Comprehensive Program Review of the
Memorial Student Center

Texas A&M University

Peer Review Report
January 22-25, 2012

Submitted by: Mark Guthier
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I. INTRODUCTION

At the invitation of Dr. Sandi Osters, a Peer Review Team (PRT) was assembled following the completion of a Comprehensive Program Review (CPR) of the Memorial Student Center by the staff of the MSC. The PRT prepared for this experience by studying the CPR and other documents provided by the MSC staff. In addition, they engaged in three days of interviews and touring of facilities. The team’s report appears in the following sections.

Scope of the Project

The review was conducted by:

Mark Guthier - Director of the Wisconsin Union at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Chair
Dr. Chris Skaggs – Associate Dean for Student Development, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences
Jennifer Ford – Director, Department of Multicultural Services
Kelli Hutka – Director of Campus Programs, Association of Former Students
Genyne Royal – President, Graduate Student Council
Ryan Davenport – Executive Vice President, Student Government Association

The Peer Review Team met on campus, January 22-25, 2012. Prior to their arrival, they received the following charge statement to provide structure to their review and final report:

- Who are the department’s current consumers and are there potential audiences in the community who may be appropriate targets for future services and programs?
- Based on your knowledge of the profession and/or the university environment, is the department’s programming current and does it provide adequate learning and development opportunities for students?
The following schedule of interviews and tours was arranged for the team prior to their arrival:

**Sunday, January 22, 2012**

- PRT meets with Associate Vice President of Student Affairs, MSC Director, Student Life Studies Director, and Self-Study Team Leader
- Tour of the Memorial Student Center
- Peer Review Team Preparation Meeting & Dinner

**Monday, January 23, 2012**

- PRT meets with MSC Senior Staff
- PRT meeting with OPAS Staff
- PRT meets with Forsyth Center Galleries Staff
- Lunch with Bryan/College Station community partners & University partners
- PRT meets with Executive Team
- PRT meeting with Marketing Staff
- PRT meeting with Programs Team
- PRT meeting with Administrative Team
- Dinner with MSC Board of Directors (external members)
Tuesday, January 24, 2012

- Breakfast with GEN Joe Weber and Mr. Tom Reber
- PRT meets with Division of Student Affairs Directors
- PRT meeting with Advising Staff
- PRT meeting with MSC Managers
- PRT meeting with Box Office Staff
- Lunch with MSC Committee Chairs & Resource Area Directors
- PRT meeting with Administrative Services Staff
- PRT meeting with Associate Staff
- PRT Meeting with UCC/RTC Staff

Wednesday, January 25, 2012

- PRT Wrap Up Meeting – Tom Reber, Sandi Osters, MSC Senior Staff, MSC Self-Study Team

After reviewing all of the materials and conducting the three days of interviews, the Peer Review Team identified nine individual themes and four comprehensive recommendations – all of which are outlined in greater detail below.

II. THEMES

Theme #1: Commitment to Students & Student Leadership

Almost without exception, in every interview the Peer Review Team conducted, the comment was made that “the MSC’s commitment to students and student leadership is outstanding.” This is truly a
great strength of the Memorial Student Center. Students in other organizations, faculty and staff across campus and community leaders were equally likely to add their voice to this common theme.

On many occasions, this sentiment was offered prior to any questioning on the part of the team. It is apparent that the fact that student leadership occurs at the MSC is well-understood and appreciated across the board.

In addition, students who are active at the MSC were able to easily articulate the skills they are acquiring while participating in MSC program planning. The MSC is, in many ways, an out-of-classroom educational experience for the students who participate in its committees. The application to “real world experience” is evident throughout the program planning cycle, where resources are available to those who demonstrate mastery of the committee, financial, planning and approval processes developed over the years.

