

# Townhall Meeting Notes

November 23, 2023

## Table of Contents

Finances, funding, tuition.....	1-4
Student spaces, facilities, resources.....	4-6
Mental health and wellness services.....	6-7
Communication.....	7-8

## Topic 1: Finances, funding, tuition

### Question 1:

Considering the inflation and the decision of other faculties at McGill such as the Faculty of Science that provided each student with additional \$1500. What kind of measurement is our Faculty taking to support graduate students' stipends, especially in terms of considering inflation?

### Reply:

The Faculty of AES is not in a position to allocate \$1500 to each student and even if it was, it would find and across-the-board less beneficial since resources would be spent thinly without consideration of true needs. Instead, the Faculty and GPS focus on assisting students in genuine need with amounts tailored to individual circumstances. In addition, new graduate funding practices are being progressively implemented. For example, the differential fee waivers (DFW) allocation method was revised to maximize their value. As such the tuition supplement paid by international students can be covered in two years instead of three. In addition, AES conducted a thorough review of each graduate award, revising the terms of reference to maximize the financial support provided to students. Finally, new funding minima and best practices will come into effect for students commencing their graduate studies in Fall 2024. The primary objective of the new model is to achieve a more equitable distribution of funds. For instance, in the previous year, the combined funding received by AES graduate students through external scholarships, from supervisors (stipends) and from McGill (internal awards) amounted to a total of \$9.6 million. With 450 AES graduate students in thesis based graduate programs, this should average to approximately \$21,000 per student. However, the actual distribution varies greatly, with some students receiving no funding and others receiving up to \$70,000-\$80,000 annually. The ongoing implementation of these new funding practices aims to address such disparities and guarantee funding for all thesis students.

### Question 2 (follow-up):

Are we planning any kind of public sharing of these new funding schemes with the students and maybe faculty?

### Reply

Yes, the information has been disseminated to all AES units. The Faculty's website will soon reflect these updates. It is crucial to bear in mind that the new funding practices will be applicable only to incoming students starting in Fall 2024. Current students enrolled in AES

graduate programs operate under the previous model, and we are committed to honoring the terms outlined in their funding letters.

We aim for transparency in this process. The previous disbursement methods of Graduate Excellence Fellowship (GEF) varied across AES units. Now, we have established stringent and centralized rules. Every unit on campus will be required to allocate funds in accordance with these rules, ensuring consistency across the board.

### **Question 3**

Is it possible to make it mandatory that stipends increase annually, at least based on the CPI Consumer Price Index like salaries?

#### **Reply:**

Within the new graduate funding model, we have set as a minimum requirement to cover the tuition fee portion, thereby incorporating the usual 4% annual fee increase. This is a step in the right direction, but we do realize there is still room for improvement. It is our commitment to continuously explore avenues for improvement and ensure the efficient utilization of available resources.

### **Question 4**

How is the Faculty addressing the problem of high tuition fees that international students must pay out of pocket once the differential fee waived is over? Most of the supervisors do not cover them.

#### **Reply:**

The Faculty's approach is centered on providing sufficient funds to cover all tuition and ancillary fees. With the new graduate funding practices, concerns about obtaining a differential fee waiver (DFW) will be alleviated for all thesis students, as funding will be provided to cover these fees. Students will no longer need to navigate the process of securing a DFW themselves.

In the new model, the responsibility of securing a DFW will shift to the supervisors and graduate program directors (GPDs), who will be required to request it as part of their overall recruitment strategy. Our aim is to make the funding process as straightforward and uncomplicated for students as possible.

### **Question 5:**

Will the current grad students who would need to apply to the fee differential waiver have to do the same "old" method or will that change for them as well?

#### **Reply:**

All students admitted since 2020 have received their funding letters. If a differential fee waiver (DFW) is not explicitly mentioned in the letter, it indicates that the student is not designated to receive one. There is a slim possibility that a DFW may become available under exceptional circumstances, but this remains an exception. The process of attributing DFWs remains unchanged in the new graduate funding practices of the Faculty, recognizing DFWs as one of the strongest recruitment tools at our disposal.

### **Question 6**

What programs is the Faculty currently running to complement student stipends because many of the scholarships that are online are either unavailable or no longer active on the website?

#### **Reply:**

The online scholarship list is currently up to date. Note that some scholarships are multi-year, meaning that a given student may hold the scholarship for more than one year. During this period, the scholarship is not available for other students to apply for, as it is currently allocated. This may lead to the erroneous impression that the scholarship is no longer active. We are exploring improving the information flow through email notifications at a specific time of the year to inform everyone about available awards. This will enhance transparency and ensure that students are aware of scholarship opportunities when they become available. We will share more details once this new method is finalized and implemented.

