

**Addressing the Needs of Non-Traditional Students:  
Adopting a Suitable Pre-Matriculation Program at Vassar College**

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**A White Paper Prepared by the Pre-Matriculation Working Group**

**Jacquie Butler, Class of 2009**

**Kleaver Cruz, Class of 2011**

**Indiana Garcia, Class of 2011**

**Rachel Tetteh, Class of 2011**

**and,**

**Zachariah Mampilly, Assistant Professor, Political Science**

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## Executive Summary

A pre-matriculation summer program is necessary at Vassar College because non-traditional students currently attending Vassar have demonstrated a need for substantive and committed support from the institution. In entering college, the transition period for non-traditional students is critical and it is the institution's responsibility to address the issues of all students attending Vassar, especially for those who are typically marginalized in society and on campus. A pre-matriculation program would provide the support needed by these students in the following ways:

- Providing academic preparation *before* beginning the regular school year
- Alleviating possible culture shock and easing the cultural transition
- Rendering awareness of campus resources and support opportunities
- Facilitating peer-to-peer/faculty-to-peer networking and mentoring relationships
- Fostering community ties and relationships
- Helping students build confidence in themselves

We strongly recommend that the institution implement a six-week summer pre-matriculation program similar to the one outlined in this paper as soon as possible. Without such a program, Vassar College will continue failing to meet the needs of non-traditional students, ignoring the voices of those students who most need to be heard, and rendering the institution's commitment to support and accessibility empty and insincere.

## Statement of Problem

At the start of the Spring semester of 2009, a group of approximately 20 students gathered to discuss issues related to their shared backgrounds and status' as ethnic/racial minorities, low-income, and/or first-generation students, (for the purpose of this paper, these student will be referred to as non-traditional students<sup>1</sup>) currently attending Vassar College. Together with various faculty members and school administrators, the students engaged in conversations and shared grievances concerning their experiences as non-traditional students. Throughout a series of meetings and conversations, some of the overarching themes included: how and why being a non-traditional student makes it more difficult for one to adjust/succeed at Vassar and the ways in which Vassar has failed to meet the unique needs of non-traditional students. In particular, the group focused on the challenges students face in *transitioning* to Vassar and sought to highlight the importance of non-traditional students becoming successfully acclimated to a college setting.

According to the U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Science (IES), large gaps continue to exist between college enrollment and completion rates of non-traditional students in comparison to White students who are not first-generation or/nor low-income.<sup>2</sup> Success at a highly selective, academically challenging institution such as Vassar intensifies the difficulties faced by non-traditional students. Rather than punishing non-traditional students for being ill-prepared for college, the institution should embrace these differences and provide the necessary support to bridge the gap between achievement rates that currently exist. It is also critical that the institution recognize the achievement gap among non-traditional students as symptomatic of societal factors rather than an inherent or natural characteristic.

Students from non-traditional backgrounds are often academically disadvantaged when entering a college setting, but it is also important to recognize that academics are not the only area in which non-traditional students endure negative consequences. Particularly at a small, liberal arts college such as Vassar where the student population is predominantly white and upper-class, disadvantages that come with low socio-economic or racial/ethnic minority status are multifaceted and complex. Though a large number of concerns were expressed by most of the students in the transition group, the overall consensus was that non-traditional students suffer economically, socially, and/or academically throughout their time at Vassar. Further, many students expressed feelings of disappointment and frustration with the institution for failing to address these issues.

Vassar College prides itself on being a diverse institution and in many ways actively seeks to diversify its community and student body. Through its admissions processes and financial aid packages, students from diverse backgrounds are drawn and accepted to Vassar College, yet ultimately find themselves (in comparison to their peers), academically under-prepared,

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<sup>1</sup>Racial/ethnic minority status denotes membership in a group designated by the U.S. Census as a minority group, including Black-Americans, Latinos, Native-Americans and Asian-Americans.

First-generation students are those who are member of the first generation of their immediate families to attend and complete a post-secondary education.

Low-income students are typically defined as those within the lowest 20 percent income rate. At Vassar low-income is determined by the Financial Aid office and includes, but is not limited, to those deemed by the college as "high need".

<sup>2</sup> Visit the IES website at: <http://www.ies.ed.gov/> for more information and statistics regarding disparities in education levels among non-traditional students.

economically lacking, and socially disregarded. In most, if not all, aspects of student life non-traditional students struggle to perform both socially and academically, with economic factors underlining many of these struggles. The first year in college is crucial for any student, and hardships non-traditional students endure upon arriving to Vassar influence the entirety of their student careers.

For these reasons, the transition group collectively decided that Vassar College must institute a program that will address the multitude of issues affecting non-traditional students today. A pre-matriculation program would be an ideal way to ease the transition period for many non-traditional students entering Vassar and can improve the lives of those students throughout their time at Vassar. Please refer to Appendix A to read student testimonials regarding the difficulties non-traditional students face at Vassar College and the need for institutional support in the form of a pre-matriculation program.

The objectives of a pre-matriculation program at Vassar would be to meet the needs of non-traditional students by:

- Providing academic preparation *before* beginning the regular school year
- Alleviating possible culture shock<sup>3</sup> and easing the cultural transition
- Rendering awareness of campus resources and support opportunities
- Facilitating peer-to-peer/faculty-to-peer networking and mentoring relationships
- Fostering community ties and relationships
- Helping students build confidence in themselves

A pre-matriculation program that could provide these essential services would strongly benefit non-traditional students and ultimately strengthen Vassar College's capacity as a diverse and inclusive academic institution.

Many of Vassar's peer institutions have already adopted pre-matriculation programs that serve to assist non-traditional students' transition to college (See Appendix B for examples). It is highly recommended that Vassar College seriously consider instituting such a program in the near future. The following is a compilation of research regarding various forms of pre-matriculation programs in effect at other institutions today and suggestions as to which form Vassar College should adopt if the institution dedicates itself to helping non-traditional students.

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<sup>3</sup> Culture shock is a term widely used to describe one's feeling of anxiety and/or discomfort in response to a new environment or living arrangement.

### **Concrete Findings and Recommendation:**

Students will be selected based on their membership in one of the three categories discussed above. For a portion of the students that the Admission's Office deems as requiring additional support, the program will be mandatory. Others will be encouraged to opt into the program at their own discretion. Students selected to attend the program will receive a full scholarship for the course including travel expenses, room, board and educational materials, dependent on approval from the Financial Aid office.

A six-week program was determined to be most appropriate to allow for rigorous academic and social preparation prior to the beginning of the school year. It allows sufficient time for students to build a community with their peers and program staff at Vassar.

The program is aimed towards providing comparable coursework that transitioning students will take in the upcoming semester (See Appendix C for sample program daily schedule). Students will take two courses for full credit. The first will be a composition course to help strengthen their writing abilities. The second will be a multi-disciplinary course that emphasizes critical reasoning skills. In addition to these core classes, students will participate in workshops organized by the faculty of the program or guest lecturers drawn from the college staff. The goal will be to acclimate students with resources available at Vassar and in the Poughkeepsie community before they begin the semester. Workshops will include learning about the different resources on campus such as the financial aid and student employment offices; how to use library and other research facilities on campus; and awareness of the resources available in the Poughkeepsie community such as places to shop for low-priced items, beauty and grooming supplies, medical facilities, and places of worship.

Social activities will be organized to foster community building both within Vassar and the larger Poughkeepsie area. Day trips to surrounding landmarks and other sights will be organized. For example, visits to the historic home of Franklin D. Roosevelt, beautiful Hudson Valley nature sites and New York City. Community service to the Vassar and Poughkeepsie communities will also be scheduled weekly for the participants.

Staffing for the program will be drawn from the Vassar community. Professors who already work at Vassar will be encouraged to submit innovative course proposals to teach in the program. In this manner, students will be able to develop relationships with their professors before matriculating as well as learning how to communicate in a college setting. The program will also make use of student counselors who will be responsible for leading tutorials, providing peer-to-peer counseling, and arranging social activities. The workshops will be run by affiliates of Vassar as well as the students and faculty already involved in the program. For example, a workshop on study skills may be organized by the Learning and Teaching Center already present on campus.

## Appendix A: Student Interviews:

### Key:

SoC Student of Color

1Gen First Generation

LI Low-income

*Question # 1: How would you describe your transition to Vassar?*

### **Student A (SoC, 1Gen):**

At first, I would say it was a very positive transition. The ALANA center and the people within my dorm made me feel like being a person of color didn't really play a role in my experiences at Vassar. But, after a while I started realizing that racial discriminations, whether intentional or not, do occur at Vassar. By the end of the year these discriminations made me feel like an outsider within my own school.

### **Student B (SoC):**

It was not ideal, but it wasn't terrible. I just felt like my fellow group didn't really understand me, being that they were white and I wasn't. They would say things around me that they shouldn't have, things that made me really uncomfortable and very aware of my race. I don't think they did it on purpose, it's just that they weren't used to being around a person of color.

### **Student C (SoC, 1Gen, LI):**

I felt very lonely as a person of color. I didn't really know anybody who was like me, except my roommate who happened to be Asian.

### **Student D (SoC, LI):**

I felt completely out of place. My roommate had more money than God. I found it really difficult to find people like me. I felt uncomfortable and ostracized when I had to deal with situations in which people's affluence were displayed. I had to somehow figure out, by myself, how to deal with this uncomfortable feeling.

### **Student E (SoC, 1Gen, LI):**

I felt very lonely, especially because my freshman year I was placed in Josselyn House, which in my opinion is the whitest dorm on campus. My fellow group was nice, but very cliquey. I don't know if they did it on purpose or not, but I was always left out. I just felt like I didn't know anybody who was like me. The ALANA center got me out of my rut. The seniors that year helped a lot by inviting me to their houses and making me feel welcome at Vassar. Because of them, I found my niche. As a first generational student, I felt very alone and lost when it came to

applying for financial aid. My mom doesn't really know what's going on, so academically I feel like she isn't really a support system. When I need advice, I know I can't call home. I mean I know she loves me a lot and cares about my well being, but she can't really provide any advice because she never went to college and isn't familiar with the culture.

**Student F (1Gen, LI):**

I never really considered coming to an institution like Vassar as even possible for me. I couldn't afford it and neither could my parents. I completed three years in a community college before participating in Vassar's Exploring Transfer. Eventually, after completing the ET program I was able to transfer into Vassar. Going to Vassar was the first time I was ever extensively away from home. As a first generational student, being at Vassar and away from home has put a strain on my family life. My family believes that I am very lucky to be at a place like Vassar. Every time I ask the financial aid office for more money or use a complex vocabulary around my family, they yell at me. They don't understand what I do or learn in college; they cannot relate. It took me an entire year to feel as if I actually belonged at Vassar. My first semester was terrible. The Transfer, Visiting and Exchange fellow that was assigned to me did not really help my transition. I felt academically prepared to be at an institution like Vassar, but not socially. When it came to not having enough money, I felt very uncomfortable asking for it.

**Student G (1Gen, LI):**

My transition was a little bit rough. It was very difficult transitioning from a High School that had predominately low income students to an institution with mostly high income students. Socially, the transition was very hard. I was surrounded by students who could afford to go out into Poughkeepsie and not have campus jobs. The people from home didn't understand why I was at Vassar and wanted me to go to community college; they didn't understand the opportunities a place like Vassar could offer me. Academically, I was always fighting. I went to the writing center all the time because I didn't have confidence in my writing.

*Question # 2: Do you think a pre-matriculation program for incoming freshmen would have had a significant impact on your transition to Vassar?*

**Student A:**

A pre-matriculation program at Vassar College would be a great thing. It would allow students to understand what it means to be at a place like Vassar before actually being thrust into it- it takes away the surprises. But I think in order for a transition program to be truly effective some sort of follow up must happen during second semester.

**Student B:**

Academically, it would be really beneficial because, in my opinion, the freshmen writing seminar didn't help me at all. It doesn't really teach you how to write- you just write. It would have definitely eliminated me from feeling/being behind.

**Student C:**

It would definitely help- allow you to get used to the environment/campus.

**Student E:**

I think a pre-matriculation program would really be a good thing. It would familiarize you with the campus, academic workload, connect you with people who identify like yourself and it also will give you confidence.

**Student F:**

Yes. I did Exploring Transfer, which was like a pre-matriculation program. I would have felt even more alone and uncomfortable at a place like Vassar if I had not completed ET. ET gave me confidence. However, ET doesn't really follow up on students once they have completed the program. The purpose of the program is to get students into a 4 year college, not necessarily Vassar.

**Student G:**

A pre-matriculation program would've given me confidence before starting freshmen year. It would have allowed me to meet a group of people who come from the same backgrounds as me. At Vassar, I felt very alone because I was on full financial aid, but a pre-matriculation program would have allowed me to meet people like me.

## **Appendix B: Models of other pre-matriculation programs**

### **A. Mt. Holyoke College: “Passages” & International Students program**

#### **1. Length of program**

2 days

#### **2. Targeted participants**

International students and students of color/ multiracial students.

#### **3. Goals of the program**

To begin to address the needs of specific groups and individuals while also building community across lines of difference; initiating dialogues critical of social identities (ethnicity, gender, class, ability, religion and sexuality).

#### **4. Selection Process**

The pre-orientation program is required for all international students. Any student of color/ multiracial student who wants to attend is also admitted.

#### **5. Credit for program**

No

#### **6. Effectiveness of the program on student experiences**

The majority of the students who participate in the program state that they found it very helpful in their transition to MHC according to an overall orientation survey. However, some students feel that they did not have as many opportunities to connect outside of their affinity groups. In response, the program has been redesigned to include both individual program events that focus on the specific needs of each group and programming events that will give the participants an opportunity to make connections across groups.

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### **B. UCLA: Freshman Summer Program**

#### **1. Length of program**

6 weeks

#### **2. Targeted participants**

Low income and first generation students.

#### **3. Goals of the program**

Provide rigorous academic training to students prior to entering college. Students take intensive coursework in composition and political science. Foster campus awareness and community among groups traditionally underrepresented on the UCLA campus.

#### **4. Selection Process**

Certain students are admitted to UCLA contingent on their completing the program. The rest are encouraged to attend by program staff who send letters to students based on where they attend high school.

#### **5. Credit for program**

Yes

#### **6. Effectiveness of the program on student experiences**

Students have higher completion rates than their comparably situated peers who opt not to take the program. Students report having a stronger sense of community and greater confidence regarding their abilities to handle college level work.

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### **C. New York State Education Department: Higher Education Opportunities Program (HEOP)**

#### **1. Length of program**

6 week pre-matriculation program, plus four years of support after entering college.

#### **2. Targeted participants**

New York State residents from low-income backgrounds with exceptional academic potential.

#### **3. Goals of the program**

Provide a broad range of services to New York State residents who would otherwise be unable to attend a postsecondary educational institution. Provides funds to assist in the recruitment, screening, and testing of prospective students. Provides structured support services including a prefreshman summer program, counseling, tutoring, and remedial/developmental coursework.

#### **4. Selection Process**

Program has strict financial guidelines that must be met by the student in order to qualify for the program.

#### **5. Credit for program**

Yes (Dependent on partner institution).

#### **6. Effectiveness of the program on student experiences**

HEOP students graduate at a higher rate than their peers.

## **Appendix C: Proposed Program Outline**

The following schedule is a glimpse of what a regular week would look like in the program.

### **Monday:**

8:00 – 9:00    Breakfast  
9:00 – 11:00   Physics in Film (Sample course title)  
11:00 – 1:00   Lunch / Study Time  
1:00 – 2:00    Workshop  
2:00 – 4:00    Tutoring w/ peer counselors  
4:00 – 5:00    Community Activity  
5:00 – 6:00    Free / Study Time  
6:00 – 7:00    Dinner  
7:00 – 8:00    Social Event

### **Tuesday:**

8:00 – 9:00    Breakfast  
9:00 – 11:00   Writing Composition  
11:00 – 1:00   Lunch / Study Time  
1:00 – 2:00    Workshop  
2:00 – 4:00    Tutoring w/ peer counselors  
4:00 – 5:00    Community Activity  
5:00 – 6:00    Free / Study Time  
6:00 – 7:00    Dinner  
7:00 – 8:00    Social Event

### **Wednesday:**

See Monday

**Thursday:**

See Tuesday

**Friday:**

9:00 – 10:00 Breakfast

10:00 – 4:00 Day Trip

**Saturday:**

9:00 – 10:00 Breakfast

10:00 – 4:00 Community Service to both Vassar and Poughkeepsie Community

## Appendix D: Estimated Budget

Based on 40 student participants attending a six weeks long program.

	Item	Quantity and Price	Estimated Cost
1.	Faculty Instructor	2 @ \$6000.00	12000.00
2.	Student Advisors	4 @ \$3000.00	12000.00
3.	Housing	44 @ \$5 per day for 42 days	9240.00
4.	Board	44 @ \$30 per day for 42 days	55440.00
5.	Travel Costs	40 @ \$200.00	8000.00
6.	Educational Materials	44 @ \$100.00	4400.00
7.	Activities	44 @ \$50.00	2200.00
	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>103,280.00</b>