

Final Report to the OSDP: 2011 SOIL Ambassadors Pilot Project

Final Report of the 2011 SOIL Ambassadors Pilot Project

Produced for the SOIL Board, the Organic Sector Development Program
Grant Committee, and the British Columbia Organic Farming Industry

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1. Introduction/Project Objectives/Role of Ambassadors

In December 2010 the executive director of Stewards of Irreplaceable Lands (henceforth, SOIL) approved the initiation of The SOIL Ambassadors Pilot Project for the 2011 Farming season. The project involved recruiting alumni of SOIL farming apprenticeships to act as sources of advice and support to those who applied through SOIL to be farm apprentices during the 2011 farming season. Please see Appendix I for a preamble and rationale for the project.

The project's objectives:

1. To reduce the number of apprentices who leave their apprenticeship dissatisfied with their experience
2. To give SOIL a better idea of the satisfaction rate of its program participants
3. To help SOIL better understand the ways in which apprentices' needs and/or expectations are not being met
4. In a more general sense, to make each season's apprentices feel more supported as they proceed through an experience that can be very challenging, and in some cases, isolating

Role of Ambassadors

In December of 2010, twelve alumni of SOIL farming apprenticeships were recruited to volunteer as SOIL Ambassadors. Each was assigned between five and fifteen 2011 SOIL apprenticeship applicants. Their job:

1. Contact each assigned apprentice individually to introduce themselves, the project, and their role as a SOIL Ambassador
2. Offer assistance with farm selection as well as ongoing advice or support, if requested, during the apprenticeship
3. Check in periodically with their assigned apprentices to inquire about the status of the apprenticeship
4. Offer any advice or support on subjects related to the apprenticeship as requested
5. Request and conduct an exit survey with each assigned apprentice at the end of the season

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2. Project Review/Results

Summary of Project Progression

Action	Result
Send promotional and explanatory materials to farm-hosts and potential ambassadors	Project was described in an email sent to a listserv comprised of host farms; project was promoted on a separate listserv comprised of SOIL program alumni
Recruitment of ambassador team of 15 volunteers	12 volunteer ambassadors recruited
Draft materials to outline role and responsibilities of ambassadors	Completed; all materials communicated via email
Initial assignment of apprenticeship applicants to ambassadors	Completed; 130 applicants (those who applied between September 1, 2010 and June 15, 2011) were assigned an ambassador.
Ambassadors make initial contact with assigned apprentices to introduce themselves, describe project, and invite apprentices to contact them should they need any advice or support	Completed, though every ambassador found the reply rate—the number of assignments who replied to the initial email—to be low: approximately 50%
Each ambassador to check-in periodically via email with their assigned apprentices	Goal was once per month check-in; in practice this was limited to approximately two check-ins during the season due to busy schedules of Ambassadors and the project coordinator. Project's efficacy was constrained as a result
Ongoing dialogue between project manager and ambassador team regarding project progress and any apprentice requests or challenges that require participation of SOIL management	Regular dialogue occurred; one incident involving an apprentice needed to be reported to SOIL management for them to address
Exit surveys to be drafted and conducted with 2011 SOIL apprentices	Completed; see Appendix II for copy of survey; 130 survey invitations sent out (invitations were sent out twice for each apprentice); 48 returned
Exit surveys to be drafted and conducted with volunteer ambassadors	Completed; see Appendix II for copy of survey; 11 of 12 surveys completed
Final report to be completed in early December	Done
Resource materials to be created and forwarded to SOIL for future project coordinator	In progress at time of report; slated to be done by December 15, 2011

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C. Project Analysis

General Observations

In initiating this project, SOIL identified the following outcomes as indicators of project success:

1. A majority of apprentices who took advantage of their ambassador's offer of support felt that it made a positive contribution to their apprenticeship experience
2. A strong majority of apprentices recommend that the service be offered to future apprentices
3. A majority of apprentices who did not take advantage of the service express a desire to have done so

The project was successful on all three outcomes, as the below survey results confirm. In addition, administrative systems were created that will allow the project to be more efficiently delivered by future volunteers, and, perhaps most importantly, a number of apprentices expressed that their apprenticeships were improved by their access to an ambassador.

