

Economics students push to lower athletics fees

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(http://ubyssey.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/wp-id-20101001_Alex-Micu.jpg)

The \$21 athletics fee funds things like Day of the Longboat. Photo courtesy Alex Micu

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A group of students is accusing the UBC athletics department of double-dipping on fees, and they want to give other students a way to stop it.

Every year, students pay \$197 in athletics fees to UBC, and another \$21 in a fee that's handed to the university after going through the AMS student society. Four economics students have started a petition to allow students to opt out of the \$21 fee; they argue they shouldn't have to pay twice.

An assignment for economics class which urged students to “fix something that [they] think should be fixed” got the students — Will Tanner, Kuzi Mutonga, Yash Khatwani and Andrew Jenkins — started on the petition. Within a week and a half, they amassed about half of the 1,000 signatures they need to get the question onto a referendum ballot.

“When we do take this petition and referendum to the AMS, there might be some real potential to save on this fee [and] shake up the [athletics] department,” said Jenkins. “It’s been really encouraging so far.”

UBC Vice-President Students Louise Cowin, who runs the athletics department, explained the \$21 fee goes toward intramurals, rec events like Storm the Wall and the Birdcoop student gym. The other fee of \$197 pays for facility expenses, building projects and varsity sports teams.

Cowin likened athletics fees to property taxes, arguing that the programs they fund serve the good of all students.

Jenkins argues that the second athletics fee collected by the AMS is unnecessary because the UBC athletics department ran a budget surplus this year. But critics of the petition contend that it’s ignoring how much long-term debt the department has from projects like the Doug Mitchell Winter Sports Centre, which was built for the 2010 Olympics.

Neal Yonson, former editor of the *UBC Insiders* investigative blog, said he estimates the athletics department is currently \$8 million in the red. Yonson was involved in a 2008 campaign that lowered athletics user fees like Storm the Wall entry costs and Birdcoop memberships.

Yonson explained the extra \$21 fee was added in 1996, in the wake of a tuition freeze that hit the budgets of peripheral departments like athletics hard. The freeze was eventually lifted, but the fee stuck around.

“It looks redundant, and it doesn’t make sense to have two separate fees, but that’s not to say it’s a bad fee,” said Yonson. “Getting rid of the athletics fee doesn’t do much; it might save a few bucks, but it doesn’t stop the university from raising it again.”

Tristan Miller, AMS vice-president finance, argued that if the opt-out referendum passes, it may be difficult for athletics to keep running so many intramural and rec programs.

“I’m generally against opt-out provisions on fees,” said Miller. “If [athletics doesn’t] have that consistency from year to year, it’s very difficult to deliver programming.”

Once Jenkins and his classmates have 1,000 signatures, they will be able to put a referendum question on the ballot for next year’s undergrad elections. If the referendum passes, students would have the choice of opting out of the fee.

Yonson argues the group is taking the wrong approach to reforming fees; he said he wishes they would instead work with the athletics department to examine the overall budget and fee structure.

“It’s easy to collect 1,000 signatures in a short deadline; it takes a lot more time and effort to work within the system, but the result would probably be better in the end,” said Yonson.