



photos by LILI Xiong

DELIA RUNE
LILI XIONG student life editors

In the small gym, students participated in a dance-off at a session on modern day hip-hop culture. In the choir room, students jammed out to live music performances of R&B hits from the 90s and 2000s. Meanwhile, students in classrooms throughout the campus listened to talks on disability culture, preserving native languages, and the history of Islam in Texas. The culmination of these sessions was Culture Fest, an annual event hosted for students by the Diversity Council (DivCo). During Culture Fest, speakers come and lead workshops and lectures for students on issues that they might not otherwise get a chance to learn about in class—everything from Alaskan native languages to how to have difficult conversations.

This year, it took place on Feb. 16. Senior Anokhi Sheth, one of DivCo's Culture Fest leads, explained the process for selecting who will speak at the event.

"The Culture Fest team is responsible for sending out like five emails a week, and they research people who they find interesting and who they think will be important to speak at Culture Fest," Sheth said. "We give them a little bit of an outline because we try to have the speakers be from minority groups, refugee groups, or something that will give students a new perspective."

According to Sheth, DivCo has focused on having more breadth in their speakers and Culture Fest sessions this year. DivCo has tried to reach out to new speakers rather than relying on people who have returned multiple years in a row.

"I think we are having a more diverse group of speakers this year because, in the past, there have been people who we'd called back for 5 to 10 years," Sheth said. "One of those sessions was called 'Belarus Belarus.' But we didn't invite them back this year, because, although it's really cool to hear their story, we thought it would be good to branch out and find new people."

First-year DivCo officer and junior Rahi Deo was surprised by just how challenging organizing Culture Fest was. Since students don't see all the work that goes into planning the event, Deo said that many people don't realize how complicated it can be to put together.

"As a regular student, I had always loved Culture Fest, but I was unaware of all the work that was put into it," Deo said. "Going to meetings and seeing people basically glued to their computers, planning and creating a great opportunity for students was really inspiring. Organization was very hard because we felt like we had to have disaster plans for everything."

One of the challenges DivCo faced was finding speakers that would appeal to the broad interests of the LASA population, according to senior DivCo secretary Zachary Suri. Suri said that it was important to DivCo that all students felt they had a place in the conversations happening at Culture Fest.

"I think our challenge this year was to make sure that we had guests who could really speak to students," Suri said. "There were plenty of people who were fascinating and who maybe some of us wanted to hear from but who weren't necessarily guests that all of the school could connect to. And so we tried to do our best to make sure that we have guests that would actually talk about themes and topics that felt relevant."

Senior DivCo President Sahana Sudarsan agreed that it had been a priority of DivCo this year to expand the types of speakers who spoke. According to Sudarsan, choosing interesting speakers makes students more likely to attend the event.

"I think we have a good range of groups that are being talked about, which is something new about this year," Sudarsan said. "Something that we are working towards in coming years is making sure we have more breadth. I hope that we get to a point where all LASA students want to and are able to attend."

Suri explained that many of the DivCo speakers this year are also authors or coming to speak about their books. This added a new element for students because it allowed them to read the speakers' books in advance or have their books signed by the authors.

"This year we're focusing more on books in particular—especially ones that are very close to what we're discussing in social studies classes," Suri said. "I'm thinking of Professor Jeremi Suri

and then Professor Daniel Joseph—they both have new books out on things that we talk a lot about, particularly APUSH, and so the Social Studies Department has purchased those books for kids if they want to read them."

Christopher Parks is another speaker who used his talk to discuss his book. Parks is a German teacher at LASA, but he explained that he didn't want his talk to be an extension of his German class.

"I didn't really want to go for the obvious cultural presentation about German culture, so I decided I wanted to have a presentation about the prioritization of creativity," Parks said. "And then I tied that in with the book that I published last year and talked a bit about the contextual history of the novel."

Parks felt that his event at Culture Fest was successful, drawing roughly 50 students for each time slot. He hopes students continue attending and engaging with Culture Fest.

