



REPORT

From the office of the...

Associate Vice-President: Services

TO: Members of the Executive Board
FROM: AVP Services and the Services Committee
SUBJECT: MSU Spark Service Review
DATE: March 17th, 2020

Dear Members of the Executive Board,

The following report is a review of the MSU Spark service conducted by the AVP Services and the Services Standing Committee. This report will look at Spark through multiple different avenues including service mission, history, structure, and engagement. The report also takes a look at what other post-secondary institutions to see if they have services that run similar to Spark. Compiling all of the information, the report is concluded with recommendations made by the committee to enhance the function and experience of Spark.

Mission and History

The Operating Policy of MSU Spark describes itself as a service led and run by students committed to “setting the stage for student success in university”. This is done through initiatives that provide small group environments, encourage extracurricular participation, connect students to their peers and upper-year students, actively support a broader first year population by acting as a resource and hosting workshops to address areas of need.

The Spark program is structured into weekly sessions, composed of small groups of first-year students led by two upper year undergraduate Team Leaders (TLs). These weekly sessions span the length of each semester (both Fall term and Winter terms respectively). Each session runs for 1-2 hours, the topics of which are planned by the Spark Coordinator along with the Vice-President (Administration) whenever necessary. They involve leadership activities, presentations from speakers, discussions, journaling/reflection periods, games and many more. There are also optional study groups and social events at various points in the semester to promote and build inclusive student learning communities. Optional open workshops take place twice a term to address specific challenges commonly faced by first years at relevant points in the year. All eligible first-year students can participate in Spark at no cost to them.

The aim of the Spark mentorship program is to provide connections and support within the McMaster community. To help students identify academic, personal, and career-related goals and create plans of action to meet them. The program emphasizes the value of extracurricular university involvement and aids students in self-reflection and individual growth, especially pertaining to leadership skills (communication, teamwork and conflict resolution). To maximize effectiveness, Spark gives priority to students with high potential for benefit from the service, while providing the remaining spots on a first come first served basis. This demographic includes (not not limited to) students on academic probation and first-generation students.

Service Structure

Spark's executive team consists of 6 different roles. This includes the coordinator, a volunteer coordinator, 2 events coordinators, an outreach and engagement coordinator, a promotions coordinator, and 2 sessions coordinators. In addition to the main leadership team, team leaders are also hired to lead various themed sessions and workshops throughout the academic year. The responsibilities of the Spark Volunteer Coordinator include recruiting team leaders, organizing all necessary training and scheduling, and completing all administrative tasks associated with the volunteers. Spark's Events Coordinators are responsible for brainstorming and organizing 4 large scale workshops designed to help incoming students succeed. Additionally, the Outreach and Engagement Coordinator's role consists of engaging with other first-year groups or MSU services on campus to organize potential collaborative events and increase student engagement. This role is also responsible for handling student feedback, supervising the Spark Ambassadors program, and organizing the services' involvement during welcome week. As well, the promotions coordinator, like the name suggests, is responsible for creating and distributing any promotional content or resources related to the Spark service. The goal of this position is to increase student engagement by raising awareness of various opportunities offered by the service. Lastly, the Sessions Coordinators are responsible for assisting the Spark Coordinator in researching and organizing various themed sessions throughout the year.

Internal Service Engagement

Throughout February 2020, two surveys were open for Spark students and TLs. The surveys addressed questions about personal experiences with Spark, service retention, support, and areas for service growth/improvement in the future. The following data comes from the survey filled out by Spark volunteers (only 14 responses were gathered):

Fig. 1)

Having a sessions training each week was effective in preparing me for weekly sessions?

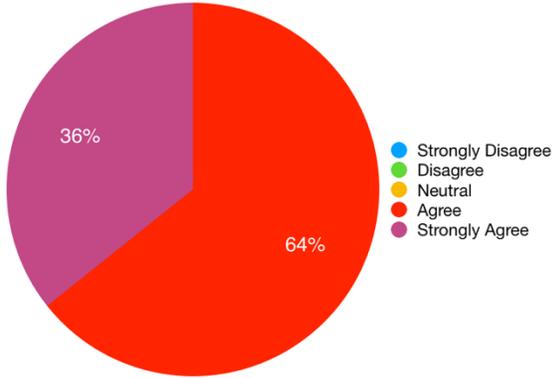


Fig. 2)

I felt supported by others on the team in my role as a Spark Team Leader/Executive?

