

The Architecture of Connection: Evaluating Campus Community Space Against Student Creativity and Demand

Author(s): *Aditi Mishra, Jo Garces*

Institution/Organization: *JEDI Ambassadors Program, FIU College of Engineering*

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Abstract

Despite the long life of the Florida International University Engineering Center, there lacks serious research into the efficacy of its community space in facilitating student community. Student community forms the backbone of student engagement with the educational institution, and is instrumental in student success and retention, and the Engineering Center's isolated position relative to the main Modesto Maidique Campus brings greater reason to measure the efficacy of its spaces for producing these results. Our project seeks to provide a basis for this measurement and gauge student needs and desires relative to community space as well as their current perspectives on the existing space they inhabit in the Engineering Center.

To collect the relevant data, this project used two data collection methods. The primary one was art events held in the EC prompting students to produce creative works portraying their perspectives, with the resultant art being analyzed for thematic connections and motifs. The secondary one was interviews with key stakeholders which sought to provide an faculty perspective by which to contrast student perspective as well as community space efficacy.

Our findings showed a large atmosphere of student dissatisfaction with the existing community space in achieving any of their desires goals, which centered around ideas of community based on mutual support, inclusion, and achievement. Furthermore, we found there was a disconnect between faculty decision-making and student desire, which makes action towards reconciling these perspectives extremely difficult. By sharing these findings and offering actionable recommendations, this paper hopes to provide a launching-pad for future research and future action to improve EC community space for the betterment of student community.

Introduction

While much scholarship on the design and efficacy of community space exists, there is no evident research or serious inquiry into the success of Florida International University campus space in facilitating social situations and student community. In particular, the Engineering Center (EC) appears isolated from the attention given to Modesto Maidique Campus, both by the student body and administration, despite being only a few blocks apart. Aside from one PantherNow article, little exists to give insight into the situation and determine what should be done. To better tailor campus design and initiatives to the needs and desires of students, it is important to gauge the perspective of students and measure the success of current design in facilitating these needs and desires.

Our research project seeks to fill this gap in the literature and provide a basis for future conversations and improvement around the community space at EC. By allowing students to express their perspectives on the EC and its community spaces, as well as to express their perspectives on community in general, a better measurement of the successes and failures of these community spaces can be developed by comparing to the general expressed needs and desires of the student population. From this, recommendations may be made and action taken to improve these spaces and improve student success and retention.

Research Framework

This research was largely spurred by the lessons learned in the JEDI Ambassador program, namely questions of inclusivity and youth participatory action research. Keeping these in mind, and informed by relevant literature, our team sought to place greater autonomy and control in the hands of the students that were the subjects of the research, which informed our

data collection methodology. Further, our research question seeks to place agency in the hands of the students both during the research and in the results.

Methodology

To best develop the metrics and measure community space success, two data collection methods were employed: interviews of key faculty stakeholders and art events. Stakeholder interviews were held to gain insights on the design of these spaces as well as gather perspectives from the administration on the functioning of student community on the EC. Art events were held in community spaces on EC, primarily the Panther Pit, and sought student volunteers with the incentive of a \$10 Amazon gift-card. Students were given materials and prompted to represent their view of community and community on the EC in a creative way, with the intent being to offer a broad and largely undirected medium for student perspective and desire to be expressed and analyzed, allowing for less outside interference and more depth in the answers. The resultant art pieces would then be analyzed for thematic similarities and motifs to construct a deeper conception of how the student community functions and interacts with the spaces it inhabits.

Key Findings

Collected art from the art events largely consisted of themes of dissatisfaction with Engineering Campus, including stress and lack of facilities. One drawing includes depictions of stressed students crying over exams and difficult subjects, which showcases the difficulties students undertaking STEM degrees in the EC face from their rigorous courseloads and high performance expectations.

