

Memorial Student Center Student Diversity Focus Groups Fall 2020

Purpose

At the beginning of fall of 2020, the Memorial Student Center (MSC) Diversity contacted Student Life Studies (SLS) to help facilitate focus groups as outlined in their diversity plan that would enable them gain insight regarding the current climate with the MSC. Student Life Studies has worked with the MSC before in their assessment of diversity within the MSC, and this is the second time SLS assisted the MSC in conducting focus groups regarding MSC student perceptions surrounding diversity and inclusion.

Key Findings with Recommendations

Student Life Studies identified several key findings and developed actionable recommendations that the MSC may take based on the results. However, MSC Diversity leadership and staff may identify other findings using their knowledge and understanding of the community. The MSC student leaders and staff are strongly encouraged to read all the results, and qualitative themes developed from the student's responses during the focus groups, to gain a fuller understanding of students' experiences.

- Students participating in the focus groups described their impressions of the MSC as a hub of involvement, welcoming, inclusive, elite and student centered. They also spoke about how COVID 19 restrictions of the last year created a different experience from previous years, and that they appreciated the adaptations and accommodations by leadership that enabled committees to meet, programs and events to happen and students to interact with other students if only virtually. However, they also felt a lack of interaction between MSC committees, and a tribal-like vibe.
 - As recommended by the focus group participants, leadership throughout the MSC should look at more opportunities for committees to cross-program, and promote each other's programs to enhance a feeling of connection and inclusion. As COVID 19 gathering restrictions ease, providing members more opportunities to socialize within their own committees, and with others outside their own committees, continuing to augment those events with the virtual enhancements adopted due to the COVID 19 restrictions.
- When asked for examples of feeling excluded within the MSC, many of the examples given were those when the student was new, either to Texas A&M, the MSC or both. Less frequently mentioned, but concerning examples, involved students feeling excluded within the MSC because of their race, color, stereotyping because of their background or because of unprofessional, vulgar behavior of others.
 - Continued emphasis on attending diversity and inclusion educational opportunities for current students and outreach to former students, inviting their participation in these opportunities, might help prevent further occurrences like one described during the focus groups. More support to attend programming sponsored by all committees, especially as virtual attendance may now be a more realistic option, could also increase both current and former students' awareness, comfort and involvement in the vast array of programming offered through the MSC.
- Many of the students participating in the focus groups also suggested continuing features of the virtual meetings held due to the COVID 19 restrictions, like breakout rooms that created smaller groups and enhanced newer students in getting to know one another.

Method and Sample

The focus group protocol and questions were designed by the MSC advisor with the MSC Diversity student leader coordinating the project and Student Life Studies. The four focus groups were facilitated by staff from Student Life Studies on October 20th, October 21st, October 28th and November 18th. Focus groups were comprised of 28 students active in various MSC committees. Additionally, focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed by transcription service (Rev.com) into Microsoft Word and Excel, for qualitative analysis.

MSC student participation in the focus groups was voluntary. Each student focus group was asked the same six questions.

Data was analyzed in a formal content analyses conducted during six sessions held in February and March, with four students (two MSC student leaders and two members of the Texas A&M Consulting group student organization) and one staff member of Student Life Studies. Content analysis identified main themes from responses of students participating in the focus group; each theme was categorized and those categories and representative student quotes are presented in this report. The complete interview transcripts as well as unitized statements associated with their assigned theme can be found in separate documents.

Results

Results will be reported as categorized themes for the questions that were asked in the protocol. Questions focused on students' impressions of the environment of the MSC, those experiences within the MSC which felt inclusive, those for which they felt excluded and recommendations to improve the student experience within the MSC. This fall the MSC Student Programs Office has not been physically available to students to gather in large groups due to restrictions caused by the COVID 19 pandemic, and that experience colored the responses from students during the focus groups, although the questions did not specifically focus on that experience.

Impressions of the environment within the MSC

The first question asked students to describe their impression of the environment within the MSC, which included staff and peer interactions, environment, accessibility, etc. The participants were asked how and why they believed their impression was developed. The category of themes and the number of statements associated with those categories are shown in Table 1.

