



# Memorandum

**To:** Prof. William Foster, Associate Provost (Policies and Procedures)  
**CC:** Prof. Denis Thérien, Vice-Principal (Research and International Relations)  
**From:** Rebecca Dooley, SSMU Vice-President (University Affairs)  
**Date:** 11/25/2009  
**Re:** Draft Research Policy

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The following are recommendations of the Undergraduate Student Senate Caucus on the draft Research Policy brought for discussion at the McGill University Senate on November 4th, 2009.

We would like to begin by thanking the people who have put so much time and effort into drafting this policy, especially Professor William Foster and Vice Principal Thérien for their extensive work. Students appreciate that policy-making is never an easy task, especially when tackling a topic like research at McGill. We would also like to thank Professor Foster specifically for his openness, understanding, and respect for student input throughout this process. The passion students often bring to the table when discussing research comes from the significant academic and cultural connection they have to the work being done at McGill. Thus, the Undergraduate Student Senators and the SSMU consider the recommendations of concerned students seriously, and aim to provide the most representative recommendations possible.

## Summary

As a group, and through consultation, we have identified a few concerns with the policy as it was presented in the November meeting of Senate. In short, students have identified transparency, review, and tracking as primary areas of difficulty. The hope is that the final version of this policy clearly defines the University's ethical commitment to these practices, and establishes mechanisms to support them. Most importantly, this consolidation of these policy documents should not prove to be ethically regressive.

## Recommendations

### **1. A clear, readable, consolidated policy focused on establishing ethical principles**



The Student Senators agree with many of the points raised at the Senate meeting of November 4<sup>th</sup>: that the proposed Policy is cluttered with contradicting or unnecessary procedure, lacks a complete section of definitions, and seems to be an end solution document. These concerns were adequately addressed by Faculty members at the meeting. We encourage the drafters of this policy to take into account those comments, to improve the current definitions, and to focus on guiding principles in subsequent drafts.

## **2. Remove or clarify clause 7.4.1**

Clause 7.4.1 in the draft presented to Senate does not clarify in what situations an "in good faith" anonymous donor would be deemed acceptable. Unless there are legitimate reasons with the proper conduct of research in mind, this clause should be struck from the policy as it sets up a less than ideal situation for transparent research and sends an inconsistent message with regards to our policies on secret research.

## **3. Include a clause on "Research with Potentially Harmful Applications or Effects" or similar to represent clauses 10 and 11 on government military funded research from the old policy**

Clauses 10 and 11 come from an important history of harmful research at McGill. These clauses were included after much debate and deliberation by the University community, and included with the understanding the McGill has a responsibility to larger society to carefully monitor research that is specifically funded by government military agencies. The clauses detail a simple box checking mechanism with participation from the VP Research and International Relations in monitoring and reporting on research that receives this funding to ensure ethical compliance. This, of course, stems from the research conducted at the Allen Memorial Institute. McGill has come a long way in our research ethics compliance since this unfortunate incident. However, it is important for any university to monitor the knowledge it is producing with care. Students recognize that military-funded research is not the only area that could produce knowledge or technology with harmful applications. Yet, it is understandable why military research has been targeted. It is impossible to ignore the harmful effects that certain areas of military related research have society as a whole. More specifically, Undergraduate students at McGill have specifically spoken out against research on the creation of thermobaric weaponry.

In order to address these concerns about research with potentially harmful effects, a clause was included in some earlier drafts of this new research policy to accommodate not only military research, but other areas of study as well (clause 12). This clause, in some drafts, effectively consolidated clauses 10 and 11 and addressed the academic implications associated with solely monitoring military funded research. We highly encourage mechanisms to be written into the new policy that would promote tracking, reporting, review, and transparency. The establishing of a review committee would be an effective method of achieving these goals.



Such a clause could look similar to the following drafted by students:

*"12. Research with Potentially Harmful\* Application or Effects*

*12.1 A Researcher shall, through their position of special knowledge, be aware of the potentially harmful applications of his or her research by non-peer reviewed agencies supporting the research through funding or other means, including support received by Research collaborators, and shall:*

*i) Indicate the possibility of these harmful applications on the check list/approval form of the Office of Technology Transfer or the Research Grants Office, and submit to the research review committee for dissemination a written statement on these applications.*

*12.2 Research Review Committee shall be a transparent, interdisciplinary body composed of faculty and graduate student researchers, and shall be:*

*i) Responsible for evaluating the possibilities of harmful applications and potential benefits of research as reported by Researchers,  
ii) Submit the full results of these evaluations to the VP RIR for inclusion as part of regular reports to Senate and the Board of Governors."*

*The hope is not to label a research independent of the researcher, but to give them the responsibility of acknowledging the potential harmful effects of their work. This knowledge comes from their intimate understanding of their research and those funding them. On a whole, this clause is meant to promote transparency, the first step in acknowledging social responsibility and ethical compliance.*

*Thank you for taking our recommendations into consideration . We look forward to seeing a new draft of the policy before the next Senate meeting. This entire process of consultation has been ideal, we highly recommend similar best practices in the creation of future policies to be brought before the Senate.*

*\*The definition of "harmful" has many interpretations and would need to be clarified in the new policy. In our recommendations we leave a loose interpretation of the word harmful up to the researchers when applying at the OTT or RGO.*

Respectfully,

Rebecca Dooley, SSMU Vice-President (University Affairs)  
On behalf of the Undergraduate Student Senate Caucus