



Re: Application for Independent Student Group Status

Dear SSMU Councillors,

We are writing to you to request Independent Student Group (ISG) status for ECOLE. ECOLE, or **Educational Community Learning Environement, Inc.**, is a project, a home, and a community space at McGill University. We seek to be a central space that will integrate the many projects related to environmental and social sustainability on campus, provide a home for interdisciplinary applied student research, bring together the Milton Parc and McGill communities, and serve as a focal point and meeting space for sustainability projects and groups. After three years of dedicated work by students, staff, and community members, ECOLE launched its pilot year this September in a MORE House at 3559 University Street.

In this letter, we will tell you more about ECOLE's membership, mandate, activities, and governance structures; detail the many ways in which ECOLE serves McGill students; and explain how ISG status will be of benefit to our organization.

ECOLE's Membership, Mandate, Activities, and Governance Structures

ECOLE is comprised of a collective of McGill students, faculty and staff members and Milton Parc residents; eight student facilitators who live in a Student Housing and Hospitality Services MORE House with abundant common spaces; two paid coordinators; and a Board of Directors with equal numbers of McGill students, McGill faculty and staff, and Montreal community members.

Per our constitution (see APPENDIX A), ECOLE's mandate is as follows:

ECOLE shall bring together students, faculty and staff of McGill University and Montreal residents in the pursuit of sustainable living through applied student research, alternative education, and community building. ECOLE is an ongoing experiment that strives to be a model for urban sustainable living.

There are many ways in which the various constituents of ECOLE go about fulfilling this mandate, all of which are structured around the Three Pillars of ECOLE: Living, Learning, and Community Building.

The LIVING pillar is primarily the responsibility of the eight student facilitators, all of whom are upper-year McGill undergraduates. The facilitators seek to make 3559 University a model for urban sustainable living and to share this model with the wider McGill, Milton Parc, and Montreal communities. In material terms, this means thinking critically about the house's carbon footprint, composting and recycling, and reducing energy and water use. In social terms, this means using consensus-based decision-making and seeking to make the house an anti-oppressive space. Given ECOLE's unique structure as both home and community space, facilitators are also tasked with facilitating activities in the publicly-accessible common areas of the house. This includes staffing open hours, hosting discussion nights and workshops, and managing space bookings from external groups (see APPENDIX D for space use statistics for the fall of 2014). The facilitators also promote the project on and off campus.

The LEARNING pillar of ECOLE is fulfilled by means of formal academic research, alternative education activities, and experiential learning opportunities.

In the sphere of academic research, each ECOLE facilitator is required to complete an applied student research (ASR) project pertaining to material or social sustainability. In addition, the ECOLE collective, facilitators, and coordinators work strategically with the McGill Office of Sustainability (MOOS) and the various McGill Sustainability Projects to push various faculties and administrators to make completing and supervising ASR projects more accessible for all McGill students and faculty members.

In the sphere of alternative education, the ECOLE collective organizes regular workshops, discussion nights, and film screenings centered on various aspects of material sustainability. The activities planned for the Winter 2015 semester will range from a sustainable cooking workshop to a sustainability research fair to a panel discussion on environmental racism by members of several First Nations communities.

The ECOLE house also hosts a wide variety of programming organized by external groups, ranging from additional workshops and film screening to eco-fashion show, most of which is open to the wider McGill and Montreal public.

Finally, ECOLE facilitates experiential learning in several important ways. First, it is the only space on campus that combines living and learning space. Collective members as well as individuals and groups using the common spaces are introduced to and participate in a model of sustainable living that they might not otherwise experience. Second, participation in the ECOLE collective provides hands-on experience in consensus-based decision-making, event organizing, and developing and implementing fundraising and communication strategies. The collective meetings also bring together

individuals with different perspectives on sustainability, creating a rich environment for discussion and debate.

The COMMUNITY BUILDING pillar of ECOLE is fulfilled by means of the various interactions between the facilitators, the collective, the coordinators, and users of the common space that the ECOLE house makes possible.

The ultimate goal of sharing the ECOLE house's common space is to make ECOLE a headquarters for the various sustainability groups that exist on campus. Having a space to meet, hang out, and collaborate builds and strengthens sustainability networks and facilitates the spread of ideas. ECOLE is also actively working to improve the relationship between McGill and the surrounding Milton Parc Community, notably by developing a relationship with the Milton Parc Citizens Committee (MPCC). Finally, the ECOLE Board of Directors is one of the few governance bodies on campus that brings together students, faculty, staff, and Montreal community members (see APPENDIX A for full details of the Board's composition).

