of campus life could come together to talk and learn. (This included setting up an outdoor living room one week!) We also decided to take over as the hosts of Sustainability Fridays – a monthly gathering that was started by professors in the Department of Chemistry in the previous year to bring people together in an informal setting to discuss sustainability.

While these events had some success, turnout was a bit low and the events failed to get broader community buy-in and attendance. Why did this happen? We had hoped (and maybe assumed) that after Vision 2020 hosted the event a few times, others in the community would share hosting duties as part of the "distributed responsibility" of community engagement. However, the opposite occurred—after Vision 2020 had hosted the Talking Tuesdays and Sustainability Fridays events a few times, everyone looked to the Vision 2020 team to continue hosting. Those outside the core team did not take responsibility for helping grow these innovative recurring events, even if they saw the value and recognized that the events addressed a critical community need: community gathering spaces. In the end, because hosting these events wasn't central to the success of Vision 2020, the events fizzled out.

We learned two lessons from this. First, in many cases it is a stronger and more sustainable model to distribute the responsibility for convening people and hosting recurring events across several groups, rather than a single one. Second, however, we learned that this is not easy and does not happen by itself. If we wanted distributed ownership for these events, we should have clearly asked for it and worked with partners to make sure they were prepared to step up. It would have been better to involve those partners in planning up front to ensure the events matched their mandates, especially since everyone faces tight resource constraints.

Also, a side note learned from Talking Tuesdays: providing food during a lunch-time event really helps keep people happy! Lemonade is great, but it's just not enough.

**LESSON: FROM THE BEGINNING, MAKE AN EFFORT TO CLEARLY COMMUNICATE WHERE THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONVENING PEOPLE AND ORGANIZING EVENTS LIES.**



# “THE HIVE”: LESSONS IN GETTING (AND KEEPING) STUDENTS ENGAGED

**Sean Reginio**

Vision 2020 Intern

Students are the lifeblood of the McGill community, bringing energy and ideas to make things happen all over campus. Through Vision 2020, we sought to harness some of this energy toward building a broader sustainability movement and to make sure that students felt like active (and crucial!) participants in the development of the Sustainability Strategy.

To reach out and involve students, we planned to have a student “Hive”, made up of passionate students who could help with events and outreach. We wanted everyone to feel empowered to take forward ideas for making Vision 2020 all that it could be. However, although the Vision 2020 Student Hive was an idea that had potential, it had a few things going against it. The Hive had two “beginnings,” one in the later phases of the 2012 winter semester, and another during the summer of that same year. Though students have energy, strong networks, and fun, thoughtful, creative ideas, both of these attempts to initiate the Hive suffered from some bad timing and lack of structure.

During the first initiation of the Hive, we had not yet realized what Vision 2020 would truly turn into. Our star-studded lineup of some of the busiest students on campus may have needed to see something more concrete before feeling willing to contribute time that could be devoted to other commitments. In our first meeting conversation was exciting, but the future for the Hive was (purposefully) not clear, which made it difficult for students to envision how their contribution would materialize.

During the second initiation of the Hive, we attempted to create a Hive that would plan a large event in the fall. Planning for an event so far in the future during a time of year when students were in a par-

ticularly carefree, summery mood proved ineffective. Moreover, with a different collection of students at each of our meetings, and no specific idea of what this event would look like, we struggled to build momentum. Once again, we failed to effectively articulate a role for students that was challenging and motivating, with both room to act independently and opportunities to influence the larger Vision 2020 process.

Overall, the Hive could have benefitted from more specific expectations of its members’ roles, a clearer vision of what the Hive would turn into, and a more careful consideration of how to keep students committed. It is important to keep in mind that student timelines can clash with planning (as many are gone in the summer). Students need to be involved in defining both *why* and *how* they are engaged, rather than simply plugging into a pre-defined box.

