



# McGill

# Question

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**TO:** Senate  
**FROM:** Prof. Darin Barney, Arts Senator  
**SUBJECT:** Optional student fees  
**MEETING DATE:** Wednesday, April 28

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**PREAMBLE:**

In 2007, the University implemented an online system (via MINERVA) enabling students to withhold optional fees paid to a variety of student organizations on campus. The organizations and services affected by this system include Radio CKUT 90.3 FM (a highly-acclaimed campus-community radio station that broadcasts from the McGill campus), the McGill chapter of the Quebec Public Interest Research Group (a student-led organization that houses a variety of social and environmental justice groups on campus), Midnight Kitchen (a student-operated service providing low-cost vegan meals to McGill students), Queer McGill (a student-run support service for lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender students), and Nightline (a peer telephone-counseling service). Each of these groups makes a unique and important contribution to meeting the goals of the *Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning*, and enriches the life of the campus more generally.

Student fees to support these organizations are optional, and are authorized by periodic referenda conducted according to the rules of Elections McGill. The online system enabling students to exercise the option to withhold fees on an individual basis was implemented in 2007 without adequate consultation with the affected groups and services, and persists against their continued objections. The intention of the online opt-out system was to make withholding these fees more convenient for individual students. However, the system has also produced unintended consequences. For example, it has unwittingly facilitated organized campaigns encouraging students to withhold their fees *en masse*, (see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A63r7J6SSyA> and <http://qiprgoptout.com>), campaigns which the targeted organizations are now compelled to contest, expending scarce resources which could otherwise be devoted to delivering their core services. These campaigns are conducted outside the scrutiny of Elections McGill and its regulations ensuring equity and fairness, and undermine McGill students' collective democratic decisions to support these groups, as expressed repeatedly in rule-bound referenda.

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Most seriously, the online opt-out system has undermined the ability of the affected groups to deliver their programs and services to McGill students, due to the negative impact of increased opt-outs on the revenues of these organizations. For example, in 2009-10, the rate of online opt-outs for the organizations and services highlighted here typically exceeded 10%. In the case of both Radio CKUT and QPIRG McGill, this amounts to over \$20,000 removed from the annual budgets of each of these organizations. As QPIRG reports: “The on-line opt-out system and resultant massive cuts to our income are beginning to severely impede QPIRG's ability to function and continue to bring events, research opportunities and resources to McGill students...Should these on-line opt-outs continue at this rate or even at a higher rate, QPIRG may no longer be able to fund our diverse working groups, research opportunities, orientation programs for new students, resource centre, and event series.”

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**QUESTION:**

1. Will the Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning) agree to conduct a thorough investigation of the impact of the MINERVA opt-out system upon the ability of affected organizations to deliver their services effectively to McGill students, and to report the results of this investigation to Senate?

2. Will the Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning) agree to meet with representatives of the affected organizations to explore the feasibility of an alternative system for allowing students to withhold optional fees, and to report the outcome of this meeting to Senate?

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