**Theme #2: Programming (Quality/History)**

The fact that the MSC produces high quality programs was recognized by almost everyone who was interviewed. And certainly, the rich history of programs like OPAS and Town Hall defines in many people’s view what the MSC brings to campus and the surrounding area. The support that students receive from staff in producing these events ensures that they are high-quality, expose the campus to minimal risk (both financially and otherwise) and provide stability from year to year. It is evident that there is a great deal of pride among the staff and students for being part of such highly respected programs and activities.
However, internal programming processes within the MSC structure can be seen by those from the “outside” as being bureaucratic. The extra time it takes for an MSC-sponsored program to make its way through the structure may actually inhibit collaboration with outside groups -- even though it was acknowledged that the process most likely increases accountability.

In addition, there is a perception that there are some programs that may only be marginally relevant to today’s TAMU students and that these programs have long since passed their prime; i.e., SCOLA/SCONA. In order to maintain a high degree of quality for all programs, perhaps some of the older ones should be evaluated for their relevance. The Peer Review Team recommends that careful consideration be given to the breadth of the current MSC program offering to determine what could possibly be scaled back or dropped.

**Theme #3: Branding/Mission/Purpose**

Throughout the interview process, it was clear that the first two themes, student leadership and programming, were understood and recognized by almost everyone as two core competencies of the Memorial Student Center. What was not as easily understood or expressed by everyone was “what is the mission of the MSC?” When pressed to describe what role the MSC plays on the campus that is unique – or what gap it fills within student affairs – the answers were often vague and certainly not as
easily forthcoming. This is only complicated by the fact that the department and the building share the same name, but not the same reporting line.

While the rich history of the Memorial Student Center (including the roles of its leaders within the college union movement) is warmly appreciated among the current day staff and students of the MSC, it is obvious that the broader campus community no longer understands that history – and in many ways, the actual mission of the MSC today.

The Peer Review Team recommends later in this report that a campus conversation needs to occur regarding what unique role the MSC department should play in the years to come – especially given the opening of the newly renovated and expanded building in the next few months.

Theme #4: Collaboration/Coordination

It was reiterated several times that the campus community greatly respects the expertise of the MSC staff members – some of whom have served the Texas A&M community for many years. In particular, the MSC Box Office was recognized as providing a tremendous service to entities outside of the MSC program area. In addition, the students in the MSC’s upper-leadership roles exhibit strong relationships and knowledge of each others’ efforts. However, there were several instances during the interview process when the desire for better collaboration or coordination was expressed.

- Internal processes can be seen as limiting by potential campus partners and affect co-programming and collaboration opportunities. Some described an “arrogance” of the MSC
staff/students as outside entities do not understand the organizational structure and at times feel “ordered around” instead of being considered a real partner. A perception exists among some that the MSC has only “their” way to produce a program or an event.

- There is a staff and student perception that former students or donors have certain perceived expectations that can “get in the way”. This perception often limits the exploration of new opportunities for a program or even sun-setting a program.

- Members outside of the MSC described the MSC, because of its historical role, as a “mini-Student Affairs” within the department that has not fully evolved with the creation of other departments within the division, often creating duplicative programs, processes, and services.

- The self-study indicated a need to have a positive relationship with the management of the facilities. It is suggested that, in addition to the facility management team, an effort be made to build a positive relationship with all tenants within the MSC, especially during building policy formation and proposed referendum discussions.

- To reduce the departmental silo-effect, Texas A&M should consider developing new internal communication opportunities which would allow for campus-wide programming information to be shared in the initial stages to prevent duplication or provide for more collaborative opportunities.

- Recommend that advisors (typically in their roles with a program for more than one year), join their student leader in the early planning stages of an event with support services staff. In addition, campus partners expressed a desire to have a list of advisors and the groups they advise.
Should more fully develop a collaborative, long-term development relationship across the Division and the MSC through the Texas A&M Foundation.

