

## 10 Ways to Make MUN More Equitable

This article is not an opening speech: it is not intended to capture the outrage and heartbreak that Americans have been expressing since the senseless murder of George Floyd ignited a groundswell of anti-racist activism across the country. This article is not a preambulatory clause: it will not detail the abysmal facts of systemic racism or reiterate the tortuous history of black oppression in the U.S. My hope is that most people reading an article about MUN equity are already in the midst of learning more about this reality and want to be a part of the solution. The question is, as MUN delegates, executives, and advisors, how do we chart the course forward?

Many people (including myself) used to think that the major inequity in MUN was that of gender. My female MUN friends and I can still recount myriad experiences where our voices were drowned out because they were higher pitched, where despite our high heels some male delegates made us feel intimidated and short, where by nature of being a woman in male-dominated crisis committees and club meetings, we felt at a disadvantage. However, what I personally failed to truly appreciate about my high school MUN days was that, as a white person privileged to attend a suburban high school that generously subsidized my MUN club, I had access to amazing training resources, strong role models, and many opportunities to overcome those obstacles. This is not the reality for minority, rural, poor, and many other marginalized populations. The biggest inequity in MUN is that some students never even have the chance to be delegates in the first place.

MUN has a severe representation problem. Some of my most meaningful past MUN experiences were working with delegates from around the world at top tier conferences. When I made blocs with friends from Italy, India, Mexico, Taiwan, Venezuela, etc., I thought we were the living poster-children of diversity in collaboration. Yet, at these conferences which consistently espoused the value of diverse perspectives, almost all of us had at least one thing in common: the opportunity and resources which made it possible for us to spend a week in a glitzy hotel doing nothing but enjoying an immersive diplomacy experience. MUN conferences across the board—especially those which don't offer financial aid to delegates—deliver a selective image of diversity. Think back to your last committee. Where were the students from Title I schools? Where were the rural delegations? Where were the Black delegates and other traditionally underrepresented races? Why is MUN consistently so white and Asian, urban, and wealthy?

The answers to these questions likely derive from the same underlying systemic problems that lead to racial inequality in nearly every sphere of American life. I don't mean to say that the MUN conference organizers, advisors, and delegates of the world can single-handedly revolutionize a deeply broken system, not least by following the advice I'm about to offer. However, I do believe that the current global state of affairs is shining a spotlight on the

pervasive problem of inequality. If we, the MUN circuit, do not act on this opportunity to make MUN more equitable, absolutely no one will, and we will be a part of the problem.

I wholeheartedly believe the cliché that MUN has the power to change lives. MUN gave me a voice; it gave me skills that I use in collegiate and professional work; it gave me opportunities and connections that undeniably helped me advance to where I am today. This is why we *must* work to make MUN more equitable from *within*. Making MUN more accessible is our unique way of investing in the long-term uplifting of marginalized voices.

To a seasoned MUN delegate, my opening lines might have implied that the remainder of this article is a directive or list of operative clauses. Yes, the following are ten actionable statements that are within the MUN community's sphere of influence. Though they might be "multi-faceted," I wouldn't venture to describe them as "comprehensive" yet— they are just the beginning. I would rather categorize them as a sort of Q&A. Here's me, one MUN delegate, asking you, the MUN community at large (and particularly those who run conferences): how will you seize the opportunity of this moment to make a change? Your time begins now.

**1. Institute a generous financial aid policy/scholarships for underserved schools at your conference.**

MUN is incredibly expensive. From conference and delegate fees to Western Business Attire to plane flights and more, finances are a massive obstacle for underserved schools to get started with MUN. Reducing or covering your conference's fees for students and schools that cannot afford them is a great start, but look to do more. Help overwhelmed advisors negotiate group prices at hotels and find cheaper plane flights. With fewer travelling conferences this year due to Covid-19, spare some of your travel budget to set up a scholarship fund dedicated to helping underrepresented delegates attend; be sure to craft an equitable distribution plan for the fund that aligns with your school's specific representation goals. If your club can't scrap together the money, provide fundraising infrastructure for delegates themselves. Run a business attire donation drive to give to MUN teams whose delegates can't afford it.

