A Handy Guide to Writing a Student-Initiated Referendum Question
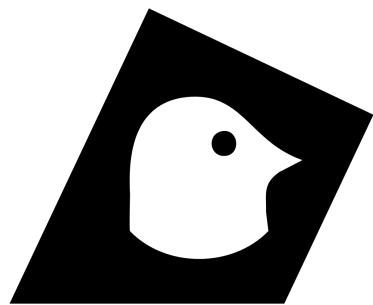
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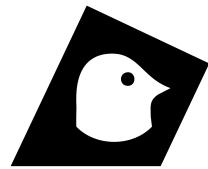
What is a Referendum Question?

- A Referendum Question acts as a way for SSMU Members to establish a fee, poll the SSMU's Membership or edit one of the Society's Governing documents (Constitution, Internal Regulations, or Policies & Plans).
- There are 2 types of referendum questions: student-initiated questions and Legislative Council initiated questions
    - **Legislative Council-Initiated Questions:** The Legislative Council may initiate a referendum question by way of a resolution of council. If passed by a two-thirds majority (⅔), it will be put to Members during the following Referendum period.
    - **Student-Initiated Questions**: Any SSMU member may initiate a referendum question through a submission through Election SSMU. Once approved, the member shall collect the signatures of at least five hundred (500) members or the signatures amounting to two (2) percent of the membership, whichever is less, on a petition. The total signatures submitted shall be from at least seven (7) different faculties or Schools, with not more than thirty-five percent (35%) being from any one Faculty or School.

What are the differences between a Legislative Council-Initiated and Student-Initiated Question?

They all end up on the same ballot, the only difference is the process and requirements. According to our Internal Regulations, referendum questions may amend, establish, or rescind any policy of the society **except**:

a. Membership fees or the finances of the Society;
b. the composition of the Society's staff; or
c. legal matters.

Process for Student-initiated referenda proposing a change to the Constitution or the Internal Regulations:
Such questions can be submitted as a member-initiated question, however, after approval and signature collection, it will be presented as a recommendation to the Legislative Council for voting. **Note the modified timing for signature collection outlined above for these types of questions.**

Élections de l'AÉUM
Elections SSMU

Située sur les territoires traditionnels des collectivités Haudenosaunee et Anishinaabe.
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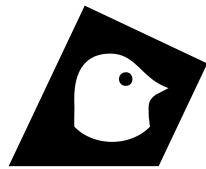
How do I submit a Legislative Council-Initiated Question?

A legislative council-initiated question must be submitted via a Motion by a councillor (and a seconder) to the steering committee, in order to be discussed and voted on at a Legislative Council session. If you want to initiate a question through the Legislative Council, feel free to contact any SSMU Councillor or executive, who would be able to submit a motion through the legislative council.

How do I submit a Student-Initiated Question?

Regular SSMU members usually submit a question via this route. To do this, you must fill in a nomination form during the nomination period of a Fall and Winter referendum, available on the Elections SSMU website (ssmu.ca/elections). You will be asked to propose your question, obtain consultations, and gather any relevant background information to support your proposal. You can get help from the governance team's Policy and Advocacy Coordinator at pac@ssmu.ca, Internal Counsel and Corporate Secretary governance@ssmu.ca, or any SSMU Executive.

Afterwards, the package must be submitted to Elections SSMU's Chief Returning Officer (CRO) for review (elections@ssmu.ca), which will be checked whether the question is clear, impartial, in line with the SSMU Constitution, Internal Regulations and Policies (unless the question directly alters one of these last two), and concern matters only within the jurisdiction of SSMU.

Once the question is approved, you must then receive at least five hundred (500) signatures on a package provided by the CRO. Also, no more than 35% of the signatures may be from students from the same faculty, and shall be from at least seven (7) different faculties or Schools. (*Note: You might want to include extra signatures to ensure all of the required ones are valid. If you have more than 500 signatures but a certain faculty is overrepresented, you should gather more signatures from other faculties to offset the overrepresentation. Please note that the 35% rule applies to the total number of signatures and not just the first 500.)

This guide will focus on writing a student-initiative referendum question.

How to write a Referendum Question?

- A referendum question is made out of two (2) parts: **Whereas Clauses** and the question itself

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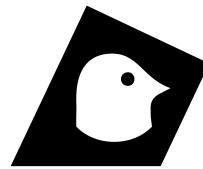
- ○ A WHEREAS clause can be thought of as a bullet point. Each highlights a fact related to the necessity of the actions that will be laid out at the end.
  - ○ WHEREAS, clauses end with semicolons ";" unless they are continuing into a sub-point (quotation from a relevant internal document), in which case you would end the clause with a full colon ":
- ● The question should refer to what you want to see changed (you can see an example in the template below)
  - ○ Ensure that the question is actionable - S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound)
- ● To help you draft your question, you should follow the template provided and reach out to the Governance team for help.
- ● Submitting a referendum question requires a lot of background work such as consultation with stakeholders and advice taking from knowledgeable people such as the Vice-President (Finance) for financial matters and Internal Counsel (governance@ssmu.ca) for legal matters.