"My experience attending Culture Fest was always really positive, and then this experience of hosting a session was a really great experience for me, so I can just hope that it'll be the same next year," Parks said. "The attendance was great, and there was a lot of engagement. I hope that Culture Fest continues to draw true authentic interest from the student population."

According to Park, the experience is a great opportunity for students to learn something because they are interested in it—not just for a grade. According to Parks, learning for personal enjoyment is something that students will need to learn to practice for the rest of their lives.

"Culture Fest is a chance to break away from the routine of learning, and just learning about specific subjects and grades and assessments," Parks said. "It's a chance to break out of that habit of just learning for a certain rubric or academic achievement and being able to pick something out of all the sessions that's really of interest to you."

Suri agreed that a lot of the importance of Culture Fest is allowing students to cultivate new interests and learn about things that the LASA curriculum might not touch on. He said that Culture Fest can be a place for students to connect what they are learning about in the classroom with new topics.

"I think it's really important that students see what the things they discuss in the classroom look like in the real world," Suri said, "and I think it's really important for students to see how themes of inequity and racial injustice work in the real world and to hear from people who are doing original research on those topics."

Sheth added that the event was a yearly tradition because it allows students to grow curiosity and hear from new perspectives. According to Sheth, if students are open to the experience, it can be a unique opportunity for them to learn.

"I think it's just a really important tradition to keep going because it allows the students new perspectives that they usually wouldn't hear," Sheth said. "It keeps them curious, and it allows them to learn from so many different perspectives. When you grow up, you would pay hundreds of dollars to see these kinds of people speak, and now you're just getting it for free. So I think it's just important to take advantage of these opportunities."

According to Suri, Culture Fest ties into DivCo's larger goal of representing and educating the LASA student body. Suri explained that he joined DivCo as a way to become more involved in these conversations about diversity and representation.

"I joined DivCo because I was really interested in having conversations about equity," Suri said. "I felt like our school didn't do a good enough job of forcing freshmen like myself, and then when I joined as a sophomore, to discuss these issues and how they relate to our everyday lives on campus."

Deo explained that, in the future, DivCo plans to continue expanding the event so that students have more options of workshops and speakers. Although this was her first year as an officer, she hopes to continue supporting Culture Fest next year as a senior.

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-Zachary Suri, Diversity Council secretary

"I hope we get more and more sessions because I think there are always topics that we don't highlight that students are really interested about, so we want to take feedback, and we want to have sessions that students are passionate about," Deo said. "It's already an annual thing, but we want to make it bigger and bigger."

Aurna Mukherjee, a junior who attended Culture Fest this year, reported that the event was a lot of fun. She explained that she got to learn about topics she otherwise knew nothing about.

"The first session that I attended was 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of being Japanese-American,'" Mukherjee said. "It was really interesting because I didn't really know about the violence Japanese Americans faced when they went to America, so it was interesting to learn about that but then also to gain perspective on what types of careers they've pursued."

Sudarsan also shared that she was excited about a lot of the sessions at Culture Fest. Suri, Sheth, and Sudarsan all mentioned that they were interested in attending or learning more about Art Markman's session, "The Psychology of Difficult Conversations."