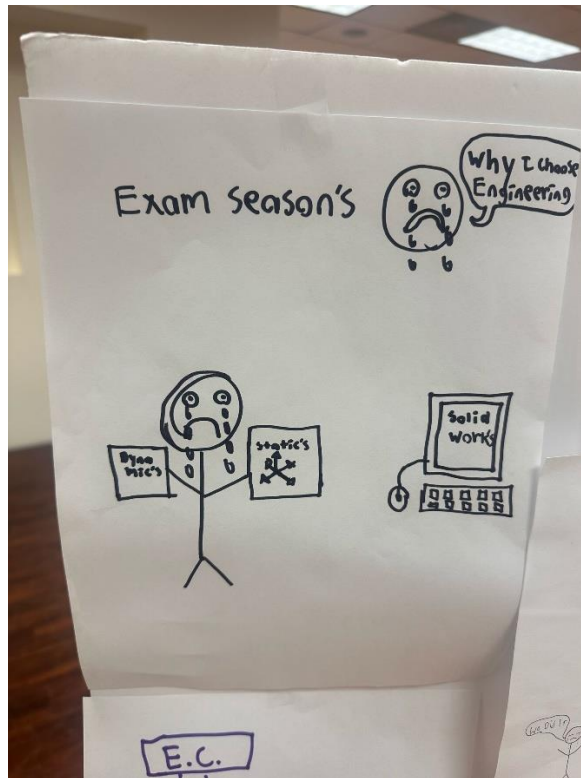


Fig. 1 – Drawing of stressed student

Perceptions of community seemed to surround issues of achievement, inclusion, and tight-knit groups that share experiences, both academic and identity-wise. Finding community in shared achievement and struggle was showcased in drawings such as one in which a group of students achieve dreams of creating a model airplane and in a drawing showcasing students finding comfort in “suffering together.” This emphasizes how students view community as a means to find support, both emotionally and academically, and how it may form the basis for student success.

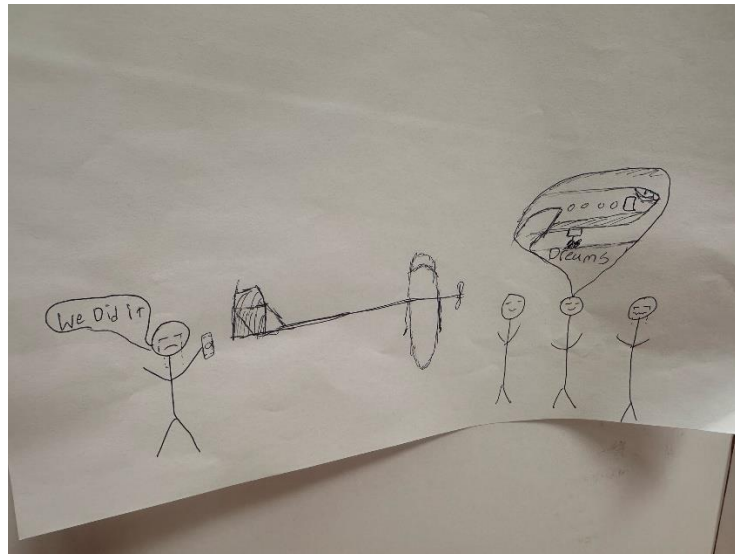


Fig. 2 – Drawing of group constructing airplane

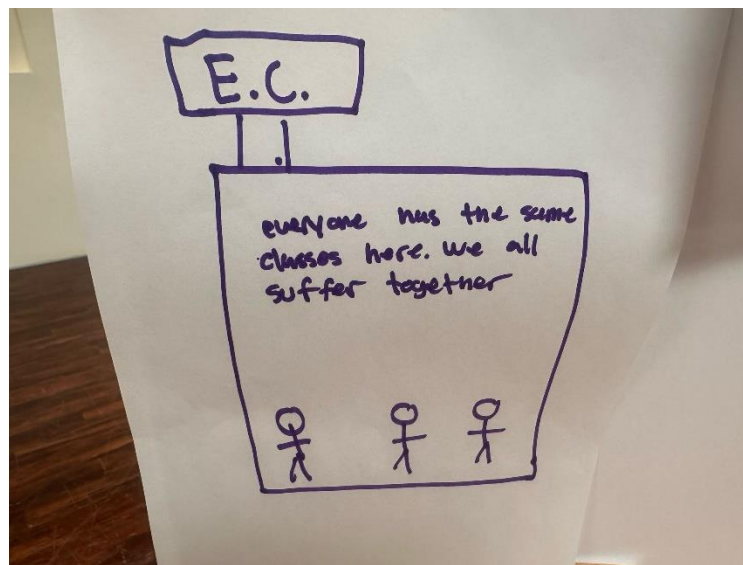


Fig. 3 – Drawing depicting shared experience among EC community

Some of the art portrayed idealized spaces that had comfortable and calming structure. Some portrayed this abstractly, such as sunny natural scenes, and others literally, such as spaces with cushions, bookshelves, and leisure space. Combined with the themes of stress and

exhaustion in many of the drawings, these motifs offer a glimpse into the desires students hold for opportunities to recuperate from the difficulties of academic life, and the need for student community and spaces that foster it to enable this recuperation and relaxation. Indeed, At art events, students expressed wishes for more opportunities for creativity and relaxation like that the event provided. More opportunities for leisure within campus community spaces, according to these students, would be highly appreciated.