**2. Recruit from minority, rural, and low-income communities.**

Students from underserved schools in rural, low-income, and minority communities will not be able to benefit from a generous financial aid policy if they do not have a MUN club, a dedicated advisor, and support from their school. When sending out conference invites, don't just look for schools that already have successful MUN clubs. Make it a goal to help bring a local school without many resources into the fold by making it easier to register students as independent delegates. Create a dedicated Secretariat role for Diversity and Inclusion, and involve them in the recruitment process from the beginning (more below). Be willing to spend extra time explaining, assisting, and problem-solving logistics for delegates and schools that have never had this opportunity before.

### **3. Create a dedicated Secretariat/Executive position for Diversity, Inclusion, and/or Oversight.**

State your organization's dedication to promoting equity in MUN by creating this or a similarly tasked position; then act on this dedication by involving this officer in every stage of conference planning and club activities. From diverse recruitment for conferences to culturally aware communications to inclusive social activities, having a leader entirely concerned with the experience of diverse delegates and club members can make a significant impact. This officer can also serve as a liaison from these members to the rest of the executive team, ensuring that voices that have been traditionally absent are heard by the leaders of the organization. This is a permanent institutional change that will ensure better representation and diversity in the highest levels of club leadership, thus encouraging members and delegates from underrepresented backgrounds to feel welcome and supported from the outset.

### **4. Select a diverse slate of committees and topics.**

That MUN is dominated by Euro and Western-centric committees and topics is not a new issue. Many international institutions already have a Western slant in their ideals, funding, and support. That means that an equitable MUN conference must actively work to include committees and topics that relate to diverse students and unique topics. Conferences should strive to have a wide variety of committees dealing with minority, rural, incarcerated, indigent, and indigenous rights. Moreover, not all committees concerned with these topics need to be framed in an international context where explicit power dynamics are at the fore: consider selecting regional bodies or tribal governments. Conferences should make an effort to host bilingual committees and should consider lesser well known topics (the typical committee list might not suggest it, but more happens in the Middle East than the Syrian Refugee Crisis, and the African Union is not the only supranational body in Africa). Don't shy away from domestic committees and topics that touch on issues close to delegates' hearts; after all, what could be better than delegates working together to devise solutions they could bring back home?

### **5. Make committee assignments intentional in order to reduce the stigma of "bad" roles.**

Many well respected conferences assign country roles to schools on the basis of their historical performance record. This practice means that "good" assignments, like powerful and wealthy P5 and G20 countries, often get doled out to schools with great programs. The unfortunate dovetail is that inexperienced schools are assigned developing and least developed countries which have little conventional power, are often more obscure to research, and have less name recognition, making it even harder for those delegates to succeed in committee. Moreover, students with heritage from those countries are led to believe that their backgrounds are not as important or relevant, thus disempowering the students themselves. That being said, it's important for the flow of specific bodies like the Security Council or narrowly-focused committees that certain roles be played by experienced delegates, so it wouldn't be feasible to make all committee and country assignments randomly. Instead, be thoughtful and intentional with role assignments:

balance the flow and realisticness of the committee with the need to empower inexperienced delegates. If making assignments on a committee-by-committee basis isn't possible, then train your staff to intentionally act against implicit country bias when calling on delegates to speak and choosing awards.

#### **6. Choose technology policies that work for everyone.**

We've all been the victim of various "snake-y" MUN tricks (i.e., deleting someone's clause, erasing google doc edit history, etc.). Unfortunately, for delegates who don't have laptops, flash drives, and reliable wireless connection/hotspots, these nefarious behaviors are even more damaging and hard to avoid. Prohibit typed resolutions. Not only does this reduce the likelihood of prewriting and the instances of "I don't know how my name got deleted from the sponsor's list!", but it also levels the playing field for delegates that don't have laptops. If your conference must permit technology for logistical reasons, make sure your secretariat communicates this to schools well in advance and has a plan in place to provide all delegates the technology they need to participate equitably. Consider allowing delegates to work off smartphones, providing wireless hotspots, and reaching out to your school's IT desk to find loaners.

#### **7. Consider opting for a 3 day conference.**

Long conferences have immense benefits: more time to make a deep connection among delegates and with staff, the ability to get through more substantive content, and additional opportunities for exploration and outside-of-committee programming. However, longer conferences are inherently more costly, especially so for those delegates and schools with financial limitations. An extra day of conference means an additional night at the hotel, increased absence from part-time work or family responsibilities, three more restaurant meals, and another day of needing a substitute teacher in the advisor's classroom. The point is, conferences should carefully consider whether the benefits of a fourth or fifth day of committee sessions outweigh the costs to schools and students.

