

First Year Feedback Forum Report 2016

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INTRODUCTION

On February 1, 2016, MSU Spark partnered with the SRA University Affairs Committee to hold the first ever MSU First Year Feedback Forum. This forum was centered around collecting feedback from current first and second year students at McMaster about their experiences transitioning into University. The event was roundtable-style, with each table having a designated discussion topic for students to visit at their leisure. There were nine topics in total, and each table included

two facilitators - one University staff member deemed an expert in each topic, there to answer any questions from students and provide context, and one student who facilitated the conversation and asked questions. As well, each table included a notetaker from the University Affairs committee, who recorded the conversation and made it possible for this report to be completed.

Below is a list of table topics, with their staff and student facilitator(s).

Table Topic	Staff	Student(s)
Off-Campus Housing	Jennifer Kleven: <i>Manager, Off-Campus Resource Centre</i>	Ruchika Gothoskar
Mental Health and Wellness	Melissa Fernandes: <i>Wellness Education Assistant, Student Wellness Centre</i>	Genya Oparin and Rina Muramatsu
Food	Chris Roberts: <i>Director, Hospitality Services</i>	Kristina Jagger and Aquino Inigo
Pedagogy and Blended Learning	N/A	Marina Sadik
Student Financial Aid and Assistance	Leanne Ruiz: <i>Manager, Student Services, Student Financial Aid & Scholarships</i>	Lindsay D'Souza
Mentorship on Campus	Kris Knorr: <i>Research Coordinator, MIETL</i>	Jonathan Davis and Carter McInnis
Arrive and Thrive	Allan Fein: <i>Research & Project Coordinator, Arrive & Thrive Project</i>	Jack Legere
MSU Awareness	Balie Tomar: <i>Events Director, MSU First Year Council</i> ; Rhea Desphande: <i>Communications Director, MSU First Year Council</i> ; Joseph Paganelli: <i>Advocacy Director, MSU First Year Council</i> ; Jessica Loiseau: <i>Chair, MSU First Year Council</i> ; Connor Maclean: <i>Vice-Chair, MSU First Year Council</i>	Rachel Sullivan
Welcome Week	Michele Corbeil: <i>Outreach and Transition Program Coordinator, Student Success Centre</i>	Kaitlyn Gonsalves and Patricia Kousoulas

In total, eight-three (83) students attended the event. Demographic information was collected from these students, which is summarized on the follow page. The event was a total of four hours, however students were

encouraged to drop-in for as long as they could.

Note that due to a technological error, notes for the Welcome Week table could not be recovered and so a summary for that section is missing from this report.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Year of Study

First year	51	61%
Second year	28	34%
Third year	3	4%
Fourth Year	1	1%

Enrollment in MSU Spark

Enrolled	45	54%
Not enrolled	38	46%

Faculty

Arts & Science	7	8%
Bachelor of Health Sciences	3	4%
Commerce	6	7%
Engineering	6	7%
Humanities	5	6%
Nursing	1	1%
Science	45	54%
Social Sciences	11	13%

First Year Living Arrangements

Off-campus (commuting)	16	19%
Off-campus (student house)	4	5%
Residence	63	76%

Experience Taking a Blended Learning Course

Yes	53	64%
No	30	36%

On OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program)

Yes	43	52%
No	40	48%

Accessed Student Wellness Centre in First Year

Yes	23	28%
No	60	72%

TABLE SUMMARIES

Off-Campus Housing

LIVING OFF-CAMPUS IN FIRST YEAR

Students who lived off-campus in their first year of study agreed that they faced challenges in attending Welcome Week events and building lasting relationships with peers. Barriers that they faced include the timing of events conflicting with employment schedules and struggling to find a space on campus. Some students expressed that although they participated in a few Welcome Week events, they felt it was difficult to stay connected to individuals that they met at these events without the residence experience. Students who lived off-campus in first year also expressed that the majority of them did not attend concerts and preferred drop-in events where they had the flexibility of walking around. Finally, students suggested that there exists a stigma related to not living in residence in first year, and it can be difficult to explain the rationale of living off-campus.

Students expressed that their primary reason for commuting in first year was financial barriers. Students expressed that residence can be very costly and they

did not feel comfortable renting a student house near campus as they would not know the other tenants of the house. Most students expressed that they take the bus or drive to school, but it can be very isolating at times. Students identified the need for a space on campus dedicated to off-campus and commuter students. They would prefer this space to have storage compartments like lockers, an area to rest throughout the day, a fridge to store food, and generally space that would allow them to build community.