Theme #5: **Community Engagement/Outreach**

The mission statement of 2008 alludes to providing balanced and diverse social, cultural, recreational, educational, and entertainment programming. It appears from our discussions with community stakeholders that the MSC is currently meeting this initiative. It is the goal of the MSC to be the “front door” to the university and community outreach programs have been successful in generating support and collaborative relationships with the community.

MSC OPAS has a history of quality programming on the Texas A&M campus. The longevity of the organization, while similar organizations across the country have declined or decreased, validates the quality of management associated with OPAS on campus. The variety of OPAS productions from major theater productions in Rudder Theatre to Intimate Gatherings and OPAS, Jr. in Rudder Auditorium reflect the diversity of entertainment options brought to campus each year. Professional management is critical for successful booking and hosting of entertainers. Recognizing the complexity of the university accounting and legal system, minimizing contract delays through the system would help OPAS management when dealing with entertainers. OPAS has generated community support for activities as noted by OPAS Gala, advertisers for play bills and donors/sponsors for OPAS from community organizations and companies. OPAS donors contributed approximately $205,000 in 2010-
2011. OPAS Encore hosts the MSC OPAS Gala event and generated an additional $200,000 in 2010-2011 to support OPAS. Obviously, continued support of such entities is critical for financial success of OPAS. Identification and engagement of potential donors to develop broader revenue streams should continue as priority.

MSC OPAS engages student leadership in their organization and students are critical components to pre-and post-show activities. Their presence as ushers at the OPAS events, assisting patrons, emphasizes that the activities are part of campus activities and Texas A&M University. OPAS utilizes surveys of attendees for feedback on which events and shows to host on campus. This has resulted in “public ownership” of invited performances and helped maintain ticket sales. Ticket sales for the 38th season were superb with 27,172 tickets sold ($1,232,000). In addition, OPAS has met the goal of 85 percent ticket sales projections for the current year.

Challenges to OPAS will continue in program identification and coordination with other entertainment venues/programs on campus, specifically Reed Arena, to prevent event overlap with major entertainment events competing on the same dates. Since MSC OPAS must share campus wide programming responsibilities with others, continued collaboration with such entities to prevent possible scheduling conflicts will be critical. In addition, identifying events targeted specifically for students will remain a challenge to delineate that, even if the students vote in favor of a particular program that they will actually show up to the scheduled event. Such was observed with the Young Frankenstein event scheduled for the Halloween period last fall. The OPAS, Jr. series has been very successful with youth audiences and should remain a priority due to outreach with both community
and public school programs for local second graders. The re-introduction of the Forsyth Center Gallery to campus should lend itself to a partnership with this group to host reception events/dinners for OPAS patrons prior to major OPAS events.

The Forsyth Center Galleries’ mission is to enhance public awareness and appreciation of visual arts. The Forsyth Center Galleries will be moving from its current, temporary location in Bryan to the renovated MSC in spring 2011. The gallery has established relationships with the Bryan community, which seems favorable and hopefully can be maintained in the future. The move to Bryan, while favorable with the Bryan community, has obviously resulted in disconnect with the Texas A&M student population and the faculty involved in teaching Art courses on campus. It is recognized that funding resources dictate the present and future direction of the gallery. Hopefully, a balance can be achieved between components of the gallery which should remain consistent and the establishment of a more flexible and dynamic exhibition similar to the current scenario with the Bush Library. Leadership of the Visual Arts Committee to identify a future road map for the gallery will be significant and critical. The “learning laboratory” component of Forsyth Center Gallery should be prioritized with its return to campus. Re-establishment and collaboration with academia should prove fruitful. Programs established for primary and secondary schools should prove beneficial to foster continued community outreach established in the current Bryan location. Incorporation of the gallery into receptions/dinners for OPAS and others should enhance visibility.

