



# REPORT

*From the office of the...*

## Associate Vice President: Services

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**TO:** Members of the Student Representative Assembly  
**FROM:** Simranjeet Singh, Associate Vice President: Services  
Christina Devarapalli, Vice President (Administration)  
**SUBJECT:** Spark Review  
**DATE:** Tuesday, March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022

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### INTRODUCTION

To the esteemed members of the Executive Board of the McMaster Students' Union,

The following report is a review of the McMaster Students' Union (MSU) service known as Spark. The aim of this review is to give an overview of how successful the service is in fulfilling its purpose and mandate. Surveys were conducted of the general student body as well as volunteers and employees of the service to gain an understanding of how the service functions, how it is perceived, and what programming/services it delivers to the student body. This review contains an analysis of those results, as well as a summary of external research that has been done. The external research took a focus on other university student unions in Ontario to understand if they offer clubs or services with strategies which can be adopted by Spark. The result of this internal and external research is summarized to give a series of recommendations made in concert by the Services Committee, VP Admin, and AVP Services.

### SERVICE OVERVIEW

#### Service Purpose and Mandate

Spark is one of approximately 20 student led services that are offered by the MSU. It is categorized as a Student-Life Enhancement Services under section 3.2.2 of the Operating Policy – Services. As stated in the Operating Policy – Spark, the purpose of Spark is:

- 1.1 To be a student-led, student-run service of the McMaster Students' Union (MSU) that is devoted to setting the stage for student success in the university.
- 1.2 To provide students with small first-year group environments that facilitate growth, and build personal development and reflection skills for their undergraduate career.
- 1.3 To encourage extracurricular participation by introducing first-year students to campus services, clubs, and leadership opportunities.
- 1.4 To connect students to their peers and upper-year students to promote increased support on academic issues and associated first year challenges.
- 1.5 To actively support the broader first year population by acting as a resource, identifying areas of need, and hosting workshops to address these areas.

To achieve its purpose, Spark must act through the following operating parameters:

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#### **2.1 The structure of the MSU Spark program shall be as follows:**

- 2.1.1 MSU Spark shall be planned and promoted over the spring and summer;
- 2.1.2 Participation in weekly sessions, which shall:
  - 2.1.2.1 Be comprised of small groups of first-year students;
  - 2.1.2.2 Be led by two (2) non-first year, undergraduate Team Leaders;
  - 2.1.2.3 Occur during the fall and winter terms
  - 2.1.2.4 Be between 1-2 hours per session;

- 2.1.2.5 Be held once per week for the length of the term;
- 2.1.3. The topics of each week's sessions will be planned by the Spark Director in conjunction with the Vice-President (Administration), as necessary;
- 2.1.4. A session may be comprised of:
  - 2.1.4.1. Leadership activities;
  - 2.1.4.2. Presentations from speakers;
  - 2.1.4.3. Discussions;
  - 2.1.4.4. Journaling/reflection periods;
  - 2.1.4.5. Games; and
  - 2.1.4.6. Other activities deemed as appropriate by the Spark Director.
- 2.2. MSU Spark shall facilitate optional study groups and social events at various points throughout the term to promote building inclusive student learning communities;**
- 2.3. MSU Spark shall facilitate optional, open workshops twice per term to address the specific challenges faced by most first year students at relevant points throughout the year.**
- 2.4. The opportunity to participate in the MSU Spark program is available to all eligible first-year students at no cost to the participant;**
- 2.5. MSU Spark shall be guided by the following learning outcomes:**
  - 2.5.1. Providing a sense of comfort, connection, and support within the McMaster University;
  - 2.5.2. Appreciating the importance and value of extracurricular university involvement;
  - 2.5.3. Demonstrating self-reflection and the ability to identify opportunities for individual growth;
  - 2.5.4. Clarifying academic, personal, and career-related goals, and assisting students in creating a plan of action to accomplish them;
  - 2.5.5. Facilitating an improved suite of leadership skills, including communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution.
  - 2.5.6. Incoming or current first-year students shall sign up for MSU Spark through an online application process for each term, respectively.
- 2.6. The eligibility requirements for participation are as follows:**
  - 2.6.1. The applicant is currently (or will be, in that calendar year), a Level I student at McMaster University;
  - 2.6.2. The applicant has not completed the MSU Spark program in a previous term or previous year.
- 2.7. Participation in MSU Spark will be provided on a first-come, first-served basis:**
  - 2.7.1. Exceptions may be provided to participants who have a high potential to benefit from the program, including:
    - 2.7.1.1. Students who belong to marginalized groups;
    - 2.7.1.2. Students on academic probation; and
    - 2.7.1.3. First-generation students.
- 2.8. The Spark Director shall set the appropriate cap for the number of first-year participants based on available resources, including, but not limited to:**
  - 2.8.1. Volunteers;
  - 2.8.2. Budget; and
  - 2.8.3. Logistical constraints.
- 2.9. Online applications will include questions for students in order to allow for diverse session groups;**
  - 2.9.1. Sessions should aim to include diverse groups of students, based on:
    - 2.9.1.1. Differing personal goals;
    - 2.9.1.2. Faculty;
    - 2.9.1.3. Personality type;
    - 2.9.1.4. Comfort level; and
    - 2.9.1.5. History of prior involvement.
  - 2.9.2. The application information shall remain as confidential as possible:
- 2.10. MSU Spark shall aim to accomplish the following:**
  - 2.10.1. Forming and maintaining personal connections and relationships between students;
  - 2.10.2. Forming and maintaining personal connections between first year students and upper year students,