TRANSITIONING INTO OFF-CAMPUS HOUSING

Students reported that the transition into living off-campus was a smooth process. They found that there was a lot of useful resources including the McMaster Off-Campus Resource Centre website. Students would like to see additional resources to help understand leases and legal documents. It was suggested that infographics be made describing possible “red flags” in leases and how to understand a lease.

Mental Health and Wellness

Students expressed that they had a positive experience with Welcome Week and the support that was available to them through Welcome Week representatives and Community Advisors (CAs). They especially appreciated the use of preferred pronouns by certain Welcome Week representative groups, which facilitated a safe environment. Students enjoyed the consent presentation during Welcome Week and would like to see other presentations regarding social norms like drinking and extroversion. They expressed that they would like to see more promotion of available services during Welcome Week like MSU peer support services (Peer Support Line, Queer Community Support Centre, etc.) and professional support like the Student Wellness Centre

and Student Accessibility Services. Examples of more promotion and further outreach that students would like to see are class talks during Welcome Week and a welcome package. As well, students appreciated services like MSU Spark and MSU Horizons that assist with the transition into first year, because they provide a strong support system.

Students shared that they were unaware that Student Accessibility Services (SAS) was an option available to them and did not approach their professors because they did not believe their professors would understand. Students shared that they would find it helpful if SAS was more widely publicized as an option and what information SAS needs.

Food

Students expressed that food on campus is too expensive and can often be inaccessible for students who have dietary restrictions. There are limited dairy-free, vegetarian, and religious options. For instance, although Bridges offers great vegetarian and vegan meals, it closes the earliest of all the food places on campus. As well, they would like for Halal food to be better advertised and to be treated with more care as they have found there is often contamination.

Students were also concerned with the nutritional content of food available on campus. Students found that healthier food options were more expensive than less healthy options, which made them financially diffi-

cult to access. Additionally, online nutritional information is very limited and inaccessible but the Mac Eats app is helpful. Students showed a preference for cheaper, more local food options in the new Living Learning Centre.

In general, students also expressed that they would like food locations to be open later, especially extended hours in La Piazza. Finally, students expressed a large concern with the meal card system as it is unable to overlap into further years because they are forced to waste a lot of extra money towards the end of their first year. Students would prefer to have an increased amount of flex dollars.

Pedagogy and Blended Learning

TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Students experienced teaching assistants (TAs) of varying quality. They found that a good TA shows that they are caring and positively noted that IntroPsych TAs are exceptionally good communicators. Students prefer TAs who are able to facilitate discussion, ask questions to students, and engage with their class. They also identified that good TAs are clear, confident, and open to conversation with students. Notably, students prefer when TAs are able to go through an assessment rubric and express their expectations. Students also noted a difference in investment from undergraduate TAs to graduate TAs with a preference for undergraduate TAs as they seem to be more invested in student learning. Students enjoy when tutorials are focused on the lecture content and are able to present the material in a different way. Student find that there is often a disconnect between tutorial material and lecture content.

BLENDED LEARNING

Class modules for blended learning courses vary between classes. Notably, IntroPsych modules were well-received and students found that they can be completed within a reasonable time. However, other modules were found to be too lengthy, contained too much content, and were inconsistent between classes in the same department. Students noted that the transition between a course with modules (for instance, CHEM 1A03) to a course without modules (CHEM 1AA3) can be difficult and would prefer continuity for related courses. The blended learning model was overall well-received as students enjoy the ability to take their learning at their own pace. Positive feedback included the weekly quizzes that allow students to review content and provide extra practice opportunities. Some negative feedback included that some students struggle to find the time to concentrate on modules outside of the classroom, and that online learning limits the interactions between students and professors. Students preferred when the live classes directly applied the module content but it is not always consistent with the module content.

ONLINE SOFTWARE & iCLICKERS

Students expressed that online learning software that provide practice (e.g. Mastering Chem and Accounting Lab) are incredibly useful as the practice allows for them to solidify their learning. However, the costs of these programs can pose a financial barrier to some students. In addition, iClickers are useful as they provide a chance to practice content. However, students prefer the opportunity to participate and enjoy iClickers when they are participation-based rather than marks-based.