Challenges associated with moving back to campus will include parking, ease of getting to the gallery, and maintaining rapport established with the Bryan community and security issues with the MSC.
location. Most of the Forsyth Gallery staff have been hired relatively recently and are only familiar with the Bryan operation, so communication and adjustment will be essential to the success of relocating. The strict constraints of endowments funding Forsyth Galleries may provide scheduling and program challenges requiring exploration of other donors and potential endowments, as well as collaboration with other museums to generate more diverse programming.

The MSC Box Office is responsible for professional ticketing for MSC and Texas A&M University events as well as Brazos Valley organizations. The Box Office is the only centralized box office in the Brazos Valley and works with 70 organizations and approximately 300 events annually by handling 110,000 tickets. The revenue stream is a blend of OPAS, MSC, campus, and community events. The Box Office has a reputation for first-class customer service, so training of staff and student workers in the position attests to the professionalism, camaraderie, and open communication associated with the Box Office. The retreats designed for student employees have been successful in educating and preparing them for tasks and responsibilities. The MSC Ticket Office possessed a good working relationship with clientele, in order to merchandize tickets through their office. This was confirmed through communication with the various entities.

Challenges associated with the Box Office are related to space and needed renovation to the current space. The tight quarters, accessibility issues and private space to meet with the general public were noted as concerns for the Box Office. Since the box office must maintain self-sufficiency in terms of funding structure, technologies such as printing tickets at home seem cost prohibitive at this point.
The Review Committee met with external constituents for lunch during the review process. The stakeholders were pleased in regard to relationships with MSC programs. Such programs as CAMAC and Black History Month were espoused as excellent programs with community support. They also highlighted the value of OPAS to the community in terms of bringing first-class entertainment to the Texas A&M campus and the Bryan-College Station communities.

**Theme #6: Communications**

The communication between student leaders and their individual advisers is very strong. It is clear that students appreciate the mentoring, skill development and amount of information provided by advisers as the work with students to produce programs and events. However, student leaders stated that communication between A Team and P Team could be improved. A Team may discuss policy changes and beginning implementing them without understanding the full effect on the committees or how to effectively communicate the changes.

The self-study, as well as comments made during the peer review process, indicated that the department is aware that communication is an area for improvement. By acknowledging this, it allows the department to be aware and intentional about future communication.

Staff communication concerns came up as a topic on a regular basis, but individuals were not always able to say specifically what should be changed, just that it should be improved. Some ideas that developed were:

- Some staff do not feel explanations are given for why certain decisions are made
Staff admitted that information may be shared, but that it may not always be read.

One suggestion to improve this would be if someone is forwarding e-communication, consideration should be given to highlighting a few important details at the beginning of the message to direct everyone to that part of the message.

The current location of the department staff and the size of the staff does limit face to face interaction, but it was clear to the Peer Review Team that efforts must be made to ensure that this occurs. Suggestions include meeting in different locations and/or inviting staff to attend a PC meeting in order to meet the students they regularly exchange email with.

Clarify for staff what information needs to be shared with supervisors, leadership or department-wide. There seemed to be a concern among some staff that communication must always follow a strict reporting line and they did not always feel comfortable going outside of that structure.

Leadership should ask staff members what information that would like to know. While it is not appropriate to share every decision that gets made, if staff could be more specific about what information they feel they do not receive it will be easier for supervisors and leadership to determine what should be emphasized and directly communicate with staff.

**Theme #7: Staff Issues**

It should be noted that the existence of staff communication issues was candidly reported in the Comprehensive Program Review document. The leadership of the MSC should be commended for
openly acknowledging that this is an area where improvement is needed. A true desire to find solutions in this area was expressed by everyone who was interviewed. The Peer Review Team recognizes that a significant contributor to the communication concerns over the last two years has been the disparate nature of staff locations due to the renovation of the Memorial Student Center. An improved team environment can only be enhanced with the relocation of staff back into their new spaces in the Center over the next months.