**2.11. A certificate of completion shall be granted to participants who attend and participate in a minimum of 8 weekly sessions;**

2.11.1 Additional recognition events for student participants may be planned at the discretion of the Spark Director and Assistant Director

## Service Structure

Spark is overseen by a Director and Assistant Director in part-time paid positions who then oversee a series of volunteers in various roles. The Director plays the main leadership role, with their purpose to allow Spark to achieve its mandate and supporting the other executives in fulfilling their responsibilities. The Director is also the main individual responsible for the budget of Spark, and the person who sets specific, actionable goals for new/modified programming or changes in service purpose in their year plan based on consultations, research, and their personal views.

### **3.1. The Spark Director, who shall:**

3.1.1. Be responsible for the planning and promoting of MSU Spark during the summer and managing MSU Spark throughout the academic year:

3.1.2. Perform duties as outlined in the Spark Director job description.

### **3.2. The Spark Assistant Director, who shall:**

3.2.1. Assist the Spark Director with planning and promoting MSU Spark during the summer and managing MSU Spark throughout the academic year;

3.2.2. Perform duties as outlined in the Spark Assistant Director job description.

### **3.3. The Spark Outreach & Engagement Coordinator(s), who shall:**

3.3.1. Be responsible for coordinating outreach and promoting the role of MSU Spark for first year students;

3.3.2. Perform duties outlined in the Spark Volunteer Coordinator job description.

### **3.4. The Spark Promotions & Publications Coordinator(s) who shall:**

3.4.1. Be responsible for the creation of engaging and informative materials for first year students;

3.4.2. Perform duties outlined in the Spark Promotions & Publications Coordinator job description.

### **3.5. The Spark Sessions Coordinator(s) who shall:**

3.5.1. Be responsible for the research and development of all MSU Spark sessions:

3.5.2. Perform duties outlined in the Spark Sessions Coordinator job description.

### **3.6. The Spark Events Coordinator(s) who shall:**

3.6.1. Be responsible for creating and implementing inclusive social events for both MSU Spark students and the broader first year community;

3.6.2. Create and implement four (4) large scale workshops focused on first year success;

3.6.3. Perform duties outlined in the Spark Events Coordinator job description.

### **3.7. The Team Leaders, who shall:**

3.7.1. Be student volunteers who lead the weekly sessions with first year students;

3.7.2. Regularly engage in informal meetings with MSU Spark students;

3.7.3. Perform the duties outlined in the Team Leader job description.

## **INTERNAL RESEARCH**

### General Student Body Survey

The general student body survey consisted of 33 questions to gauge how effectively Spark delivers its services to the student body. This allows for reviewers to understand how the student body perceives the service and will allow us to determine areas in which service delivery or communication with the student body can be made more efficient. There were 196 responses to the survey, with the plurality from first year students. As this represents only about 0.7% of the student body, this is not a highly representative sample.

