

Memorial Student Center Student Conference on National Affairs 64 Spring 2019

Purpose of Assessment

Each spring the Memorial Student Center (MSC) Student Conference on National Affairs (SCONA) hosts a conference to provide “programs for students across Texas, the nation, and the world to exchange ideas and discuss the role of the United States in the global community.” The theme for SCONA 64 was “Extinguishing the Flames of Fury: U.S. Strategy and Response in the Face of Global Terror” and was held February 14-16, 2019. SCONA 64 utilized speakers and team facilitators with first-hand experience in the topic to guide delegates in the creation of a policy paper. This is the eleventh time the MSC SCONA committee has worked with Student Life Studies to assess various aspects of the conference.

Method and Sample

The survey was produced using Teleform[®], a software program that creates scannable paper surveys and databases. Of the 16-question survey, 12 were quantitative and four were qualitative. Data were analyzed using SPSS[®], a statistical software package, and Microsoft Excel[®]. The paper survey was distributed to conference delegates at the conclusion of the conference. Of the 120 delegates who received the survey, 49 completed it, yielding a 41% response rate. This was a 17% increase in response rate compared to 2018.

Key Findings with Recommendations

Student Life Studies identified several key findings and developed actionable recommendations the department may take based on the results. However, the MSC SCONA committee may identify other findings using their knowledge and understanding of the community. Student leaders are strongly encouraged to read all the results and qualitative comments to gain a fuller understanding of students’ experiences.

- Delegates were very positive regarding their experience with MSC SCONA in general. The roundtables and speakers continue to be highlights of the conference. Having facilitators with the roundtables were reported as what delegates found most valuable. MSC SCONA is encouraged to continue focusing on these aspects of the conference and finding facilitators with experience on the conference topic.
- While the Terrorism Panel was rated positively with 92% in agreement with its showing the broad scope of terrorism in ways delegates had not thought of before; it also was one of the lower rated aspects. Additionally, based on comments, delegates felt disappointed by it or that it did not provide as much value. MSC SCONA may want to explore this aspect of the conference specifically and identify its purpose and if it is reaching that purpose.
- There were several comments regarding the schedule for the conference. It seems that most delegates felt the length of time for speakers’ presentations and the roundtable discussions was too long. However, there were a few who indicated there was not enough time. MSC SCONA might look at the schedule and see how breaks are fitting in or how different types of activities are scheduled to provide some change for the delegates.

Results

Results will be reported as means, standard deviations (sd), and frequency percentages for the number of people (n) who responded to the question. For ease of reading, frequency percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole percent, so totals may not add up to exactly 100%. Tables are in descending mean or frequency order for 2019. Summary themes are contained in this report; the entire list can be found in a separate document. Comparison data to previous years will be provided where appropriate.

Delegates were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about this year's conference speakers. Table 1 illustrates delegates were most agreeable with Andrew Card's presentation meeting the intended outcome.

Statement	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2019 Mean (sd) [n]
The Honorable Andrew Card delivered insight on the difficulties of developing policies to combat terrorism, showed me an example of handling stress in the aftermath of a terrorist attack.	92%	8%	--	--	3.92 (.28) [48]
Mr. Ali Soufan's experiences as an FBI Special Agent and security consultant showed me the difficulties of dealing with terrorism from a law enforcement perspective.	84%	16%	--	--	3.84 (.37) [49]
Ambassador Henry Crumpton detailed the response of the intelligence community to terrorism.	83%	17%	--	--	3.83 (.38) [48]
Terrorism Panel – The terrorism panel showed me the very broad scope of terrorism in ways I had not thought of before.	55%	37%	8%	--	3.47 (.65) [49]
Lt. Gen. Marshall "Brad" Webb effectively conveyed the role the United States military's special operations teams combat terrorism around the globe.	41%	49%	10%	--	3.31 (.65) [49]

Table 1: Conferences Speakers

Participants were asked to share their feedback regarding the speakers. Of the 39 people who commented, most were complimentary describing the speakers as interesting, knowledgeable, insightful, outstanding, and informative. Additionally, students appreciated the different perspective speakers provided. However, a few students felt that some of the speakers were dry and that the presentations were long. There were mixed comments regarding the panel. Some seemed to value it and enjoyed it being more interactive, while others were disappointed in it.

