

An Open Letter to Recognized Student Organizations

PRESENTED IN COLLABORATION BY BLACK STUDENT
ORGANIZATION & KEYYATTA BONDS

Dear W&M Community,

Over the past few months we have compiled questions and responses from identity-based & multicultural organizations (MCOs) and non-MCOs surrounding diversity & inclusion. As a result of the questions asked and responses given, we've created this document to serve as a starting point for a larger conversation.

If the community is going to constantly say that we are "One Tribe One Family," it's about time we start acting like it.

Yours,

Loni Wright & Keyyatta Bonds
(BSO Co-President)

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What Don't We Know?

When we talk about sensitive topics it can often feel like we aren't walking into the conversation with equal knowledge about the disparities we're discussing. Before we dive into the conversation, take a moment to look over this section so that we're on the same page as you move through this document.

On Barriers:

The top three barriers that many organizations are not aware of are: classism, ableism, and elitist language.

- **Classism:** Money is a large barrier that prevents people from participating in organizations. Make sure that money is not the sole reason someone cannot join your organization or participate in your organization's events.
- **Ableism:** There needs to be a mechanism in your organization where students can come to you confidentially if they would like to participate in an event but may require accommodations. Ex. At a movie night, always post closed captions.
- **Elitist Language:** Someone may not join your organization because they are unfamiliar with the words you are using. Make sure to explain your organization and its mission in the simplest, most accessible terms possible.

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What Don't We Know? (continued)

On Diversity & Inclusion:

There's a lot of confusion surrounding Diversity & Inclusion, partially because it's used very frequently in so many different ways at William & Mary. Oftentimes, we use both words in combination with each other, but it's important to separate the two for understanding because their definitions are very different. When we talk about diversity, we do not mean diverse ideas, but rather diverse perspectives. These perspectives often come from gender identity, sexuality, faith, ability, and race. Diversity isn't something you inject. There is no "quick fix", you have to work at it. It takes repetition, time, and continued efforts. Diversity is the characteristics and traits of a group, while Inclusion is the behaviors and norms that make sure people feel welcomed. (Diversity is bringing people to the table, while Inclusion is making sure everyone at the table feels comfortable and welcomed to speak.)

- It can be easy to get caught up in whether or not your organization is "diverse enough." When discussing diversity, the conversation around satisfaction can be problematic as it lends itself into fulfilling a diversity quota. So, while D&I should be talked about and heavily discussed, at no juncture should your organization be like – yes, we have this many of these different groups, so we are "satisfactorily diverse."
- Diversity is a case-by-case situation for every organization. If members are satisfied with the group and perspectives, and it's a fairly homogenous group, that's great. If members are satisfied with the group and perspectives, and it's a fairly heterogeneous group, that's great. It just depends on the organization; however, it's beneficial to examine why your org is homogenous. Is it because only a certain kind of person is interested in the topic or because other groups don't feel welcome to come and talk at the table?

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Engaging in Difficult Conversations

Anyone and everyone should talk about Diversity & Inclusion. It is important that the goals and intentions of an organization are clearly and plainly laid out. In not addressing D&I, in some capacity, your organization is being complicit. D&I is applicable to any and all disciplines. Start the conversation and have it often: Collaborate on these conversations, invite multiple orgs that need to have the conversation, invite an administrator or expert in the field to host to help direct the conversation and step in if things go awry. When making a decision consider how a minority may perceive it if a specific race/culture/identity/religion is not present in the process.

On the Arts:

It's important to remember that you can be appreciative of art, while also being critical. Art is meant for critique and interpretation, so if there is something up for critique, dive into that discussion.

It may help to research alternative perspectives of traditional art to get a more complete scope of the work.

- For example, let's take Shakespeare's Othello. Your organization can appreciate the story, while simultaneously having a discussion about racism and discrimination.

Pieces can also be reworked to accommodate for the discussion taking place.

- For example, Firehouse Theatre in Richmond reworked [Oedipus Rex](#) to take place in a 1920s Baptist church.

That is not to say that every time period must be changed, but simply to point out that there are ways to give a piece more context and make it inclusive for more individuals.

