Change the Field, LLC

A Queer People of Color Social Justice Development Firm

Vassar College Report

November 2015

**Introduction**

Change the Field, LLC was honored and humbled to be invited to Vassar College (V.C.). for campus consultancy. While planning the itinerary for the week the planners and I made sure to keep students needs and concerns at the center of the campus visit. Each meeting and session was planned to maximize my ability to get a sense of challenges at V.C. and from that information devise some goals to help improve climate. It is our hope V.C. takes this report and other institutional data it has gathered to develop a full strategic plan to improve campus for its students.

**Method**

A central structure of my campus visit involved the creation of separate dedicated spaces for students to detail their full campus experience. I met with students of color, LGBTQI students, LGBTQI+ undergraduate and graduate students of color, as well as student centers, faculty and administrators. These groups represented a wide cross section of V.C.’s campus community in terms of gender, race, age, class, major, sexual orientation, national origin, and campus stratification. I used this method to gather information and weave a picture of V.C. that would allow me to make the best recommendations to help move V.C. through some of its challenges.

The challenges outlined below is the springboard from which all of my suggestions for improvements are based. Please note all recommendations and challenges will be filtered through the lens of V.C’s LGBTQ+ students of color.

**Findings**

Below are direct quotes from LGBTQ+ student of color at V.C. I have collated them into common themes for understandability.

**Not being able to be one’s full selves on campus**

“A lot of times I feel like I have to choose between my two identities.”

“Administrative offices: i’ve never felt able to express my opinions to admin”

“If I want to tell my story, there is nowhere for me to do it”

“Overall lack of spaces to explore intersectional identity”

“ I'm sad there's a lack of institutional space for me”

**Being consumed and invisibilized by pervasive whiteness at Vassar College**

“Honorary whites, we are this wedge that's meant to separate people of color but I think we are people of color. We experience racism in ways that other people don't and we benefit in other ways because of colorism”

“feels great to be queer until people find out you aren’t white”

“The dominant groups take over the spaces. ie: Queer Lady Socials: whiteness and cisgendered people are glorified”

“I want less cultural appropriation”

**Feeling left out in White LGBTQ and Student of Color Spaces at Vassar College**

“ I feel left out of the LGBTQ center here because it's so white. “

“ The hetero nature of ASA made me feel uncomfortable for my first two years so I have stopped going”

“Feel extremely isolated by the white dominated LGBTQ+ orgs that are supposed to be open to all students”

“LGBTQ+ Orgs: the white supremacy makes me feel iffy”

**Overall lack of transparency and trust from the campus administration and leadership**

“More accessibility to information and how decisions are made”

“VSA/Trustee Board: very white trustees. the influence that Trustees have is greatly underestimated.”

“Cappie went to meet with a powerful white man and the lecture was full of white men. That’s the only event she actually went to. Feels like she cares more about the trustees and the funders than the actual student body”

“The money that the Africana Studies program should have gotten from the selling of Kendrick House is just sitting there. Let the Africana Studies program access that money freely”

“I want Transparency in terms of what administration is doing”

**Challenges dealing with campus faculty, staff, and administration**

“Fin Aid: I feel like a burden. The lady looks at me and I feel bad. The help that

they give me has decreased every year even though my need hasn’t changed”

“The VSA is a mess. I had to deal with a suicide and Dean of studies yelled at me to become a stronger person when it came to the suicide attempt. Tried to quit but they threatened to kick me out of my dorm”

“I feel misguided in many aspects. I feel so alone and i feel like im grasping for straws. There is no historical memory. ALANA Center Directors are switched out so often. I feel lost”

“Metcalfe: white counselor made me feel worse”

“More Asian Professors in the Asian Studies department. Stop focusing on the migrationary stories. Only white people teach Asian Studies. Why?????????”

“I want More QTPOC Professors”

In order for V.C. to begin the journey towards transformation, it must listen closely to what students are experiencing on campus. I have shared direct student quotes so you can get the unfiltered truth that your students shared with me. While this direct student feedback is quite difficult to digest, please look at this as a springboard for action. Your students know exactly what they need and it is the imperative of V.C. to provide avenues and resources for improvement.