While we have outlined in the paragraphs above the four bodies that make up ECOLE, (specifically, the collective, the facilitators, the coordinators, and the Board of Directors) as well as some of the functions of these bodies, we would like to explain the governance structure of our organization in more detail.

ECOLE strives to be a non-hierarchical, anti-oppressive organization.

Per our constitution, all students, faculty, and staff of McGill as well as all residents of Milton Parc are automatically members of ECOLE and have the right to use the ECOLE house common spaces during open hours and by means of the space-booking system (see APPENDIX A for details). Any member who attends at least one meeting of the ECOLE collective is considered a member of the collective, and the collective, as the body closest to the membership of ECOLE, is considered to be the heart and soul of the ECOLE project. It is the primary consultative and decision-making body of the organization, and is ultimately responsible for realizing ECOLE's programming initiatives and ensuring its long-term sustainability.

It is worth noting that the ECOLE collective is the current embodiment of the Student Working Group, the dedicated team of McGill students who worked tirelessly to garner institutional support for the project over the past three years and bring it into being.

The ECOLE facilitators, as outlined above, manage the physical space of ECOLE: they maintain cleanliness, coordinate space booking, and help realize the collective's programming initiatives. All facilitators are de facto members of the ECOLE collective.

Legally, ECOLE is a provincially incorporated not-for-profit organization, a status that obliges us to have a Board of Directors elected by the members each year at our Annual General Meeting.

The Board of Directors ensures that the ECOLE project is fulfilling its legal responsibilities under the Quebec Companies Act, gives feedback on the decisions and operations of the collective, and champions the project within the McGill and Montreal communities.

Finally, the ECOLE coordinators oversee the administrative aspects of the project: they ensure that communication flows smoothly in all directions; maintain relationships with external stakeholders such as the SSMU, the MOOS, and SHHS; and work toward the continued institutionalization of the project. While the collective allows for collaborative and consensus-based decision making, the coordinators maintain a global vision of the project and pick up the logistical slack during stressful periods of the academic year and the summer months.

How ECOLE Serves McGill Students

As a student-centered project, ECOLE seeks to benefit members of the SSMU in a myriad of ways.

Perhaps most importantly, students are able to book space free of cost at the ECOLE house, conveniently located on campus at 3559 rue University, for group meetings, workshops, events, and more. The only space-use requirement is that activities that take place in the house have a link with material or social sustainability, broadly defined. As many student and community groups find it increasingly challenging to book any space at all, let alone a free space that is committed to anti-oppression and safe(r) space, we believe that our common spaces are a crucial asset for McGill students.

Our space use statistics bear out this belief (see APPENDIX D). From September 1 to November 30, the ECOLE house hosted over 1,000 space users, a number we fully expect to grow as more students and community members learn about ECOLE. Space-use activities ranged from meetings of student groups such as Divest McGill and the F-Word magazine to model interviews for SUS's Ecouture Fashion Show to a Thursdays (a)Live concert by CKUT radio.

In addition to formal space bookings, ECOLE opens its doors to all of its members from 4pm to 7pm every weeknight. During open hours, individual students and student groups can use our common spaces to study, relax, network, and meet, without a prior booking.

As well as providing space, ECOLE's alternative education programming improves the quality of student life on campus and promotes skill-building and skill-sharing. Cinéma ECOLE, for instance, is a free, biweekly film series that seeks to spark conversations about sustainability on campus and beyond. Next semester, we will be holding skill-building workshops on grant-writing, screen-printing, and unionizing. We hope that this programming will help not only sustainability-minded groups but all students develop the critical reflexes and concrete skills that they need to realize their goals—and, of course, that it will help students relax after midterms and finals.

Next, multiple student bodies on campus, including the SSMU Environment and Ad Hoc Sustainability Committees, have recognized the need for greater institutional support for

sustainability. As a space and a community hub, ECOLE satisfies many of the needs associated with this issue and will become a staging ground for pulling McGill in a more sustainable direction.

For example, at the annual Joint Board-Senate meeting of 2014 Senators and Board members unanimously agreed that interdisciplinary learning is one of the key factors of innovation, and that our campus lacks opportunities for students from different disciplines to share ideas and become better versed in the work of their colleagues.

ECOLE, by providing space as well as an organizational structure in the form of the collective, helps to address this innovation deficit. By organizing and attending events and workshops together, members and space-users of ECOLE expose each other to ideas from multiple disciplines and come up with innovative collaborative projects.