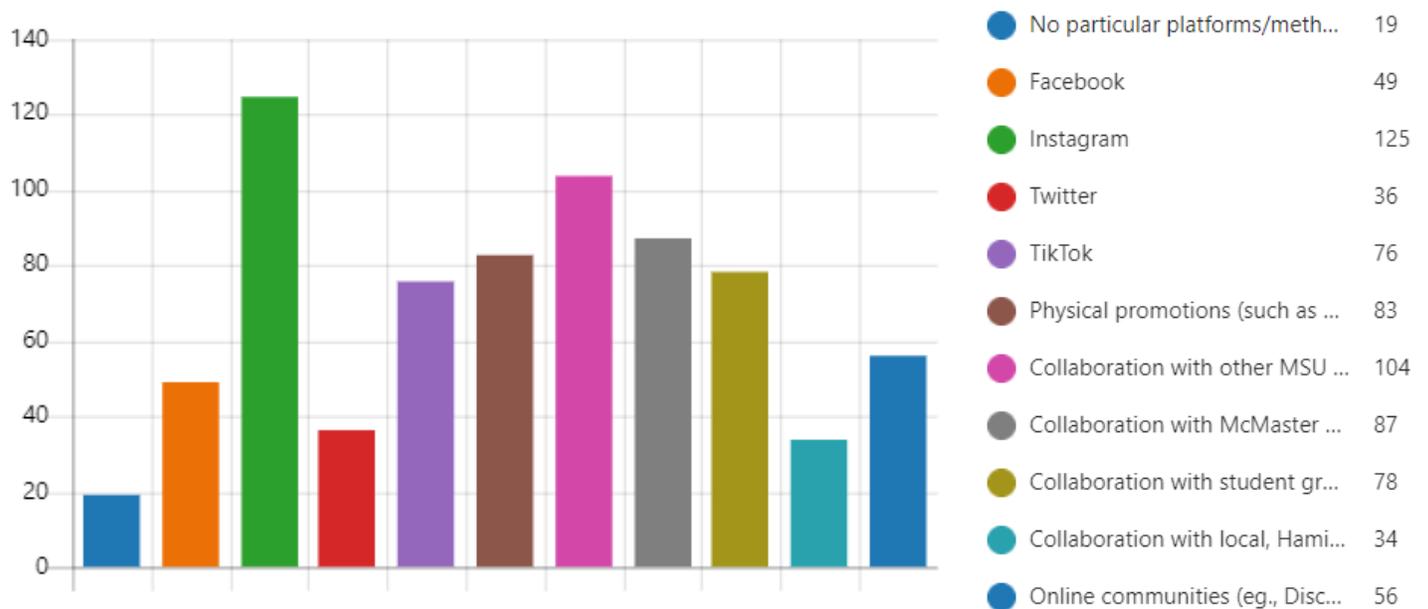
The greatest number of responses came from Science students (41%) followed by Social Science students (13.8%). Approximately 88% of respondents were domestic students from Ontario, with those from out of province and international students making up the remainder.

In order of greatest to least number of respondents, the three largest ethno-racial groups were White/European, East or Southeast Asian, and South Asian. Cisgender women made up the supermajority of respondents (79.3%) with most of the remainder made up of cisgender men, and about 7% made up of individuals of various non-cisgender identities. About 84% of respondents were heterosexual, with the remaining 16% comprising various homosexual, asexual, and bi/poly/pansexual identities.

Each of the three options of residence (those who live in McMaster residences, students who live in off-campus housing, and students who commute) were selected by approximately 1/3 of respondents. Average annual family income appeared to be within the range of \$100,000 to \$150,000 though likely at the lower end. Most respondents originated from family units composed of four to five individuals.

