

Adequate Consultation

Student's Society of McGill University (SSMU); Last Updated May 2014

Introduction

One of the challenges consistently faced by both SSMU and McGill is a lack of consistency and understanding of adequate and participatory student consultation. This document serves as a guideline to support the consultation process within SSMU. It includes the definition by which SSMU will understand adequate consultation, as well as a methodology to reach a level of adequate consultation.

Further, this guide can assist in ensuring that consultation occurs between SSMU members and McGill University processes. While this document cannot mandate the university to consult with students, it can act as a guide to inform reasonable expectations in these consultation processes.

Guiding Principles

Respect: The consultation process should be carried out by SSMU with the highest level of respect for the diverse opinions found in the student body.

Definition

'Adequate Consultation' is defined as the ongoing inclusion of input and participation regarding the design and decision making process for any event that impacts SSMU membership from interested parties and relevant stakeholders. Adequate consultation is only such if it is implemented; namely, the consultation process must be linked to the design and decision making process.

Terminology:

1. **Event:** anything that significantly impacts the membership of the SSMU; including but not limited to policy development, policy revision (scheduled and ad hoc), events, major decisions on building use, representative positions within SSMU, and generally any decision being made while representing student interests
2. **Ongoing:** regular and meaningful formal and informal consultation during the process by which an event occurs, from inception to completion
3. **Input:** the sharing of ideas, feedback, opinions and feelings from individuals and groups
4. **Participation:** the inclusion of individuals and groups in the decision making and implementation process
5. **Design and decision making process:** the process by which the event actualizes
6. **Interested parties:** those individuals or groups of people that have an interest in an event, but that may not be a relevant stakeholder
7. **Relevant stakeholders:** those individuals or groups that have a direct stake in the event and that will be primarily affected by decisions related to the event

Methodology: Developing a Consultation Plan

A consultation plan consists of 5 steps which together provide a framework to help ensure the consultation process is effective and ultimately adequate. The steps include: (1) Define the desired outcomes of consultation; (2) Identify key stakeholder groups and invite interested parties for participation; (3) Develop and share a consultation strategy and timetable; (4) Detail reporting and/or documentation of the consultation process; and (5) Evaluation. Steps 1 through 3 are proactive; these steps ensure that the event receives adequate consultation. Steps 4 and 5 are reactive; these steps help manage expectations following the consultative process by showing community members when consultation has taken place, and help to improve for the future.

1. Define the desired outcomes of consultation:

Before beginning the consultation process, it is important to develop clear goals by determining what elements of the event require consultation. Ask:

- Is there room in the event budget for consultation activities?
- Should the consultation plan include consulting on all issues envisaged in the event? If not, is the list of issues selected sufficient to provide a comprehensive discussion of the event?
- Does the consultation plan take a holistic approach, yet remain focused enough to generate necessary information?
- Is the consultation process completely transparent?
- How will the list of issues influence selecting the consultation strategy?

2. Identify key stakeholder groups and invite interested parties for participation:

Identifying Relevant Stakeholders

Ask:

- Who will have the power to affect the event?
- Who will the event affect?
- Do the above questions identify all of the relevant stakeholders?
- Will the stakeholders change over time?
- Are there stakeholders that will be interested/affected by only specific parts of the event?
- What are the likely issues that stakeholders will wish to discuss?
- What are the stakeholders' interests and why?

Direct Contact

Although it is impossible to mandate participation in the consultation process, it is necessary to establish direct contact with stakeholders and allow them to decide whether you will proceed with or without them. Direct contact requires an interpersonal *exchange*, not simply reaching out without response.

Contacting Interested Parties

There should always be an open callout to all SSMU members to allow individuals who are not affiliated with groups identified as stakeholders to participate if they so choose.

Number of Participants

There should always be, at minimum, as many people consulting as there are people working on the event. Although strategies should be selected such that as many people as possible can participate (listservs, surveys, fairs), it is reasonable to limit the number of participants for certain strategies (focus groups, committees); if there are more people interested than feasible for strategies of the later kind, assign representatives to participate on behalf of larger groups, or redirect individuals to strategies of the former kind.

Opting In

Provide respondents with information on how their response will be used; ask all respondents to 'opt-in' to making their response available to the public and to being contacted again (if appropriate).

Diversity and Equity of Participants

Diversity is necessary to the consultation process. There are two things to consider:

(1) Diversity of Identities: because of societal systems of oppression, often events implicitly reinforce pre-existing hierarchies; it is important to equitably consider opinions. This means there must be a greater emphasis placed on the opinions of those who have been systematically marginalized.

(2) Diversity of Opinions: although it is useful to consult with proponents of the event, it is also important to consider the biggest adversaries to both develop a well rounded event and curb future backlash.

Ask:

- How will the event disproportionately affect or exclude marginalized groups? Are there members of those groups involved in the consultation?
- Are there opinions from many different intersectional identities? Are the opinions of those with more intersectionally marginalized identities being included, heard, and valued?
- Are there consultative strategies included that cater to those less comfortable assertively taking up space?
- Are the consultative strategies accessible for those with different barriers to access (particularly those with physical disabilities)?
- Are there individuals who both support and oppose the event involved in the consultation?
- Are all opinions being considered not only equally but equitably?

3. Develop and share a consultation strategy and timeline:

Possible Strategies for Consultation

Outlined below are possible strategies for consultation. Whilst this list is not exhaustive of all methods that could be used, it serves as a guide for ensuring that adequate and sufficient consultation is completed with the interested parties and relevant stakeholders identified.