ECOLE's commitment to promoting action-oriented applied student research will also help us promote innovation and interdisciplinary learning among undergraduates at McGill. Undergraduate students in particular face many bureaucratic obstacles to engaging in applied student research, including confusion over course options, difficulty connecting with interested professors, and a lack of knowledge on how to approach research in a non-academic, community setting. As was mentioned above, the ECOLE facilitators, coordinators, and collective have already begun making connections with faculty members, the McGill Office of Sustainability (MOOS), the Community University Research Exchange (CURE), the Experiential Learning Network (ELN), and others groups and individuals in order to identify and overcome barriers to engaging in ASR. The ECOLE facilitators will also be sharing their own research projects at a research fair at the end of the year, providing key examples of applied student research to their fellow undergraduate students.

Finally, ECOLE benefits members of the SMMU by providing concrete and unique opportunities for undergraduate students to build bridges between communities that often have little to do with each other. ECOLE believes that on-campus divisions between faculty, staff, and students and the off-campus divisions between the McGill, Milton Parc, and broader Montréal communities are detrimental to mutual learning and personal growth. Many projects that could ameliorate both on-campus and off-campus life are impossible to realize due to a lack of resources and connections. ECOLE offers its space, resources, and the connections with administrators, staff, Milton Parc residents, and student groups that three years of sustained networking have made possible to anyone who wants to break down barriers in the University and Montreal communities and bring people together to work toward a more sustainable future.

Space, learning and skill-building opportunities, institutional support for sustainability initiatives, and more integrated and inclusive communities: ECOLE offers all of this and more to McGill undergraduate students.

How ISG Status Will Benefit ECOLE

Status as an Independent Student Group (ISG) would benefit ECOLE in several key ways as we go about fulfilling our mandate and serving undergraduate students.

Firstly, while we hope to foster a project with a diversity of users, the majority of our facilitators, collective members, and space users are undergraduate students at McGill, and we consider ECOLE to be a student-centered project. As such, ISG status would help ECOLE maintain a direct and institutionalized connection with the undergraduate student body. It would facilitate links with SSMU clubs and services organizing around sustainability, allow us to reach out to interested students through events such as activities night, and expedite our participation in a wide variety of undergraduate student events.

Secondly, ISG status would formalize our fruitful institutional relationship with the SSMU and allow our organizations to pool resources. SSMU councilors, executives, and funding bodies have been dear friends of ECOLE over the past three years as we have gone about securing funding for and institutionalizing the project, providing us with connections to a vast array of groups and individuals working toward sustainability on campus, with money for Winter 2013 and Summer 2014 coordinator positions, and with moral support. A SSMU Council member and a SSMU Executive currently sit on our Board of Directors. We hope that this long history of collaboration will be reinforced by the accord of ISG to ECOLE. The additional benefits that come with ISG status, such as access to room booking within the SSMU building, would be extremely beneficial given the accessibility and size limitations of our current space. All of the advantages that the SSMU has and would continue to offer ECOLE will be repaid in kind in open access to ECOLE space and programming for all McGill undergraduate students, a place for a SSMU representative on our Board of Directors, and a (hopefully) permanent home for the McGill sustainability community.

Thirdly, ISG status would be an invaluable credential as we negotiate our long-term sustainability with the McGill administration. Given the innumerable benefits ECOLE brings the McGill community, the institutional imprimatur of ISG status would make the SSMU a guarantor of our mission to serve students, thus reinforcing our legitimacy on campus as a McGill student-centered group.

Finally, in our search for long-term funding sources, ISG status would reify ECOLE's place at McGill and demonstrate the strong connections our organization has with the undergraduate student body, potentially opening up funding sources that are not currently available to us. We are grateful for the funding we have received from the Sustainability Projects Fund to get off the ground in our pilot year. Our SPF grant, however, is a non-renewable seed grant. Thus, we would like to investigate looking for financial support from the SSMU and the McGill student body in order to continue functioning.

We hope that this letter has served as a useful overview of what ECOLE is, how we operate, how we benefit McGill students, and how our organization would benefit from ISG status. Given the myriad of ways that ECOLE benefits members of the SSMU, and given the ways in which ECOLE could benefit from ISG status with the SSMU, we ask that SSMU Council approve our request to become an Independent Student Group.

We welcome your questions and thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Alan Chen, Emily Boytinck, and Selin Jessa

Appendix A: Constitution of ECOLE

Appendix B: Member List

Appendix C: ECOLE One-Pager

Appendix D: ECOLE November Report