Submitting the Nomination Package

- → The nomination package should be sent ahead of the end of the nomination period of the respective referendum to the Chief Returning Officer (elections@ssmu.ca).
- → Please note that signature collection is also due at the end of nomination period, therefore the nomination kits must be submitted ahead of the deadline to allow time for Elections SSMU to approve your question and to collect signatures.
  - ◆ Once approved, the member shall collect the signatures of at least five hundred (500) members from at least seven (7) different faculties or Schools, with not more than thirty-five percent (35%) being from any one Faculty or School.
  - ◆ *Note: You might want to include extra signatures to ensure all of the required ones are valid. If you have more than 500 signatures but a certain faculty is overrepresented, you should gather more signatures from other faculties to offset the overrepresentation. Please note that the 35% rule applies to the total number of signatures and not just the first 500.

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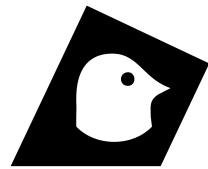
Timeline

➔ Due to the extent of the research and consultations necessary ahead of the referendum question proposal, ensure that you are giving yourself adequate time to complete all the steps.
    ➔ If you cannot complete the consultations in time for a referendum or you feel your question is underdeveloped, the question should not be submitted and instead should be postponed to the next scheduled referendum until it is ready.
➔ If you feel your question is being delayed by difficulties in the research or consultation process, contact the Policy and Advocacy Coordinator to get support.

1. Brainstorming

Think about an issue that affects McGill's student body, then think about how SSMU can make a positive difference for that issue. This could include creating a new policy, project, role, or stance, or amending/improving something that SSMU already has in place. Try to think about both the issues and your solutions from a multitude of perspectives, not just your personal experiences.

2. Research

Conduct research into the issue, as well as the solutions that either SSMU or external groups have implemented to address the issue. Research might include understanding current events, reading articles or journals on the topic, reviewing SSMU documents, identifying equivalents at other institutions, and more.

3. Governance team contacted (pac@ssmu.ca)

When you contact the governance team, they will provide you with some preliminary feedback on your work so far and suggest next steps for you. This includes checking your knowledge of SSMU governance, of the consultation process, of any relevant documents, and of SSMU's previous actions related to the issue. The governance team will essentially act as a guide to make sure that you stay on track and follow SSMU's standards.

4. Consultations

Now that you have received some guidance and suggestions from the Governance team, you can initiate your consultations. Consultations help to broaden your perspective and make sure the issue is being addressed in a way that aligns with SSMU values and the needs of students.

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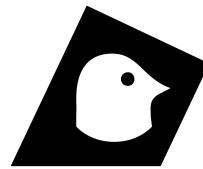
Use SSMU's Consultation Policy as a foundation for your consultations, including who you consult and how you consult them. Many groups or individuals will need advance notice, so take this into consideration and try to initiate consultations well in advance to ensure the person/group's availability.

Some potential people include:
- Policy and Advocacy Coordinator (pac@ssmu.ca) - Any questions regarding the SSMU Constitution, Internal Regulations, Policies, SSMU positions.
- Internal Counsel and Corporate Secretary (governance@ssmu.ca) - Any questions regarding SSMU Governance (executive council, legislative council, general assembly, board of directors) and legal issues.
- Accountability Commissioner (accountability@ssmu.ca) - Any questions regarding measures to hold officers, councillors, directors, and staff accountable.
- VP Clubs and Services (studentlife@ssmu.ca) - Any questions regarding SSMU clubs and services, IRs of student groups.
- VP Finance (finance@ssmu.ca) - Any questions involving finances and fees.
- VP University Affairs (ua@ssmu.ca) - Any questions involving McGill, their structures, and their policies.
- Other SSMU executives
- SSMU Commissioners and Coordinators

5. Completing the nomination package

Based on the initial brainstorming, the research conducted, the consultations, and any other relevant information, begin to write a draft of the nomination package based on the template and SSMU's standards. At the same time that the package is being drafted, you should also begin creating any other documentation that should be included with the motion in the Appendix.

6. Consultations follow up

Once the question and package has been drafted, send it to all the consultants for a chance to give more feedback. This would also be the step where you would negotiate with the individual (if applicable) on their level of involvement or responsibility for any projects that would follow from the question's approval.

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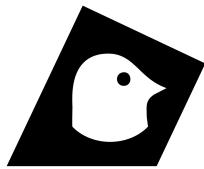
7. Motion finalized

Now that consultants have provided feedback or approved of the question, it is time to do one last review to make sure the question and justification meets SSMU standards. This includes implementing any changes that consultants may have suggested, proofreading, and verifying the structure matches the SSMU template. This is also when you ensure that any corresponding documents are completed and affixed to the Appendix.

8. Submit package to the Chief Returning Officer

Once the question and package has been submitted, the Chief Returning Officer will review it to ensure it is in line with SSMU standards. If it is approved, you will be prompted to start collecting signatures.

9. Question is ratified at the Board of Directors

Approved Referendum questions will be circulated and voted on by the Board of Directors at least seventy-two (72) hours in advance of the Polling Period.