Theme Category	Number of Statements
MSC as a hub of involvement	24
Welcoming, friendly, family, comfortable, caring, staff check-ins	23
Inclusive	21
Lacking interaction between committees within MSC/ Tribal like vibe	19
Student centered	15
Exclusive/Elite reputation	14
COVID related – not the same experience as before COVID	12
Accommodating/adaptable (for COVID)	10
Sense of belong, community, feeling included within their committee	9
Disconnected, busy staff, bureaucratic environment	4

Table 1: Impressions of Environment

Students participating in the focus groups spoke of their impression of the MSC as a hub for students, describing the MSC as a lively, busy place where students passionate about their involvement can join committees with diverse interests and opportunities to become involved. Some described students within MSC committees as goal-oriented, innovative and proactive about the causes and programming their committees promote and deliver. Some described it as a place to come just to study or have a good time, although that had been limited because of the COVID 19 restrictions. One student new to the MSC said,

Like the way I view the MSC is kind of like,... a city hub has, like you know, everything around like A&M. It's like, oh you can like just, you know... a MSC want to eat, like better, then MSC different committees meet at the MSC or like, here's just kind of ...everything's here. And, I guess really so that's been like kind of dampened by COVID. But, I don't know, like my MSC ALOT, like upper classmen, they talk a lot about, like, just how the experience used to be like a great time, so I can kind of sad I am missing out on that.

Students within all four focus groups commonly described their impression of the MSC as welcoming, friendly, and caring. A few mentioned receiving check-ins during the COVID-19 pandemic from student leadership and advisors. Likewise, quite a few students focused on how the MSC adapted around the gathering restrictions caused by COVID 19, accommodating to meet committee and individual students needs through virtual venues like Zoom. However, students also spoke about their impressions of the MSC colored by COVID related restrictions, missing the interactions students experienced in the MSC prior to COVID. One of the students commented, "I'll say it's always been a very friendly environment at least amongst other groups. I guess if you just know other people. I will say this semester and this year has been a little bit more challenging because you don't really get to see people I'd normally see at the SPO [Student Programs Office]."

Responses categorized as inclusive included those themes describing the MSC environment as open-minded, committees involved in outreach, including diverse committees and diverse students, equitable, and supportive of interaction between committees. One student active in the MSC Woodson Black Awareness Committee described its inclusiveness:

My impression of the environment is one that the MSC seeks to try to be an inclusive place. They try to get some understanding going on a lot of issues and, with my specific committee, we focus a lot on pushing that information out by any means necessary because we are a very pivotal role of a lot of the issues that... I'm sorry. We're a pivotal role in understanding the issues of the Black community, where we've been, and where we are now, and how we've gotten to now.

Although students spoke about the MSC as inclusive, they also talked about the lack of interaction at the MSC, especially between members of different committees. Some described the MSC as tribalistic. As one student remarked, "about the tribalistic vibes of the SPO, I guess sometimes. I see, at least in my experience, I've seen maybe directors and leaderships kind of move around more between the committees, but not so much as like members. I never really got to experience talking to other committees or... I felt like when I came in here, I should only be around CAMAC and do things with CAMAC, speak with people in CAMAC." And although the COVID restrictions imposed this last year were not helpful in alleviating that impression, as noted by another student, it preceded last year; "Obviously with COVID it's a little harder to interact, but I basically did no interaction whatsoever with other organizations when I was a general member."

Students also described the MSC as student centered, somewhere they can build relationships, develop leadership skills, interact with both student leaders and advisors interested in their growth. The MSC also impressed them as exclusive, elite with a selective reputation on campus. One student said,

Having MSC in front of the committee name, it definitely sets it apart from all the other organizations on campus. It shows you that these committees, they have the support of the university for a reason and they're doing something. They're accomplishing things and they have a plan. They have goals, and they want to get somewhere. Also, because they have I don't know about the other committees, but for SCOLA we have an application process. You have to apply. You don't just get in."

Words and attitudes associated with the environment of the MSC

The second question asked students what words and attitudes would they associate with the students and the committees of the MSC. The themed categories which emerged from the students' responses, noted in Table 2, were similar to a few derived from the first questions responses. Students frequently spoke about the committed attitude associated with membership within the MSC, as students bring passion, dedication, perseverance and a positive attitude to their work on committees. One of the students said, "It's just that people...they really care about the organization that they're in. Depends on what the organization is for. People have a passion for a leadership service or whatever specific function that committee has."