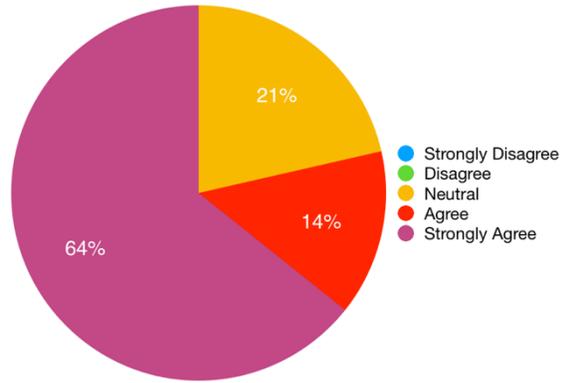


Fig. 3)

I felt that students were engaged with session topics each week?

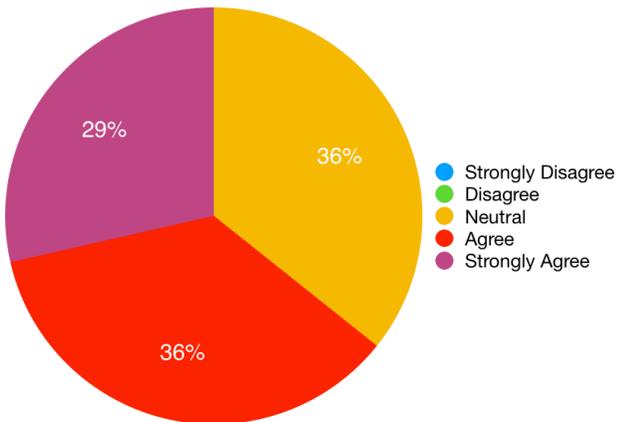


Fig. 4)

The number of students that attended session each week was consistent?

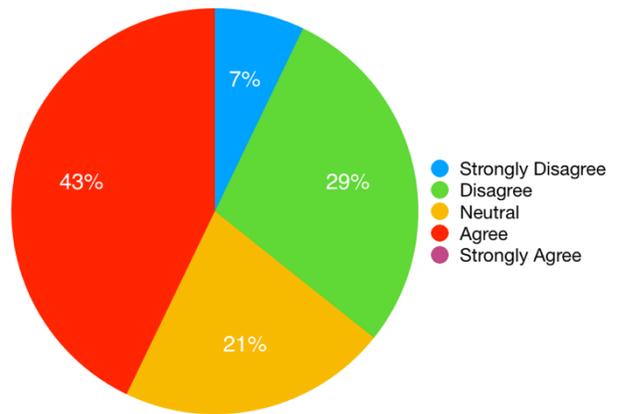
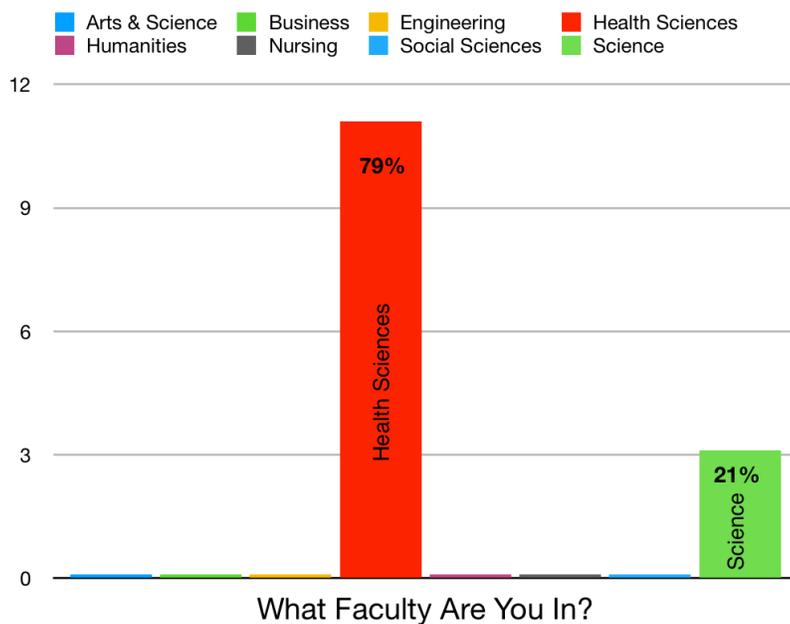