The pilot project did reveal one area in need of improvement, however. The apprentice response rate (the percentage of apprentices who acknowledged initial contact by their ambassador), at approximately 50%, was lower than anticipated, and indicates that the approach to promoting the project and initially contacting apprentices needs to be improved.

Moreover, anecdotal accounts by ambassador team members suggest that some apprentices chose not to take advantage of their ambassador's offer of support when faced with a challenge on their farm. Generally, the reason given was that they forgot about the service.

Both problems can and will be improved by reforming the strategy used with the initial contact email (for example, requiring ambassadors to email their assigned apprentices once per week until they receive an acknowledgement of their efforts to contact) and by ensuring that ambassadors are checking in with their assigned apprentices once per month.

Survey Results

Much of the relevant parts of the apprentice exit survey can be expressed as charts, which are included below. The ambassadors' exit survey was based on anecdotal accounts, and is discussed below. See Appendix II for a copy of the surveys used. Results are summarized in section D (Project Conclusions).

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2011 Apprentice Exit Survey results

Ambassadors collectively approached 130 applicants to fill out the survey; after two requests, a total of 48 surveys were returned. Here are the relevant results:

Chart 1: What was the final status of your apprenticeship? (48 replies)

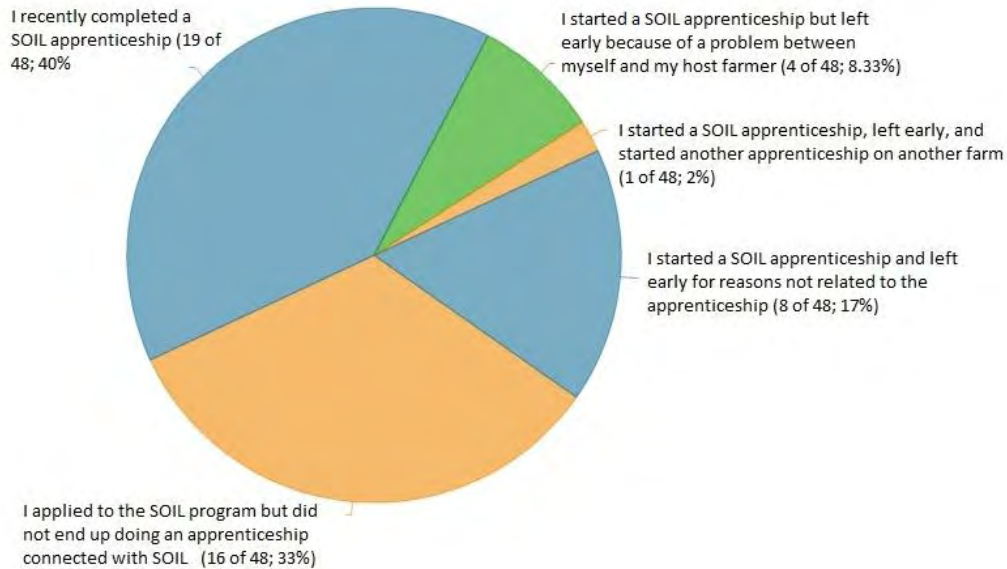
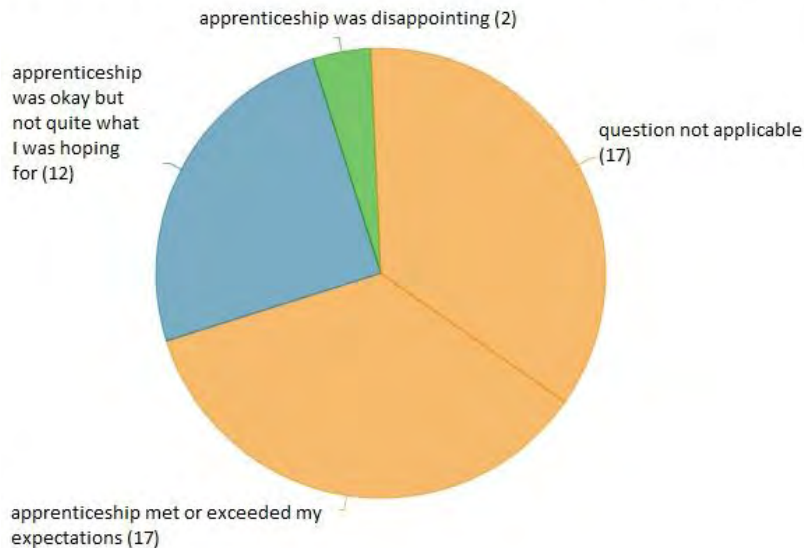


