

## MEMORANDUM

**FRM:** Jason Rubin, VSA President  
**TO:** William Plapinger, Chair of the Board of Trustees  
Sally Clement, Chair of the Student Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees  
Mark Ordan, Trustee  
Geraldine Laybourne, Trustee  
Meryl Streep, Trustee  
Catharine Hill, President  
Chris Roellke, Dean of the College  
Jonathan Chenette, Acting President & Dean of the Faculty  
Stephen Rock, Acting Dean of the Faculty  
Marianne Begemann, Dean of Strategic Planning & Academic Resources  
Elizabeth Eismeier, Vice President for Finance & Administration  
Janet Gray, Professor of Psychology & Director of Science, Technology, and Society,  
in her capacity as Faculty Observer to the Board of Trustees  
Teresa Quinn, Assistant Dean of the College for Campus Activities  
David “D.B.” Brown, Dean of Students  
Ed Pittman, Associate Dean of the College for Campus Life & Diversity  
Luis Inoa, Director of Residential Life  
**RE:** Student Space Committee Findings & Recommendations  
**DTE:** March 2, 2013

### Executive Summary

Over the past year, the VSA’s Student Space Committee engaged in a comprehensive research agenda dedicated to examining the concept of student space on campus in light of the potential opening of the current bookstore space in the College Center. Findings have directed the Committee towards addressing three key questions: does the campus need a student space? If so, what should that space look like? And, what can be done to address some of the campus’ needs pending the construction of a new space? The Committee found clear need for a new space. Students cited dissatisfaction with existing spaces and the need for casual, comfortable communal spaces for use between classes and late night as well as places to gather that offer alternatives to parties and campus-wide events. The space should serve two functions: a large comfortable 24-hour café-style dining and “hang out space” on the one hand and a more structured student organization and services space supporting organization meetings and activities as well as identity-safe support spaces and other student services. The Committee has overall concluded that the conversion of the current bookstore space into a dedicated student space provides the College with a critical opportunity to address a wide-range of pressing student needs on campus and continue supporting crucial extracurricular and social engagement.

### Introduction & Background

On September 9, 2012 the Vassar Student Association (the “VSA”) unanimously chartered the Student Space Committee (the “Committee”). The Committee was charged with advising the College in its consideration of how to best utilize what is currently the bookstore space, once the bookstore is relocated to the former Juliet space. This memorandum, together with

the notes and other data resulting from the Committee's various research projects described in more detail below and available upon request to the VSA constitute the Committee's findings and report.

The Committee's membership was as follows:

Jason Rubin, VSA President

Vince Marchetta, Class of 2013 President

Daniel Shaw, Class of 2014 President

Alison Ehrlich, Class of 2015 President

Benjamin Morse, Jewett President

Catherine Chapman, Raymond House President

The Committee was chaired by Jason Rubin and met in full over the course of the year at his discretion. The chair also provided regular updates to the VSA Council, Dean of the College, and Assistant Dean of the College for Campus Activities.

### Methodology

The Committee engaged in three forms of data collection in order to shape its analysis:

- A. *Outreach*: The committee began its process in the fall with informal conversations with house teams in all nine residences. Two members of the Committee facilitated each session with the help of a discussion guide developed by the Committee. These informal sessions were followed by one-on-one informal brief interviews with students (so-called "guerrilla interviews") in the Students' Building ("UpC"). The Committee developed a short questionnaire relating to respondent experience with UpC to standardize these mini-interviews. Finally, the Committee tabled in the College Center, asking students to fill out index cards describing what they would like to see in a new student space.
- B. *Focus Groups*: In October the Committee set up six focus groups: four divided by class year and two serving as mixed-year controls. The Committee brought in a recent alum, first to work with the Committee in developing a standardized discussion guide and then to facilitate all six groups. Each group consisted of approximately ten students and lasted roughly an hour and a half. Groups were voice recorded and members of the Committee attended each to take notes. Participation was incentivized with \$10 of Vcash.
- C. *Campus Wide Survey*: In the beginning of the spring semester, the Committee developed a 35 question survey providing a quantitative method of further evaluating the qualitative data received during the course of the focus groups and as other points the Committee wished to explore. The survey was distributed by email from the Committee's chair and 700 students responded. Responses were demographically representative across class years and residences.

### Findings

The Committee began the year with the understanding that the bookstore would soon relocate from its current location, freeing prime territory in the College Center, which the College had committed to designating as a student space in some form. Over the course of the year, in light of various financial constraints facing the College, those givens have

become less clear, and therefore the Committee has endeavored to maintain fluidity in its research, broadening the work it has done and tackling a wide variety of questions relating to the need for a student space. The Committee has therefore sought to address first: whether a student space is indeed necessary or desirable, second: what such a space should look like, and third: how the College may begin to address some of these concerns pending the completion of a new space. This section is organized accordingly.