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Engaging in Difficult Conversations (continued)

On Day-to-day changes:

- As an organization, there are a lot of passive actions you can take from reposting information from MCOs to collaborating more with MCOs to providing resources related to D&I within your discipline (i.e. STEM Club sharing information on medical racism).
- While an explicit conversation is important and necessary it's also important to work it into more casual conversations and speak up when you hear something that isn't okay. It can be hard to stand up to your friends and be "the odd man out" but change is not easy, and this is a necessary step you can do every day. If certain members display behavior that is not in accordance with your organization's mission or D&I practices, call them out in private to describe why that behavior is not acceptable. If the situation is serious, as an organization, you have the power to formally remove a member from the organization and report the behavior to the appropriate offices.

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Long-Lasting Changes

The best way to ensure that any changes your organization makes are long-lasting is to leave behind formal infrastructure (D&I statements, constitution changes, etc.). Once the Executive Board has left behind explicit and concrete plans, younger members have a clear structure to follow. Of course, Executive Boards - in collaboration with general members - can make policy changes in the future, but it is essential for the groundwork to be laid and explained while founding members of the changes are still present.

On Tackling Issues & Differing Opinions:

The most difficult part in discussing D&I is recognizing there is a problem. Acknowledgement is the first step, then your organization can plan from there. You can have diversity and members could still not feel welcomed or included in that community (inclusivity). As an organization, you need to actively work to create a welcoming environment that encourages open dialogue and differing perspectives.

1. Your organization must be intentional in all of its interactions and make sure to include those who you see are being left out or correct certain behaviors as they occur.
(Address and correct traditional exclusionary practices)
2. If someone is in opposition, listen, and adjust. Find a solution to their direct problem or critique and try not to alienate them for their beliefs or concerns.
3. The environment and culture you create sets the tone for all conversations. If you never ask members for their thoughts or opinions, constantly talk over them, or always make excuses for certain behaviors INSTEAD of listening and correcting, there's a problem.

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Long-Lasting Changes (continued)

On Tackling Issues & Differing Opinion (continued) :

4. As an organization, depending on your sphere of influence, you can only do so much. So, it may be easy to tackle issues in stages instead of all at once.

- If a glaring problem is race relations – talk about that, create a plan, then move on to another aspect. All of this work cannot be done in one swoop; it's nice to address everything at once but in chunks makes it easier, then do that.
- Create a system to address the most glaring concerns then you can use that structure as a basis to address other issues (like socioeconomics and disabilities)

On Accountability:

To know if your organization is doing well, you have to be transparent in what your organization is doing. People don't know what's happening in Exec Board meetings, so always put out reports or statements when changes or decisions are made. If you have new D&I goals, post those on social media. If you have collab with more MCOs that year, say that. Be very vocal to the campus community about what you are doing for D&I. Now, if people read all that information is up to them, but your organization at least has done the first step in making that information readily available and easily accessible. No one should have to file through 19 pages of your website to find a vague statement. Make Diversity & Inclusion a priority within your organization. Make measurable and realistic goals each year in accordance with the org's general D&I statement.

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Long-Lasting Changes (continued)

On Accountability (continued) :

- It's important when making goals to check in on progress at least on a semesterly basis. So, engage with more diverse groups by holding more collabs, analyzing how those collabs went and how successful they were (How many of their members vs. you members were there? Was their equal work and promotion done? Did you have a debrief with the org to go through what went well and what could be improved if it was to be done again? Do you still keep in contact or support the org through social media posting?).
- Consistently, talk about D&I because when you're not talking about it or shining light on issues and their possible solutions, you are being complicit.

Accountability comes into play in three main ways:

1. Objective self-reflection within an Exec Board.
2. Be open to honest and constructive critique of your D&I plans. If members of the W&M community can directly ask questions or get clarification on your organization's plans, this helps build relationships beyond your organization. You are creating an approachable and open culture around your organization in allowing a space for feedback.
3. Campus/community perception and reception – If your org is open and honest about what it's doing, and the community can openly comment on that, then you can improve. Having an open dialogue between your organization and the campus community (whether they are members or not) is important because truthfully your organization doesn't know EVERYTHING.