Theme Category	Number of Statements
Committed	17
Welcoming	14
Skill Development/Student centered	12
Exclusive/Elite reputation	10
Inclusive	10
Interaction between committees or lacking	4
Aggie Core Values	3

Table 2: Words and Attitudes of MSC

Again, the association of the MSC as welcoming was prevalent, as the students used words like genuine caring, outreach and comfortable to describe their experience. Exclusive or elite reputation also came up as descriptor of MSC committees, as one student explained through their experience in MSC Hospitality: "I definitely thought that the MSC organizations were exclusive just because they have MSC attached to it. That's a huge part of A&M is like the MSC. It's literally in the middle of campus. I guess that's what I thought, that it was very exclusive. Then, just like the interview process is very intensive at least for Hospitality. You get that sense like okay, if I do get it, that's a big accomplishment."

Students also associated inclusiveness with the MSC, noting it includes diverse committees with diverse interests that reach out to develop surrounding communities. Students also recognized that the MSC provides opportunities for their skill development, including leadership and relationship skills and overall encouraged students' innovation and adaptability, especially this year. A student involved in MSC OPAS summed it up, as they shared:

OPAS, they took a very big hit not being able to put on their shows in person, because I definitely was looking forward to a lot of them. But, they found a way.

So, taking that loss and say, 'Okay, we can't sit here in a dump forever. What are we going to do? Oh, we can hold some private screenings through other means.' So, I definitely do think that we are a very big, innovative group and we find a way. And, we're still trying to find a way even in this virtual world because there's a lot that you can do through Zoom, but no one really wants to because it doesn't feel the same. But, we're rolling with the punches.

Examples of feeling included and welcomed within the MSC

Students were next asked to share an example when they felt included and welcomed with the MSC, and describe the characteristics of a positive, inclusive, welcoming environment. Although responses were unique and varied, Table 3 shows the categorized theme by which responses were organized and the corresponding number of responses.

Theme Category	Number of Statements
Supportive committee members	22
Committee leadership actions	21
Committee meeting structures	18
All member MSC programs	6
Developing programs	5

Table 3: Examples of Feeling Included

Examples highlighting the students' experience of supportive fellow committee members, and their shared purpose was the most common theme from the examples of the students' experience of inclusion. Their examples showed how their fellow committee members expressed caring, friendliness, shared interest, and in person interaction (hanging out or studying) helped make students feel included. Some talked about feeling included because of their committee's involvement in offering diversity programming, supporting their racial and ethnic identities and providing a place to explore those identities. A student active in MSC CAMAC explains:

I always go back to Poemas Y Cafe. It's a program where people write poems and we watch a poem that expresses Latin X identity and what it means to them. I guess joining those programs... Being a part of those programs and then this year planning it myself, really made me feel included, especially hearing stories and experiences from other people, which I could relate to. I didn't think I would get that being at A&M.

Others spoke about feeling included due to interactions with MSC leadership, either within their own committee or generally. MSC leaders calling new members by their first names, providing development opportunities and mentoring members were among examples shared. And, this year, due to COVID 19 gathering restrictions, students talked about feeling included because leadership (and advisors) called to check-in about their welfare, how they were feeling and doing at school and setting up a buddy system. One student who was attending Texas A&M remotely described their experience:

Because for me, I don't spend most of my day talking to anyone my age because I am home by myself and so I think that, you know, just those hour-long Facetimes, where someone will call you up or that they pair us up with lunch buddies every week and just having that person that you're designated to talk to you, they've

really done a good job and making you feel included and that also supported it, because this can be really difficult emotionally and mentally just because of everything that's going on right now.

Committee meetings were also mentioned as the means that students felt included, some due to adaptations in these meetings because of the COVID 19 gathering restrictions. Students mentioned specific MSC committee practices which really made them feel included, like MSC OPAS “houses,” MSC FISH “family” reveal nights, and receiving a sub-committee freshman of the month award. The group chats and chat rooms during committee meetings, using other virtual meeting spaces like Tik-Tok and alternating whole committee and sub-committee meetings weekly helped the students feel included virtually. They also talked about in-person at the Student Programs Office (SPO) subcommittee meetings and retreats as the way they felt included. One student just said, “But, in the SPO, honestly, just whenever I pass by and people say hi and stuff, that's when I feel included in the space.”

Examples of feeling excluded and unwelcomed within the MSC

Students were also asked to describe a time, an example, of when they felt excluded or unwelcomed in the MSC and to describe the characteristics of an unwelcoming environment. Students were specifically asked to describe the characteristics of an unwelcoming environment in the department or their committee. Theme categories and the number of associated statements by the participating students are noted in Table 4.