PROFESSORS AND LECTURES

When asked about professors and lectures, students indicated that they prefer when professors have office hours that vary every week as this is able to accommodate for different student schedules. In the classroom, students enjoy the use of examples to solidify their understanding of content. As well, students are largely in favour of additional practice problems that are available prior to tests to allow for more accurate assessment of student's knowledge and allow students to prepare for the tests. They also expressed an interest in teaching more soft skills in the classroom like time management and teamwork. With regards to review sessions in lecture, students clearly expressed that they would like more review sessions, but they are only useful when professors are able to provide a detailed breakdown of the course. Students also believe that it would be useful to submit questions in advance of the review session.

ACADEMIC ADVISING

Students expressed that they are aware of the academic advising services that are available to them but have not accessed them and would not access these services as many students are not comfortable reaching out for help. This was echoed in the mentorship section (see pages 8-9).

COURSE EVALUATIONS

Students believe that course evaluations are important but the students who fill out these evaluations often have polarizing opinions which may not give a holistic view of the course. In addition, some professors have explicitly expressed that they do not value course evaluations and this is considered a large barrier for students to fill out course evaluations.

LEARNING PORTFOLIO

Learning portfolios have been identified to be a useful tool but most students have not had a positive experience with it. Reflective activities are often not implemented well in classes and there is a strict breakdown of reflective assignments. This limits the ability of students to be able to truly reflect on their experiences. Students would be in favour of including learning portfolios in course content as part of a pass/fail. In addition, students found that the interface isn't very use friendly and even TAs aren't comfortable using the Learning Portfolio. Finally, students expressed that the Learning Portfolios are too specific to McMaster and it might be more beneficial to move towards a program that is more universally recognized.

Student Financial Aid and Assistance

ONTARIO STUDENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (OSAP)

Students shared that they found the OSAP application process to be complicated and would have preferred to receive more support on how to complete the application. Most students discovered OSAP through siblings who have been through the process before.

SCHOLARSHIPS AND BURSARIES

In comparison to other schools, McMaster was noted to offer significantly lower entrance scholarships and students did not find that their scholarships and OSAP were sufficient to provide financial support. For the most part, students were unaware of the scholarships and bursaries that were available to them as they were not well advertised and they struggled to navigate Mosaic. Students expressed that they have used the Student Financial Aid Services website and found it helpful. However, information was slightly messy and could be better organized by dates. Students would prefer an

entrance scholarship system that analyzes different aspects of your financial situation, including a focus on financial need as this is more fair. They would also appreciate a system that looks at extracurricular activities instead of purely your academic record.

STUDENT FINANCIAL AID SERVICES OFFICE

When students access the Student Financial Aid Services office, they found the front desk to be very helpful but the wait times can be lengthy and can be difficult to navigate which forms and which desk to approach. They also felt uncomfortable as there is not a lot of privacy at the front desk when the information you are sharing can be sensitive or personal ID information. To inform more students of financial aid opportunities, students would like to receive email reminders or a workshop to learn about scholarship opportunities. They were not aware of counselling services that were available to students but have found that they have been extremely helpful and understanding when these services are accessed.

Mentorship on Campus

Students agreed that peer-to-peer mentorship is a valuable experience for both academic and non-academic issues. However, both academic and non-academic mentorship exist for different purposes, target different goals, and face different issues.

ACADEMIC MENTORSHIP

Peer-to-peer mentorship is valuable for students because it allows them to seek help without having to ask a professor, which can be intimidating. However, a large issue with academic mentorship is follow-through. For example, with course-specific mentorship, it can be difficult when mentors do not reach out as much as they could. Most course- or program-related mentors should be reaching out to students at least once

a month and once a week during midterms. Students would prefer mentors to reach out more for academic mentorship programs.

NON-ACADEMIC MENTORSHIP

A large issue with more informal or non-academic mentorship (like MSU Spark), is that student turnout can be low, and meeting times are late in the evening (8-10pm) which did not work for many students. Commuter students especially have difficulty staying on campus that late into the night after being on campus all day, while still having to commute home after 10pm, and waking up early the next morning for classes.

Although the Student Success Centre had many mentorship programs and opportunities, they are not

used until a mentor takes a student to the SSC or advises students seek out SSC programs. Generally the SSC resources are not taken seriously by students, even if they are promoted by professors and other university avenues. Having an upper year mentor advise students to use the SSC is the push that students need to actually use SSC resources.

IMPROVING MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Students had the opportunity to reflect on their previous mentorship experiences, outlining positive or negative experiences they had. Students shared that most of the positive mentorship experiences they had had were a result of dedicated mentors, collaboration, and multiple opportunities to interact with peers. Students identified several aspects of mentorship programs that made them successful. One aspect is having mentors and group members keep an open-mind, create a non-judgemental space, and develop an inclusive environment. Students also mentioned that the opportuni-

ty to create life-long friends with peers and upper years made the mentorship experience better. Finally, having leaders or mentors that are positive, upbeat, passionate, and energetic. Unfortunately, some negative experiences were caused by a lack of training for mentors, lack of outreach to students, or a lack of face-to-face interaction.