Generally, respondents felt that the role of Spark (from the definition provided) was appropriate and should be expanded. Most stated they had first learned of Spark through either the Spark Instagram, the MSU Instagram page, or Welcome Week events. These three methods of communication were also the main means by which respondents continued to hear of or interact with Spark after having already learned of the service, though conversations with friends/acquaintances represented another notable area through which respondents were re-exposed to Spark. About one fifth of respondents had no knowledge of Spark before the survey. Use of Instagram and collaboration with both MSU and McMaster services were generally described as the most impactful means by which respondents felt Spark can increase its profile. Physical promotions, use of TikTok, and collaborations with student groups/clubs were also noted as areas where respondents felt Spark should invest future resources.

**Figure 1.** A figure to show platforms/methods which general student body survey respondents believe should be used to expand awareness of the service.



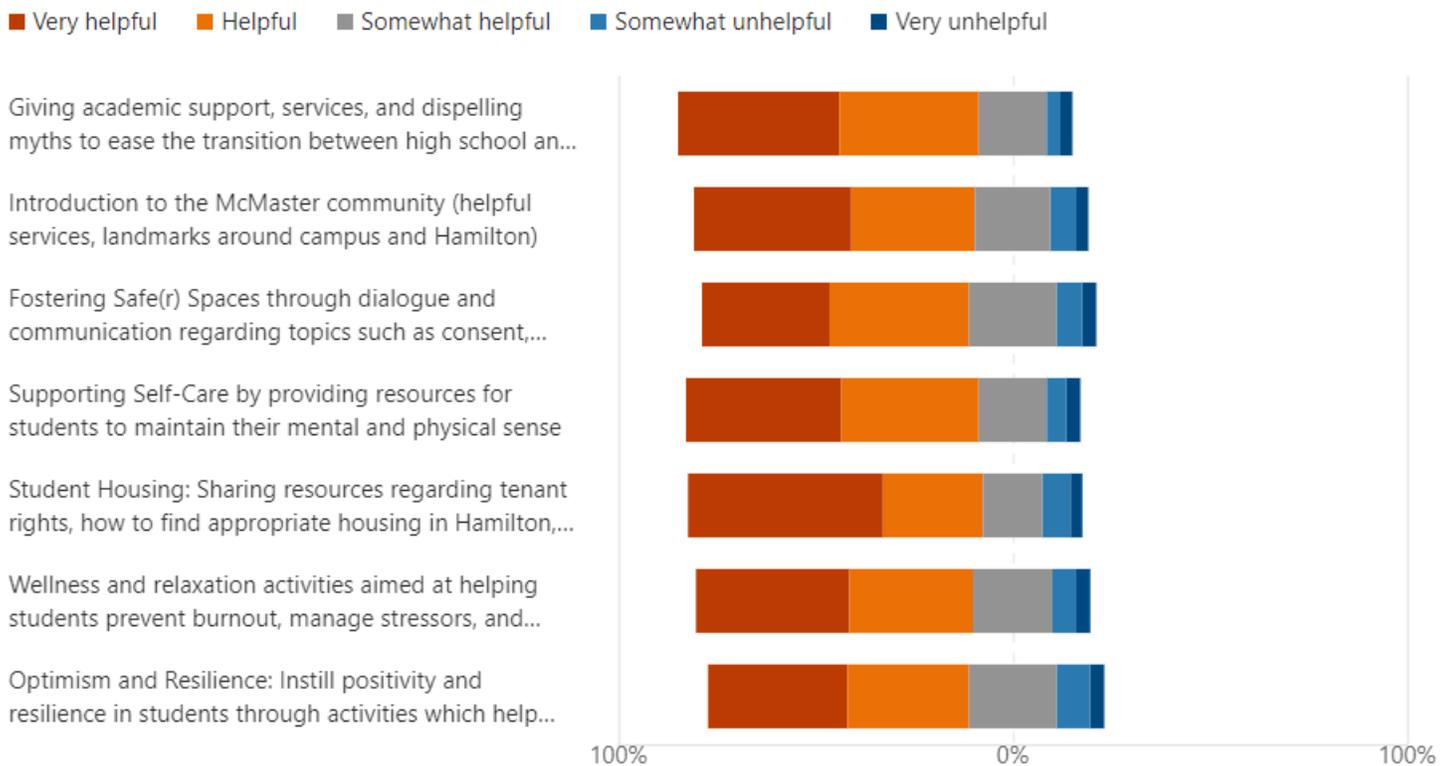
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Approximately 46% of respondents were not aware of Spark in their first year. Out of the remaining 54% who were aware of Spark in their first year, 41% registered for Spark services, while 59% did not. In this last group, the group which knew of Spark but chose not to attend its services, it was clear that other obligations were the main reason respondents did not register. 45% of this group (which had knowledge of Spark but chose not to register) felt academic obligations were the primary reason they did not register with Spark. Overall, about 68% described time constraints caused by the combination of academic, work, and other extracurricular obligations, as being the primary reason, they did not register for Spark. However, it is also important to note that about 21% of respondents did not register as they already received services from competing programs from services such as Archway, while 11% felt the programming offered was not of interest to them.

