



Mayor Sylvester Turner's Student Leadership Alliance  
Report 2019-2020

Vishaal R. Kuruvanka, Director



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**I. Members:**

Vishaal R. Kuruvanka - Director  
Morgan Latin - Chair - South Texas College of Law  
Grace Wickerson - Co-Chair - Rice University  
Jonathan Dullen - Secretary - Lone Star Community College  
Alan Modrow - University of Houston Downtown  
Ariana Engles - Rice University  
Ashlyn Vaughn - University of Houston Downtown  
Dalaiah Shelton - Houston Baptist University  
David Kronenberger - UT Health Science  
Deborah Llanas - Houston Community College System  
Greg Norwood - Houston Community College System  
Kernard Jones - Texas Southern University  
Lateryka Hudson - Texas Southern University  
Luis Moreno - University of Houston  
Marcos Perez - San Jacinto College  
Matthew Castaneda - Lone Star College System  
Maysarah Kazia - University of Houston  
Moses Colquitt - Prairie View A&M  
Nadin Fallah - University of St. Thomas  
Ryan Hamilton - University of Houston  
Yingyao Catherine Shao - Baylor College of Medicine

**Supporting Members:**

Juliet Stipeche - Director, Mayor's Office of Education, City of Houston  
Brandon Denton - Associate Director, Mayor's Office of Education, City of Houston  
Alfredo Dominguez - Associate, Mayor's Office of Education, City of Houston



## II. Executive Summary

The Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance (MSLA), being the first of its kind in the nation, is a bold initiative that connects student representatives from 14 higher education institutions in Houston with city officials to address pressing issues facing the city. Exposing our students on a broad scale to Houston's great civic leaders gives them the opportunity to observe how the city works on a foundational level and implement change. In an effort to ensure Houston can continue its robust economic growth and begin a generational transition in government, it is necessary for the city's youth to be involved in addressing issues affecting Houstonians. MSLA's energetic and diverse student representatives worked on a comprehensive campaign to advocate for student needs across Houston and support Mayor Turner's efforts.

Although student voting has increased in recent years, it is important to continue civically engaging and educating students on the larger issues that our city, state and nation face. Being the inaugural council, we laid the groundwork for the council to represent approximately 300,000 university students and took the first step in our journey to get city youth involved in local politics by assembling council members to address the consequential national census. Many of our representatives in tandem with college officials put on workshops at their universities to increase awareness about the census and decrease the spread of misinformation. Although COVID-19 hindered our ability to make progress towards the council's goals, MSLA's formation is a large step in the right direction for Houston's youth as it marks the beginning of our involvement in leading innovation and thought on city-wide issues.

Our hope is that this council, with the continued support of the city and Mayor Turner, can spark innovative dialogue to make progress on city challenges such as COVID-19, student voting, access to mental health resources, and much more. My hope is that other cities can adopt this innovative initiative and further begin the transition from the greatest generation the US has ever seen to the younger generation that must learn to solve these issues.

We want to thank Mayor Turner for giving us a seat at the table and listening to our thoughts and suggestions. We are grateful for his service and leadership to the City of Houston and thankful for his support of this initiative.

Sincerely,  
Vishaal R. Kuruvanka  
Founder/Director of Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance



### III. **MSLA's Mission:**

Advocate on behalf of university students and foster collaboration among student leaders to tackle pressing issues in the City of Houston

The initiatives that MSLA worked on this year are the following:

- MSLA Set Up & Constitution
  - Process for selection of student representatives
  - Selection of projects and initiatives
- Census Awareness Campaign
  - Participated and attended Complete Count Education subcommittee meetings
  - Held events at college campuses to increase awareness of census
- Refugee Advocacy
  - Sent correspondence to Texas Governor Abbot on refugee resettlement
- Administered survey to collect data based on student concerns that will be relayed to campus presidents, chancellors and the City of Houston
  - Recommendations based on students' needs will be laid out later in the report to understand the state of university students pre - COVID 19

### IV. **MSLA Set Up & Constitution:**

This being the inaugural year for MSLA, considerable administrative duties were settled in the first few months of the council being convened. After open debate, member and the leadership roles were defined, and the constitution was ratified. As stated in the constitution, amendments can be added by  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority vote. Mayor Turner's first direct interaction with council members was on November 15th, 2019 and can be found [here](#).