There were at least three identified strengths in this theme. Overall, the staff expressed appreciation for the improved efforts that the leadership had made recently with respect to professional development. The process currently in place appears to be transparent, responsive and fair. The other two areas of strength had to do with the training programs that are currently in place for staff in the Box Office and the Forsyth Galleries. These were held up as models for the rest of the campus.

Opportunities for improvement with respect to staff communication include:

- Training for the entire staff on human resources policies
- Focus on the context of why decisions are made
- Provide more information in summary format
- Make face-to-face communication a priority
- Accounting staff would like to meet the financial chairs of the committees
- Develop a better understanding of when “chain of command” communication is not required
- Work on improving trust
- Acknowledge that interpersonal relationships are important to everyone
Theme #8: Funding

The department has very diversified funding sources which allow for flexibility as well as long term support. This is an asset that the MSC enjoys that should be nurtured and protected. If employed in a dynamic fashion, the diverse funding streams can allow the MSC to respond quickly to campus needs and student interests. It was very apparent that fundraising (as one financial component) is a strength of the MSC – of not only staff, but students as well. The department does a great job of stewardship with former students and benefits from this on an annual basis.

It was expressed that the funding model for the Box Office and Forsyth Galleries limits their roles, programs and the upkeep of their space. For the Box Office, this unit often is faced with the question “Is this a business or a service?” While the Peer Review Team does not have specific recommendations for changing these funding models, the Team would recommend examining the models to determine if any changes should or could be made.

During the interviews, several students and staff made comments about the limitations of endowments for programs. Individuals expressed concern (or even fear) of being able to make programmatic changes based on endowment restrictions and donor involvement. The Peer Review Team recommends reviewing all endowments, with those staff and students affected, to ensure that all parties understand the parameters within which they may be working. This will allow everyone involved to have accurate information and not make assumptions based on lore.
Theme #9: Assessment

The MSC staff does a remarkable job of assessing the leadership development of the students who are active in the MSC committees. The development of and evaluation of student learning outcomes at an individual student level is conducted with a thoroughness unseen in almost any other student center in the country. Students and staff alike can authoritatively articulate the learning that is occurring in the committee and leadership structure within the MSC. This is definitely a core strength of the Memorial Student Center and one that should be acknowledged and recognized.

A great deal of program data is also collected by the MSC students and staff. However, it tends to be data associated with the programs that are already delivered – and not always analyzed in a timely way immediately following the event. The following gaps were identified where additional data collection and/or assessment may be beneficial:

- Assess campus needs proactively; i.e. conduct market research before events are planned
- Track and collect information from program participants while they are at events
- Develop longitudinal data on the number of people who apply to be involved in the MSC
- Determine the relevance of MSC programming to today’s TAMU students
- Learn more out about the people who are not coming to MSC programs
III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: Position the MSC as the “Heart” of the Memorial Student Center

Throughout the Comprehensive Program Review document and during the on-campus interviews, the MSC placed much emphasis on their expressed position to be the “premiere campus-wide programming body.” While the intent behind this phrase is to communicate either that the MSC was the first on the campus to do this and/or is the only group who has the primary responsibility for doing this today, it seems that the use of the word “premiere” is unfortunately getting in the way of everyone having a clear definition of what the MSC does. It is the Peer Review Team’s observation that no amount of clarification is going to simplify the matter and that the energy wasted on continuing to explain the use of this word is energy lost on what otherwise might be a more compelling vision of why the MSC exists.

Therefore, the Peer Review Team recommends that the MSC consider a phrase, a brand, and/or a mission that positions it as either one of (or both) of the following:

- The heart of the Memorial Student Center
  - The group whose sole responsibility is to breathe life into the Center each and every day
- The campus-wide Community Builder
  - The group whose sole responsibility is to build campus community for ALL members of the campus – students, faculty, staff, former students and community guests
  - This is in line with the Role Statement of the College Union, which states, in part:
The union is the community center of the college, serving students, faculty, staff, alumni, and guests. By whatever form or name, a college union is an organization offering a variety of programs, activities, services, and facilities that, when taken together, represent a well-considered plan for the community life of the college. *Adopted by the Association of College Unions International’s general membership in 1996.