Students identified several ways to improve mentorship programs:

- Create meaningful promotion to target specific needs instead of general mass promotion
- Give students the opportunity to connect with more than one mentor or upper year
- Allow time for face-to-face interaction because it tends to be more meaningful and helps students feel connected
- Help students feel more connected by reducing the age gap between first years and upper years
- Increase job-related mentorship (through 4th year or alumni partnerships)

Arrive and Thrive

PROMOTION & ENGAGING STUDENTS

In order to introduce the Arrive and Thrive tool to students on and off-campus, students thought it would be best to use incentives to participate in activities and initiatives. Students also mentioned that different programming might be required for on and off-campus students. On-campus students could receive programming on the weekend since they are already living on campus. Off-campus students should receive programming on weekdays since it's more time-consuming and costly for students to commute to campus.

Students tend to learn the most about programs at McMaster through Facebook, Email, and word of mouth. Unfortunately, some students mentioned that on Facebook, it is easier to forget a post or not take it seriously. Emails might be taken more seriously and students might remember them more. Students agreed that they might check avenue for details on McMaster

programming, but unless a professor posted it as a news item, they were unlikely to look at it.

Some barriers to engaging in programs such as Arrive and Thrive are rooted in social and group norms where it isn't the 'norm' in your friend group to engage and attend events or programming. Other barriers include accessibility (both time and space), and intimidation. Some students felt that it would be intimidating to be surveyed by the online tool and then receive recommendations or referrals to professionals because some students might not be ready for such a big step.

TOPICS & THEMES

Students gave a variety of answers when asked about topics and themes to include in Arrive and Thrive programming. For transition purposes, students thought it would be beneficial if upper years could share their experiences with first years and have first years share their

fears or worries. Upper years could address those fears using their own experience to help first years feel less worried. Students also felt that another valuable topic to address was alcohol consumption since many students are uneducated on appropriate or healthy habits in regards to alcohol consumption. Some students expressed fears that if they accessed counsellors or health professionals they would dictate exactly what a student should or shouldn't do. Students would benefit from programming that allowed for conversation about both

sides of an argument where a students could hear both sides and make their own decision on any given topic. Students expressed the value in creating activities or programming centered around eating habits. One specific idea was to create a meal plan for students to follow, especially during busy times of the school year such as exams. Students expressed the need for healthy food options to be available on campus, as well as learning to cook for themselves.

MSU Awareness

Although some students understand what the MSU is, most students don't understand what the MSU does. Many students had the perception that the MSU mainly runs events but that MSU services (e.g., WGEN, QSCC, Campus Events, etc.) were university services. Most students who were aware of the MSU find it difficult to get involved with the MSU because it's time-consuming to constantly check and stay up-to-date with job postings. Students felt that Clubsfest attempted to showcase and inform students about all the MSU has to offer, which some found helpful but overwhelming. Students agreed that because getting involved with the MSU is intimidating, and it is a good idea to start with drop-in committees (such as the CLAY sessions committee) as an entry-level commitment. When addressing event promotions, students agreed that Facebook where they find the majority of information. Students also expressed that they were less likely to attend events if their friends were not attending. With school work taking up so much time, it can be difficult to make time to attend events, even if students are interested.

It is visible that the MSU attempts to reach out to as many students as possible, but many students simply do not care. There are those who are extremely involved in the MSU and those who are not involved

at all, but there is no in between. It is difficult to get the students who are uninvolved because their network circles are also uninvolved students whereas those who are involved tend to connect with other students who are involved. For students who plan on getting involved but do not know what to be involved in, it can be difficult to experiment and find something to be passionate about. Students expressed worries that they weren't sure where exactly they would fit into such a large organization.

The MSU Presidential election impacted students by showing how much the student body values the MSU, its direction, and its potential to change. Students were surprised at how seriously elections and student governance is taken at McMaster. However, one student expressed their disinterest in the MSU after elections because it made the organization seem too large, and that all those involved with the MSU are extraverted and constantly involved.

Students suggested several ideas on how they would see the MSU do more. Students generally agreed that the MSU should take on more academic programming or create a tutoring service. Students also mentioned having more larger events like Welcome Week (e.g., Games night, spontaneous MacConnector to meet new people).

