Minutes for EQUALITY VCU Meeting

May 17, 2016 at noon
Alumni Board Room, MP Campus

Attendees
Amy Miller
Lisa Webb
Brie Dubinsky
Kelly Chroninger
Jan Altman
Camilla Hill
Megan Guinn
Jeff Wing
Donna Coghill
Dorothy Fillmore
Archana Pathak
R. Dale Smith
Austin Higgs
Dae Newman

New Business
Co-Chairs have concerns about Dr. Mitchell which have been shared with Dr. Rao. They will summarize their concerns and actions to date and open up for discussion and next steps.

- Dale shared the LGBTQ Task Force report with us. He shared that Dr. Mitchell did not approve the report for release to the Diversity Council following its
completion; Dr. Mitchell instead recommended editing elements/sections of the report. Dr. Rao has read the report, but the Diversity Council has not. Members of the LGBTQ Task Force were invited to present a summary of the report to the Council. The Council asked task force members why the task force focused solely on LGBTQ issues; this indicated that perhaps the Council did not have context for the presentation. At that time, Dr. Mitchell indicated to the Council that the report was in draft form, and until that time, the Task Force had not been aware that their report was not final.

- The co-chairs have had two important meetings recently. First, they met with Dr. Rao, Brian Shaw, and Laura Rugless to share the task force report, and to share concerns about Dr. Mitchell’s reluctance to release the report, as well as her office’s current search for the Director of LGBTQ Initiatives. Rao celebrated the report, and asked the co-chairs to meet one on one with Dr. Mitchell, to share their concerns directly with her.

- At the subsequent meeting with Dr. Mitchell, which Brian Shaw also attended, the Co-Chairs asked her for clarity. Dr. Mitchell had previously emphasized that the Task Force was under her direction, but later did not maintain that they were operating at her request. Dr. Mitchell has sent the Co-Chairs a list of edits for revision in the Task Force’s Report (primarily grammar and some language/verbiage); though she was reluctant to approve the release of the report, she has since expressed confusion as to why the Task Force had not shared it with others.

- The co-chairs also spoke with her about the current search for the Director of LGBTQ Inclusion and Diversity Initiatives position. Finalists’ names were announced (not to the public, but to Equality VCU), and Paris Prince was not selected as a finalist. This may be construed as an obstruction of continuity in
the position, and may be connected to the obstruction issues with the LGBTQ Task Force report. The Co-Chairs believe it shows a lack of respect for both Paris and the position. This position has become a “revolving door” - 1st person in position lasted only 6 months, and second search failed.

- The Co-Chairs explained these concerns about the search to Dr. Mitchell. Her response was to “look to the search committee.” The Co-Chairs insisted that Dr. Mitchell would have influence on the search committee. She responded that she had spoken with legal counsel and understood the ramifications, and again referred them to the search committee.
  - Dr. Mitchell had no clear response on why she hesitated to release the report. Asked why she did not have Paris added to finalist list, and she responded “a lot of reasons went through my head.”
  - Asked what her goals were for LGBTQ inclusion at VCU, Dr. Mitchell responded with very general ideas which were similar to answers she gave when she was first hired. Mentioned best friend who died of AIDS, as proof that she does care about the LGBTQ community.
  - Co-chairs reassured Dr. Mitchell that they are not interrogating her personal beliefs - they are simply concerned with her repeated lack of action on matters related to our community. Dr. Mitchell stated that she was the impetus for changing of name from Subcommittee to Equality VCU, which is not correct, according to Equality VCU members who were part of that decision.

- After the meeting with Dr. Mitchell, Brian Shaw (who also attended) informed the Co-Chairs that President Rao is allocating $20,000 for the 2016-17 year for Equality VCU’s programming/efforts going forward. There may be a possibility of additional funding in the future. Funds are not contingent upon our decision of
whether to make our concerns public. Dr. Rao is also open to meeting with co-chairs twice a year going forward.

- The Co-Chairs informed Dr. Mitchell that they would be sharing their concerns with Equality VCU at our meeting today.
- The Co-Chairs noted that Laura Rugless, who was present at their initial meeting with Dr. Rao, comes across as a capable and helpful partner who is invested in our issues.

Discussion of Statement

- Members noted that Equality VCU has experienced past obstructions from Dr. Mitchell. For example, in a previous semester, members had to push for a year to get her to send out a short survey about the inclusion of LGBTQ issues in our academic curriculum. The obstructions this semester, however, are of a stronger degree.
- The search for the Director of LGBTQ Inclusion and Diversity Initiatives position is happening at a relatively inconvenient time when most 9-mo. faculty have left campus, and concurrently with the search for a new Director of Disability Support Services, with which EVCU co-chair Amy Miller is deeply involved.
- Members agreed that we should consider this issue from an intersectional perspective. Equality VCU’s representation is not racially diverse - we need to understand the position from which we speak and the potential for us to be incorrectly perceived. Also, we should reiterate that our focus is on the larger issue of position’s lack of continuity, not just the exclusion of Paris from the final stage of the search.
- Co-chairs emphasized that the major issue with Dr. Mitchell is lack of accountability.
Donna has been contacted by Dr. Mitchell with a request to talk. Dr. Mitchell told Co-Chairs that she had a great relationship with former EVCU co-chairs Jeff and Donna. By contacting Donna, Dr. Mitchell may be trying to get a wider understanding of issues and concerns and how EVCU perceives her communication.

Members considered the question of whether to make public their concerns, and if so, in what way.

- Some wondered why we had not communicated directly with Dr. Rao earlier, but there was a lack of direct access due to larger institutional structure.
- It was acknowledged that the Co-Chairs’ conversations with Dr. Rao and Dr. Mitchell may have already had our desired effect. Further public announcement may be an unnecessary step that would harm our relationship with Dr. Mitchell.
- Dr. Mitchell wrote a response to the co-chair’s initial meeting with Rao. Copies were shared by Dale. The response detailed her work for LGBTQ inclusion.
- Members discussed the possibility of delaying any public response and reaching out to other campus groups who work with Dr. Mitchell so that we can better understand the larger context. Content and nature of responses may need to be broader if we ever make a public statement of concern.
- Members considered affirming concerns that have been raised, and asking for Dr. Mitchell’s plan to address these concerns. Dr. Mitchell has acknowledged that she should be more involved in communicating directly with EVCU, rather than simply going through Paris.

Members ultimately agreed to:
• Affirm the Co-Chairs’ concerns re: Dr. Mitchell
• Inform Dr. Mitchell that we are very aware of accountability, watching for progress or lack of progress

• Members further discussed their concerns about makeup of search committee for the Director of LGBTQ Initiatives position. A major concern is that Lisa is only active member of LGBTQ community who is on it.

• It was pointed out that job description states that person in this position will serve on Equality VCU, which may be a conflict of interest.

• Members agreed that we are concerned about an overall pattern of lack of leadership and accountability - not one specific incident, but many of them over the course of several years.

• Members also wish to emphasize that we have the potential to lose two very diverse, capable, outstanding members of the VCU community if Paris is not hired for this position. VCU could lose him and his husband, Dr. Ravi Perry.

• Co-Chairs planned to send around a draft of response to meeting attendees for comment.

Next Meetings:
  • 6/21/16 MCV Campus, Sanger 1-038