

# **Project SOIL: Shared Opportunities on Institutional Lands**

**An OMAF/MRA New Directions project  
ND2012-1763**

**Survey Report  
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## **Introduction**

Project SOIL was funded in 2013 under the New Directions Research Program as *Feasibility Study of On-Site Institutional Food Production: Leveraging public land to grow shared opportunities*. Project SOIL is a feasibility study that explores the potential of on-site food production at public health care and educational institutions. We launched the project in September of 2013 under the shorter name of **Project SOIL**.

## **Survey<sup>1</sup>**

In February 2014 we launched an online survey to identify the degree to which Ontario institutions were interested in exploring on-site food production arrangements, how feasible they thought those arrangements were, and what obstacles were in the way of seriously considering such initiatives. We shared the survey invitation through a number of outlets: 1) we sent out invites to all Ontario colleges and universities, 2) we emailed all school boards, 3) Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care (CCGH) sent a notice out to their contact list (nearly 400 hospitals and long term care facilities), 4) CCGH also included info and link in their newsletter (1200+ subscribers), 5) survey information was posted on SOIL and CCGH websites, 6) Hillary Dunn (Agri-Food for Healthy Aging) sent the notice out to their 400+ stakeholders and also tweeted to her 500+ followers.

Despite this wide reach, we initially had a very low response rate (only twelve complete responses in the first two months of the survey). Consequently we decided to leave the survey open until the end of June. We also hired two graduate research assistants to start soliciting hospitals, schools, and long-term care facilities over the phone. We were very fortunate to find two excellent and very committed graduate students (Elena Christy and Cassie Wever) who were able to reach the right people in a number of institutions. However, even their best efforts only resulted in an additional 32 responses bringing us to a total of 44 responses. This was far below our projected number of 150. The results of the survey are therefore limited and can only be used in a qualitative analysis. We have prepared a summary analysis to guide our future work. On the other hand, the in person phone-calls resulted in some fruitful discussions, and consequently the students were able to develop an extensive list of over thirty individuals who agreed to be contacted for the next stage of research (interviews). This proved to be an excellent benefit of the additional survey recruitment efforts, as it put our interview work ahead of schedule.

## **Key Survey Results**

The following are the key findings from the survey that summarize the responses and offer some insight into the institutional needs and expectations.

- ❖ Institutions had a very wide range of total and available acreage available for food production:
  - Total acreage was anywhere from less than one acre for a number of smaller education and health centres, to 150+ acres for larger post-secondary campuses. However, the most common answers were for spaces between 1 and 3 acres and more than 10 acres (but less than 150).
  - Available acreage was also extremely varied ran from 0.5 to 20 acres (including rooftops) or from 1-75%.

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<sup>1</sup> This survey was approved by the Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board. More details on the ethics certificate and research protocol are available on request.

- ❖ Land was primarily used for parking and pavement (32 respondents), followed by lawn (31), treed areas (24), and with less than one-third of respondents mentioning decorative or edible gardens (14 and 10 respectively).
- ❖ Landscape maintenance was relatively evenly distributed between being contracted out (11 respondents) and being managed in-house (14 respondents) or both (6 respondents).
- ❖ Respondents were most interested in on-site food productions for the following reasons:
  - Benefit to patients, staff and students (27 respondents)
  - Access to fresh food (22)
  - Showcasing/educational purposes (18).
  - There was still a moderate level of interest (almost half of respondents) in therapeutic benefits (13); and only marginal interest in aesthetic value and the potential financial benefits of on-site food production (though many later raised money as the primary constraint).
- ❖ The most cited potential barriers to prevent respondents' institutions from considering on-site food production were:
  - Lack of administrative capacity (21)
  - General lack of interested (10)
  - Concerns for liability (11)
  - Lack of land/limited space (9)
  - General maintenance regarding both staff and cost/funding (6).
- ❖ Measures of success educational institutional would like to see included in future SOIL work (ranked by times mentioned by respondents):
  - Availability and participation of teacher mentors, dedicated student volunteers (mentioned more than once)
  - Long-term sustainability of project (1 year +) after initial investment and momentum has passed (mentioned more than once)
  - Positive impact on food choices on students/staff and overall satisfaction (mentioned more than once)
  - Educational opportunities for students and community members
  - Produce used by on-campus food outlets or collected by food bank or agencies
  - Production of food that can be used by institutions with limited kitchen equipment (e.g. fresh vegetables for salad)
  - Tonnage of food produced
  - Demonstrated success with partnership between school boards and key agents
  - General output (financial, produce, community involvement) for money invested
- ❖ Measures of success health care institutions would like to see included:
  - Clear evidence that the organization has benefited from the investment
  - How administrative (and public) acceptance and approval was reached
  - Demonstrate the positive health and nutrition effect on patients being served fresh food, both for overall patient wellness and/or to minimize patient stay (and reduce hospital's costs) as a result (mentioned more than once)
  - How the produce was adequately used and did not go to waste
  - Dollar per square-foot revenue

- Funds could be allotted to dietary staff for food preparation
- The potential to grow on smaller plots and still have good yield
- Reasonable finances to implement
- Shared involvement and enthusiasm by staff and number of participants
- Improved aesthetics of landscape
- Contribution to healthier workplace for staff and patients and relation to other wellness initiatives
- Media coverage

While these survey results have no statistical significance (due to the low response rate) they provide important guidance for our future work. They portray a wide ranging set of resources, constraints, and expectations for on-site food production among Ontario institutions. They also give us some sense of the institutional motivations for considering on-site food production, and the success metrics that would be meaningful to those institutions.

**Contact**

For additional details about this survey or any other aspect of Project SOIL, please contact Dr. Phil Mount [phil.mount.foodsystemsresearch@gmail.com](mailto:phil.mount.foodsystemsresearch@gmail.com) or Dr. Irena Knezevic at [irena.knezevic@carleton.ca](mailto:irena.knezevic@carleton.ca).