Fig. 5)



Each of the figures depicts various aspects of the service from the perspective of volunteers. **Figure 1** demonstrates the importance and necessity of weekly trainings to prepare Team Leaders for sessions. This indicates that the internal functions of the service are effective in preparing volunteers to help achieve the services mandate. It is clear that the survey responders understand the importance and benefit of these trainings in regard to helping them complete their responsibilities each week. **Figure 2** asks TLs and Spark Executives if they feel supported in their role by other team members. Majority of responses, more than 70%, indicate that they agree/strongly agree with the question. This demonstrates that Spark volunteers have created a safe and supportive environment for one another, which ultimately allows the service to function in a way that is supportive for our students. **Figure 3** asks TLs if they feel students are engaged with weekly session topics. While 36% of survey responders said “neutral”, most responses agreed with the question. Volunteers recognize that students are engaged with weekly session topics. This demonstrates that the topics created by the Sessions Coordinators are engaging and interesting, indicating that, in the future, it is important to maintain similar topics which engage students. **Figure 4** asks volunteers if the number of students that attended session each week was consistent. Looking at the chart it is clear that responses vary quite a bit. Just over 40% of responders agree with the statement, while 36% disagree/strongly disagree. **Figure 5** depicts which faculty each of the volunteers are from. Keeping in mind that there were only 14 responses, 11 responders come from Health Sciences while just 3 are in Science. Understandably, this is not an accurate representation of team members, but it is worth noting that (of the people who responded) there is not much variety in terms of students coming from different faculties on the volunteer team.

Furthermore, the following data comes from surveys filled out by students who participated in Spark this past year (in total there was 40 responses, 25 of which will be use):

Fig. 6)

I felt comfortable and welcomed when attending Spark sessions/events

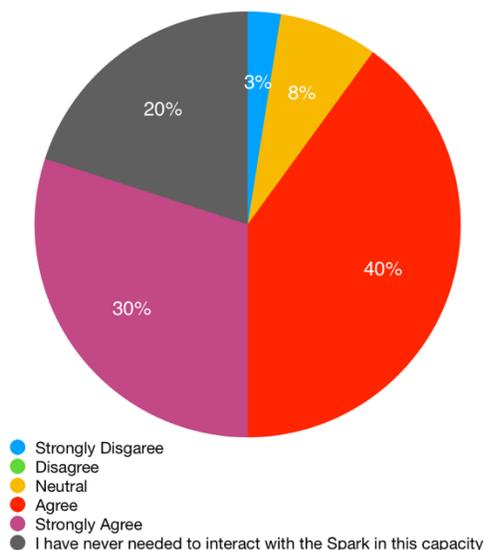


Fig. 7)

I felt comfortable reaching out to Spark volunteers when I needed support

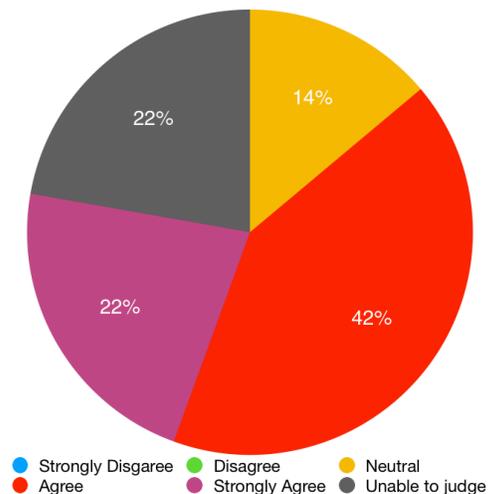


Fig. 8)

