

On The Record S3E5 - Wellbeing Referendum

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SPEAKERS

Andrew Yang, Mackenzie Currier, Meghan McCracken, Joy Barai, Racy Rafique, Maya Abramson

- A** Andrew Yang 00:04
Welcome back to the on the record podcast. In today's TMU Week in Review, we talk to students and experts about TMU's new referendum, giving students the chance to vote on the extra money the university has asked for, to allocate towards improved health and wellness services on campus.
- M** Maya Abramson 00:20
Then we hear from a student who speaks from her own experiences with these campus services, and what it's like to deal with health issues in university. I'm Maya Abramson.
- R** Racy Rafique 00:29
I'm Racy Rafique.
- A** Andrew Yang 00:31
I'm Andrew Yang.
- R** Racy Rafique 00:32
And that's what's coming up on today's TMU Week In Review.
- A** Andrew Yang 00:41
This week, TMU hosted a referendum to potentially increase fees for student wellbeing

This week, TMU hosted a referendum to potentially increase fees for student wellbeing, including a plan to make a new student wellness hub, hire new support staff and decrease wait times

M Maya Abramson 00:52

The proposed fee increased from \$4 to almost \$39 would be an increase of 888%. That is not a calculating error 888%. Naturally, it has proved to be pretty controversial. For more on this we're chatting with Racy Rafique, a multimedia reporter and editor in our newsroom,

A Andrew Yang 01:14

Racy, you've been reporting on this issue for on the record?

R Racy Rafique 01:17

Yes, I have.

A Andrew Yang 01:18

So can you talk us through what precipitated this referendum?

R Racy Rafique 01:21

So TMU hosted a referendum last week that asked students to vote on whether they want to pay more out of pocket for better health and wellness services. So these services include the school's Medical Center where students can book various types of appointments, like a quick prescription fill, or a routine checkup, or any other basic medical care. There's also the Center for Student Development and counseling or the CSDC, which provides students with basic mental health care. The main issue students have been complaining about is the wait times for the mental health care services offered by both the medical center and the CSDC. This is where the referendum comes in. In my interview with president Lachemi, he said that students concerns about wait times and accessibility were two of the main issues the money from the referendum would be used to solve. So just to break down the referendum: students currently pay almost \$4 a semester towards the wellness fee. TMU was looking to add an additional fee of almost \$35 per semester. That comes to almost \$39 per semester, if the referendum passes.

M Maya Abramson 02:28

You spoke to many students about how their mental or physical health creates challenges at school. Can you tell us about that?

R Racy Rafique 02:34

Racy Rafique 04:10

So one of the main voices in my story for OTR's print edition is a second year international student named Lynette George. Lynette uses both physical and mental health services from TMU. And as an international student, she doesn't have many choices when it comes to accessing affordable treatment. I've spoken with Lynette several times over the course of the semester. In September, she told me how she was on the waitlist to see a psychiatrist for an ADHD assessment. She had been on the waitlist since June or July. It's now November and Lynette is still on the waitlist. For someone with ADHD she talks about how tough it is being undiagnosed while in school. Because you can't access disability accommodations from the school, you're unmedicated, you don't have any tools for how to help yourself succeed and deadlines continue to accumulate. As someone who was diagnosed with ADHD a few months ago, I can tell you that being undiagnosed can impact every factor of your life, especially academics and grades, since it is a constant struggle between knowing you need to do something and actually going and doing it. Now imagine this application to other illnesses such as anxiety and depression. Everyone I spoke to maintained that diagnosis and treatment doesn't just make you magically better, but it really does help. Lynette told me that at this point, she has kind of mentally prepared herself to remain untreated for a long time. She said it's been 19 years. What's a few more?

A

Andrew Yang 04:03

So for these students, what kinds of supports exists currently on campus, and what kinds of issues are there to accessing these services?

R

Racy Rafique 04:11

There's the CSDC and the medical center which both provide mental health support. Wait times to speak to a counselor through the CSDC are over 14 weeks on average, though, according to the Student Wellbeing department. For the medical center, it's a bit different students can book an appointment to speak with a physician about their struggles, and typically they only have to wait about two weeks. But this initial appointment is one of two with a physician before you can be recommended to a psychiatrist if you're looking for a diagnosis or medication. The psychiatrist waitlist is currently full and moving very, very slowly. There's also the issue of TMU not having an actual physical center with all these services available. Part of the money from the referendum would be used to fund a brand new location for a student wellbeing center.

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Maya Abramson 05:01

So how did the referendum come about?

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Racy Rafique 05:04

Students have been complaining about wait times and other accessibility issues for a long time. After the toll of the pandemic, the school has seen a rise in students looking to access treatment. The school had to do something about the lackluster services. And after speaking

with various student groups and community members since last winter, they came to the conclusion that raising the Student Wellbeing fee would be the best course of action to address students needs.