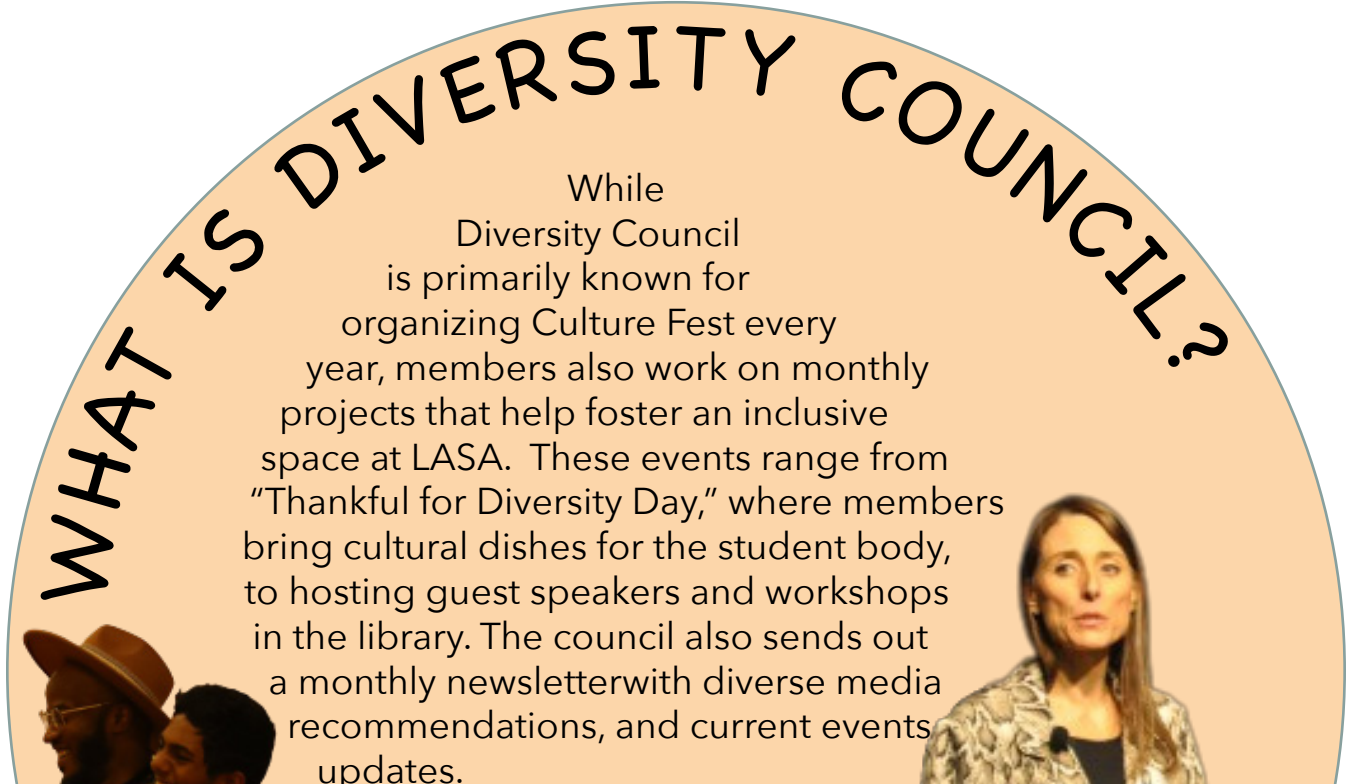
"I think 'The Psychology of Difficult Conversations,' is super interesting and relevant," Sudarsan said. "It's about the psychology of civil discourse, which I think is super cool for a bunch of high schoolers who are going out into the world to hear about."

Mukherjee felt that Culture Fest acts as exposure to subjects and groups that students don't know much about. Not only is it interesting to learn about new topics, but Mukherjee believes that it is a critical skill for students after they graduate from LASA.

"I think it's really important for students to know about the different cultures that there are and be exposed to different kinds of people because I feel like if you don't have that sense of diversity in you, when you go into the real world, it will be difficult for you to adjust," Mukherjee said. "In a lot of situations, the demographics in schools aren't really representative of the people you're going to see in life."

Deo agreed that Culture Fest is one small step that LASA takes toward producing students who will be educated on sensitive topics and able to have difficult conversations. According to Deo, it is important that students attend Culture Fest to take advantage of this opportunity for growth.

"All in all, we want students to attend and learn something new because learning is one of the first steps to growth," Deo said, "and with growth comes tolerance and cultural acceptance, and a less ignorant and less hateful society."