### V. **Census Awareness Campaign:**

The importance of the Census cannot be overstated. As of June 28th the Houston Census self-response rate is 52.3%. With that being said, students are usually forgotten in the census count and this directly affects the resources that are available to the communities that our students are from. The purpose and reasoning for Census can be stated below from the census.gov website:

"The census provides critical data that lawmakers, business owners, teachers, and many others use to provide daily services, products, and support for you and your community. Every year, billions of dollars in federal funding go to hospitals, fire departments, schools, roads, and other resources based on census data. The results of the census also determine the number of seats each state will have in the U.S. House of Representatives, and they are used to draw congressional and state legislative districts. It's also in the Constitution: Article 1, Section 2, mandates that the country conduct a count of its population once every 10 years. The 2020 Census will mark the 24th time that the country has counted its population since 1790."

The outcome of the 2020 census will have lasting impact on the city of Houston thus, it is very important to have everyone in our community participate to get the most accurate results. The outcome of the census plays a huge role in the annual allocation of



more than \$675 billion in federal funding across the nation. In Texas, being undercounted by even one percent in 2020, can result in a loss of federal funding of at least \$300 million a year. This potential reduction in funding would affect several school programs and services such as special education, classroom technology, teacher training and Head Start, to name a few examples. It is imperative for the success of our schools, to have accurate results in this upcoming census. To increase the census count, Mayor Turner created a Complete Count Education subcommittee and invited all University Presidents and Chancellors to convene and discuss ways that we could increase student counting on campuses on October 25th, 2019. MSLA members were able to sit side by side with University Chancellors and Presidents to hear directly from census workers, representatives from Houston In Action, and Mayor Turner on the importance of the Census and ways that we can ensure the most accurate counting on campuses. After attending these Subcommittee hearings MSLA members recognized the importance of census and moved that each representative hold Census events at their respective campus to dispel inaccurate notions about the Census and emphasize the importance of the count. Some of the material used is shown below:



#### OUR VOICE

The Census shows how many people live in an area, which determines the number of representatives Texans have in Congress and the number of electoral votes Texas has in presidential elections.



#### OUR BUSINESSES

Companies use population and demographic data from the Census to determine where to set up shop and expand, creating jobs and generating opportunities for Texans.



#### OUR QUALITY OF LIFE

Much of our federal tax money that we send to Washington comes back to Texas in accordance with Census calculations, and supports housing, transportation and other services we use.

- MSLA members reached out to nearby daycares, libraries, and faith-based institutions for permission to allow census representatives to host information sessions
- MSLA members established dates in February 2020 to host census representative information sessions/special activity events on their campus
- MSLA members established dates after March 12 to secure areas in their campuses to host census representatives for instant reporting of students into the census
- Resolution was drafted for Mayor Turner asking him to attend an event after March 12 to boost attendance for instant reporting participation
- Holding virtual events on respective campuses to inform students that Census is still ongoing

Student Events Held Pre-COVID : 4 (UH, HCC, San Marcos, TSU)



Students Reached: 450

Due to COVID 19, many events planned in mid to late March were cancelled, but MSLA intends to hold these events virtually as the census has been extended to ensure that we can get the most accurate count of our students and people in the Houston community.

**VI. Refugee Resettlement Advocacy:**

The following is a letter sent from the MSLA to Governor Greg Abbott on his policy of not participating in the refugee resettlement program under the leadership of Co-Chair Grace Wickerson.

**Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance**  
Houston, Texas

**Office of the Governor**  
P.O. Box 12428  
Austin, TX 78711

Month, Day, 2020

Dear Governor Greg Abbott,

We are proud that Houston is the number one city for refugee resettlement in the country. At a time of crisis for nearly 70.8 million people around the world<sup>1</sup> who flee war, persecution, and violence, Houston has opened its doors wholeheartedly to provide the infrastructure necessary to transition refugees into American life. Refugees are a crucial part of the diversity of this great multinational city. They are part of what makes Houston strong.

Refugee students, in particular, are vital members of many of our campus communities. They are fellow classmates, co-curricular partners, and close friends. Many of our institutions believe in expanding access to higher education for everyone regardless of their background, and refugee students are no exception. Texas is the friendship state; it is our duty to welcome refugees with open arms and prayers.

We as young leaders in Houston will not turn our backs on refugees. We oppose this measure and call upon Texas leadership to reverse this decision for the 2021 Fiscal Year. We believe Houston should stand for its refugee populations that many in this city have invested their livelihoods to support. Such a decision threatens many critical programs that help refugees transition to the United States, economic gains generated by integrated refugees, and intellectual capital brought by refugees to our institutions of higher learning. We believe that

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. "Figures at a Glance." *UNHCR*, [www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html).



openly opposing this measure for the next fiscal year is the only right thing to do. It will put our state on the right side of history - where we stood for the most marginalized and we're committed to welcoming them in with open arms.