Theme Category	Number of Statements
New member exclusion (caused by self and others)	13
No example of feeling excluded	11
Committee members/leaders creating a clique environment	9
Exclusion due to race/color	7
Stereotyping experience	5
COVID 19 gathering restrictions within SPO	4
Recommendations to prevent further exclusion	4
Student Programs Office (SPO) financial/physical inequities	2
Unprofessional topic of conversation	1

Table 4: Feeling Excluded in the MSC

Examples of feeling unwelcome or excluded provided by the students included the feeling of exclusion that accompanies unfamiliarity with the MSC and Texas A&M as a new student and new member of a committee, reluctance in approaching others unknown to them, and the perception of being noticeably different than others in ethnicity, race, or background. Some noted that feeling of exclusion derived from either through their own inaction, as one student describe it “I think one way we could definitely feel excluded is that if we decided not to partake in all the activities or make the effort to put ourselves out there.”

About one-third of the respondents could not provide an example of feeling excluded within the MSC. Representative of that feeling, one student shared, “I've never felt excluded from things, like, from the MSC. I've never seen something like an event or a certain individual who like, I didn't see... I didn't think I could approach or that wouldn't hear me out, I guess, or anything. I, always, there's just like a breadth of inclusiveness that exists in the MSC.” Still these students shared some characteristics of an unwelcoming environment, including leadership within the environment not being overtly welcoming, coinciding with

the third most common example of feeling excluded. The student explains leaders actions, "I think you're just this kind of indifferent, didn't really care, didn't put forth effort at all, I think that'll kind of make me feel unwanted or unwelcome kind of in that environment where someone that really just brushes you off and doesn't necessarily listen to you, I think, facilitate that kind of environment."

Further examples of exclusion mentioned by the students were categorized in analysis as environments created by leaders or others within committees. One of the students described the influence of leaders, "It really does depend on who the executives are and who is running it. I think those people really steer how welcome you feel and how open you are to sharing things. I think also the cohesiveness of the executives also makes a huge difference."

Although infrequent, but of significant concern, are responses from students who indicated feeling excluded due to their race or color, and because of stereotyping based on their backgrounds or courses of study. A student shared an experience that occurred during an MSC tailgate event that included former student interaction, and how an encounter with a former student made this student (a Black male student) feel excluded:

The entire time I'm speaking with him, he's hinting at the stereotypes that people put on about Black people, especially Black men. He asked me, 'Did you play sports in high school?' I said, 'No, I didn't. I've never played sports. I got here on a[n] academic scholarship.' He asked me, 'Have you ever played sports?' I'm like, 'No, I have not played sports.' He asked me what my major was. I told him that, and he was like, 'What do you want to do with that?' and I'm like, 'Okay. Good discussion. Great. We're getting somewhere.' Then, he goes into, 'You know, you could be the next twelfth man.' And I'm like, 'Here we go. Back with the football stuff.' And everyone who knows the Twelfth Man tradition, it stemmed from football. So, for him to say that, it's like, do you think I'm not intelligent enough to be here? Where does that come from?

The student then continues, observing this same former student's interaction with fellow MSC involved students, which further exasperated his feeling excluded:

And, then, two members from LT Jordan [Institute] come over and they start talking about the programs that they're doing, the trips that they're planning on taking, and he asked them, 'Well, what countries have you all been to? Have you all have the opportunity to learn any languages?' and all vast things like that. I'm like, why is it that with two White students in here, you give them the questions of, vast, much more, but I'm only reduced to questions about football?

Other students described their experience of stereotyping by fellow students within their committees based on backgrounds and their majors. One student's details of that experience of exclusion is below:

I was stereotyped I guess when I first came to the MSC. Like I said I'm from a very small town. I grew up on a farm. I'm an Ag major. When I got into the MSC, I think I was stereotyped into someone that you would see from an Ag background on social media. Someone who's very conservative. Someone who's closed minded. This is actually recently with my last committee.

One student spoke about feeling excluded within the MSC due to conversations that were unprofessional and vulgar in this student's opinion. The student described the incident:

There was one day where there's this group of people talking down about a girl, and it was, mostly, they were joking, but it was in a sexual manner and I didn't think that was very professional and it kind of made me uncomfortable. And, yeah, like I said, I don't remember exactly what they had said, but it had to do with that and I just remember that they were using cuss words. And I was like, this is not a very inclusive space for people who might feel a little more strongly about those kind of topics.