Attrition was noted as being quite strong, with less than 35% of registrants stating they attended at least half of all sessions offered. Nonetheless, strong majorities also described the environment during sessions as being supportive and

felt comfortable reaching out to team leaders outside of session time slots if in need of support. When reviewing the major topics Spark focused on in the Fall 2021 semester, every single topic was received positively and viewed as both appropriate and useful by large majorities of respondents. The positive sentiments described in the previous responses coalesced in one notable statistic, specifically that 77% of attendees recommended Spark as a useful tool for incoming students.

**Figure 2.** A figure to show respondent perception of Spark sessions topics and their view of whether these topics are helpful to first year students.



Overall, student sentiment was quite mixed regarding a return to in-person sessions, with 33% of respondents being of a neutral opinion. While the plurality did express moderate or high enthusiasm to return to in-person sessions (44% of respondents), a significant minority (23%) expressed moderate to high opposition. Thus, future Spark programming must be mindful of these student perceptions. Finally, regarding the Spark Achievement Award, the majority of respondents were aware of the award, and generally expressed a desire to see the award slightly expanded in the future.

### Volunteer and Executive Survey

The executive and volunteer survey consisted of 44 questions to gauge how effectively Spark's executives and volunteers view its functioning and delivery of services to the student body. This allows for reviewers to understand how the leadership and volunteers of Spark perceives the service and will allow us to gain an understanding of where areas for improvement exist. There were 22 responses to the survey (about 70% of whom were team leaders), which represents approximately 45% of all executives and volunteers with Spark.

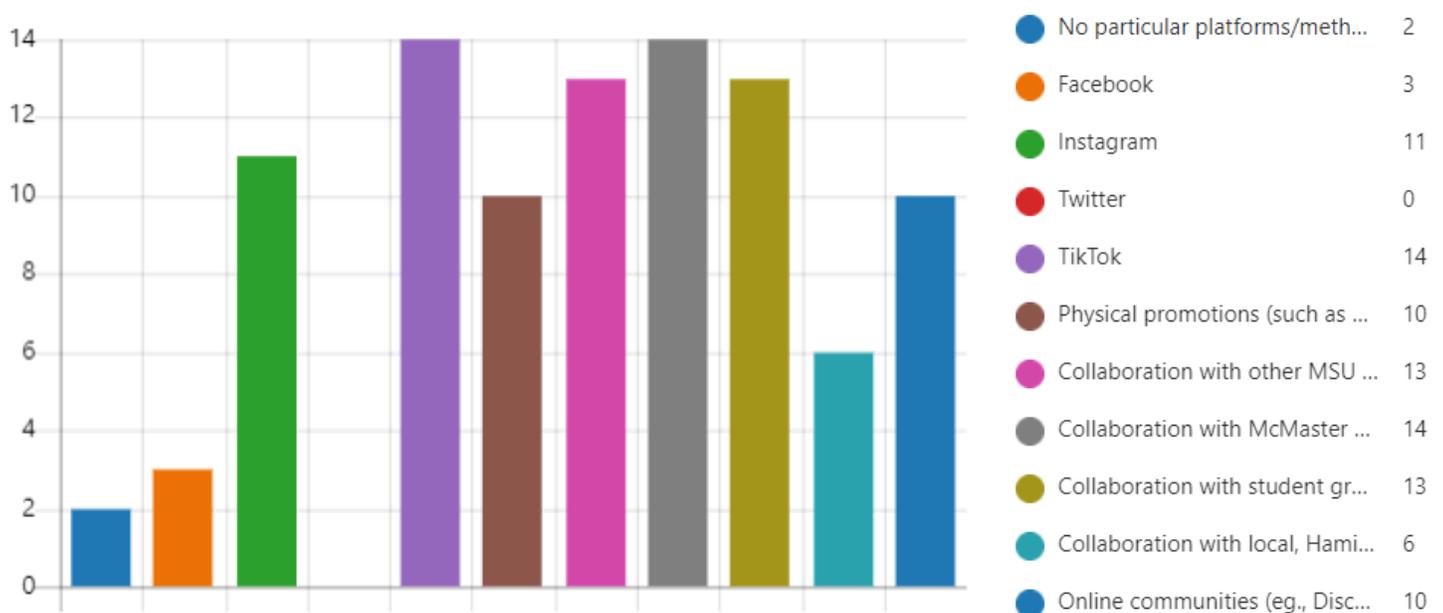
Health Science represents the faculty from which the greatest number of volunteers and executives originate, with half from that faculty. Science is a close second, with 35% of volunteers from that faculty. Third year students represent the years with the greatest number of respondents, with 100% of respondents being domestic students from Ontario.