While Diversity Council is primarily known for organizing Culture Fest every year, members also work on monthly projects that help foster an inclusive space at LASA. These events range from "Thankful for Diversity Day," where members bring cultural dishes for the student body, to hosting guest speakers and workshops in the library. The council also sends out a monthly newsletter with diverse media recommendations, and current events updates.



graphic by Annelia Coleman



photo by LILI Xiong

ART MARKMAN

The Psychology of Difficult Conversations

Art Markman has given talks at LASA before, but this is his first time at LASA's new campus. Markman has a PhD in Psychology, and has written a number of books bringing cognitive science to a broader audience. He is also a part of a radio show and podcast called *Two Guys on Your Head*, produced by KUT. At Markman's Culture Fest session, he talked about civil discourse requiring the ability to talk about difficult topics that can create strong emotional reactions. His session focused on the psychological value of having these conversations, as well as strategies for having them more effectively.



ON BEAT Choir teacher Deric Lewis performs live R&B hits from the 90s and 2000s. The room was jam-packed with students enjoying the live music. photos by JC Ramirez Delgado

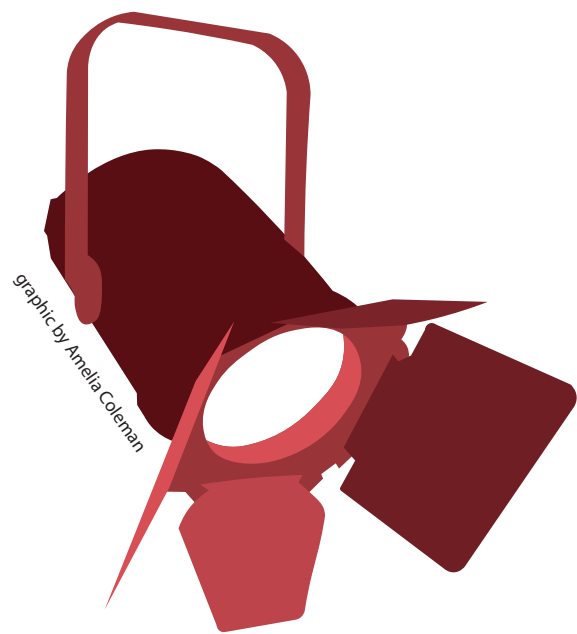


BANJO BALLAD Junior Miguel Lathrop plays the Banjo alongside other musicians at English teacher Cory Snyder's session titled "Hootenanny." Hootenanny has been a long-time Culture Fest session at LASA, where students bring their instruments for a free-form musical jam. photo by LILI Xiong



EXPRESSING & EDUCATING LASA German teacher gives a talk on the challenges of managing creativity with school and work pressure. Parks spoke about his experience writing *The Berliners*, the novel he published last year. photos by LILI Xiong

SESSION SPOTLIGHTS



graphic by Annelia Coleman



photo by LILI Xiong

Jeremi Suri

Racial Politics and U.S. Elections

Both historian and LASA parent, Jeremi Suri was among the speakers Diversity Council had lined up for the day. At his session, Suri discussed how past racial politics continue to influence and distort current elections. He held a Q&A session after his talk, in which students brainstormed how to make the U.S. electoral system more inclusive and fair. Suri brought up topics such as decreasing the minimum voting age, and increasing the amount of polling locations, especially in rural areas. Suri also has a book coming out, which the Social Studies department purchased for LASA students who are curious to read.



photo by LILI Xiong

Luis Miguel Ramirez

Miguel St. Michael

Luis Miguel Ramirez is a LASA Spanish teacher, but is also a singer-songwriter and former frontman of Latin Alternative group, Son de Rey. He took Culture Fest as an opportunity to introduce his Pop, R&B, and Tejano inspired music to students, playing both some of his recorded songs, as well as performing some of them live. Students also got the chance to learn about Ramirez's creative process, from brainstorming song ideas to music production.



THE RAISE OF A HAND Junior Ben Catterton raises their hand at a Culture Fest session in the library during a Q&A session. According to several teachers, student engagement was high in many of the sessions. photo by LILI Xiong