A

Andrew Yang 05:28

What has the state of student wellness services been like at TMU recently,

R

Racy Rafique 05:33

Post lockdown students require more mental health support than before. The Student Wellbeing Department said almost 5000 Students access TMU's medical services last year. A majority of these visits were mental health related. About 68% of the Medical Center's total visits that year were for mental health care. That's a 55% increase from students who use the services in 2019, pre-pandemic. There's too many students who need timely access to care and not enough staff to accommodate them. There are only 24 counselors right now at the CSDC. And the majority of them are not full time staff members.

M

Maya Abramson 06:10

So based on what I'm seeing on social media, this referendum seems to be pretty controversial. Why is the issue so complicated?

R

Racy Rafique 06:17

Look at it this way. Students want better services, they feel they deserve quicker access to mental health care and accommodations. The school says sure, we'll give you exactly what you're asking for. But you have to pay for it yourself. What student wants to pay an extra \$70 per year on their tuition that's already thousands of dollars. Some students I spoke to were actually unfazed by the idea of paying nearly \$70 more a year, these students weren't even people who use the school services. But even among students who do use the school services, the ask is tough. If they don't, if they don't vote to pay that extra fee. Does that mean that they have to continue to deal with these long wait times? Lachemi told me no. Regardless of the referendum results, the school will still be committed to making accessibility to health care a top priority. But how if they need the top up of \$70 a year to improve things? Where will the money come from if the vote doesn't go their way? The reason the issue is so complicated is because it makes you wonder, whose responsibility is it to make sure that students have adequate access to mental health services? Who should be the one footing the bill? It's easy to say the school should do it. But where would they get the money from? And also does asking students to pay for their own basic needs set a precedent for future cases when the school needs more money to help its students?

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Andrew Yang 07:43

We saw on TMU's social media channels that the announcement of the referendum was generating some controversial replies. We spoke directly to a couple of students to get their

generating some controversial replies. We spoke directly to a couple of students to get their views on the current services and the potential fee increase. Joy Barai, graphics communications student at TMU, who is a user of the school psychology services during the pandemic. He's voting against the referendum, because higher health and wellness fees adds to the already hiked tuition fees international students pay every year.

J Joy Barai 08:10

It's undeniable that we pay about three times the domestic fee. And that's all considered that fine. And we've been doing it for over years. So small increments like that adds pressure on top of the tuition that the international students pay, which is mostly three times and what the fee increases.

A Andrew Yang 08:33

Aside from the proposed fee increases, Bai says that the school needs to be more clear when it comes to what this referendum is aiming to bring students.

J Joy Barai 08:41

My vote achieves that the university whenever they come up with a new plan, they have to be transparent about what how those expenses are going to be related to their benefits. Instead of just generalizing that more green space, more private spaces for mental health, which is not the solution.

A Andrew Yang 09:00

Barai says that the referendum shouldn't be all about the new services that the school will bring the students. It's the improvements to make to existing services that the school needs to focus on.

J Joy Barai 09:10

A service that it's already rendered, it's not useful to ask a fee increase for that. So instead, if they could ask for like more, bringing in more counselors or reducing the wait time for seeing a psychologist in terms of need. That would be something more I would vote yes for.

M Maya Abramson 09:31

Mackenzie Currier is in her fourth year of Creative Industries at TMU. She said she supports a yes vote in the referendum so that services can be improved.

M Mackenzie Currier 09:41

Mackenzie Currier 10:12

Though it is a bit more money. I ended up voting in favor of it because though it will be more in everyone's tuition. If this is the only way that we can get access to those services at TMU. I think they outweigh the consequences of that per person charged.

M

Maya Abramson 10:01

Mackenzie has heard stories about fellow students struggling to access wellness services.

M

Mackenzie Currier 10:06

I've heard of friends trying to access the counselors on campus and having an extremely long wait times upwards of like four to six months or something like that, which just for people who need help, that's far too much time before they get access to the services.

M

Maya Abramson 10:26

Overall, McKenzie is not satisfied with the way TMU administration deals with issues of student wellness.

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Mackenzie Currier 10:32

Well, I think there needs to be more push from the managerial level like of the school to make this a priority. I feel like TMU does a lot of lip service to their different causes. But I would like to see some tangible change.

M

Maya Abramson 10:51

So some TMU's students are game for an increase, and some are not, but Racy, how to TMU's current views compared to other schools.