**LESSON: HARNESSING STUDENT ENERGY REQUIRES A CLEAR VISION FOR HOW STUDENTS CAN BE DIRECTLY INVOLVED AND EMPOWERED TO ACT INDEPENDENTLY.**

# WALKING THE WALK OF SUSTAINABILITY

**Kathleen Ng**

Senior Sustainability Officer

We always wanted Vision 2020 to ‘walk the walk’ of sustainability. It was important to us that we minimize our environmental impacts while also taking into consideration social sustainability issues such as inclusion and accessibility. However, in retrospect, it is clear that we didn’t quite live up to expectations – our own or those of the community. With a little more forethought we could have done better. Here are some examples.

**Not-so-green events**—‘Sustainable’ events should minimize environmental impacts and we really did try. For example, we used reusable dishware, and usually procured food and beverages from sustainable sources (e.g., McGill Food and Dining Services, Macdonald Campus). But we bought Vision 2020 t-shirts without regard to where or how they were made, often printed more copies of things than we really needed, and forgot to arrange composting and recycling for all events. Most importantly, we didn’t communicate to participants that these were ‘green’ events, and thus missed an opportunity to educate and inspire people to hold ‘green’ events of their own.

**Not-so-accessible events**—Accessibility is another important consideration when planning sustainable events (e.g., the length, timing, and location of events that favour one segment of the population versus another). While we tried to accommodate different needs, sometimes we missed the mark. Importantly, we did not consider universal design principles in planning for events. Events were not necessarily accessible to those with mobility impairments, many events were too long for those with very busy schedules, and the format did not necessarily accommodate people with varied learning and communication styles. Also, we did not promote our events sufficiently to those without daily internet access.

**The language trap**—The Vision 2020 team is primarily anglophone—not unusual at McGill. But we claimed to have an accessible, welcoming process, and here at McGill and in Montreal that includes making materials and events available in French. While we did try, only our final reports and some of our event announcements are actually available in both languages. We should have secured more bilingual capacity on our team for translation of written materials and planned ahead to make sure that options such as whisper translation were available for our events.

**Staying inside the “McGill bubble”**—In our engagement events, participants often talked about the desire to strengthen ties between McGill and the surrounding community. This is a goal that Vision 2020 has embraced but not acted upon. We considered extending our consultation beyond the McGill gates, but repeatedly deferred it due to concerns about capacity. Because of this we have missed out on capturing the full breadth of feedback that could have been provided by those outside of the McGill community. (The language barrier mentioned above is also problematic here.)

In summary, we have found—as everyone does—that it is not always easy to live up to our principles. When we failed, it was usually because we ended up in a last-minute scramble—grabbing cookies from Subway 15 minutes before a workshop, scurrying frantically around an unfamiliar building looking for a recycling bin, or realizing only as we pushed send on a document that we (again!) forgot about translation. Many of our missteps could have been avoided by allowing adequate time for planning and shifting our team norms to make things that were forgettable add-ons become part of business-as-usual. We must remain mindful of sustainability

**LESSON: ACTING IN ACCORDANCE WITH YOUR PRINCIPLES IS NOT ALWAYS EASY BUT IT MATTERS. DON’T LET RUSHED SCHEDULES, POOR PLANNING OR OLD HABITS GET IN YOUR WAY.**



# MANAGING EXPECTATIONS: QUESTIONS OF WHERE AND WHEN

**David Gray-Donald**  
SSMU Sustainability Coordinator

**Josée Méthot**  
Vision 2020 Coordinator

## *Where is the action?*

Developing a sustainability action plan for McGill as a whole is a tricky task due to a high degree of local autonomy among different campus groups. Within McGill, there are many smaller local communities where much of the day-to-day functioning and decision-making of the university happens. This includes 11 separate faculties (e.g., Arts, Science, Medicine, etc.) within which many departments work independently on curriculum programming. These communities fit together in varied and imperfect ways to form the internally diverse “McGill community”.

As it stands, the high-level, institution-wide Sustainability Strategy that Vision 2020 is in the process of bringing into being may not be equally applicable or relevant to every sub-community at McGill. The intentionally broad scope of Vision 2020 failed to capture the fact that action at a local level is also vital and can bring about big change. To address this, we tried emphasizing the importance of local action while simultaneously telling people it was outside the current scope of Vision 2020, but this did not work very well. Fostering championship at local levels might have helped fix this, but after some initial efforts to get this going (in the faculties of Arts, Management, Science, etc.) the amount of effort required seemed unrealistic. Looking back, we could have worked differently to design an engagement process in which people felt empowered to talk about both big and small action ideas in areas where it mattered most to them.