### I. Does Vassar need a student space?

This question, fundamental to the Committee's work, is complicated for a number of reasons, including the need to define a "student space." At the most basic level, to borrow the words of a focus group participant, these spaces are defined by a sense that "you can go to [them] whenever you feel you want to." By in large, students indicated that a student space was unconstrained, comfortable, and most importantly accessible day and night. Unsurprisingly, students also often narrowed their conceptions of students spaces based on existing spaces on campus, in particular the Retreat and UpC, both discussed in more detail later in this section.

Allowing students to make their own definition of student space, a majority of students on campus disagree or strongly disagree with the statement "I am satisfied with the current student spaces on campus." This dissatisfaction grew from freshman year, through senior year, when off-campus housing seems to make accessible student spaces on campus all the more critical. Fully 70% of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that "there should be more places for informal meetings on campus" and 79% of respondents agree or strongly agree that "having spaces where I can spend time in-between classes is important to me."

The need for flexible-hour student space on campus has been echoed by several projects of both the College and VSA over the past few years. The Committee on Inclusion and Excellence, for example, in its 2010 audit entitled "What Would It Take For You to Thrive at Vassar" recommended the College "Establish vibrant social programming for students who do not want drinking or drug-oriented activity between 10 pm and 2 am on weekend nights." Focus group respondents again and again confirmed the space could and should serve to provide substance-free social spaces during these key hours. Similarly, the VSA's Alcohol Task Force last academic year suggested increases in so-called "counter-programing," including providing spaces available to students to socialize late night on weekends.

While it is clear that student space is critical on campus, the Committee's research makes equally clear that existing spaces are simply not cutting it. The two spaces most often identified as student spaces are UpC and the Retreat. Focus group participants overall described UpC as unwelcoming. One participant said it "doesn't have the feel of a place I want to settle in" and another participant, in justifying an initial rather positive response to UpC was quick to qualify "if there was any other space available to students with late hours, I would give [UpC] a lower rating." Quantitative data supports this sense of dissatisfaction. Just shy of 80% of survey respondents utilize UpC only once or less per week and when they do the overwhelming majority do so just for food.

Similarly, of the Retreat one focus group participant noted it "works in spite of itself." Across focus groups, participants echoed a sense that the Retreat's food and central location

made it one of the best student spaces the campus had to offer, but still largely inadequate. Another participant commented, “it can seem like more of a transient space rather than a space you want to sit and occupy.” In contrast with UpC, the Retreat was overwhelmingly utilized with three quarters of respondents indicating that they visit the retreat three or more times a week. However, further survey data attributed this success more to matters of convenience than comfort or utilization as a “hang out” space. Over three-quarters of survey respondents indicated that availability of food and central location were their favorite features of the Retreat, while only roughly 3%, 1% and 8% cited hours, seating and layout, and social atmosphere, respectively.

As demonstrated above, the Committee’s research indicates a strong need for student spaces, rooted partially in an overall dissatisfaction with existing ones on campus. One focus group participant exemplified the general sense of dissatisfaction with a rather poetic metaphor “[UpC] has that vibe of a dance. When the floor is large, but there aren’t enough people, nobody wants to dance.” The next section is dedicated to understanding what will make students dance.

## II. What should Vassar’s student space look like?

It is clear that the ideal students space is no one thing. A staggering 90% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed, “a student space should be multipurpose.” Further research indicates that “multipurpose” means at least two distinct purposes: a more casual, informal “chill space” and a more structured space for use by student organizations and services. Structurally, the existing bookstore space is conducive to this kind of bifurcated approach, with the front well-lit more airy space serving as a potential café-style space and the back office areas and areas towards the rear of the space without sky-lighting potentially serving as more structured meeting or utility space.

As one focus group participant put it, the café space should feel like a nearby much-loved coffee house: “I want it to be like the Crafted Kup, with loitering.” One participant put it simply and rather obviously “I like having a relaxed space to hang out with people.” While it may sound obvious, participants largely agreed, and felt there was a lack of unstructured comfortable space to “hang out in.” Not surprisingly, participants struggled with specifics, but there were a few key themes it was clear the space could not succeed without:

- Food: over 70% of survey respondents indicated food was an important or very important aspect of a student space. Focus group data agreed, with one participant asserting “almost all of my hanging out is centered around food.” Students, however, did not feel as strongly about type, roughly a third felt “coffee bar” style offerings were critical while another third felt hot food offerings were important. It should be stressed that all research indicated that availability of food (particularly coffee) in some substantial form was critical to the success of any student space.
- Hours: similarly to food, late-night hours are essential to the success of a student space. “If you’re going to cut it off at midnight, I’m not going to want to go,” put one focus group participant plainly. Almost 80% of survey respondents felt that having the space available 24 hours a day was important or very important. This was further underscored by the fact that nearly a quarter of students listed unreliable hours as their least favorite aspects of UpC. Sixty-two percent of respondents say