Vassar College students are keenly area of the how the rhetoric of liberalism is not manifested in their daily lives on campus. They are expected to perform “civility” at the risk of their mental and physical health. Added to this knowledge is the self-awareness that to be a “great” V.C. student requires unhealthy sleeping habits, high stress, drug use, and other illegal activities. Students voiced they feel isolated in their major areas of study as well as outside of the classroom. This isolation has a dispirit impact when students have intersectional identities and is built into V.C. culture of liberalism and actively rewarded. Students do not have accessible campus administrators that they feel they can discuss problems with. Additionally, seeking counseling can often be a re-traumatizing experience. Students recognize that V.C. has representational diversity and very clearly know that there is limited access to systematic processes, staff, or departments dedicated to help students with multiple marginalized identities develop healthy habits and campus efficacy.

The students shared that the burden is squarely placed on their shoulders to bring up and educate white students, faculty, and staff on issues related to race. Campus spaces are very dominated by white, heterosexual, male culture and students lack spaces where they can come together and learn from each other across identity. V.C. has an overall lack of campus wide education about micro and macro-aggressions, how they are gravely affecting campus climate, and how to curtail them on campus. Students repeatedly discuss what they identify as a lack of support from upper administration and faculty. Despite a more diverse student body there is a lack of non-white faculty. The use of small representational students groups for “campus conversations and administrative meetings” is not seen as helping and is actively isolating voices and opinions that differ from “well connected” students.

**Move to Action**

In this section of the report I make a number of strategic and goal suggestions to improve V.C.

Student Suggestions for Improvement

“More human and financial for affinity spaces”

“better mental health care and better access”

“create a Social Justice Studies Department”

“Mandatory inclusion orientation for students and staff”

“Physical Accessibility to all buildings”

“More intentional programming that focuses on challenging privilege”

“Stop throwing all the work on B and Judy. Give them more money, staff, resources or actually do the work themselves rather than throwing it on the diversity centers etc.”

“Have Cappie come with questions to us…present real tangible solutions”

Strategic Priority 1: Develop a Culture of Transparency and Open Communication

Short Term Goals

Create a method of communication with your students that is proactive, informative, and accessible (blog post, direct emails, tweets...etc.)

Create a regular sustainable campus wide forum for discussion on current campus issues as related to LGBTQ+ students of color

Make available and easily accessible all demographic and evaluative data about V.C. and use that information to create logical evidence based improvements

Long Term Goal

Create review processes for all divisions, offices, and departments that examine the how well LGBTQ+ students of color are being served and use that information to create logical evidence based improvements

Create an effective and sustainable system of evaluation and feedback for students to use regarding administration, faculty and staff.

Develop stronger faculty accountability by creating mandatory professional development and competency trainings regarding campus culture, inequality, accessibility, and transformation.

Strategic Priority 2: Develop a culture of sustainable intersectional ethic of care for LGBTQ+ Students of Color

Strategic Priority 3: Develop and Improve Campus services and identity spaces based in an intersectional socially just approach

Strategic Priority 4: Hire experienced staff and develop current Faculty, staff, and administrator competencies to better serve LGBTQ+ Students of Color

**Final Comment**

The campus climate at V.C. presents many challenges to overcome. From microaggressions, isolation, and drug abuse; your LGBTQ + students of color suffering from issues that are present at campuses across the country. What make these issues unique to V.C. are the culture of “professed liberalism” and the lack of concrete strategies for transformation. The sheer amount of resources present on this campus should create a breeding ground for unique and creative solutions to your challenges.

V.C. has a vibrant and rich campus environment that obfuscates the interior challenges for students and LGBTQ students of color specifically. Students seek more structure and support to help them navigate the toxic aspects of being a Vassar College student. Look to your LGBTQ+ students of color for help to change campus, they are very knowledgeable about the issues and the solutions. Students want long-term vision and well thought out strategy for improvement of which they can actively shape. As one V.C. student put it “ Vassar is a specifically safe(r) place for white queer students.” You have to work hard to seek corrective paths that center the most important humans on your campus, your students. Without them there would not be a Vassar College. It is of the utmost importance that V.C. not pass up this opportunity to become a world-class institution inside and out.

**Resources**

Book(s):

* + *Culture Centers in Higher Education (2010)* Edited by Lori D. Patton
  + *Contested Issues in Higher Education* (2011) Edited by Marcia B. Baxter Magolda and Peter M. Magolda
  + *Teaching for Social Justice Education (2007)* Edited by Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin

Article(s):

Reimagining the University: A New Paradigm for Racial Justice by Ajay Nair <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ajay-nair/reimagining-the-universit_b_8921930.html?1452092176>

Black Lives Matter on Campus Too by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/11/black-lives-matter-on-campus-too.html

QPOC Resource Guide - https://msc.wisc.edu/lgbtq/lgbtq-resources/