Fig. 4 – Drawing depicting inclusive and comfortable community space



Fig. 5 – Drawing depicting pleasant natural space for inclusive community

Many students expressed dissatisfaction with the state of Engineering Campus community space, especially in relation to MMC campus, in interactions. Namely, many expressed that while MMC offers diverse and varied spaces with wide range of utility and beauty, EC lacks in all these areas. The primary utility of EC, as expressed by the students, lies in its technical spaces and study areas, however some still expressed dissatisfaction with these as well.

The reoccurring themes and perceptions from the student population at the art events finds a contrast in the responses from stakeholders in the interview process. Some expressed sympathy for renovated and improved community space, however cited that constraints such as limited funding, high renovation costs, and space constraints make it difficult to accommodate both individual and group needs, with one stakeholder remarking that “reality is expensive.” The disconnect between budgeting decisions and obstacles and student desires and initiatives leads to a sense of a gulf between what is possible and what is wanted.

Some felt there needed to be better communication and transparency between faculty and students, and that there was a gap in this dynamic particular to EC. One stakeholder commented that “[students] need to feel as if they can be heard,” an issue exasperated by students feeling a lack of personal engagement in faculty communications and on-campus involvement, which in turn makes establishing lasting community difficult. These stakeholders feel that a greater closeness of involvement between students and faculty would allow for deeper and more lasting community as well as help students be more involved in building their community spaces. In these ways, stakeholders made clear what they view to be the administrative obstacles to developing effective community and community space while offering a possible path forwards for how this may be eased via greater cooperation and connection between faculty and students.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings, steps should be taken to bridge the gap between faculty and students while facilitating a productive decision-making process. More frequent and better communicated meetings of faculty in which students would participate would encourage greater communication and give students the ability to ask questions that would normally more opaque on how to get them answered. Furthermore, student committees could be formed specific to EC to allow for direct student action and decision-making alongside the faculty. With these, action could be taken on how to better shape community space for student needs and desires while also working around limitations that are often not easily knowable for students.

From the desires expressed by the students, future community spaces and future renovations to existing spaces should prioritize a balance between academic and leisure activity. Creating comfortable and appealing space for relaxation and group bonding would ameliorate the

stresses of academic life and allow students to recuperate, while offering areas amenable to study would allow for more comfortable and high-performance productivity. To this end, flexible space should be created via movable furniture and other methods that could allow for space to be simultaneously apt for leisure and academics.

In the future, using findings from this project, a metric can be established for the success of the community spaces on EC and guidelines may be clearer for designers. Further research should be performed to this end, gauging student perceptions through varied data collection methods with the aim of gathering as complete a picture as possible of what is required of community space. We believe our project can help deepen the connection between the student body and campus, enhance academic and personal success through fostering peer-to-peer networks, and create a more welcoming campus for everyone.

Limitations and Future Directions

The primary limitations of this project included difficulties with data collection and contending with high workloads. Namely, during art events, student volunteers were difficult to acquire. Many students indicated that they were too busy due to their studies, a sentiment backed by the fact that the vast majority of students in EC community spaces were engaged in either individual or group studying. Another common sentiment was of a relative hostility or confusion towards being asked to draw; despite the final positive reactions of those who participated, many would state that art and creativity were simply not things they engage with or were good at and thus were uninterested in participating. Future research may find it worthwhile to further investigate this aversion and find methods to mitigate it in future data collection.

For issues of high workloads, which led to our team cutting back on the frequency and number of art events we intended on hosting, future researchers may be able to mitigate these complications with larger team sizes.

Conclusion

Overall, this project revealed a high level of dissatisfaction with student community space among the EC student population. This dissatisfaction stemmed from a disconnect between student desires and needs surrounding community and community space presently available on camps. This issue is exasperated by a lack of initiative bridging the gap between student wants and faculty decisions. The recommendations offered by this paper hope to bridge this gap and offer insight into how future community space may best achieve the aims of fostering student community.

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