It is for all these reasons that we were devastated to learn that Texas has closed its doors to refugee resettlement. We believe such a decision is against the values of our nation, as a place where those in need can find a home where they can succeed. Texas is made better when refugees succeed.

Sincerely,

Grace Wickerson, Rice University, Co-Chair of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Moses Colquitt, Prairie View A&M University  
Member of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Greg Norwood, Houston Community College, Member of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Morgan Latin, South Texas College of Law Houston, Chair of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Deborah Llanas, Houston Community College, Member of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Marcos Perez, San Jacinto Community College, Member of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Alan Modrow, University of Houston-Downtown, Member of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Matthew Castaneda, Lone Star College-North Harris, Member of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Ariana Engles, Rice University, Member of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

David Kronenberger, UTHealth Science Center Houston, Member of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Ryan Hamilton, University of Houston, Member of the Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Vishaal Kuruvanka, Director of Mayor's Student Leadership Alliance

Jonathan Dullen, Lone Star College Kingwood, Secretary of Mayors Student Leadership Alliance

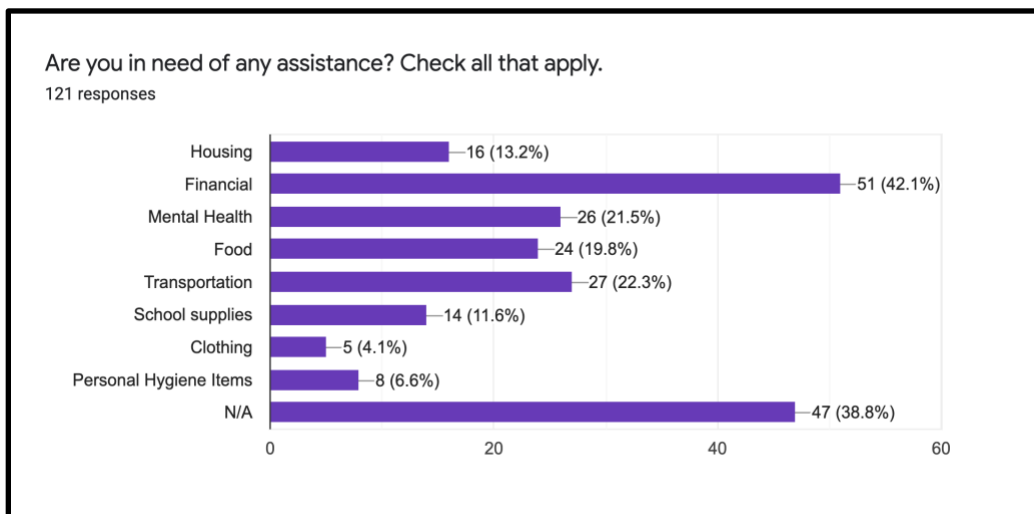




## VII. State of Students MSLA Report:

This past year the MSLA townhall committee administered a survey during the spring 2020 semester in an effort to understand and capture student needs across the greater Houston area. The preliminary results yielded by this survey are shown below:

- 67% students reported either “no” or “maybe” to a question regarding being heard by campus administration on student needs
- Among the 121 responses, approximately 13 (10.7%) of students reported that they have been sexually assaulted
  - 34.7% of students believe that sexual harassment is occurring at their campus
- More than 30% students believe that there is not enough accessible transportation around their respective campus
- Over 25% students believe that their campuses are not helping secure job/growth opportunities
- About 42.1% of students asked for financial assistance
- Other needs are posted below



Recommendations are outlined below for the student concerns that have been reported:

- Create channels for students to express their concerns to MSLA members and Campus Administration
  - Have faculty sponsors designated to assist and support students in voicing their concerns
  - Administer more surveys to capture student concerns and needs
  - Introduce peer mentorship programs on all higher education campuses that will serve as avenues for students to directly express concerns and ask for guidance
- To curb the rate of sexual assaults happening on campuses across Houston we can increase awareness of sexual assault and reporting procedures
  - Creating sexual assault hotline number on campuses