Chart 2: Appraisal of SOIL Apprenticeship Experience (48 replies)



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Chart 3: Usefulness of SOIL Ambassador (48 responses)

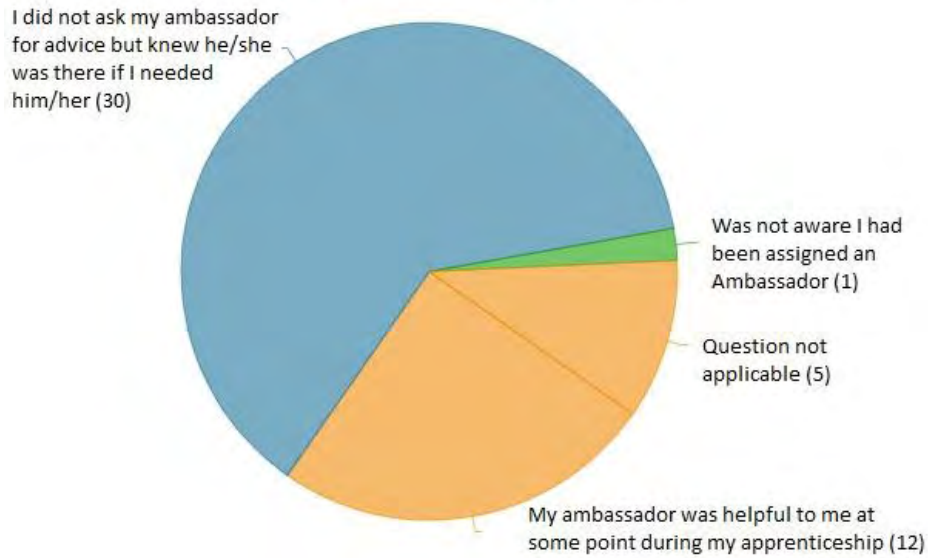
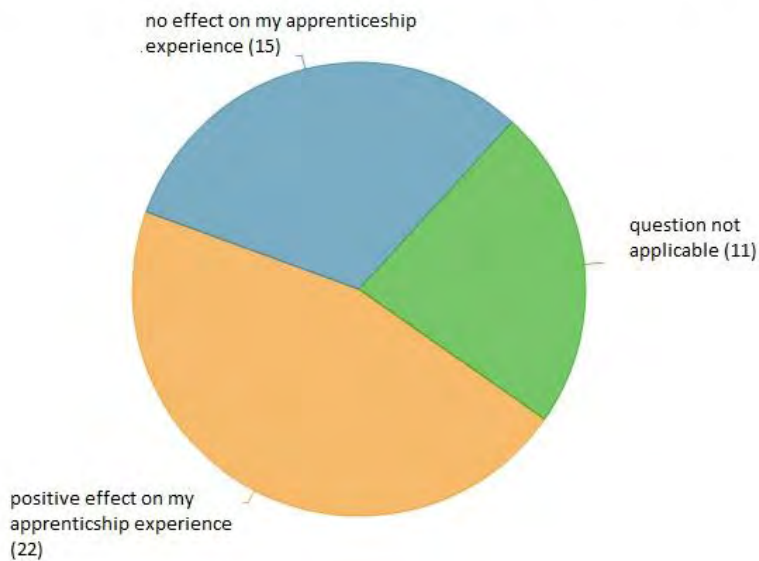
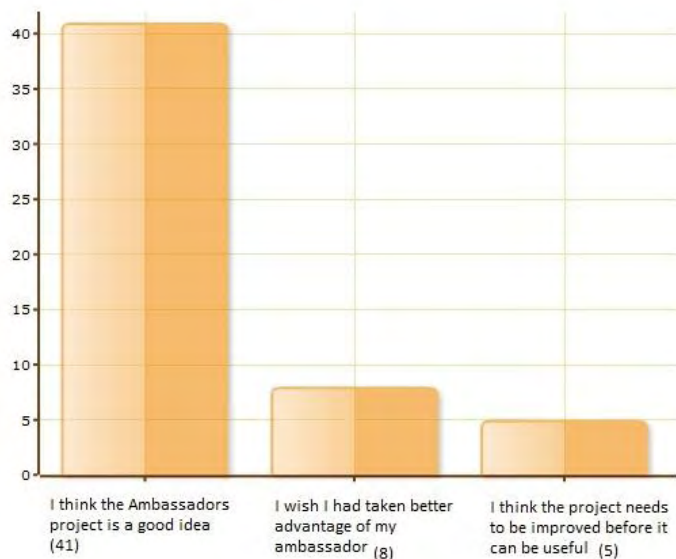