In order of greatest to least number of respondents, the four ethno-racial groups in which all respondents identified were South Asian, White/European, East or Southeast Asian and non-white Caucasian (such as those of Middle Eastern or Central Asian ancestry), representing about 32%, 27%, 23%, and 18% of respondents respectively. Cisgender women made up a clear majority of respondents (63.6%) with all other respondents identifying as cisgender men (36.4%). 0 respondents stated a non-cisgender identity. 80% of respondents were heterosexual, with all of the remainder having either a homosexual/gay or bi/poly/pansexual identity.

The vast majority of respondents (75%) live in off-campus housing, with the next largest group commuting, and one respondent living in a McMaster residence. Average annual family income appeared to be within the range of \$100,000 to \$150,000, though near the higher end of that threshold. Most respondents originated from family units composed of four to five individuals, with both parents/guardians having an average of a Bachelor's degree in education.

Generally, respondents felt that the role of Spark (from the definition provided) was appropriate, but unlike the general student body survey, were more lukewarm regarding expansion and hoped to keep the status quo. Most stated they had first learned of Spark through friends/acquaintances and the Spark Instagram. These two methods of communication, in addition to the MSU Instagram, Spark Facebook, physical promotional materials (such as posters), and collaborations with other services were also the main means by which respondents continued to hear of or interact with Spark after having already learned of the service. Use of TikTok and collaboration with MSU Services, McMaster University services/initiatives and student clubs/groups were methods viewed by the respondents as the most effective means by which the awareness of Spark can be expanded.

**Figure 3.** A figure to show platforms/methods which executives/volunteer survey respondents believe should be used to expand awareness of the service.