- weeknights were when they would “most want a student space to be open.” Students want a space they can visit reliably whenever they would like.
- Atmosphere: students are satisfied with the library – a majority of survey respondents felt they were overall comfortable with the number of spaces to work independently. However, the student space will likely need to serve two masters allowing for what a focus group respondent labeled “light work” as well as socializing. Outlets are critical – nearly a third of survey respondents cited a lack of them as the biggest problem with the Retreat – as is comfortable and versatile seating – respondents wanted a little bit of everything in that area with booths, group tables, couches and arm chairs all receiving over 60% positives in the survey. Less important aspects include television (over half of respondents indicated it was not important or should definitely not be in the space at all) and even recreational activities, such as pool or ping pong (less than a third of respondents felt strongly about seeing these activities available). Three-quarters of respondents would like to see live performances in the space.
  - Location: the bookstore space’s prime location in the center of campus makes it a perfect choice for a future student space. “There’s a centrality to the Retreat that’s very important,” said one focus group participant, and nearly 50% of survey respondents agreed citing the Retreat’s central location as its single best feature.

The more structured portions of the space could provide the opportunity to tackle various long-standing space problems. For example, there has recently been a strong outcry from students to improve, expand, and otherwise make more accessible identity-safe spaces. Earlier this year, the VSA passed Resolution 27-8 “A Resolution for a New Women’s Center” which sought to address the fact that “the current space for the Women’s Center is too small (125 square feet) for students to meet, let alone have discussions, or events that would assist in unifying diverse groups of women on campus and empower and train female leaders.” Similarly, currently pending before the VSA is a largely popular resolution “Urging Increased Support for Students of Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds” which proposes the creation of a support-space for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and Access, a campus organization dedicated to meeting the needs and concerns of students with disabilities, is currently partnering with the VSA to consider the establishment of support-spaces for students with disabilities. Each of these important causes require central student-friendly space on campus. Dedicating portions of a larger student space to them could send a strong message about student support and the importance of these safe spaces to our campus. Further to these important endeavors, space generally remains in high demand for student and particularly student organizations and groups, with many focus group participants in particular citing a desire for more informal meeting space, rehearsal space, performance space, and similar spaces.

Overall perhaps the strongest message regarding the space was don’t overthink it. As one focus group participant said “outlets, coffee and lighting are all I need.” A casual, comfortable, all-hours café area coupled with dedicated office and service spaces would make up the ideal student space and address many pressing needs on the campus.

### III. What can be done in the meantime?

“The problem with UpC is that I feel that Vassar tried to provide students with a late night space where they can go, but...the functions they were supposed to provide were poorly

executed.” This focus group participant’s sentiment, while a little blunt, makes an excellent point. While the above outlines the many reasons why a new dedicated student space is much needed, why that space should be the bookstore space, and what that space should maybe look like, a lot can be done to improve the current situation before that new space becomes a reality.

- Retreat hours can be extended later. An overwhelming 85%+ of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that “late night food is important” to them. Extending the already-available Retreat’s hours past eleven could help address this critical need.
- One focus group participant noted “there’s no true 24-hour space on campus” and he is largely right. Even the Library’s dedicated 24-hour space closes on weekends (and of course, even when open does not satisfy many of the most sought-after components of a student space I have laid out above). Extending its hours to truly 24/7 could increase space available to students.
- Food was obviously a major theme of the Committee’s work. Beyond extending the hours of the Retreat, improving and expanding the popular UpC “meal swipe equivalency” program to allow for more options and flexibility could address students’ craving for late night meals. Expanding the Kiosk’s hours into midterms and study period could also provide some of the coffee students are clearly craving.
- Making the Aula more readily accessible as a rehearsal and performance space, whether by giving the Campus Activities Office broader control over it, expanding the VSA’s purview, or creating an improved system for students to cooperate and coordinate with Faculty, could alleviate some of the crushing need for performance organization space on campus.
- Many currently available spaces such as the various College Center meeting rooms are underutilized because they are inaccessible (particularly to small groups or individuals not enjoying VSA-certified status, a problem the VSA’s developing preliminary organizations system is working to tackle). Improving the Campus Activities Office’s reserve system or providing more student autonomy over some of these spaces could alleviate some of the demand.

### Conclusion

“When I think about myself as a Vassar student I think about studying in the Library, when I think about myself as someone who like to have fun, I think of the Mug and the THs.” However, when most research participants thought of themselves as anywhere in between, they had nowhere on campus they wanted to be. The Committee has worked diligently to demonstrate the critical role a student space could serve on campus, not only in working to improve the daily student experience, but to facilitate the extracurriculars that are so critical to personal development on this campus and provide student services that help make every student here feel safe and supported. It is the Committee’s strong hope that the College will take this opportunity and use this research to build a space that will serve this campus and its students in critical ways for a long time to come. The VSA looks forward to continuing to partner to make this a reality.