

November 2, 2017

To the student body,

The Second Senate of the Vassar Student Association acknowledges the hurt and pain caused both by the William A. Jacobson event on October 25, 2017, and by our role in approving and funding it. We should have been more diligent in upholding our Guiding Principles and how we apply them; this speaker does not reflect our values as a Senate.

We endeavour to continually do better and learn from our mistakes. We have already begun to make changes in our processes and structures. Finance Funding Applications will now be published with the Senate agenda for transparency purposes, a much more thorough process for Campus Activities approval of events is being put in place for accountability, treasurers of organizations will be required to do a much more in-depth vetting of speakers prior to submitting applications for funding, and we will be exploring corrective action for the VCLU in misrepresenting their event to the Finance committee.

Please find below a statement by the Finance committee of the VSA:

“The Finance committee of the VSA recognizes that there has been a great deal of confusion surrounding the approval and funding of the VCLU event. As a committee, we strive to continually work towards funding campus programming in line with the VSA’s Guiding Principles of promoting values of anti-racism and intersectional feminism. At the same time, the Committee attempts to keep an open mind to all students who approach us for funding. We do our best to foster a committee that is welcoming and open-minded but also expect treasurers and organizations to abide by our Guiding Principles when choosing whom to invite onto campus. Finance Committee members devote several hours each week to review applications that come from groups across campus in order to ensure that they can be funded in a timely manner.

In regards to the VCLU event involving Professor Jacobson, we were initially approached with an event titled “An Examination of Free Speech and Hate Speech in the United States Today.” Understanding that Professor Jacobson had spoken at Vassar before (on May 5th, 2014) and doing our best to research him, we decided to allocate funding for the event. All allocations of this kind must be approved by the VSA Senate. The consensus agenda of the VSA Senate contained the initial funding approved by Finance Committee on Sept 27, 2017 and was unanimously approved by the VSA Senate at the meeting the following Sunday, October 1, 2017. The Friday before the event was set to happen (October 20, 2017), a member of the committee made the Chair of Finance aware that the event name had been changed to “Hate Speech is Free Speech Even After Charlottesville” and the event description had been changed significantly from that originally provided to the Finance Committee. The Chair contacted the

president of the VCLU, who initially agreed to change the name and description to the original, but then became unresponsive thereafter. The Chair then contacted the VCLU once more, to ask that posters displaying the different name and description be taken down, but was met with no response.

This event has helped us recognize a significant accountability gap between Campus Activities and the VSA in the contract signing process, which is something members of VSA exec have already begun to rectify. We are hopeful that the Vassar community will continue to utilize the student activities fee to continue to enrich the campus while being mindful of who they wish to bring.”

Mindful of the hurt on campus, members of the VSA Executive Board explored remedial steps that could be taken, subsequent to the event’s approval through Senate and Campus Activities. These steps included checking whether the speaker’s contract had been finalized, requesting that contract be vacated by the College, and determining, in conference with administrators, whether the speaker’s actions in promoting the event on specific online sites constituted a violation of the safety clauses in the contract. The Executive Board also wrote a joint letter with Healing to Action to the President of the College asking her to take appropriate action.

We would like to acknowledge the immense amount of work, energy, and thought that was put in by members of our community, such as Healing to Action, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, and the ALANA Center, in light of this event. While the past few weeks have worked to show the strength of our community, there is a lot we need to reckon with on this campus and beyond, especially when it comes to our understanding of belonging and diversity. It is our hope that the events of the past week offer all of us an opportunity to pause and reflect on our community, and what we want it to be.

The VSA Senate