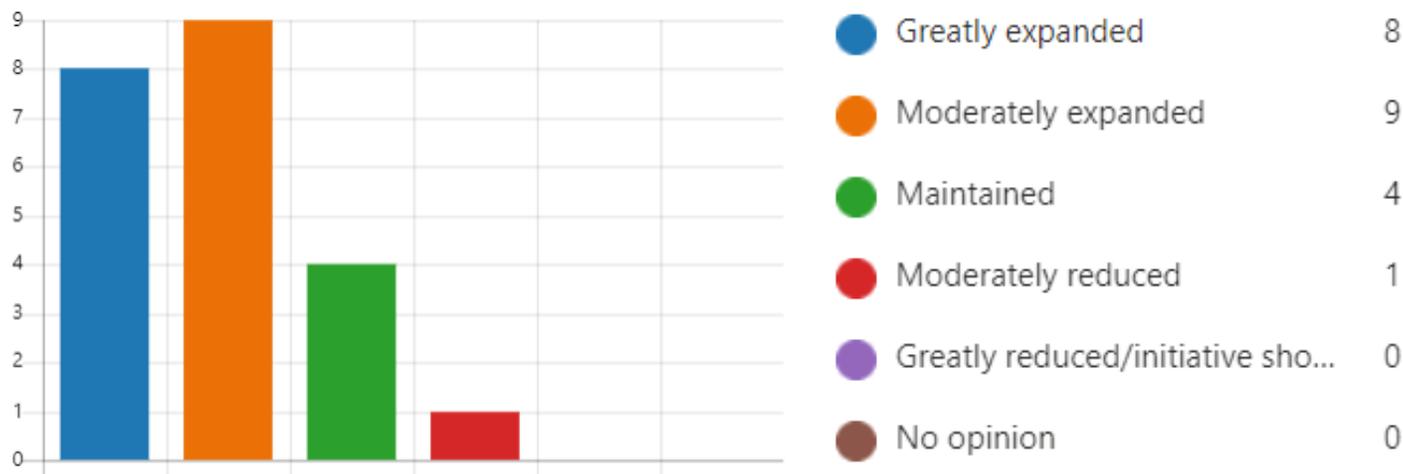


Communication between Spark and both the Marketing & Communications Department and the Underground was viewed as being quite efficient. However, communication between Spark and MSU Administration was viewed quite negatively. Job descriptions were also generally seen as being appropriate to expected task and work. Similarly, the workload expected of individuals did not generally impede on other responsibilities had by respondents. The hiring process was viewed as being fair and legitimate by the vast majority of respondents as well. In addition, volunteers expressed that they generally felt comfortable during trainings, during sessions, and during other events. They felt that they were also able to reach out to executives in the case of concerns or questions, and to receive other support during sessions, before and after sessions, during trainings, and during other events. Volunteers and executives also displayed strong trust in fellow team leaders during sessions, and expressed positive sentiments regarding comfort, ease of collaboration, and success in session planning.

Furthermore, events such as team building exercises, weekly trainings, competencies, and group events were generally viewed as being very appropriate, effective, and useful. Trainings were viewed consistently as being positive, useful tools that ensured successful delivery of sessions' materials. This sentiment also generally applied to re-trainings delivered at the beginning of the academic year for returning team leaders. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion trainings were also viewed as highly competent, with few areas for improvement in the views of respondents. Regarding sessions' materials, there was near unanimous positive opinions regarding the utility and relevance of content delivered to Sparklings. However, when looking at team building exercises, the response was quite lukewarm. Most felt there were an adequate number of such events (55%), while approximately equal proportions felt there were insufficient (18%) and excessive (27%) number of events. Overall, the workload expected of respondents based on the job descriptions was

viewed as being appropriate, rarely impeding the ability of those within the Spark team from achieving their other academic and extracurricular goals. Finally, regarding the Spark Achievement Award, there was strong positive opinion regarding the new initiative, with a clear majority supporting expansion of the award in future years.

**Figure 4.** Executive/volunteer perceptions of whether or not the Spark Leadership Award should be expanded moving forward.



## EXTERNAL RESEARCH

As a part of the external research strategy, Services Committee embarked on a research planning aimed to review all undergraduate student unions of universities in Ontario. While this goal was not met, in total, detailed information of relevant structures at other institutions was collected from more than 10 Ontario universities. This has helped shed light on the interesting and unique arrangements which exist at other educational institutions, and important areas in which the MSU can potentially improve delivery of programming by Spark.

Brock University community offers a series of unique services, though none are directly akin to what is offered by the MSU. Brock University itself has a mentorship program which appears to offer internship and collaborative opportunities for students to work with peers and mentors in non-academic avenues. This is more formalized than anything that can be offered by the MSU, but interesting to note as it appears to emulate some of what is offered by McMaster. Awareness of how other institutions offer programming is vital as it can ensure Spark is aware of differentiators between what it can deliver and what competing McMaster programs may deliver if inspired by services at other post-secondary institutions. When looking at the Brock University Student Union, we see no equivalent program to Spark. However, there do appear to be faculty-specific mentorship programs similar to what are offered by faculty and program societies in the McMaster community.