Chart 4: Ambassador's Contribution to apprenticeship (48 responses)



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Chart 5: Apprentices were asked to indicate if they agree with each statement (47 replies)



A few quotations taken from general comments by respondents:

“The Ambassador program is a very good idea and I can see it helping a plethora of apprentices. I did not need to use it because I knew what I needed to do.”

“The ambassadors are mainly useful prior to actually making the leap and heading out to the farms.”

“Encourage your ambassadors to make the first move with the mentees. People often don't always take initiative to seek help like this, but they often will respond to messages.”

“Perhaps more regular check-ups?”

2011 Ambassador Exit Survey results

Eleven of twelve ambassadors completed the exit survey, a copy of which is in Appendix II. Here are the relevant results of the survey:

- Ideal number of assignments per ambassador is 10-15
- Response rate to initial contact by ambassadors was between 40 and 50%

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- Rate of request for guidance of some kind was between 20 and 30 % of apprentices. Ambassadors felt that a majority of that number benefitted from that request for guidance
- When asked for ideas on increasing the participation rate among apprentices, the most common suggestion was to increase the number of check-ins with apprentices throughout the season

Analysis of Project Goals

Objective	Result
To reduce the number of apprentices who leave their apprenticeship dissatisfied with their experience	Difficult to determine directly until future results can be compared. Apprentice Exit Survey results are positive though: 85% thought project was a good idea; of 32 respondents who started a SOIL apprenticeship, 69% felt their ambassador had a positive effect on their experience; and a combined 97% either benefitted from their ambassador's guidance (28%) or knew their ambassador was available if needed (69%)
To give SOIL a better idea of the satisfaction rate of its program participants	Success. See chart 2 of 2011 Apprentice exit survey, above
To help SOIL better understand the ways in which apprentices' needs and/or expectations are not being met	Success: A general SOIL feedback box was included in the 2011 Apprentice Exit Survey and some valuable feedback was provided to SOIL. In addition, as a direct result of the Ambassador project a sexual harassment complaint was received and addressed.
In a more general sense, to make each season's apprentices feel more supported as they proceed through an experience that can be very challenging, and in some cases, isolating	Success. See row one in this chart.

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D. Conclusions and Recommendations

When initiating this project, SOIL identified the following outcomes as indicators of project success. Actual results highlighted in bold.

1. A majority of apprentices who took advantage of their ambassador's offer of support felt that it made a positive contribution to their apprenticeship experience. **Indicator present. See chart above: Analysis of Project Goals**
2. A strong majority of apprentices recommend that the service be offered to future apprentices. **Indicator present. 97% of survey respondents believe the project is a good idea.**
3. A majority of apprentices who did not take advantage of the service express a desire to have done so **Presence of indicator difficult to ascertain. Wording of the survey was insufficient to confirm. 8 of 48 respondents expressed regret at not having taken advantage of the service, but the survey failed to account for those who thought the project a good idea but who did not need the service during their apprenticeship.**

Conclusions/Recommendations

1. The project was successful, and there is sufficient support for its continuation to extend the project into the 2012 season
2. The project can now be delivered solely using funding that SOIL can provide. For the 2011 pilot, OSDP funding was sought after and secured to pay for the additional labour required to create documentation, administrative systems, and survey creation. Next season, project manager and ambassador stipends will be lowered to reflect a lower time commitment, and SOIL should be able to fund the project indefinitely based on its annual revenues
3. The project's efficacy can be increased if the rate of ongoing communication between ambassadors and apprentices is increased to one check-in per month initiated by the ambassadors
4. The project manager recommends that a similar apprentice exit survey be conducted at the end of the 2012 season to compare the 2011 and 2012 season results.