I felt that the session topics were relevant and applicable to my first year experiences

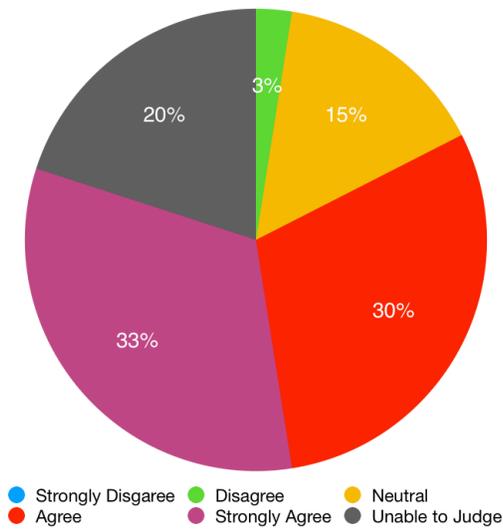


Fig. 9)

I felt that spark was a valuable service in helping me through my transition to first year

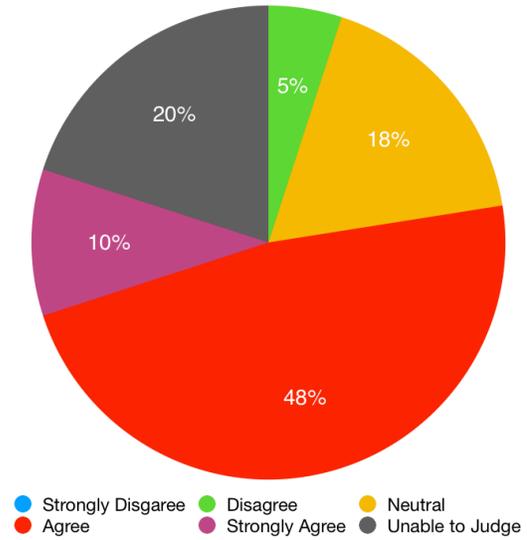
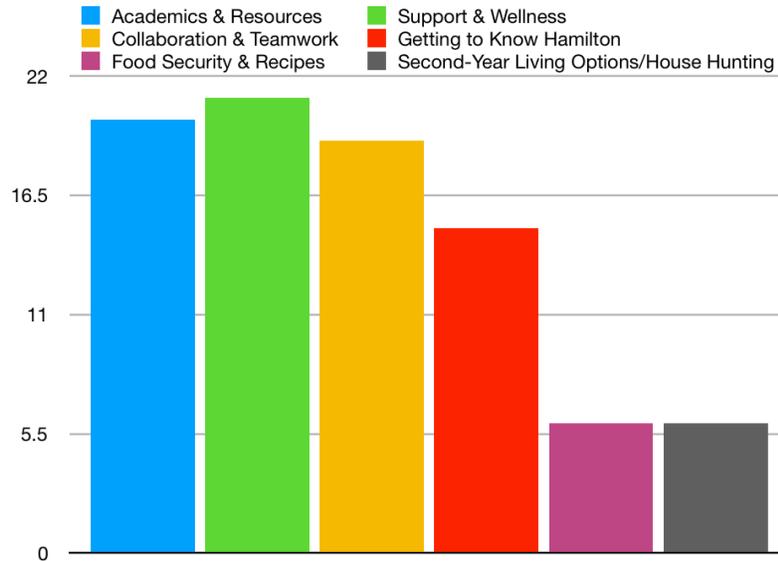


Fig. 10)

Through the weekly sessions hosted by Spark, how impactful was Spark in helping you understand the following (this graph indicates answers that were ranked as "somewhat/very impacted")