When looking at the Carleton University Community, we see that the Carleton University Student Association has no services akin to Spark and appears to have 0 clubs with a focus on first year transition. The university however does have faculty-led transition programs which take a focus on ensuring first years have necessary academic supports. When viewing the University of Guelph's supports, we see two programs, STARTonTrack and BounceBack which are held in the fall and winter semesters respectively. These are aimed at first- and second-year students and are essentially mentorship programs which pairs students with those in upper years. There are no programs akin to Spark amongst the services of the undergraduate student union associated with the University of Guelph.

The University of Ottawa, like the previously mentioned universities, offers a mentorship program called UOConnexion, where upper year students can give guidance and supports to incoming first years. A differentiator is that it is quite centrally managed and not faculty-based as in other institutions. Aside from this, the student union of the university does in fact have two clubs with a focus on supporting first years, "Academic Success Educators" which takes a strong focus on developing first year academics, and "Linx" which offers more of a general mentorship program. No Spark-equivalent service was found.

When viewing the community of the University of Western Ontario, we see similar themes as seen in previous institutions. There is a mentorship program offered by the university called Thriving Foundations which offers upper-year

mentorship, simulations of campus life in summer months for incoming matriculants to take part in, and academic supports, though the student union lacks a Spark-equivalent service or clubs. Overall, a similar trend is found at Laurier University, the University of Windsor, the various University of Toronto branches, and most other Ontario Universities.

In summary, we see that the services offered by Spark are one of a kind, as the MSU remains either one of the few or the only student union to take a strong, service-based approach in its delivery of first-year student mentorship. In addition, the variety of programming offered, the breadth of content, and depth of specialization of Spark is a rung above anything found in research at other institutions. With that said, even though all large faculty societies at McMaster and many program societies offer mentorship programs, including faculty-based mentorship within Spark's repertoire may be a useful means by which Spark's service delivery can be enhanced, thus it is a noteworthy recommendation to potential trial in the upcoming year.

## CONCLUSION

From the information gathered through surveying of the student body and volunteers + executives of Spark, it is clear that Spark makes up a very important factor of the McMaster community. Its services are vital to the safety of students, and it is an important factor ensuring emergency health services are readily accessible. Spark excels in the vast majority of metrics, this review has unveiled a few minor areas in which Spark service delivery can be improved.

Firstly, there should be continued strong usage of Instagram due to its near ubiquity amongst the student body. Simultaneously, there should be a strong focus on potentially adding TikTok as a new platform as it was strongly expressed by the student body as an area in which Spark should have a presence.

Second, in light of the comparatively tepid support for a return to in-person sessions, Spark should investigate maintaining a hybrid option of service delivery. This will ensure Sparklings can attend sessions even if unexpected conflicts occur that prevent them from being able to attend. Furthermore, this was a strong means by which Spark can ensure accessibility, thereby reducing the strong attrition of attendees which is generally experienced by Spark in each cycle.

Finally, as a result of its great success during its pilot and the strong support received by both the student body and executives/volunteers, the Spark Leadership Award should be continued and incorporated as a direct component of Spark's operating policy. This will ensure that the wonderful program continues to support student growth and success for the future.

With these steps in place, Spark will be able to successfully improve its already exceptional service delivery and continue its role as a vital part of the McMaster Community. I would like to thank the Services Committee, Administrative Services Coordinator, Director of Marketing and Communications, the Director of Spark, Assistant Director of Spark, everyone on the Spark Team who helped, and those in the student body who responded to the surveys for their help in the creation of this report.

## Recommendations

1. Keep continued focus on Instagram as main means of social media promotion, with TikTok as a secondary focus.
2. Investigate hybrid option for Spark sessions, when possible, wherein Sparklings can at least attend sessions virtually even if a session is designed to be run in-person. This is to help ensure accessibility and might reduce attrition considering the tepid support for a return to in-person sessions.
3. Look into incorporation of the Spark Leadership Award into the service operating policy

Best regards,

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