- Introduce educational material for students to take while going through student orientations to increase awareness
- Offering more counseling services for students on campus
  - Students who reported that they have been assaulted have also asked for mental health services
- Improve surveillance and monitoring in and around campuses
- Connect student organizations across universities to come up with a comprehensive charter to create uniform response to sexual assault incidents
  - List of steps students should take once assaulted
  - List of resources available to students
- Increase number of Metro bus stops to areas in and around higher education campuses so that students can have greater access to public transportation
  - Evaluate times and areas where more students require transportation and increase public transportation accordingly
  - Introduce other forms of public transportation such as shared scooters and bikes
  - Increase shuttle service provided by on campus transportation systems
  - Create apps that are specifically designed to provide students with the estimated times and frequency of public and on campus transportation
- Connect students to more opportunities for work study programs with companies based in Houston so students can begin to accumulate relevant work experience in their field.
  - Have peer career advisors on each campus who help review resumes and assist with finding internships and jobs
  - Offer virtual training programs from companies available to students
  - Create fellowships that aid with efforts battling COVID-19 through the City of Houston for students who lost internships, jobs, and post-graduation opportunities
  - Offer more externship (1-5 day job shadowing) opportunities throughout college campuses
  - Improve alumni network and involvement at universities
- Raise awareness of resources for financial assistance and scholarships for students
  - Create a database on scholarships and avenues for financial assistance specifically here in Houston based on merit and need
  - Increase awareness on COVID financial assistance programs that are available to students

#### VIII. **Projects & Suggested Initiatives for 2020-2021:**

The following are possible areas of focus for the 2020 MSLA cohort. This is based upon data collected from the collective student body, Mayor Turner and recent developments in the City of Houston.



- Work towards more collaboration between organizations on campuses towards same causes
  - One of main purposes of MSLA is to increase collaboration between these student leaders across Houston. MSLA council members will be facilitating events between campus orgs across Houston so that these organizations can work together and have a greater impact moving forward
- Election 2020
  - Spread more information on polling locations
  - Advocate for more campus polling locations
  - Increasing awareness/knowledge on candidates
- Promotion of General Equality (Racial, Gender, Class, Diversity)
  - Developing educational initiatives within our communities around the promotion of equality and fair justice for all individuals, irrespective of race, gender, class, and diversity
  - Advocating for reformative measures within our agencies and institutions, specifically, law enforcement and policing in Houston; such measures could include:
    - Re-evaluate funding considerations for the various bodies encompassing our law enforcement
    - Enhance training and educational measures in the form of seminars, discourses, class-led training sessions, etc., for law enforcement agencies (both new and existing members) around inequalities and injustice prevalent within our communities
      - Furthermore, in order to prove and test the efficacy of the aforementioned educational programs and measures, we propose there could be examinations, system-wide protocols, and better oversight measures in order to enhance accountability and responsibility
      - Such measures will hopefully provide us with the ability to institute and construct effective policies in order to promote equality for all individuals and increase the general welfare of all citizens
- COVID-19
  - Develop measures to educate and increase awareness about COVID-19 as well as to promote disease prevention strategies
  - Enhance accessibility to information around COVID-19
  - In response to the myriad of challenges faced by students as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, we hope to collect more information around the various needs of currently enrolled high school, undergraduate, and graduate students in Houston, which will help us evaluate proper allocation of resources for students
    - Various needs include:
      - Access to technology for remote learning



- Access to counselors and mentors
- Career development and recruiting
- Information transparency around college applications
- Student life adjustments
- Financial and economic assistance
  - Food and Medical Security
  - Tuition
  - Living conditions
- Other initiatives to consider:
  - Provide access to information on both on economic assistance in order for individuals to receive adequate care and with regards to unemployment benefits for all citizens
  - Work with blood banks regarding storage and transportation of plasma as well as increase plasma donations among recovered patients
- Reports will be submitted to University Presidents, City Council members and Mayor Turner



**IX. Recommendations for MSLA 2021:**

The following are recommendations for the following MSLA cohort based on conversations with council members, leadership and surveys.

- Increase engagement and dialogue between city officials and student leaders
  - MSLA is an avenue for our student leaders to hear about the issues that Houston faces so we can begin working on them. The following is a list of departments that we can recruit officials from to speak to MSLA committee members
    - City Council Members
    - Public Health Officials (on COVID)
    - Census officials
    - Department of Neighborhoods
    - Houston Police Department
    - Housing and Community Development Department
    - Houston Health Department
- Establish a research arm of MSLA that can regularly submit reports to city council and Mayor Turner
- Build an online presence to further initiatives and advocate for students
  - Continue the social media campaign focused on increasing census registration of students
- To increase engagement of council members, a contract will be signed between the council members at the beginning of the year stating that they cannot miss more than 3 meetings in a given academic year. Missing three meetings means that they would have attended approximately 75% (9/12) of meetings which would not take away from efficiency of council. We will also schedule dates well in advance of meetings to alleviate absences.
- Collect more data on the development of our council members and their experiences
  - This can be done by survey our students at the end of every month when we have the bi-monthly meetings



X. Gallery:

