

**4 August 2010**

**Report on the Committee on Inclusion and Excellence’s Audit of Campus Life and Learning: “What Would It Take For You to Thrive at Vassar?” (2008-10)**

2009-10 Committee on Inclusion and Excellence (Audit Team Members in **Bold**):

Elizabeth Anderson ‘11, VSA, V.P. for Student Life

**Sylvia Balderrama, Associate Dean of Students and Director of Psychological Services**

Marianne Begemann, Associate Dean of Faculty

**Rena Blumenthal, Assistant Director of Religious and Spiritual Life**

David Borus, Dean of Admission and Financial Aid

Light Carruyo, Sociology

**Lisa Collins, Art History, CIE co-chair**

**Sara Fairchild ‘10**

Luke Harris, Political Science

**Katherine Hite, Political Science, CIE co-chair**

**Luis Inoa, Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Residential Life**

**Kiese Laymon, English**

Joanne Long, Dean of Studies

Benjamin Lotto, Dean of Freshmen

**Michael Mestitz ‘12, VSA, elected**

**Jannay Morrow, Psychology**

**Edward Pittman, Associate Dean of the College for Campus Life\***

**Thomas Porcello, Associate Dean of Planning and Academic Affairs**

Chris Roellke, Dean of the College

Molly Shanley, Director of the Learning and Teaching Center

**Samin Syed Shehab ‘11, VSA, elected**

Nathaniel Silver ‘10

(and **Summer’s-Grace Green ‘09**)

\*CIE Audit Team Member Edward Pittman chose to abstain from signing onto this report.

“Vassar College is committed to working toward a more just, diverse, egalitarian, and inclusive college community where all members feel valued and are fully empowered to claim a place in--and responsibility for--our shared working, living, and learning. The college affirms the inherent value of a diverse campus and curriculum reflective of our lives as members of multiple local and global communities.” (From Vassar’s Mission Statement)<sup>1</sup>

**Context:**

Since January 2007, the Committee on Inclusion and Excellence (CIE), a twenty-two member joint task force of students, faculty, and administrators, has worked both to formulate and

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<sup>1</sup> This statement was recommended for inclusion in Vassar’s Mission Statement by the Committee on Diversity and Difference (CODAD) in 2003, and was affirmed by the president and the senior officers in 2004.

propose recommendations for institutional change with the goal of ensuring that all members of the student body can enjoy the fullest promise of a Vassar education. The CIE has also proposed and worked to implement a range of policies, programs, and practices to widen Vassar's doors to promising, high-achieving students. In 2008, recognizing that much of the CIE's work focused on access, the committee decided both to continue this vital work and, simultaneously, to study our campus climate--to understand better what Vassar feels like to those who come here to learn. The CIE sought to improve our grasp of current student experiences of--and ideas for--Vassar College life and learning to inform and propel our policy, program, and practice proposals.

After first learning about the importance of campus audits to positive institutional change at the 2007 Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Greater Expectations Institute in Burlington, VT (six CIE members attended) and then studying several audits--and their roles in major change initiatives--at other colleges and universities, the CIE decided to conduct an audit of campus life and learning at Vassar using confidential student focus group sessions as the primary data-gathering method. The CIE opted for an approach that emphasized sharing and close listening. In spring 2008, the CIE formed a twelve-member Audit Team of faculty, students, and administrators, and that August, our Audit Project began in earnest.

The goal of the "What Would It Take For You to Thrive at Vassar?" Audit Project is: 1) to listen closely to student perspectives--including proposals for change--regarding central dimensions of campus life and learning; and 2) to recommend changes--emanating from the audit--that help ensure that all students can thrive at Vassar. Drawing inspiration from the college's stated mission, the Audit Project seeks to contribute to making Vassar a place where all students "feel valued and are fully empowered to claim a place in--and responsibility for--our shared working, living, and learning." Put another way, the project seeks to foster a campus where all students can actively commit to their personal and intellectual growth, and to the vitality and wellbeing of the college community.

### **Process:**

In the summer of 2008, the CIE hired Dr. Mark Chesler, an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Michigan and a consultant on issues of equity and organizational change, to train and help us conduct an audit of college life and learning, based around the broad themes of: success, satisfaction, achievement, community, access, promise, and engagement. What follows is a dateline of the CIE Audit Project process.

August 2008: Nine of the twelve members of the CIE's Audit Team participated in a two-day retreat (August 19-20, 2008) in Alumnae House Library. Led by Dr. Chesler, the purpose of the retreat was team building and audit instrument design. At the retreat, we held the following sessions: What is Our Hope for a Cultural Audit?; What Do We Already Know?; Audit Instrument Design; and, Next Steps: Where Do We Go from Here?

Shortly after, CIE co-chairs Lisa Collins and Katie Hite met with the 2008-09 VSA Executive Board to share the CIE's Audit Project and to solicit the Board's help with instrument design, particularly in the creation of key focus areas. We stayed in close contact with the VSA Executive Board and the VSA Council over the course of the academic year.

September-November 2008: After soliciting student opinions in targeted venues, the Audit Team, in consultation with the full CIE, solidified the focus group questions; selected the targeted focus groups; organized a publicity campaign; coordinated the recruitment and preparation of student focus group facilitators; strategized the recruitment of student participants; and submitted an application for the project to Vassar's Institutional Review Board.

December 2008: The CIE's Audit Project received approval from Vassar's Institutional Review Board in early December. After a nominating and vetting process, the Audit Team secured twenty-five recommended students willing to serve as focus group facilitators for the project. All agreed to participate in a six-hour facilitator training session led by Dr. Chesler in February 2009. The roster of twenty-five students included students who self-identified with, and who wanted to participate in, all of our targeted focus groups with the exception of the proposed focus group of Native American students (see below).

January 2009: When the approximately 2,400 students returned to campus following winter break, a brochure explaining the upcoming audit of college life and learning and soliciting their participation in a targeted focus group, awaited each student in their campus mailbox. Posters explaining the "What Would It Take For You to Thrive at Vassar? Audit Project, as well as an advertisement on Facebook and a mass email reminder, all reinforced the all-in-residence-student-mailing. All elements of the solicitation of focus group participants/publicity campaign stressed the importance of actively working together to create a place where all students can thrive, and of having student voices at the center of policy, program, and practice considerations at Vassar.

To personalize the publicity, representatives from the Audit Team answered questions about the audit of college life and learning, and encouraged students to participate in a focus group session at a College Center table during the first two weeks of spring semester 2009.

In our invitation, we asked students to sign up for one or more of the following sixteen targeted focus groups (in alphabetical order): Asian American; Black or African American; Culturally Jewish; Female; First Generation College Student; International, born and/or raised outside the U.S.; Latino/a, born and/or raised in the U.S.; LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer); Male; Multiracial; Native American; Religiously Committed; Student from a Working Class Background; Student Living with a Disability; White or Caucasian; and Other.

In our solicitations for participants, we fully acknowledged that everyone has multiple affiliations; however, we asked students to sign up only for groups that they both self-identified with and wanted to participate in. Though most students checked more than one focus group, students were placed in one of their selected groups. Multiple affiliations and intersecting interests, however, were acknowledged and student participants were encouraged to share their whole and complex selves within their assigned focus group session.

In the end, 100 students signed up to participate in a targeted focus group session, not including the twenty-five students who signed up to serve as focus group facilitators. Due to low enrollment, three of the sixteen possible focus groups were cancelled: Asian American; Native American; and Other. Ultimately, however, an Asian American focus group session was held.

February 2009: On February 1, 2009, Dr. Chesler returned to Vassar to lead a six-hour training session for twenty-three (two were absent) student focus group facilitators. The students learned about the Audit Project and were trained to guide confidential focus group sessions with their peers. At the training session, the student facilitators also finalized the seven broad focus group questions for the “What Would It Take For You to Thrive at Vassar? Audit Project. The questions thus used were:

1. We are gathered here, in part, as a group of \_\_\_\_\_ students. Given this at least partial self-identification, are there ways that Vassar could be a more welcoming and supportive environment for you?
2. As a \_\_\_\_\_ student, are there times on campus when you feel unsafe or like you can't be yourself?
3. Where, if anywhere, do you see inequity or injustice on campus?
4. Without naming names, are there particular practices by faculty members that have enabled your success?
5. Without naming names, are there particular practices by administrators that have helped meet your needs?
6. How do you define success at Vassar, and what do you hope to accomplish by the time you graduate?
7. What changes would you like to see on campus?

March-May 2009: Nine of the thirteen focus group sessions were completed. Members of the Audit Team helped prepare the trained student co-facilitators before their ninety-minute sessions and debriefed with them promptly afterwards.

For various reasons, the sessions for students who self-identified as: Black or African American; Culturally Jewish; LGBTIQ; and Student Living with a Disability were not completed spring semester. We decided to try to re-launch these four groups in September 2009.

On May 12, the Audit Team hosted a forum for the student facilitators to share both their experiences as facilitators and their personal thoughts and ideas--on record--on how we can all work to create a place where all students can thrive. Both the February 1, 2009 student facilitator training and the May 12, 2009 student facilitator forum were audio taped and transcribed with consent.

June-August 2009: A hired outside transcriber began the process of transcribing the approximately thirteen hours of taped focus group and student facilitator sessions. The work of transcribing the initial nine sessions was completed in July 2009. The Audit Team met on June 30 to begin collectively listening to the taped sessions. Completed transcriptions were circulated to the members of the Audit Team late summer/early fall for study.

September-December 2009: Dr. Chesler returned to campus in October for a daylong retreat with the Audit Team to help with preliminary analysis and interpretation of the focus group and facilitator session data. Focus group sessions for Students Living with a Disability and Culturally Jewish students were held, respectively, in November and December 2009. An Asian American focus group also formed and held a session in November 2009. **Ultimately, sixty Vassar students participated in a total of twelve confidential focus group sessions conducted by trained student facilitators in 2009.** From November 2009 through January 2010, the Audit Team continued to listen to and study the focus group and facilitator session data and prepared a preliminary draft of findings, or key themes, from the sessions. In December 2009, members of the Audit Team presented an overview of the project at a VSA Council Meeting and garnered support to work with house teams and other student leaders to host early spring semester conversations about the audit findings with interested students.

January 2010: Vassar's Institutional Review Board approved request for renewal of the CIE Audit Project.

February-April 2010: The Audit Team spent the month of February in student residence halls sharing some of the project's findings; asking for feedback and input; and closely listening to additional experiences and ideas. In pairs, members of the Audit Team held conversations in all nine dorms on campus, as well as in a townhouse (TH) and an off-campus student house.

**Approximately 180 students participated in these 11 conversations--the public sharing and listening phase of the project.** In addition, because a student focus group of Black or African American students had not been convened, a pair of team members held a sharing and listening session at the ALANA Center with fifteen members of the Black Students' Union (BSU). Sharing findings and hearing anew in public forums was an important component of the audit process, as it provided us with an opportunity to test/probe our working ideas and themes and to gather new ones. Co-chairs Katie and Lisa also presented the work of CIE, including an overview of the Audit Project, at the Faculty Meeting in February and at the Administrative Forum in March.

May-July 2010: Report writing and initial planning of dissemination and implementation efforts.

### **Method:**

The audit of college life and learning is based on a two-stage process of soliciting student opinion around the themes of success, satisfaction, achievement, community, access, promise, and engagement.

In the first stage, "homogenous" (based on interest and one aspect of self-defined identity) focus groups were convened (as described above), each mediated by two facilitators, who had attended a training session with Dr. Mark Chesler, asking a series of open-ended questions generated by the Audit Team. Focus groups were chosen as the method for soliciting student opinion because of their potential for encouraging dialogue among participants with the express purpose of both soliciting opinions about college life and learning and of generating ideas and discussion within the group about those opinions. While focus group sessions do not usually generate generalizable quantitative data, they are used for their ability to generate qualitative data that reveal underlying experiences, perceptions, and attitudes from within a selected research population. The open-

ended nature of the questions is designed to encourage interaction among focus group participants that leads to rich description and analyses of shared and divergent opinions and experiences.

Each focus group, lasting approximately 90 minutes, was tape-recorded. Shortly after the conclusion of each focus group session, the facilitators met with a member of the Audit Team to talk through their impressions of the focus group session, with the Audit Team member taking notes during this debriefing session. Additionally, a focus group session consisting of the group facilitators, at which they discussed their perceptions of their own group session and compared themes that emerged across sessions, was held in May 2009, and was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in the same way as the other sessions.

After the conclusion of the focus group sessions (with the exception of the three sessions, which were held in the fall of 2009), the tape recordings of each session were transcribed during the summer of 2009. In late summer/early fall of 2009, each member of the Audit Team received a complete set of transcriptions and companion CD of the audio-recordings of each session. Each team member was assigned two sessions to listen and read through, first to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, and second to create a list of major themes that emerged during the session. Two members of the Audit Team examined each focus group session in this fashion. At group meetings of the Audit Team, the two examinations of each session were compared for their similarities and differences, and any differences in opinion were subject to open discussion. In a collaborative context, then, each focus group was used to yield a set of statements about the major issues raised in its session. Once each group had yielded a set of statements, groups were compared to see which groups had voiced similar themes, and where differences existed. From this, the Audit Team determined that four major themes crosscut the focus group sessions: inclusion; dialogue; governing and governance; and success. Each of these themes is discussed in more detail below.

Because the initial stages of the Audit Project involved soliciting student discussion in homogeneous groups, the Audit Team utilized a second stage of data solicitation designed to involve heterogeneous groups. After the four major themes cross-cutting the focus group sessions were identified, a series of residence hall events were set up, in which a pair of Audit Team members hosted an open forum, one in each of the nine residence halls, plus one in a townhouse (TH), and one at a venue for students living off campus, to discuss the provisional audit findings and solicit further feedback and input.

At each residence hall forum, one Audit Team member presented initial findings and sought to facilitate conversation about the extent to which these findings resonated with the experiences of those who attended the forum. The other Audit Team member took detailed notes of the evening's conversation. (The decision was made not to record these sessions out of a concern that recording devices would, in this setting, make participants feel self-conscious in a way that might serve to stifle conversation in this more public setting.) Each forum was scheduled to last an hour, with the Audit Team expressing willingness to stay for a longer period if there were students interested in doing so. Virtually all sessions went well beyond the hour. Notes from these sessions were collected and shared among members of the Audit Team for the purposes of

comparison among residence halls and also for comparison with the themes identified in the homogeneous focus group sessions.

The bulk of data that is directly presented below in the form of direct quotations, as well as that, which lies behind the findings, is taken from the focus group sessions. In part this is due to the research design, in which the focus group sessions were recorded while the residence hall sessions were not, which thus provided a level of detail in the former not available in the latter. It is also a result of the widely divergent numbers of students who attended the various residence hall forums and the ensuing difficulties of determining what represents a representative opinion among those meetings. It also seems to be the case that the selection process and intimate size of the focus group sessions fostered greater trust and candor than the open listening and sharing forums in the residence halls.

It is our sincere hope that this report, and its methodological focus on sharing and close listening, will help inform and direct the goals and tactics of a vital change initiative, as we collectively work toward creating a campus where all students can thrive.

## **FOUR RECURRENT AUDIT THEMES**

### **I. Inclusion**

**“It doesn’t feel like we’re all necessarily in one community.”**

Students see campus engagement in terms of individual choice. They see the choice to engage or withdraw as one made based on personal interest and/or temperament.

Some students are frustrated by what they see as the apathy or lack of engagement of their peers in issues of campus concern. Others suggest that they do not have the time or tools--especially full access to the facts about the issues--to involve themselves.

Some key campus rituals---especially serenading--feel superficial and even frivolous, alienating, and disrespectful to some students.

In general, students feel particularly supported by, and are aware of, the administrative offices that serve them during the first weeks of their freshmen year. Then, after the intensity of their first couple weeks on campus, the heightened presence of the administrative offices seems to recede, to the relief of some students, and to the discomfort of others.

In general, there is a sense that the college cares about the wellbeing of students and has the appropriate support systems in place, but there is also a lack of clarity about who and where, exactly, to turn (to) for support, and a hesitancy to do so based on personal predilection and a restrictive sense of campus norms.

There is concern with the paucity of on-campus weekend night events that do not revolve around alcohol and drugs.

Some students, especially (straight) female students, voiced concern with the “hook up” culture on campus, a culture of casual commitment-free sexual encounters with acquaintances or strangers, and the lack of dating. There is recognition that there is little modeling of healthy, sustaining, intimate relationships.

Some students feel marginalized due to aspects of their social identities or locations. In general, students--particularly those from underrepresented groups at Vassar--want formal, consistent, and affirmative acknowledgement of their presence on campus. They also seek genuine acknowledgement of how Vassar is enriched by--and benefits from--their presence as students, as well as the realities and challenges they may face.

Students referenced a wide range of experiences with the ALANA Center, from embracing it to avoiding it, from feeling welcomed to feeling excluded. Some students questioned the Center’s purpose, place, and meaning in relation to other campus spaces and the college at large.

Students voiced concern regarding the college’s relationship to Poughkeepsie and the local community, including the ways some students disparage Poughkeepsie. This disparagement is particularly vexing for students who identify with the city based on its resonance with their own home communities.

Some sense that the college’s relationship to Poughkeepsie runs in one direction--from Vassar to Poughkeepsie--and desire to forge more mutual relationships. Some students want interrogation of the seemingly dominant perception that Vassar is white and Poughkeepsie is black, as well as that the poor city needs Vassar’s help.

Some thought that living off-campus should be in all students’ imagination and easy to do.

Many students wish to see the campus more open to the broader community.

## II. Dialogue

**“All of the students stressed that the most important and effective way for Vassar to change is for dialogue and conversation such as this to continue and be more open to the rest of the campus.”**

**“When you want to deal with serious issues, there tends to be this sting movement, like ‘I don’t want to talk about that,’ and it gets old and people don’t want to talk about it even though everyone knows that it’s a pervasive issue, Vassar even knows.”**

### DESIRE FOR DIALOGUE

There is strong interest in continuing the dialogues launched during the 2009 focus group sessions, both within groups based on interest and identity, and within more heterogeneous groups. Participants stressed the need for more group discussions like the focus group sessions. Productive and genuine dialogue--the honest, open, vigorous, and respectful exchange of ideas--is seen as vital to the creation and sustainability of our shared working,

living, and learning campus community. For some, genuine dialogue is seen, in and of itself, as part of a change effort; others seek dialogue that is explicitly action-oriented.

#### IMPEDIMENTS TO DIALOGUE: SILENCE, SPEECH, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

There is a complex culture of suppressed speech, or silence, on campus. Students refrain from voicing their own thoughts about key issues and concerns both in public and in more private settings with their friends and peers. Some students appear to suppress their speech because they sense that the campus climate does not support a broad range of voices and opinions. There is a strong sense that there is a dominant, assumed, and controlling liberal secular viewpoint on campus, and there is a deep resistance or hesitancy on the part of students to disrupt this seemingly privileged and prescriptive worldview.

It also appears that students may refrain from publicly voicing their own thoughts about issues of concern on Vassar's small campus for fear of having their (possibly distorted) words travel without them to unintended sites and contexts and, in this manner, carry the potential to harm their public reputations.

Genuine speech also seems to be hindered by the sense that students can be quickly and definitively labeled by others and "fixed" into a static, limited, and limiting identity in the campus imagination. This form of labeling, students seem to fear, will impede their engagement with other students, burden the public possibility of their growth and change, and work to deny them fluidity and complexity. This dynamic was particularly salient for students who defined themselves as religiously committed, as they frequently expressed their reticence to reveal their religiosity for fear of being reduced to a fixed, oversimplified religious category and, in this way, seen--and engaged with--as outside the campus mainstream.

Latino/a students also pinpointed this dynamic and discussed the withholding of speech for fear of being labeled "the angry minority." Students who defined themselves as multiracial also voiced their frustration with the lack of open dialogue about the realities of, and issues concerning, multiracial and multicultural identities.

In addition, there is a strong sense that Vassar's campus culture refrains from holding its members accountable for their words and actions. Students express this as a lack of "calling each other out."

This holds true at both an institutional level and in interpersonal relations on campus.

Moreover, when someone is offended and attempts to articulate his/her thoughts directly, there seems to be a dynamic (and a fear of one) in which the offended person is told by peers (or made to feel that) that he/she must not have properly understood the spirit, genre, or intent of the offending words or acts. In this manner, the offense is often expressed or rationalized as irony, sarcasm, or humor (i.e. "it was a joke"). This dynamic appears to function as another form of silencing.

### III. Governing and Governance

**“I feel like we don’t actually know who’s making the final decision here about a lot of things.”**

**“There is an inequality when it comes to information. . . . There are people that know things and people that don’t know.”**

#### DECISION-MAKING

Students want to be kept abreast of issues and initiatives, they want to be listened to and responded to, and they want a clear role in decision-making.

The desire for transparency and open communication, especially in major decision-making, is a key theme, as there is a shared sense that major decision-making largely takes place behind closed doors.

There is also a critique that when student ideas and suggestions are solicited, that the final decisions made in relation to these solicitations, are not promptly reported back to students.

There is conflation--and misunderstanding--between the term “administrator” and the eight senior officers of the college. And, in general, students find confusing the broad “administrator” category, as well as the titles, roles, and responsibilities of individual administrators.

#### RESOURCES AND INFORMATION

There is a sense that there is an inequity of information, that some students have knowledge of “special channels” to resources and opportunities, and others do not.

Students voiced a desire for open channels for discussion and information, as well as for the transparency of networks, channels, and resources.

There is a strong desire for clear, consistent, coordinated public information though students feel inundated by email messages, and often delete them.

In terms of communication, some sense that the dominant college mode is one of reactive, media-wary “crisis management,” instead of a preferred proactive mode of regular, on-going, inclusive, well-attended, and productive campus dialogues around issues of concern to publicly air, and possibly resolve, them.

At the same time, there is a desire for strong, clear, coordinated, and prompt responses to campus crises from senior officers.

#### RHETORIC AND CLAIMS

Students expressed that Vassar’s claims regarding the diversity of the student body do not always ring true. There can be a disconcerting disconnect between the college’s claim of diversity and students’ sense of it.

Within the “female” students focus group, there was also discussion of the disconnect between the feeling that Vassar instills that women can do anything men can do, and the stark recognition, particularly off-campus in field work and study trips, of their gender-informed vulnerability.

#### IV. Success

**“There is immense social pressure at Vassar to be engaged in ‘eighty’ activities, clubs, organizations, groups, have an active social life, and get straight A’s, all at the same time.”**

#### UNDERSTANDINGS OF SUCCESS

Students express a tension between learning for learning, and learning for a grade.

There is also tension between the pursuit of balance and wellbeing, and formal markers of success. Students sense that the college--in its preoccupation with rank and rankings--prizes academic accomplishments (grades, honors, fellowships) over other forms of accomplishments. There is a desire for many forms of success to be appreciated, including personal growth.

Some students feel that GPAs are nicely downplayed at Vassar, in comparison to their high schools or their sense of Ivy League colleges, and they feel that Vassar students are more relaxed and less competitive than their Ivy League peers. For others, GPAs loom uncomfortably large.

There is a search for a balance between academics, social life, and extracurricular activities, as students feel pressure to over-commit.

For some, there is also a struggle to know how to value their education, and what to make of their college experience.

#### PEDAGOGY

Students express a range of mostly positive relationships with faculty. Students enjoy small classes and open-minded, accessible, and approachable faculty. There is appreciation for professors who go out of their way to work/connect with students and who demonstrate that they want everyone in the class to succeed.

Students voice their desire for faculty to share more of their lives and perspectives outside the classroom on issues beyond their particular expertise. Some express a desire for faculty to be more active in some of the student groups and to make appearances at the events that are important to students.

Some students want faculty to be more mindful about how students might experience difficult, charged, and/or potent topics.

They also want faculty to be more aware of the fact that what shows up as academic struggles in classes often have emotional struggles at their base.

## CURRICULUM/CO-CURRICULUM

Within many of the focus group sessions, there are calls for a new required course. Suggestions for the goal of the course range, and include: a course that helps students name, engage, resolve, and prevent conflict; a course that provides a primer toolkit based on feminist, queer, and critical race theories; an applied local community-based learning course; a course that focuses on contemporary life at Vassar; a course that explores classism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism; and a course with attention to the dynamics and impact of whiteness.

Students suggest that some of these issues are fruitfully introduced during freshmen orientation, but suggest that the topics need to be collectively, seriously, and substantively returned to over the course of their time here. There is also the suggestion that a course taught by a faculty member may best convey the seriousness of purpose.

Faculty advising is seen as inconsistent. Students seek consistent, available, helpful faculty advisors who provide direction and support.

Students appreciate the accessibility and approachability of many administrators. Students greatly appreciate being warmly and directly engaged as individuals by administrators, lauding the times when administrators reached out to them and supported their event, activity, or growth. They appreciate when administrators accept invitations to attend student events or collaborate with them on campus activities. The Office of Religious and Spiritual Life and the Office of International Services were repeatedly heralded for the support they provide for religiously committed and international students, respectively.

## GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

### I. Inclusion

**Goal: A campus where all students feel they belong, and can actively commit to an inclusive and evolving campus community.**

1. Foster trust in the institution by clearly defining and frequently restating the college's core principles and priorities. Clearly align practices with principles and priorities, and proactively address gaps with honesty, clarity, and compassion.
2. Explicitly ask/invite students to commit/belong to the Vassar community. Continually explain why committing to belong to our "shared working, living, and learning" community is vital, and model various ways to do it.
3. Affirm and address the perceptions, experiences, needs, and aspirations of different social groups on campus. Continually signal openness to closely listen to,

and frankly discuss, the ways social identities and locations can differentially influence how students experience campus life and learning.

4. Provide meaningful opportunities for collective action. Encourage working together for a common purpose or cause. Provide ample opportunities for students to contribute to the wider community.
5. Consider the practices--including the rituals--that work to define us as members of the college community, and ensure that they reflect and resonate with the contemporary realities and aspirations of the diverse and evolving student body.
6. Make support networks central and present throughout the campus experience. Reorient campus culture so that actively inviting support--including professional support--is seen as normal and healthy.

### **Recommendations for Concrete Action:**

#### **ORIENTATION**

- A. Enhance student-student advising. One viable model is the Asian Students' Alliance "Big Brother and Big Sister Program."
- B. Incorporate janitorial staff into orientation, and set clear expectations for student maintenance of living areas.
- C. Share clear hosting guidelines and "best practices" with incoming international students and hosts. Consider local (non-Vassar) families as potential hosts, and enable off-campus experiences.
- D. Make concrete commitment to first-generation college students to better ensure their wellbeing, possibly by the creation of an administrative post. Consider offering regular dinners for first-generation college students and members of their support networks.
- E. Foster opportunity to talk about faith during orientation. Consider the creation of freshmen orientation activity modeled after "Gays of Our Lives," a comedic-based skit, around religions of our lives.
- F. Create opportunity to talk about living and learning with a disability during orientation, and promote greater awareness and understanding of disability issues.
- G. Provide post first-year, follow-up opportunities for students to re-experience freshmen orientation activities such as "Gays of Our Lives" and "Sex and Sensibility."

H. Offer clear follow-up to freshmen orientation for students at the beginning of their second year both to reflect on their first-year experiences, and to equip them for the challenges and opportunities of the sophomore year.

#### STUDENT LIFE

- A. Provide appropriate prayer and reflection spaces for people of all faiths.
- B. Accommodate the dietary needs of all students.
- C. Establish vibrant social programming for students who do not want drinking or drug-oriented activity between 10 pm and 2 am on weekend nights.
- D. Invite frank conversations about the culture of “hooking up” on a female majority campus in small, trust-generative groups facilitated by someone who is equipped to discuss the possible emotional and physical costs of casual sexual encounters with acquaintances or strangers.
- E. Invite conversations about healthy relationships: what they look like, and how to form them.
- F. Assess the rituals, or “Traditions” as they are listed in the Vassar Student Handbook, to see if they both reflect and resonate with the student body, and contribute to the vitality and wellbeing of the college community.
- G. Review the accessibility to popular student curricular and co-curricular activities, particularly in the arts. For highly desired activities where there are significant barriers to access due to competitiveness or high demand (photography, music, film, and drama were specified) provide alternate, more inclusive paths to participation.
- H. Create multiple sites for conversations about the ALANA Center, including its name, its mission and purpose, its current and potential constituents, the representativeness of its programming and staff, and the role (material and symbolic) the multicultural center has on campus.
- I. Foster discussion regarding designated cultural spaces on campus, including centers such as ALANA, Bayit, LGBTQ (formerly Blegen House), and the Women’s Center.
- J. Study and follow up on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Consortium on High Achievement and Success (CHAS) student survey data.

#### LOCAL COMMUNITY

- A. Develop, encourage, and publicize more opportunities for learning about Poughkeepsie and the local community, including more opportunities to see the human and social capital aspects of the city.

- B. Enable off-campus housing for interested students.
- C. Avoid “penalizing” students by barring them from campus housing and, in effect, sending them to live in the local community.
- D. Combine relevant high school and college organizational chapters (i.e. hold collective Amnesty International meetings with local high school and college affiliates) to enable communication and collaboration among area high school and college students.
- E. Offer Vassar’s shuttle bus service to Poughkeepsie residents, and allow local residents to use campus facilities.

## II. Dialogue

**Goal: A campus community defined by productive and genuine dialogue--the honest, open, vigorous and respectful exchange of ideas--among students with a broad range of backgrounds, experiences, and views.**

1. Institutionally commit to create more spaces and opportunities for--and assistance with--dialogue and discussion. Foreground the ways dialogue can lead to change and growth.
2. Set clear expectations for how intense disagreements (both in person and on line) will be handled. Provide models for effective conflict resolution.
3. Foster shared faculty commitment to model and facilitate productive dialogue with students about key campus issues and concerns.

### Recommendations for Concrete Action:

- A. Establish regular, proactive town meetings with the strong and clear expectation that all students participate.
- B. Establish a combined academic and student/residential life Intergroup Dialogue (or Intergroup Relations) Program, a cohesive, curricular/co-curricular integration of scholarly learning and experiential knowledge to deepen awareness of issues of justice, identity, and diversity, enhance communication skills, and promote dialogue and civic engagement. For an influential (and ambitious) model, see the University of Michigan’s Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR). <http://www.igr.umich.edu/>

Occidental College (1,850 students) adopted a curricular-based Intergroup Dialogue Program (IDP) modeled after the University of Michigan’s program in 2002-03. See <http://www.departments.oxy.edu/dialogue/index.htm>

C. Provide students with the Teaching Tolerance handbook: “Speak Up!: Responding to Everyday Bigotry” and invite students to take the “Pledge to Speak Up.” See <http://www.tolerance.org/handbook/speak/speak>

### **III. Governing and Governance**

**Goal: A campus where honesty, transparency, clarity, and compassion are the guiding principles for communication.**

**Goal: The College’s policies governing student life and living are known, practiced, and fairly, promptly, and consistently sustained.**

1. Institutionally commit to end perception and reality of an inequity of information and resources at the college, as it is undermining institutional trust and a sense of fairness and order. Make all resources, services, and opportunities--and the criteria for obtaining them--public, transparent, and clear. Publicly state--and clearly communicate--all resources available to students, and distribute them fairly and consistently.
2. Heighten awareness of the college’s governing structure, and show how students can participate. Invite conversations regarding our shared governance, and the rights and responsibilities of all students to sustain it.
3. Provide more clarity and transparency about the composition of the student body. Discuss real and/or perceived gaps between rhetoric and reality.
4. Consistently affirm the meaning and purpose of a diverse student body. Address real and/or perceived inconsistencies between espoused and enacted institutional values regarding diversity.
5. Provide frank, honest, and compassionate acknowledgement of the realities, challenges, and opportunities at Vassar and beyond for all students.

#### **Recommendations for Concrete Action:**

- A. Increase student awareness of Vassar’s governing policies, procedures, and privileges.
- B. Make explicit the decision-making processes at the college, and clearly share how students can participate in them.
- C. Explain and publicize who is who (particularly senior officers and other administrators), and who is in charge of what on campus. Clarify, publicize, and prominently display the administrative organization of the college.

D. Promptly and explicitly share who (or what body or office) made what important decision and why.

E. Invite conversation about the role of the current Matriculation Pledge signed at freshmen registration, and its passive annual renewal via registration.

F. Consider the establishment of an evolving, collectively defined and actively sustained honor code that encompasses the ideals of both principled living and learning. For a model of one of the most deliberate living honor codes in the country--and one of the few honor codes with a social dimension--see Haverford College (1,169 students) <http://www.haverford.edu/studentlife/honorcode.php>

G. Financial aid policy and publicity need to clearly state how citizenship status relates to the policy.

H. Take visible institutional action to make certain that all academic departments and college offices create and clearly state, publicize, and follow collectively agreed upon policies and procedures for distributing discretionary funds.

I. Keep current the survey, report, and manual spearheaded in 2008 by Vassar's Class Issues Alliance (now Vassar Association of Class Activists): "Navigating Vassar." Publicize the manual and make it easily available to all students.

J. Rethink the viable channels of communication with students.

#### **IV. Success**

**Goal: A College where all students achieve academic success and social satisfaction.**

1. Align curricula and pedagogies with college's core principles and mission.
2. Invite conversations about definitions of success at Vassar.
3. Continually highlight a wide range of student paths to satisfaction and success.
4. Promote time and space for administrators and faculty to be genuinely available to students, and present at key student activities and events.
5. Increase administrator and faculty awareness of the principles and processes of social, emotional, and cognitive development during late adolescence and early adulthood.
6. Heighten administrator and faculty awareness and understanding of students' social identities in the context of systems of power and inequality.

## **Recommendations for Concrete Action:**

### **PEDAGOGY**

- A. Provide opportunities for faculty to expand their range of pedagogical practices--including field-based and socially engaged pedagogies--to best address the campus as a vibrant and evolving learning environment for different kinds of learners.
- B. Regularly provide faculty with opportunities to collectively learn and share pedagogical tools for facilitating classroom dialogue around key campus issues and concerns. Equip faculty to directly engage campus conflicts and crises with students.
- C. Reorient faculty advising by equipping and encouraging faculty to engage students not as “pre-majors” or “majors,” but as whole people--with personal and academic challenges and aspirations--who are eager for connection, guidance, and a sense of the possibilities that may await them.

### **CURRICULUM/CO-CURRICULUM**

- A. Provide meaningful opportunities to reflect on and practice personal and social responsibility in the curriculum and co-curriculum.
- B. Enable curricular and co-curricular opportunities for civic engagement and community partnerships; provide a range of opportunities for students to contribute to the wider community.
- C. Explore the possibility of widely offered/strongly-encouraged courses that allow students to collectively explore questions of deep social and personal significance.
- D. Create a forum for dialogue between academic departments/programs and student organizations around shared interests: citizenship, nation, sexuality, gender, disability, race, class, culture, etc.

### **CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND POST-COLLEGE ADVISING**

- A. Align resources and practices, as much as possible, with the college’s core principles.
- B. Proactively provide honest and sensitive advising concerning the realities, challenges, and opportunities for students regarding internships, work, and careers.
- C. Provide international students with candid advising specific to their international status, and develop an active alumnae/i network for international student graduates.
- D. Provide students living with a disability with candid advising specific to their needs for accommodations, and develop a network of alumnae/i who can share post-college experiences, including workplace accommodations.
- E. Find and further outside funding for important but unpaid internships.

F. For a model of the range of career advising possibilities, see Brown University's Career Development Center. Note Brown's advising position and campus initiative that focuses on "Careers in the Common Good" (i.e. "non-profits, government, entrepreneurial, and for-profit arenas that have a focus on social causes and social change"). See <http://careerdevelopment.brown.edu/ccg/>

Wesleyan University's Career Resource Center (2,700 students) also has a "Careers in the Common Good" program in conjunction with Wesleyan's Center for Community Partnerships.

[http://www.wesleyan.edu/crc/students/special\\_programs/ccg/about.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/crc/students/special_programs/ccg/about.html)

#### GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

A. Apply for a Ford Foundation Advancing Higher Education Access and Success Grant, see <http://www.fordfoundation.org/>

B. Apply for a Ford Foundation Building Knowledge For Social Justice Grant, see <http://www.fordfoundation.org/>