Introduction

On April 28th, 29th, and 30th, 2016, graduate students were asked to vote on two approved questions regarding an increase to Compulsory Ancillary Fees (CAFs) at McMaster. Of the seven hundred and one (701) students who voted, representing approximately 21% of the total graduate student population, 50.4% voted NO to the first referendum question (to increase the Student Wellness Centre [SWC] fee for continued access to mental health practitioners on campus) and 51.4% voted NO to the second referendum question (to increase the career counsellor fee for services related to professional training). As a result, both questions failed. Although services provided by counsellors and psychologists were cut, graduate students continued to have access to a psychiatrist by way of a physician’s referral.

Following the vote, graduate students urged the GSA, through the Graduate Students Service Review Committee (GSSRC), to continue to meet with the university administration with respect to the reinstatement of mental health services. Many students identified that they benefit from these services and believe that future graduate students will too.

The GSSRC is comprised of graduate students from different faculties, including students who have personally experienced mental health issues and accessed both on- and off-campus resources. The committee worked on two fronts: maintaining the discussions with the University’s administration for the reinstatement of improved mental health services and ensuring the provision of supplementary mental health resources and wellness activities to graduate students. Moreover, the GSSRC and GSA Council approved a change in the GSA Health Plan to improve the psychological coverage offered by the plan. The new coverage is $100 per visit up to $400 per year, beginning in September 2017. The GSA has also partnered with Arrive and Thrive, Grad Wellness Initiative, and OpenCircle to provide students with wellness activities and mental health resources.

September 2016 Survey Results

In order to better understand the priority of graduate students, in September 2016, the GSSRC launched a survey on mental health services asking graduate students their opinion on what mental health services matter most to them. In total, 940 graduate students responded to the survey.

The results of the survey demonstrated that:

- 75.2% of respondents preferred to have mental health services made available on-campus instead of off-campus (i.e., private) counselling services.
- 65.7% were interested in taking the issue of mental health services and fees back to a vote.
- Respondents ranked access to group therapy run weekly by counsellors as the most important mental health care followed by the access of “one-on-one session with a counsellor serving all students in the SWC” and “access to one-on-one counsellor serving only graduate students at the SWC.”

The survey results served as grounds for the GSSRC’s discussions with the University administration regarding the need to have mental health services for graduate students reinstated.

*To access the full results of the survey, please visit the GSA Website

The April 2017 Referendum Questions

In January 2017, the University drafted a new mental health services and fee proposal for graduate students. Upon review and thorough deliberations, the GSSRC committee decided to bring the question of mental health services and fees for graduate students back to a vote. In addition to the university’s proposal of accessing mental health services through the SWC, the committee considered the introduction of the Student Assistance Plan (SAP), which includes access to remote (phone call and online) mental health services that would be provided by the GSA’s Health and Dental provider.

This vote will determine if graduate students opt for access to mental health services at McMaster’s Student Wellness Centre (SWC), and/or through the SAP provided by the GSA’s Health and Dental provider.

The GSA Council approved the following two referendum questions that graduate students will be asked to vote on between April 1st and April 3rd, 2017.

**Question 1**

Do you want to pay an additional $23.86* per term ($71.58 per annum) to access in-person mental health services at the McMaster University Student Wellness Centre? [Yes or No]

*Part-time students will pay an additional $11.93 per term ($35.79 per annum).

**Question 2**

Do you want to pay an additional fee of up to $10 per annum for a Student Assistance Plan provided through the GSA Health and Dental provider, which provides remote (phone call, online) mental health services? [Yes or No]

The services accessible at the McMaster University Student Wellness Centre (SWC) are:
• In-person access to a psychologist, counsellors, mental health nurses and wellness education experts (along with an OHIP-billed psychiatrist and physicians)
• A broad range of services including mental health, academic issue, and personal issue counselling
• In-person workshops on a magnitude of issues
• Graduate-only group counselling sessions

The services accessible from the Student Assistance Plan are:

• Access to counsellors and registered social workers
• Counselling services available 24-hours/7 days-a-week by phone and/or online chat
• A broad range of mental health services within the scope of clinical counsellors and registered social workers
• Several types of self-evaluation tools and relevant time-sensitive content (i.e., tip sheets, messages on stress management) available online, at any time

The Outcomes of the Vote

Graduate students are asked to vote on two independent questions that would lead to the following outcomes:

1. If both referendum questions are approved, students will have access to both mental health services at the SWC and remote services through the SAP. They will maintain existing coverage for off-campus (i.e., private) counselling services at a rate of $100 per appointment, up to $400 per year.
2. If only the first referendum question is approved, students will have access to mental health services at the SWC, but not remote services through the SAP. They will maintain existing coverage for off-campus (i.e., private) counselling services at a rate of $100 per appointment, up to $400 per year.
3. If only the second referendum question is approved, students will not have access to mental health services at the SWC (besides those offered by a physician, or a psychiatrist on referral by a physician), but will have access to remote services through the SAP. They will maintain existing coverage for off-campus (i.e., private) counselling services at a rate of $100 per appointment, up to $400 per year.
4. If neither referendum question is approved, students will not have access to mental health services at the SWC (besides those offered by a psychiatrist and/or physician) nor will they have access to remote services through the SAP. They will maintain existing coverage for off-campus (i.e., private) counselling services at a rate of $100 per appointment, up to $400 per year.

\[1\] Sessions will be available if the minimum number of students required is reached to warrant pulling a counsellor from their one-on-one work.
**How are the Services Funded?**

**Mental Health Services at the SWC:** Access to mental health services at the SWC for graduate students is funded in part through non-tuition related compulsory ancillary fees (CAFs) paid by graduate students to the University. CAFs are funded by students for non-academic services such as athletics, wellness, and career guidance. Pursuant to the Ministry of Education and Training’s (now the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities) Policy on Compulsory Ancillary Fees dated June 28th, 1994, CAFs are separate from tuition fees and are levied on students in order to cover the costs of items that are not normally paid for out of operating or capital revenues. Currently, graduate students pay $10.09 per term ($30.27 per annum) towards SWC fees. The proposed fee of $23.86 will be paid in addition to this current fee.

**Mental Health Services through SAP:** Currently, graduate students pay a total of $186 per annum for their Graduate Student Health Plan, which as of September 2017, will include coverage for $100 per appointment up to a maximum of $400 per annum for counselling services. The SAP fee of up to $10 per annum, if approved via the referendum vote, will be paid in addition to the current premium paid to StudentCare and enable students to access remote (phone call and online) counselling services.