## *When is the action?*

When we began this process, we assumed that, within the span of a year, we would be able to develop a vision and goals for sustainability at McGill alongside a comprehensive action plan. This turned out to be a misguided plan, fueled by ambition but blind to the complexities of engagement in a fragmented community with a history of flawed consultation processes that have bred distrust.

It took almost 10 months to complete the Vision & Goals document (from March to December 2012). We learned that it takes time to build relationships of trust, to plan and host events, to gather data, to review it, to write drafts and receive feedback, and to realize when you’ve done “enough” engagement. This long process meant that action planning didn’t really kick-off until January 2013, and while we now have a draft action plan, we don’t expect to finalize the Action Plan until late Fall 2013.

The simple fact that things took longer than expected means that we failed to meet some community desires for fast (and clear) action. We are only now reaching a point where we can answer questions about the “who, what, how, and why” of sustainability action over the coming years. Overall, we could have done a better job of managing expectations and keeping people informed as to when action-planning, including at local levels, would really get going.

**LESSON: MAKE SURE THAT  
STAKEHOLDERS UNDERSTAND BOTH THE  
SCALE AND TIMING OF YOUR PROJECT  
SO THAT COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS  
MATCH WHAT YOU INTEND TO DO AND  
ARE ABLE TO DELIVER.**

# REFLECTIONS ON TIME AND TRUST

**Martin Kraye von Krauss**  
Manager, Office of Sustainability

Our ambitions for the Vision 2020 process were (and still are) high. We all knew the mantra. *We would work from the grassroots upwards. We would bridge the full range of perspectives in the McGill community. We would be inclusive and democratic to an extent that would set a new standard for McGill.* In doing so, we then expected to generate a consensus on the priority sustainability actions to be taken, and we would foster innovative partnerships that would assume responsibility for these priority actions. All of this would be accomplished in a year, a year that would turn out to see the dawning of one of the worst budgetary crises in the history of McGill.

Our pursuit of these ambitions quickly revealed how challenging they would be to achieve. Simply put, I think we failed to recognize how much time it would take us to: (i) access and meaningfully engage with the wide variety of perspectives in our community; and (ii) build trust. For example, we did not foresee how challenging it could be to even access some perspectives. For some groups, hectic schedules simply did not allow for discussions about where McGill should be going with sustainability. For others, the format and language of engagement events proved to be a barrier, with some experiencing Vision 2020 as an exclusive process reserved for the “institutionally literate”, and others experiencing the process as too informal and lacking in rigor. Finding ways to accommodate these different needs proved difficult, and in retrospect it would have been better to slow down and address these issues and opportunities rather than rush through to satisfy a preconceived timeline.

Another challenge we encountered was in the articulation of the Vision 2020 documents themselves. One of the most frequent criticisms of the Vision and Goals document (admittedly, a very ambitious, forward looking piece), has been that it lacks speci-

ficity. This intentional ambiguity originally stemmed from our sense that in the early stages of a process such as Vision 2020, when trust is in many ways still nascent, generalized wording can be used as a means of building common ground, fostering a sense of community ownership and developing a shared vocabulary. Only as the process moves on and trust is built can achieving clarity and consensus at greater levels of detail become possible. Yet the criticism remains. We've learned that a series of trust building iterations are required for a strategy to truly be a community owned endeavor, while still containing enough detail to support planning and accountability. These trust building iterations require considerable effort and adaptability, and so allowing adequate time and consideration for them from the beginning is crucial.

**LESSON:** STRATEGY-MAKING FROM THE BOTTOM-UP REQUIRES A LOT OF EFFORT AND CAN BE DIFFICULT TO PLAN. BE WARY OF OVER-STRETCHING YOUR CAPACITY.