It is worth noting that approximately 8 survey responders indicated they had never attended sessions/interacting with the service in a weekly-sessions capacity which accounts for the grey areas on the pie charts. **Figure 6 & 7** both ask students to address their comfort levels when engaging with Spark. **Figure 6** specifically asks students if they felt comfortable/welcome when attending weekly sessions. Approximately 70% of students who responded in the survey

indicated that they agreed/strongly agreed with the statement. Additionally, as seen in **Figure 7** 64% of survey responders said they agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that they felt comfortable reaching out to Spark volunteers for support. These high agree/strongly agree values demonstrate that Spark volunteers are creating safe and supportive environments for first-year students! It is important that the service maintains this comfortable environment in the future. **Figure 8 & 9** address student perceptions of Spark sessions/events and the benefit they provide for first years and their experience at/transition to McMaster. **Figure 8** asks students if they felt session topics were relevant and applicable to their experience as a first year. Just over 60% of responders agreed/strongly agreed that session topics were useful for their experience. Incorporating this with the data from **Figure 3** it is clear that session topics are beneficial, engaging, and useful from the perspective of Spark volunteers and participants! **Figure 9** depicts responses when asked if Spark was a valuable service in helping transition into first year. Similar to the other questions, majority of responders agreed with the statement. These responses help indicate that Spark is fulfilling its mandate and helping create positive experiences for students. **Figure 10** looks at session topics and asks students to rank how impacted they felt they were on each topic. The graph depicts responses that were ranked as very impacted and somewhat impacted. The data shows that majority of students felt very impacted by the sessions on support & wellness (24%). Topics such as academics & resources (23%), collaboration & teamwork (22%), and getting to know Hamilton (17%) were among some of the highest impactful session as well. The other 14% is split evenly among food security & recipes and second-year living options/house hunting. The graph demonstrates that students are being impacted by Spark session topics in different ways, it is important to maintain this engagement and impact in the future. In addition, students were also asked to indicate which workshop topics they would be interested in attending if they were hosted by MSU Spark.

The topics were

- Student Housing
- Applications, Resumes, Cover Letters, and Interviews
- Cooking
- Tips for first year success
- How to get involved
- Studying strategies
- The Top 10 places on Campus
- A deep dive into McMaster's libraries
- Services of the MSU
- Summer opportunities in Hamilton
- Engaging with Hamilton & discussions on gentrification

The highlighted topics were the most popular among survey responders. Each topic was selected in some capacity but an overwhelming majority are the topics

highlighted. This indicates that students are interested in attending workshops, learning more about student life, and are looking for a way to engage with this service, and the Hamilton community, beyond weekly sessions. Finally, one note from both of the surveys is that majority of responses indicated their engagement with the service came from interacting with posts on social media! The social media outreach of this service has been effective this year and should be maintained and improved in the future.

External Research Data

We wanted to compare Spark to similar services that may exist at universities across Canada to help identify areas of improvement and current areas of success within the service. Our committee was able to identify similar first-year transition services to Spark at the following universities: Dalhousie University, Queens University and Carleton University. The following section will outline an overview of each university's service and some of the key takeaways from the committee's analysis of the current service provision at these various schools.

Dalhousie University

The Dalhousie Students Union offers *Dal After Dark* events, which are free or low cost events available on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. The program offers students the opportunity to apply for grants to facilitate events for their first-year community. Our committee liked that this program gives students an opportunity to engage in community building activities during hours where they may have more free time (i.e. weekends), and liked the ability for students to plan their own events. On the other hand, *Dal After Dark* may prove to be financially inaccessible for students depending on the cost of certain events. We believe that Spark is successful in providing engaging programming for first-year students at no additional cost.