However, it is important to note that completing consultative actions does not necessarily constitute consultation; there must be participation and implementation for consultation to be adequate.

Listserv

A Listserv should be sent out to all SSMU members to give an opportunity for feedback and/or provide information about the other strategies selected for the consultation process.

- Ensure the email is concise, clearly laid out and written in understandable terms
- Include (when relevant): background information; summary; discussion of the issues; outline of options; relevant views and information; assessment of impact on different groups; proposed timetable; statement regarding availability of alternative formats (hardcopy); list of those being consulted; how responses will be used
- Ask questions that will elicit the views and information you require and provide respondents the option to reply to either/or and multiple choice type questions as well as more general written feedback
- Offer respondents an opportunity to provide feedback in a different format (open forum, committee involvement, etc.)
- Give a sufficient amount of time for responses and make deadlines clear

Committees and Subcommittees

The role of a committee is often implicitly understood rather than having been written down and agreed, but your committee members will operate more effectively if there is a clear outline of their purpose and role.

Ask:

- Which of the following will the committee have a role in: visioning and leadership, accountability, legality, financial oversight, and/or staff and volunteers?
- What is exact role and responsibilities of your committee members, the level of commitment required, and the skills and qualities required to carry out the role effectively?
- Do you need specialized positions within the committee? (e.g. chairperson, secretary, treasurer, etc.)

A sub-committee is a small group of people assigned to focus on a particular task or area. A sub-committee generally makes recommendations to the larger committee for decision, or sometimes may be delegated aspects of decision-making by the committee. Regardless of tasks assigned, any decisions made by such groups remain the responsibility of the committee at large.

Group Sessions/Focus Groups, formal and informal

Group sessions and focus groups, in either a formal or informal context, are discussion based consultative methods most useful in the following contexts:

- When the primary intent is to collect research (and not to resolve conflict, build consensus, increase communication, change attitudes, or make decisions)
- When there is a power difference between participants and decisions makers

- When there is a gap between professionals and their target audience
- When there is a need to investigate complex behavior and motivations
- When there is a need to evaluate the degree of consensus on a topic

Consultation Fairs

A consultation fair can either be planned to gain information for a specific project, or can be a regularly scheduled event which can collect information on multiple initiatives requiring consultation.

Surveys

Surveys can be distributed using the listserv, but ensure there is always the option for participants to access a hardcopy version. Questions should be a mix of open-ended and close-ended questions as this mix allows for more thorough answers, and a simpler method of responding, respectively.

Choosing a Strategy

Ask:

- Is the chosen method suitable for the objective?
- Is the technique appropriate for the size and kind of audience?
- Is the method appropriate for the technical knowledge of the participants?
- Will the proposed method create an environment conducive to open and honest communication with a high level of trust even among the most vulnerable groups?
- Are sufficient budgets allocated to undertake the proposed activities?
- Will suitably qualified staff be involved?
- Has sufficient information been provided for participants to make informed judgments?
- Is the technical level of the information suited to different stakeholders?
- Is appropriate language and vocabulary used?

Developing a Timeline for Consultation

Ask:

- Have participants been informed well in advance?
- Have deadlines for consultation been clearly advertised?
- Will the results of the consultation be provided in time to inform decisions made?
- At which intervals of the event design and decision making is consultation needed?
- Does this consultation plan fulfill the *ongoing* requirement of adequate consultation?

Maximizing Participation

Ask:

- Have you advertised selected consultation strategies in multiple ways? (e.g. listserv, posters, on the website, etc.)
- Are the consultation strategies selected accessible to those with different disabilities? (e.g. advertisements compatible with text-to-voice technology, wheelchair accessible spaces for consultation events, etc.)
- Does some of the consultation process go to the people being consulted, rather than require them to come to you? (e.g. brainstorming board in study spaces, etc.)

- If you have a sufficient budget, do you provide a reward for participation? (e.g. snacks and drinks, a randomly selected prize winner, etc.)

Establishing a Grievance and Redress Mechanism

The consultation process should define specific internal conflict management systems, and internal and external grievance redress mechanisms. Ask:

- Can grievances be reported to a neutral party?

4. Detail reporting and/or documentation of the consultation process:

A detailed report of the consultation process should be written. This report should include two things: (1) The plan determined for section 1-3 (above); and (2) all of the feedback generated. The feedback should then be analyzed accordingly such that it can be easily used in the event design and decision making process moving forward, and referenced in future revision of the event (if it is deemed unnecessary to extend or do an independent consultation then).

An alternate benefit of this documentation is that it can be used in the instance that the consultation process is externally deemed inadequate. Further, if appropriate, this documentation can be included in press packages.

5. Evaluation:

Once the consultation process is complete, it should be reviewed. This should occur at two intervals: (1) immediately following the consultation process, and (2) once the event happens.

Ask:

- Did the consultation process meet the desired outcomes?
- Were the stakeholders pleased with the event? Did any stakeholders surface after the consultation? If so, how did they get missed?
- Was the strategy employed effective?
- Was there a feedback loop in which consultation actually affected outcome?
- Were there grievances from those involved with the consultation? Were they handled effectively? How could they have been avoided?
- Were there grievances from those not involved with the consultation? Why were these individuals not involved? Were the grievances handled effectively? How could they have been avoided?
- What went well in this consultation process?
- How could a similar consultation process be improved?

Other Consultation Initiatives in the McGill Community Context

- Consultation at McGill (Student Consultation and Communication Work Group, McGill Administration Initiative): <https://www.mcgill.ca/consultation/>