# HIRING CONSULTANTS: A LESSON FROM WORKING WITH “OUTSIDERS”

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When Vision 2020 first started, we spent the bulk of our initial budget hiring external consultants to design, manage, and co-lead the process. We did so thinking we lacked the internal skillsets required to achieve our objectives. However, after a series of unfortunate events (described below), we eventually learned that we did, in fact, have the ability to cultivate skills internally, bring in more direct help, and make Vision 2020 a process driven from within McGill.

So what happened with the consultants? Despite good intentions and previous experience, the consultants simply didn't have a nuanced understanding of McGill, nor did they approach campus sustainability in the same way we did (e.g., priorities, vocabulary). There was also a lack of understanding of the scope of work between the consultants and the Vision 2020 team at McGill, which caused some tensions. For example, our desire for collaboration with the campus community exceeded the consultants' expectations. These tensions were amplified by the fact that the consultants worked remotely, and there was not enough checking in to ensure we were on the same page. This led to problems, or misaligned expectations, going unnoticed too long, and culminated in a situation where a major deliverable prepared by the consultants went thousands of dollars over budget, did not meet our team expectations for quality, and ended up having to be rewritten internally (with the help of some alumni who had experience in sustainability at McGill).

Perhaps our biggest lesson from this experience was that a lack of upfront planning and clear communication norms caused us to waste a lot of our initial budget, which could have been more effectively spent elsewhere. The consultants' labour was also expensive compared to that of internal staff. When we eventually realized our error and hired a full-time project manager, our ability to work closely together day-in and day-out fundamentally changed our process for the better.

Remember that you usually hire consultants for one of three reasons: (i) because you lack a skill, (ii) because you lack the time, or (iii) because you know something but it's more legitimate for a consultant group to discover and report it. In any of the above situations, but especially the first, it is important to ask yourself, do we really need consultants? Or is there already, or could we hire or train, someone who could complete this work internally? If consultants are truly necessary, take plenty of time to establish norms early in the process and make sure instructions and expectations are understood and trust is established on both sides.

**LESSON: DON'T ASSUME THAT A CONSULTANT IS NEEDED FOR YOUR PROJECT. IF YOU DO DECIDE TO WORK WITH CONSULTANTS, BE SURE TO ESTABLISH CLEAR EXPECTATIONS AND SCOPE AT THE START.**

# CONCLUSION

Strange as it may sound, taking the time to comb through our experiences from the past year and shine a light on our collection of failures has been a remarkably useful and inspiring exercise. Why? The learning couched within these setbacks, slip-ups, missed opportunities and unexpected turns actually forms the base of our current expertise, actively contributing to the developing maturity of this earnest, eager project. We're still earnest, we're still eager, but the lessons we've detailed here have left us more grounded, more informed, and more considerate of all the factors and how they interact.

In contemplating our failures for an extended period of time, we've also realized that while sometimes a dropped ball is really our bad, in many cases it's just the way a good game plays itself out. In this sense, excellence is not a static factor that exists in the absence of failure, but rather a quality that emerges through a very dynamic process of reaching out, connecting, experimenting, and actively seeking to learn from what comes up. As we shift our focus now from planning to action, it's exactly this kind of excellence we're striving to embody. Fumbling and all.

With this in mind, we're also looking for ways to avoid making the same mistakes twice. As just one example, we now better understand the value of working with peers to be more considerate of social sustainability concerns. To improve, we're reaching out to two groups this fall: the Social Equity and Diversity Education Office and the Office for Students with Disabilities. By attending focused workshops on accessibility, discrimination, gender identity and Aboriginal perspectives, we're striving to develop the consciousness and skills to create safer spaces for all of our community engagement processes.

Now, having enjoyed (and hopefully gained some useful insight from) this account of our many lessons learned, be sure to read the companion to this document - the [V2020 Impact Report](#). Because while it's crucial to investigate our failures, it's also pretty amazing to consider the positive impact Vision 2020 has had on so many individuals and communities here at McGill. And when you've done that, please contact us. We'd love to hear your thoughts on what's happened so far, where we are now, and especially what we can accomplish together.



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