 Whatever the final outcome, the new phrase needs to be something that is unique to the MSC, is inclusive and egalitarian. It should be readily endorsed by all who read or hear it. If it has to be explained and defended, it probably needs to be re-worked.

**Recommendation #2: Engage in Aggressive Benchmarking with Sister Schools**

The history of the MSC serves as one of its foundational strengths. However, the processes and organizational structures that have evolved over the years in support of that history may be preventing it from realizing its full potential today. The old adage, “you cannot see the forest for the trees” comes to mind here. The particular trees that staff members have been tending for the last several years may be alive and strong, but is everyone certain that they are tending the right trees – or had time to pay attention to the forest around them? What if the forest has moved entirely? How would you know?

It is time for the staff to engage in some aggressive benchmarking to determine if their current approach and direction is still sound. However, it is important to note that, with all advising approaches there are trade-offs. Some require more staff time, some require less. This report has outlined several areas where new approaches might be advised. Some of them will require a different allotment of staff time than is currently used. In order to decide whether or not to endorse a new approach, having some comparative data in hand might be helpful.
As a starting point, here are some data benchmarks for the MSC staff to generate:

- Program planning processes
- Staff organizational charts
- Student organizational charts
- Advising staff ratios to committees
- Advising staff ratios to programs
- Advising staff ratios to student leaders
- Overall program budget as compared to total number of programs produced
- Average total time from program concept to program implementation
- Overall program attendance as compared to total number of programs produced
- Number of program committees
- Number of active committee members
- Learning outcomes – how are the developed, how are the measured?

**Recommendation #3: Produce a Campus-Involved Strategic Plan**

By engaging in a comprehensive and campus-involved strategic planning process, the MSC would accomplish several important items simultaneously. First, there would be broad buy-in as to the mission of the department. Second, resources could then be deployed to the most mission-centered activities, perhaps freeing up resources for new initiatives. And third, the sense of “team” among the
staff would be improved as everyone will be moving in the same direction, toward the same goals.

Recommendations for the components of the plan and participants include:

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<tr>
<th>Strategic Plan Components</th>
<th>Strategic Plan Participants</th>
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<td>Mission Statement</td>
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<td>Vision Statement</td>
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<td>Values Statement</td>
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<td>Community Members</td>
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A fully developed and comprehensive three-year strategic plan should take anywhere from three to six months to develop, produce and distribute – depending on the amount of staff resources dedicated to it.

**Recommendation #4: Create a Staff Development/Culture Plan**

The staff members throughout the department, both in leadership and line positions, are eager to improve the sense of team, communication and culture. Therefore, this recommendation should come as no surprise and will likely have much support from among the team to develop and implement. The sense of team that is created and exists between the students and their advisers is something that the
staff needs to invest in between and among themselves as well. Suggestions in this recommendation include:

- Create a Staff Development Plan; include training, communication formats, team building, etc. The planning process should include staff from all areas of the organization.
- Focus on staff recognition in both big and small ways; i.e., plan both appreciation events but also deliver handwritten notes
- Make moving back into the MSC a celebration event for the entire staff
- Find ways to allow all staff to experience the positive effects of working directly with student leaders, not just the advisers
- Building a staff culture that demands respect and expects a positive staff environment

IV. CONCLUSION

The Memorial Student Center stands on the brink of a great new chapter in its history. The newly renovated and expanded facility will easily be one of the top 5 unions in the country. The historic strength of the programming that has occurred on the campus provides an excellent foundation for new initiatives in the building. The many changes within the MSC department over the last several years have created eagerness among the staff to get back into the facility and to move forward in positive ways. Taken together and pursuing at least some of the recommendations in this report, the MSC is well-positioned for an exciting future.