### **Question 7**

How will students be compensated for the delays in research, the inability to access labs, and the impact on their thesis work and funding for example, some funding extensions if needed.

#### **Reply:**

We presume this refers to the disruptions during the winter term 2023. There is an ongoing effort to address the situation. If you believe you may be eligible for compensation, please initiate the process by sending an email to Prof. Charron ([jean-benoit.charron@mcgill.ca](mailto:jean-benoit.charron@mcgill.ca)), explaining your circumstances and the challenges you are currently facing. Based on this information, Prof. Charron will provide guidance on whether or not you should proceed to send an email to the Associate Deans of GPS.

The associate deans GPS will conduct a thorough review of each student's situation and determine what compensation can be offered accordingly. In many cases, compensation may involve adjustments such as extending deadlines to facilitate thesis submission. There is also the possibility of providing funds to cover tuition fees or offering a stipend, but these decisions will be made by the associate deans of GPS based on the individual circumstances of each student. This process is actively ongoing, and we are committed to addressing each case to the best extent possible.

### **Question 8**

Is there any simplified and efficient process in place that students can use to apply for extra funding and how is their request processing being communicated and managed?

#### **Reply:**

Students are asked to communicate with their Graduate Program Director (GPD), who can inform them of all potential sources of funding.

For inquiries and guidance related to external funding applications, students are encouraged to reach out to Susan Gregus ([susan.gregus@mcgill.ca](mailto:susan.gregus@mcgill.ca)).

### **Question 9**

What will be done to help the students who are opting for the non thesis option? Because their tuition fees are already very high, and they don't have access to many funding opportunities like the thesis programs.

#### **Reply:**

Depending on the nature of the request, students may have access to the compensation provided by GPS, presenting a potential avenue for resolution. It is crucial to consider that non-thesis students, lacking a research component in their program, may not have been impacted to the same extent by the specific circumstances in question. As a result, the nature of the compensation available to them might differ.

Nevertheless, our commitment remains unwavering, and we will explore every possible avenue to help for eligible students.

## **Topic 2: Facilities and resources**

### **Question 1**

What are the measures being taken to improve access to facilities and resources, including autoclaves, equipment, and general laboratory conditions? Because there is a lack of up-to-date equipment, maintenance issues, unnotified electrical shutdowns, water interruptions, and it's graduate students who have to deal with these problems when they try to do their research/work.

#### **Reply:**

Macdonald Campus' facilities are aging, requiring maintenance and renovations. The good news is that McGill has committed to investing \$100 million into this campus to address deferred maintenance to keep the buildings and infrastructure up and running and up to code.

The renovation ongoing in the Raymond Building serves two purposes - deferred maintenance of the entire building and the installation of a new research facility (a plant pest containment lab). Every lab will get a new hood, a new HVAC system and sprinkler systems. Closure of a building is very disruptive both for those who have to vacate the building (Plant Science labs) and for those hosting them. The next building that will undergo deferred maintenance is likely Parasitology and then Barton. The basement of the Macdonald-Stewart building will also need to be equipped with a sprinkler system. To address the needs for lab swing space during renovations, the Campus Planning Office at Facilities Management is currently performing a scoping exercise with the aim to put mobile labs on campus.

The situation with the autoclaves has recently improved through the installation of a new device and the DI water issue has been addressed. We realize that electrical shutdowns are very disruptive but they are simply unavoidable in order to install a new panel, for example. Efforts are being made to schedule them when they least interfere with operations. Next May, a planned electrical shutdown will be necessary for several days are we are already planning for this.

### **Question 2**

What are the measures being taken to address the lack of grad students' specific spaces on campus?

**Reply:**

At the moment, the Faculty has a severe space deficit simply because one building is entirely offline. Some of the staff residences on campus have been converted for administrative purposes. We are looking into the possibility to make similar space available for a graduate student lounge.

**Question 3**

How is the Dean's office addressing the issue of food insecurity on Mac Campus, especially for graduate students during the summer months when they come here for research?

**Reply:**

While food service is not directly under the Faculty's purview (it is under McGill's Food and Dining Services), last summer we ensured that Twigs was open during lunchtime and a vending machine with sandwiches was available. We will gladly hear about specific further needs.

**Question 3 (follow-up):**

The sandwiches (1 row of sandwiches) were only available during the term so not available during the summer and some students didn't even know it was there. Can we consider putting the vending machine in a more central area to be more obvious/accessible to students, and to be affordable. It can be an option explored with Twigs with them providing the food items (salads, sandwiches, other items maybe) so there is no external or other company to compete with them?

**Reply:**

We will have another conversation with food and dining services and it may be more effective for the student societies to have that conversation directly with that office (Mathieu Laperle, Mr. <mathieu.laperle@mcgill.ca>).