R

Racy Rafique 10:59

So currently, TMU's students pay almost \$4 a semester for their wellness fee. This compared to the 16 other schools in Ontario is actually the lowest rate in the province. The additional almost \$35 would put TMU at nearly \$39, which would rank the school as number seven on the list from least to most expensive fees. So we're about in the middle. When you look into other schools, you find that \$39 a semester is actually not that high of a number to pay for a wellness fee. TMU has just always paid very little for it, which translated to long wait times and no proper physical health center on campus.

A

Andrew Yang 11:40

You said you spoke to President Lechmi about this issue. What else did you learn from him?

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R

Racy Rafique 11:44

The referendum is just one small piece of a larger picture the school has for TMU's Student Wellbeing. Lachemi told me that the school has been in talks with different focus groups community members, staff student unions, since at least last February trying to tackle the broad issue of strengthening student well being on campus. Whether or not the referendum passes school has big plans, including building a large hub that would host all of TMU's health and wellness service centers right on campus. I think I came out of the Lachemi phone call with more questions and answers. If plans will still continue, how exactly does the nearly \$2 million dollars per semester from students factor into this? He did say that a minimum of 25% of the fee would be dedicated to frontline support that would be available for students in September 2023. So I assume that means more staff and counselors, which is one of the main things students said they wanted.

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Maya Abramson 12:42

This episode comes out on Monday. But as of recording, we don't have the results. Based on your research. What can we expect from the referendum.

R

Racy Rafique 12:50

One thing that I think is particularly significant to note is that there's no minimum voter turnout required in order for the referendum to be considered valid. Of course, there's still an appeals period after the results are released. But it's very possible that the mandatory fees of all students at TMU will be decided by a disproportionately lower number of actual voters. Knowing historically that TMU's students don't really vote in TMSU elections, for example, you can guess that this could be the case with the referendum as well, especially considering that it is only happening online. It will be interesting to see which side of the referendum felt more strongly about the issue though, strong enough to actually go on RAMSS and vote. Racy from the future here! The referendum passed on November 4 by 571 votes. If approximately 46,000 eligible voters less than 4000 voted. 2218 for the increase and 1647 against so while only 8.5% of students turned out to vote 100% of students must now pay the extra \$34.90

M

Maya Abramson 14:03

Thank you so much Racy. For more on the story you can check out on the records print issue which is out on newsstands across campus today. Now we're sitting down with Meghan McCracken a student in performance production. Megan has been vocal about her experiences with mental and physical health issues and how these have impacted her studies. Meghan, thank you so much for joining us.

M

Meghan McCracken 14:41

Thank you for having me.

M

Maya Abramson 14:42

So can you talk to us about how health issues have impacted your studies overall?

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Meghan McCracken 14:47

Yeah, absolutely. So I am right now a third year TMU student but back to a first year situation. So I have been struggling with mental health since right in the middle of high school. I was diagnosed with depression when I was 15, and was seeking therapy privately from there, when I was making the transition from high school to university, having a really hard time because therapy is really expensive. So I had a bit of a crisis in my first year, and was referred to the counseling services here. And it was really hard because there was a lot of limitations to it, which I wasn't used to, where I was given a timeline of oh, you can only have four appointments. And after that, good luck. So it was a little bit frustrating. The first person I met with at counseling services was lovely, was a different type of therapy I've ever experienced. And then I had to cut my ties with her just as she was making a transition. And then I was referred back to counseling services a few months later after experiencing another crisis, and was referred to someone else. And then I have been with that person for now, two and a half years. And I have loved my time, I've really experienced some growth in my time with counseling services, as well as been given a lot of opportunity to participate in group therapy with counseling services, which I really enjoyed. But yeah, it's been a very long transition and really difficult.

M

Maya Abramson 16:38

Can you talk about -- did you ever experienced long wait times when trying to access these services?

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Meghan McCracken 16:43

Yeah. So right at the beginning, it was a really, they told me like four to six months, and I was like, I can't wait that long. And so I was seeking private therapy outside. But then, when I was able to get into counseling services, they told me, I couldn't be seeking both services, even though like, I knew I needed more support than I was getting, which was really hard. And yeah, it was really a long wait time. Now, I haven't experienced the wait time. And it's really hard for me to hear about people in my life that are seeking help with counseling services and having to wait because I didn't really have to experience that. I also did it all through COVID. So it wasn't an issue of having to go into the office. It was always online. So it was a little bit more convenient for me. But yeah.

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Maya Abramson 17:27

Right, for sure. And you talked about having switched programs. Can you talk us through a little bit about how some of the health issues you've dealt with either physical or mental have

impacted going to school and completing assignments and stuff like that?