Suggestions for creating a more inclusive environment within the MSC

At the end of the focus groups, students were asked what students, staff and organizations within the MSC could do to make the environment in the departments or organizations more inclusive for students. The greatest number of statements from the students included ideas to increase opportunities for students to meet one another in the MSC, including more all MSC events. Theme categories and the number of associated statements by the participating students are noted in Table 5.

Theme Category	Number of Statements
Opportunities to meet others in the MSC (especially members outside their committee)	22
More social events	9
Diversity increases	4
MSC Leadership, mentoring	4
Continue adaptations started due to COVID 19 gathering restrictions	4
Recommendations to prevent further exclusion	4
Application process improvements	4
Improved marketing	3
Use of assessment data for improvements	2

Table 5: Suggestions for a More Inclusive Environment

The students most frequently recommended increasing intentional interactions between the MSC committees to help build relationships and inclusion within the MSC. Influenced by their experience this last year's restricted access to the MSC SPO because of COVID 19, they want more primarily social events, even though these students recognized everyone is busy and may find it hard to fit into schedules. One MSC committee member talked about attending a Midnight Yell social and then said, "I feel like we should do more of those. Obviously wait until we all cleaned out, but I wouldn't recommend doing that now necessarily. But have more socials and try to force your members to come to the socials. Yeah. I know that is a challenge."

Others suggested more co-programming between committees, promoting other committee programs to improve inclusion and increase diversity efforts. In support of this, one said, "I would love to see more co-programming. I know it's difficult for us to do it because it's COVID. It's halfway towards the year. SCOLA's big thing is the one big conference that we have. We don't really have a lot of space for co-programming, but I would love to see other committees who do have that space to do that and to invite other committees personally. 'Hey, we're having this event. We would love to have WBAC come. We would love to have ALOT come'."

Others ways the students suggested for creating a more inclusive environment was to add an MSC mentoring process within committees, similar to one that MSC Hospitality currently runs. Others recommended keeping some of the adaptive programming that occurred as result of COVID 19 restrictions, like virtual meetings that include break-out rooms enabling students to meet one another in

small groups. One student talked about that benefit, even over meeting in- person (although that is still preferred):

I think in person it's way better, but it wasn't a priority in person to make those small groups. If you just went to a meeting, nobody would be thinking oh, we need to get people to speak together. Now that we're online, you're like okay, well we have trouble paying attention in person. So we have to make an effort to get these people to communicate. So breakout rooms.

Students also suggested changes to the application process to join MSC committees, specifically confusing and redundant forms and requirements in ELIAS. Others mentioned improving the marketing materials that are displayed showing MSC committees, so that they represent the diversity of the students more accurately and are more current (show current students). And the students expressed that they want to make sure that the data that comes from the focus groups are reviewed and used to make improvements to the MSC environment.

Department Background

The Memorial Student Center (MSC) is a department in the Division of Student Affairs providing students with academic, cultural awareness and arts programs. The MSC provides leadership development opportunities for students involved in any of the 17 committees or various trips and service experiences or 5 resource areas. Additionally, the MSC has developed a diversity plan, active from 2016 through 2021, and per its website (<http://msc.tamu.edu/about-us/diversity>) the MSC "will strive to be the leader in diversity efforts among the Division of Student Affairs through programming and the development of leaders in the pursuit of creating a diverse marketplace of ideas."

Project Details

The Department of Student Life Studies provides quality assessment services, resources and assessment training for departments in the Texas A&M University Division of Student Affairs and student organizations. Services by Student Life Studies are funded, in part, by the Texas A&M University Advancement Fee. Results of this project and other assessment projects done through Student Life Studies can be found at <https://studentlifestudies.tamu.edu/results/>. Additionally, anyone can follow Student Life Studies on Facebook.

To work with Student Life Studies for future assessment projects, please fill out the Assessment Questionnaire at <https://slsform.dsaapps.tamu.edu/>.

Report prepared for: Jaccard Nelson, Executive Vice President of Diversity, MSC and
Melany Pearl, Advisor, MSC

Report prepared by: Susan Fox-Forrester, Student Life Studies

Report prepared on: May 14, 2021

Analysis (Qualitative) by: Jaccard Nelson and Kimberly Morrison, MSC
Farisha Rashid and Kazybek Atausha, Texas A&M Consulting Group (student organization), and Susan Fox-Forrester, Student Life Studies