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Appendix I: Preamble/Rationale for the SOIL Ambassadors Pilot Project

The organic farming industry will not flourish if it cannot replace retiring farmers with younger ones; nor can many organic farmers succeed without reliable, enthusiastic labourers. SOIL plays a vital role in solving both of these challenges. But SOIL does not just network aspiring apprentices with host farms. It provides valuable advice and resources to both farm hosts and apprentices that increase the likelihood of successful relationships.

Many Farmer/Apprentice relationships are fruitful for both parties, but in some instances relationship strife--sometimes failure--can occur due to mismatched or unclear expectations, poor planning, poor communication, etc. A majority of such cases are preventable. SOIL already has in place a well-written set of guidance materials for prospective apprentices and hosts, but this guidance could be strengthened by connecting new apprentices with those who have been through the program. These 'ambassadors' could provide support through intake interviews as well as providing guidance to apprentices who encounter difficulties in their apprenticeships. The mission of the Soil Ambassadors Pilot Project would be to reduce the number of apprentices who leave their apprenticeship dissatisfied with their experience and improve the quality of experience for all apprentices and host-farmers.

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Appendix II: Exit Surveys

2011 SOIL Apprentice Exit Survey

This survey was sent to 130 SOIL Program applicants. All applied to apprentice during the 2011 farming season. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain the efficacy of the 2011 SOIL Ambassadors Pilot project. 47 surveys were returned.

Your name--not required but helpful to us

Not mandatory but really helpful for SOIL Admin

Your chosen farm--not required but helpful to us

Please choose the answer that best applies: *

- I applied to the SOIL program but did not end up doing an apprenticeship connected with SOIL
- I recently completed a SOIL apprenticeship
- I started a SOIL apprenticeship but left early because of a problem between myself and my host farmer
- I started a SOIL apprenticeship, left early, and started another apprenticeship on another farm
- I started a SOIL apprenticeship and left early for reasons not related to the apprenticeship

Please choose the answer that best applies: *

- My SOIL apprenticeship met or exceeded my expectations
- My SOIL apprenticeship was okay, but not quite what I was hoping for
- My SOIL apprenticeship was disappointing
- Question not applicable

This year, SOIL piloted a project called SOIL Ambassadors, which paired each new applicant with a SOIL Alumnus who was available for advice and support during the apprenticeship. Please choose the answer that best applies: *

- My SOIL Ambassador was helpful to me at some point during my apprenticeship
- I did not ask my SOIL Ambassador for support or advice at any time but I knew he/she was there if I needed him/her
- I was not aware I had been assigned a SOIL Ambassador
- Question not applicable

The SOIL Ambassador project made a positive contribution to my SOIL Apprenticeship experience. *

- Yes
- No, it made a negative one
- The project had no effect on my experience
- Question not applicable

Please check ALL that apply *

- I think the SOIL Ambassadors project is a good idea
- I wish I had taken better advantage of my SOIL Ambassador
- I think the Ambassadors project needs to be improved before it can be useful
- I don't think the Ambassador concept is very useful for new apprentices
- I would like to mentor new apprentices in future

Do you have any suggestions for improvement of the project?

Do you have any general feedback for SOIL?

I would like to be contacted about being a mentor to apprentices next year. *

- Yes
- No

Submit

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SOIL Ambassador Exit Survey

This survey was sent to all twelve members of the 2011 SOIL Ambassador team. Eleven surveys were returned.

Your name *

How many apprentices were you assigned? *

If you did this again, how many apprentices could you comfortably manage? *

Approx. what percentage of your assignments acknowledged your attempt to establish contact with them? *

How many of your assignments asked you for guidance of some kind? *

By your estimation, how many of your assignments benefited in some way from your guidance? *

Overall, response to this service by 2011 apprentices was low. Do you have any ideas on how we can increase participation? *

Any other thoughts about the project and how to improve it? *

Any suggestions for the project's manager in terms of future coordination with Ambassadors? *

I would like to be contacted about being a mentor to apprentices next year. *

- Yes
 No