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Meghan McCracken 17:39

Absolutely. So yeah, I was originally out of high school, I applied for the Social Work program, because one I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I knew that social work, gave me a lot of options in wanting to do lots of different things. And I knew I wanted to help people. So I applied for the Social Work program got in and started my first year in COVID, right, September 2020. And so it was really difficult in that sense in I was living at home in Waterloo. With my parents, everybody was at home. I was also dealing with physical problems, which we were talking about where I was having a lot of undiagnosed stomach issues where I was getting really sick and I wasn't able to like participate in class I was passing out I was in the hospital, it was just like one thing after another after another. And so I was dealing with that, as well as struggling, that my whole year had been ruined. I didn't have a senior year, I didn't have a that big transition to Toronto that I was expecting and have been thinking about for the last four years. So that really decreased my mental health. And then I had a situation in my first year where I had written an exam for a psych class I was taking and I passed out in the middle of the exam. And I had to fight with the professor for like two and a half months to the point where I had to go to like the head of the psychology program and fight for my rights of I passed out in the middle of this exam. I don't understand how this happening to me is like it's going to affect my grades and stuff. So it was just like a very complicated situation. And I think was like a bit of a trigger in triggering my mental health generally. And yeah, and so it's I think since that it comes in really big waves where I'll be fine for a really long time and then it will something drastic will hit me and it's like that spiral of all this progress just isn't worth it anymore, if that makes sense.

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Maya Abramson 19:52

And that psychology professor that you had to fight with. Do you find that that's representative of professors in general. Have you experienced professors who are accommodating when you need accommodations for health or, or issues like that?

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Meghan McCracken 20:05

Yeah, no, I have never experienced anything like that. Since that moment, it's only been that one professor. And whenever I tell that story to people, they're always shocked that I can't believe a human would react that way and exactly, exactly that, right? No, I've never experienced it. And I really value how accommodating some of my professors are. And that, like mental well being and physical well being comes before anything as much as like, it sucks for all we're paying for, and you can't come in. Like we've really developed a system of being online that like there is convenience to work from home or do all those things, which is really nice as well. So would you describe your overall experience with student on campus wellness services as positive or negative or somewhere in between? Um, currently I would say positive, just because I'm seeking services very regularly. I love the person I've been connected with. And like I said earlier, the progress. But I think at first I was a little bit turned away from it just because of exactly what we were talking about before the wait times the only limited amount of availability, the like timeline of only being able to have so many appointments was just like, not

what I was used to. Yeah, and I know, I know we haven't talked about this yet. But when I first was like, turned away, almost, I had to seek services outside like I was saying, and trying to find something that like the school could help me pay for in that sense was really difficult. Especially being in Toronto the services I would have sought out or the people I would have gone to to get recommendations of who to go to was limited now because I was new to the city.

M Maya Abramson 21:43

So there is this referendum that has just happened this week. And part of that includes plans to decrease wait times, to add more staff to the student wellbeing services and to create a new wellness hub. How do you feel about all that?

M Meghan McCracken 21:45

I'm very for it, I know it was a big topic of conversation with friends that are first-years, fresh out of high school. And trying to explain to them the importance of it was really, it was a good conversation, you know that they didn't understand that they were paying basically nothing for it. And for people that in my life that come to me asking me about my experience with counseling services, they are always like, oh, that's what I expect to happen to me. And then when it doesn't, and they're turned away, have a hard time. So it was really a good conversation and feeling like a bit of a mentor situation for these people of yes, I think this is a good thing. As much as the money piece of it is a little bit annoying. You have to pick and choose your battles, I guess. As someone who has used these services, what other changes do you think the school should be implementing to improve them? Um, I wish it was more known. I think that's one thing that I have thought about my entire experience with it is that I wish more people knew about it. Because it's not really an advertised thing. I really had to go searching for it. And also like it's not used, which is really sad, and talked about publicly if that makes sense. You know that I'm very open about talking about my experience, but you can talk to other people that won't share that experience as well. So I think that's- I wish it was more easily accessible and easier to find. Yeah.

M Maya Abramson 23:23


Absolutely. And do you think if it was more easily accessible and more advertised that would help decrease the stigma of mental health issues and other issues on campus?


M Meghan McCracken 23:30


Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And I think it would start a conversation that we constantly are talking about, we need to talk about more.


M Maya Abramson 23:38

Thank you, Megan, for sharing your experiences. Students looking for on campus support can head to TMU's Student Wellbeing website.

 Racy Rafique 23:46
And that's it for this week. We'll see you in two weeks for a new episode. For On The Record.

 Maya Abramson 23:51
I'm Maya Abramson.

 Racy Rafique 23:53
I'm Racy Rafique,

 Andrew Yang 23:54
and I'm Andrew Yang.

 Maya Abramson 23:56
This has been TMU Week in Review. Thank you for listening