

Question

TO: Senate

FROM: Senator Stewart-Kanigan, Senator Ayukawa, Senator Rourke, and Senator Greenspon

SUBJECT: Question Regarding Student Services Funding Sustainability

MEETING DATE: April 22, 2015

PREAMBLE:

Whereas, Student Services are integral to students' ability to succeed and thrive academically and personally, and student demand for services such as those offered by Mental Health and the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) is growing, leading to an inability to sufficiently reduce wait times (Mental Health states that their wait time is 2-3 months, but student testimony reports wait times up to 5 months¹) and a reduction in OSD's services,

Whereas, several services under Student Services are legally mandated to be offered to students (such as certain accommodation services of the OSD and the disbursement of financial aid),

Whereas, funding from the central administration has decreased to approximately 3% of the total Student Services budget, with 80% funded by student fees; central funding has historically decreased over time while overhead continues to rise,

Whereas, it was reported at the Committee on Student Services that in 2015-16 the central administration will cease its funding of \$112,000 to Campus Life and Engagement for orientation, reducing its funding to only two staff positions within Scholarships and Student Aid,

Whereas, the Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning) stated that in the event that the most recent budget cut by the Quebec government was above the \$5-6 million projected by McGill, government grants designated as for "services for students" that previously were distributed exclusively to Student Services may begin to be distributed to other student-serving units to protect the "core mission" of the University; the announced cut was \$11 million,

Whereas, in summarizing the 2013 Joint Board-Senate Meeting on Mental Health, the Provost "pointed out that improving the mental health of all members of the McGill community is key to promoting a healthy University environment,"²

1. <http://www.mcgilldaily.com/2015/03/student-services-budget-faces-threat-of-depletion/>
2. https://www.mcgill.ca/senate/files/senate/d13-26_joint_board-senate_report.pdf

QUESTION:

Will government grants designated as for “services for students” be disbursed to units beyond Student Services in 2015-16 given the most recent cut?

Why are Student Services such as Mental Health and Office for Students with Disabilities not considered essential to supporting the core teaching mission of the University in the same way that services such as advising are?

Response from Senator Dyens, Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning):

Thank you Senators Stewart-Kanigan, Ayukawa, Rourke, and Greenspon for your question

Let me clarify some facts :

1-Wait time:

Wait times for Mental Health and Counselling vary considerably depending on which type of service is requested or assessed. Subsequent to intake or triage, the five-month waiting time is correct if one is seeking a psychologist. A psychiatrist wait time is closer to a few weeks (depending on the period at which service is requested. Wait time increases as we get closer to exams, of course). In Counselling, the wait time is usually three weeks, but counsellors do not always see students once per week - sometimes students are seen only every three weeks if their conditions are not classified as life threatening.

Let me be very clear here: There has been no cut to OSD’s budget. The alleged reduction in OSD services is a reduction in services not deemed essential caused by a substantial increase in the need for essential services.

2-Budget:

-We estimate that Student Services will close FY15 with a \$100k *surplus*.

-Student Services is utilizing \$1.5M of the approximately \$6M surplus to fund FY16 operations. This use of the surplus is meant to cover *all* of the normal additional costs to operations as well as the government imposed cuts.

-There were NO CUTS made to either OSD, mental health or counselling in FY 15 and none planned in FY 16

-I have asked Student Services to spend down their surplus over the next 4-5 years.

-My conversations with the Executive Director of Student Services always focus on how to best meet the needs of students.

-This being said, my conversations with the Executive Director have also focused on not creating unsustainable expectations. We cannot create services or respond to quickly to demands if we cannot ensure the sustainability of these additional services.

3-And to specifically answer the two questions:

The government grant we receive is meant to fund services to students. Services to students include units such as the Dean of Students, Service Point, Advising, the Libraries, etc. What the Provost and I have told the President and Vice President of SMMU is the following: If we face unsustainable cuts over the next few years, we may be forced to reallocate a portion of the government grant to ensure the viability of services to students. We would be able to do so only because Student Services has an accumulated surplus of more than \$6M. This is not a long-term solution and is only meant as a potential emergency measure to ensure that all services will be maintained.

2-Mental health and counselling are considered critical services to students. This being said, the demands on our services, in OSD, in mental health and in counselling continue to increase. This, as you all know, is a North American phenomenon. As I told Senate earlier this year and last year, we cannot meet every demand, and we cannot take over the public health care system. What we can do, however, is to focus on providing the best, and healthiest possible environment and to provide as much support as we can. What we can also do is to have a well-developed wellness strategy and action plan. I will ask the incoming senior directors of Student Services and Athletics and Recreation in coordination with every SLL unit to develop such a plan within this academic year.