It is also worth pointing out that the Hort Centre sells fresh produce baskets to students for a reduced price. Dining services at John Abbott are accessible to Mac students as well. Finally, there is also the MCSS run restaurant at the Ceilidh, and BYOB, Happy Belly

**Question 4**

Are there any plans to convert the Mac Market into a full grocery store or implement other measures to improve food availability year-round?

**Reply:**

There are no plans at this time.

**Question 5**

Are there any plans to implement more grocery shuttles?

**Reply:**

The grocery shuttle is arranged by Student Housing (not the Faculty). The frequency of the grocery shuttle is once a week.

### **Question 6**

Are there any needs-assessment survey being currently conducted to evaluate student needs in regard to food and dining and are there any initiatives on campus (like midnight kitchen) that are available?

#### **Reply:**

The Faculty will gladly work with the student societies to discuss the needs. Any commercial enterprise will want to be reassured for financial viability (critical mass of customers). Direct contact with Food and Dining Services may be the most effective way forward.

### **Question 6 (follow up)**

We can definitely explore the idea of offering cooking classes or also explore the idea of food banks, grocery voucher programs, or subsidized food pantries. There is an initiative downtown that provides students facing food insecurity or unable to afford their groceries, with both vouchers to various grocery stores in addition to providing a variety of staple food items. I don't know if that could be something that we can work on with, with your support to create links with grocery stores here in St. Anne that could offer such vouchers or discounts for students.

#### **Reply:**

The Faculty encourages student societies to initiate discussions with local merchants.

## **Topic 3: Mental health and wellness services**

### **Question 1**

How has the university provided mental health support to students facing anxiety and distress due to the asbestos situation and other challenges?

#### **Reply:**

A fast-track system is in place for students experiencing anxiety related to asbestos concerns. If a student communicates this to the Wellness Hub, they will receive priority access to care. This initiative has been implemented and is reportedly still in effect. Students are encouraged to utilize this resource if they are experiencing anxiety or other related concerns due to the asbestos issue.

### **Question 2**

Is there a plan to address issues related to the Wellness Hubs availability for appointments and support?

#### **Reply:**

To clarify, the Wellness Hub is not under the Faculty's purview, but we understand that there are challenges in securing timely appointments. The Wellness Hub is actively addressing this issue through various initiatives such as regular scheduling of peer support groups. Efforts are being made to tackle the shortage of available appointments, and the Wellness Hub is exploring diverse strategies to reach as many students as possible.

### **Question 3**

Would you say this issue is due to the lack of staff in the hub?

#### **Reply:**

Staffing may be one reason. It is important to note that the university's mandate is not that of a health provider. Instead, the university guides students to health providers, as an entry point.

### **Question 4**

Are any additional steps being taken to improve the accessibility and quality of mental health services for graduate students?

#### **Reply:**

There are initiatives in place to enhance support for students. At the Faculty level with the help of GPS, we have introduced a seminar series centered on the concept of an Individual Development Plan (IDP), offered to both thesis and non-thesis students. The IDP serves as a guide, directing students towards the appropriate services and acting as a central point of entry for various service providers. Previously, these service providers would send emails to students, but now, their engagement is more tangible. We have made the seminar series mandatory for non-thesis students, providing them with regular access to these valuable resources. However, it is important to note that while participation in the seminar series is not mandatory for thesis students, the enrollment and participation rates are currently low. This is an aspect we recognize and are actively working on, aiming to encourage increased participation among thesis students to ensure they benefit from these resources as well.

## **Topic 4: Communication**

### **Question 1**

What are your plans to provide more accurate and transparent timelines for building closures and re-openings to avoid confusion and frustration?

#### **Reply:**

The Faculty and FMAS have committed to improving how information is communicated. There are many factors that create uncertainty in construction time-lines as is to be expected when renovating older buildings.

### **Question 2**

Are there plans to add the information or news such as closures or any scheduled event that can disrupt one's work, it is being done for the shuttle and that has been helpful. It could be a news section on the faculty website so one would know if they needed information you go there because yes we do get a lot of emails and things might be lost in spam folders for example, so an updated online timeline, could be a resource that people could just click on and find the information.

**Reply:**

Most ad hoc communication occurs via email and the Faculty encourages students to consult these carefully. Information on long-term planning of projects can be found here:  
<https://www.mcgill.ca/macdonald/about/campus-projects>

**Follow-up:**

We agree that it is important for communication to be done via a variety of modes. For example, the email will inform a certain group, the website would inform others, opportunities like this townhall would inform others, social media, word-of mouth ..... for example, we try to put up posters and just have the physical announcement, we send out emails, we have a newsletter, so there's different things that are going to reach different people.

End

**Stay tuned for next** semester's townhall, and please feel free to send us your questions or concerns.