Delegates were also asked a series of questions specifically pertaining to their roundtable experiences during the conference. Table 2, on the following page, demonstrates a majority of the delegates reported the roundtable facilitators provided useful insight, the delegates practices communication skills, and that there was value in the presentations. All three statements were more positive compared to the previous year.

Statement	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n]	2016 Mean (sd) [n]
My roundtable facilitator(s) provided useful insight during the roundtable discussions.	88%	10%	2%	--	3.86 (.41) [49]	3.79 (.41) [34]	3.63 (.63) [100]
I practiced valuable communication skills from the roundtable discussions and policy-making process.	80%	18%	2%	--	3.78 (.47) [49]	3.68 (.48) [34]	3.68 (.49) [100]
I found value in the roundtable policy presentations. *	78%	18%	4%	--	3.73 (.53) [49]	3.29 (.68) [34]	3.73 (.47) [98]

Table 2: Roundtable Discussion

*Question in 2016 and 2018 was "I found value in the roundtable policy presentations and skits."

When asked what they found most valuable from the roundtable discussions and presentations, 44 students shared their views. Students appreciated the insight from their facilitator, the conversations and discussions in their small group, and working as a team. Additionally, students enjoyed the diversity of thoughts and ideas in their groups and learning from one another. Alternatively, students were asked what they found least valuable from the roundtable discussions and presentations and 38 students wrote comments. The most common aspect shared was that roundtable discussions and presentations were too long with several specifically talking about the activities being 5 or 6 hours. However, there were a few students who indicated they would have liked more time. Other things students found least valuable included not having rules written or the lack of direction, the icebreaker, having disruptions, and that the presentations were too long.

When delegates were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with their overall conference experience, a majority of the students reported a high level of agreement with all aspects, as seen in Table 3. The conference experience results were more positive this year compared to the previous year.

Statement	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	2019 Mean (sd) [n]	2018 Mean (sd) [n]
SCONA 64 provided an environment that freely explores ideas/perspectives that are different than my own.	94%	6%	--	--	3.94 (.24) [49]	3.64 (.49) [33]
I increased my knowledge of the United States' response to global terrorism by participating in conference activities.	90%	10%	--	--	3.90 (.31) [48]	*
The quality of communication prior to the conference was satisfactory.	47%	41%	12%	--	3.35 (.69) [49]	2.97 (.92) [33]

Table 3: Overall Conference Experience

*Question not asked

Delegates were asked how they heard about MSC SCONA by selecting options from a provided list. Table 4, on the following page, reveals that professors and word of mouth continue to be the main methods used to learn about MSC SCONA; additionally, these methods almost doubled from last year. Email and social media

decreased as a way delegates found out about the conference compared to last year. Delegates selecting the “other” response option were provided the opportunity to write in how they learned about MSC SCONA. Of the four comments, students said through friends, their major, the Navy ROTC, and the LAUNCH office.

How did you hear about MSC SCONA? (Select all that apply)	2019 Percent [n=49]	2018 Percent [n=33]	2016 Percent [n=99]	2015 Percent [n=91]
Professor and Institution	59%	34%	32%	39%
Word of Mouth	43%	28%	51%	32%
Email	12%	16%	24%	17%
Other	8%	8%	18%	30%
Flyer	6%	6%	9%	3%
Social Media	4%	8%	13%	6%

Table 4: Marketing

Conference participants were asked to provide suggestions for next year’s conference. Of the 37 who shared a recommendation, several discussed having clearer directions, providing information about the dress code, sharing more information before the conference, posting the schedule online in advance, scheduling breaks and longer times for dialogue and dinner, planning socials for the evenings, spreading out the speakers, providing video support in the presentations, and serving healthier food options.

Organization Background

According to its website (<http://scona.tamu.edu/>), the Memorial Student Center (MSC) Student Conference on National Affairs (SCONA) was founded in 1955 in order to bring national and foreign policy issues to Texas A&M University. The conference, which brings together delegates from all over the world, focused on “delving deeper into issues that are complex, regionally specific and affect the global community as a whole.”

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/>.

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