Queens University

The Alma Mater Society at Queens University does not currently offer any year-round first-year transition programming. Instead, the Student Experience Office at the university runs a program called *Q Success*. *Q Success* is a combination mentorship and workshop program for first-year students. Similar to spark, the program aims to cover topics pertinent to successful first-year transition, and covers topics such as: transition to university, mental health, physical health, academic support and community building. *Q success* covers many of these topics through workshops, which are free for students to attend throughout the year. The mentorship aspect of *Q Success* is separate - students can reach out to be assigned to an upper-year mentor, and much of that relationship is developed outside of the workshops. The committee found great similarity between the topics covered in *Q Success* and those highlighted throughout the Spark sessions, demonstrating continuity of pertinent topics for first-years to engage with across institutions. The idea of separating the workshop aspect of

the service with the mentorship component is something that differs from the current provision of Spark. While this may allow students to engage in a way that is most comfortable, accessible and relevant to their individual needs, the committee believes there is also a beneficial impact of combined mentorship augmented with workshop facilitation.

Carleton University

The Carleton University Students Association does not currently offer any year-round first-year transition programming. Similar to Queens University, much of the programming related to first-year student support and transition is facilitated by the Student Experience Office. Carleton University runs a program called *First Year Connections* which pairs a first-year student with an upper-year student. These partnerships can be made through shared experiences, when a student selects to be matched according to a 'stream' of the program. 'Streams' of the program include a distance student stream (for those taking classes solely online), first generation student stream, Indigenous student stream, International student stream and transfer stream. Additionally, there are academic streams specific to a number of the first year programs available at the university. Thus, first-year student is able to request a mentor that may hold similar identities to their own, share similar experiences to their own, or are able to provide a sense of academic guidance and support through being in similar academic programs. The program does not have any set structure of workshops or events, as much of the mentorship activities are conducted on an individual basis between the mentor and the student. The committee thought being able to select a mentor with similar identities or shared experiences may provide a more comfortable experience for many first year students. However, Spark has served to build a community for students who have different experiences, identities and academic backgrounds. Potentially, Spark could focus on further catering specific events or workshops for specific groups of students, such as first generation students or commuting students.

Committee Recommendations

1) MSU Spark should increase the number workshops throughout the year

As of now the spark Events Coordinators are tasked to run 4 workshops a year. There is clearly an interest from students to attend workshops. The committee believes it would be beneficial to increase the number of workshops Spark hosts each year to help engage students all year long. As seen through initiatives hosted at Dalhousie, Carleton, and Queen's, it is clear that workshops are a unique and effective way to engage students. The *Q Success* program at Queen's University combines mentorship with workshops, which is a one idea we can try to take on in order to enhance the already high engagement with MSU Spark. In addition, the introduction of more workshops may help to solve the issue of low engagement

during second semester that is seen each year. By holding more workshops in first semester, student who are not already registered with Spark may see a huge benefit and feel encouraged to register for the following semester. Furthermore, creating more workshops is one step towards finding ways to engage students with the service all year long. In the future, the service may want to consider looking into year-long sessions so that student engagement is maintained!

2) MSU Spark should increase collaboration with campus services (such as faculty societies and the Student Success Centre)

By collaborating and partnering with campus services such as SSC and different faculty societies, Spark can strive to diversify its volunteers and reach more students across McMaster faculties. As indicated in responses, majority of Spark volunteers come from Health Sciences. It is important to have a faculty-diverse cohort of volunteers so that Spark participants from different faculties are able interact with upper years from the same programs. Students have indicated that they feel comfortable reaching out to Spark volunteers for support. However, through reaching out to different faculties Spark may be able to find more volunteers that will be able to support students academically that come from their own faculty. In addition, these partnerships can help to increase year-long engagement and help to push promotion during session registration, especially for second semester!

3) MSU Spark should increase social media usage and promotion

As indicated in both the volunteer and student survey, majority of folks hear about Spark through social media. The service has positively engaged with social media usage this year by hiring a new Outreach and Engagement Coordinator. By increasing social media usage Spark can strive to reach out to more students, and hopefully encourage more registration for second semester.

Warm Regards,

Stephanie Dephoure, Abdur-Razakh Mohamed, Brian Zheng, and

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Martino Salciccioli". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Martino" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Salciccioli".

Martino Salciccioli
Associate Vice-President: Services
McMaster Students Union
avpservices@msu.mcmaster.ca