#### **8. Cultivate strong bonds with new advisors from underrepresented communities, and include pre-, during, and post-conference programming specific to them.**

All MUN delegates and conference staffers know that advisors are the secret ingredient to a successful MUN conference, especially on the high school circuit. New advisors (especially those who come from traditionally underrepresented communities) might feel out of place among veteran advisors when they attend conferences, so it's critical to reach out to them and ensure their experience is positive. Before a conference, have your Diversity and Inclusion Officer collaborate with your Communications Officer to reach out to all new advisors to ensure that their questions are answered. Check-in with these advisors throughout the conference and host a "first-time advisors" event to foster supportive connections and healthy relationships. Follow-up with these advisors immediately after the conference — if they had a bad experience for any reason, you'll want to address it as soon as possible so they aren't discouraged from continuing. Most importantly, pay careful attention to these advisors' feedback and keep them abreast of the steps your organization is taking to address the issues they bring up. Similar programming

should be established for head delegates from first-time schools and underrepresented communities.

**9. Use social media to provide training resources, promote diversity, and make MUN less intimidating.**

Use your conference/club social media pages and website for more than just videos of crazy crisis updates and committee invasions. Fill your page with training videos, mock resolutions, and example speeches. Post about the importance of embracing diversity in MUN by sharing articles about diversity in real-life international relations. Leading up to a conference, have every chair/crisis director post a quick video or picture introducing themselves and showing their human side outside of the background guide. Host live streams on specific MUN skills and ask for questions in advance; be sure to record the stream and post it later for delegates without strong broadband access. Regularly push out free and innovative resources for research like the Live Universal Awareness Map and open-access academic repositories. If your organization has the bandwidth, ask your secretariat and staff to hold virtual office hours in the weeks leading up to the conference. Encourage delegates to direct-message the conference with questions about MUN, conference activities, or their specific committees — any way that conferences can engage new delegates will serve to make MUN more accessible for everyone.

**10. Reimagine and restructure your organization so that is not only inclusive of, but actually designed for underrepresented delegates.**

The Officer for Diversity and Inclusion should be intimately involved with planning all club programming, but especially so in the work of building spaces and activities that are intended for underrepresented members. Create committees chaired and directed by people who look and sound like the delegates you are attempting to uplift. Diversify the guest speakers at your meetings and keynote presenters at your conference. Offer space and time for intra-organization minority affinity groups to promote camaraderie and support. Invite the whole club to participate in educational events that commemorate and applaud the efforts of marginalized communities in past and current international relations endeavors. When creating awards criteria, remember to value delegates for their growth over time and passion for substantive debate and collaboration, not their initial experience and skill. Last but certainly not least, listen to, encourage, and support delegates and members with underrepresented identities and ensure they have the opportunity to enact the changes they see fit within our organizations. Make it clear that not only will your Officer for Diversity and Inclusion listen to delegates or team members who bring up concerns about discrimination, but that your entire leadership team will act to remedy the problem at its source. The work of creating an equitable MUN circuit requires those in the bubble of privilege to trust the experiences and seriously address the concerns of those who have been systematically denied the opportunity to enter the community, let alone reach the upper echelons of its leadership.

**Remember that MUN is about creating leaders for tomorrow.**

While keynote speakers have touted this maxim for years, it seems to me that we *actually* need strong young leaders right now more than ever. This moment is a great opportunity for the MUN community to do what it does best: learn about, collaborate on, and create solutions for the most pressing problems of our generation. Making MUN more equitable means giving students of all races, ethnicities, national origins, religions, gender or sexual identities, geographic regions, and disability statuses the chance to immerse themselves in the experience that turns kids in suits into kids with the power to think critically about and affect the world around them.

Our primary reason for enacting these changes must be because we desire to acknowledge and correct the mistakes MUN has made as an institution, and because we believe that making MUN more equitable will allow more young people to blossom into their full leadership potential, eventually lifting up their communities and becoming global citizens in their future careers. However, it's clear that MUN stands to benefit from greater inclusivity as well. MUN is special when people with diverse perspectives learn to work together; MUN loses its power when almost all delegate voices come from the common vortex of privilege.

The MUN world has a long history of inequity, and thus a long way to go in reversing it. Moreover, there are pervasive, underlying issues that a MUN delegate might say are “outside the scope of this committee’s mandate.” However, with every small change this community makes to promote the ideals of equity, inclusion, and justice, we use our passion for MUN to seriously empower those who have rarely gotten the chance to raise a placard.

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