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Long-Lasting Changes (continued)

On the Diversity & Inclusion Statement:

A statement is always a great place to start and it is [a formal requirement by SLD](#) for your organization's constitution to include a non-discrimination clause. With a statement, you can broadly lay out what your organization believes in reference to D&I, then have tangible and realistic goals you all would like to work towards. It is also great practice to constantly reaffirm the organization's beliefs and denounce discriminatory/prejudice practices. You can make the statement as specific or broad as you would like to accommodate the needs and mission of your organization. Make sure your statement includes instructions that are easy to follow, reference, and then implement. Here are some main points to include:

1. General statement, all-encompassing statement refuting racism and discriminatory actions
2. Things specific to your organization's discipline or function Ex. STEM Club not engaging in fallacies like people of different races have different pain levels
3. An action plan - specific overarching goals/initiatives relating to D&I: These are guiding actions you will continually take now and into the future including anti-discriminatory and anti-racist measures. Every year new goals specific to the year (separate from the constitution) should also be made
4. A reporting process for discriminatory actions that includes set consequences
 - Presented in a mode where those both in and outside your club can file a report
 - If certain members display behavior that is not in accordance with your organization's mission or D&I practices, call them out in private to describe why that behavior is not acceptable. If the situation is serious, as an organization, you have the power to formally remove a member from the organization and report the behavior to the appropriate offices. Remember, even though if it is one individual, they are a reflection of the ENTIRE organization and could ruin the reputation and credibility of your organization on campus if you 'protect' and defend their heinous behavior.

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Tokenism

Tokenism is making the perfunctory (bare minimum) effort to be inclusive of BIPOC. The word “performative” may come to mind when talking about these behaviors. If your actions are sincere and you aren't operating under some sort of quota - “We need two minorities then we're good. Then they can't say we aren't diverse if we have two!” - or regulating all your minority members to insignificant positions because they are minorities then you likely aren't engaging in tokenism. That being said, you cannot force anyone to run for an Executive position. Members have to feel that they are part of something in order to run. This goes back to creating an inclusive environment. A conversation amongst Exec needs to be had about how to retain members and what does retention look like for your specific organization. Is there a high turnover rate? Why is that? Address those problems first then the D&I aspects come secondary.

On Recruitment:

There is not an issue in wanting to increase physical diversity of your organization, but that rhetoric starts to become problematic when organizations start to target BIPOC students in recruitment.

1. Make sure to create an open and welcoming environment (i.e. smiling, open posture, dancing) upon the first meeting, so all types of students feel comfortable in approaching your organization.
 - It is important when having conversations about Diversity & Inclusion that diverse aspects of the population, besides race, are considered. So, on first glance, an organization may not look diverse – but there are other hidden factors that are at play.

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Tokenism (continued)

On Recruitment (continued):

2. Prioritize your organization's mission/purpose and common interests in your conversations with students. Do not just talk to a Black person because you have only talked to one Black person during recruitment – but talk to everyone! It's great to have a catchy one-liner or joke to start the conversation, then the rest will follow. The easiest way to increase Diversity is to truly talk to everyone and be very honest and objective about your organization:

- How much time, realistically, must someone commit?
- What are your goals as an organization?
- What are some of the failures of your organization, with Diversity & Inclusion or in general, and how are you working to grow/improve?

As the member of an organization, you have to present a realistic picture, so the student then has the agency to make the choice if they want to engage with your organization or not. You retain more members once you are honest and transparent about the organization, so you recruit people who love the mission and are there to positively help change the culture around your organization.

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Tokenism (continued)

On Outreach:

Outreach can take on a number of different forms, but your goal with outreach shouldn't be to target specific groups, but rather to expand the scope of awareness for your organization.

Outreach must be intentional if you want to attract a more diverse population. You must start in prioritizing your organization's mission/purpose and focus on common interests; having this as a basis of conversation in recruitment helps you stay balanced, so you're not pandering to a certain demographic. This is not the time to send the sole BIPOC member out alone to promote your organization. Transparency breeds trust so be forthcoming about what you struggle with as an organization. If you aren't very diverse but are hoping to be more inclusive and welcoming - say that! Be honest about the culture and Diversity & Inclusion, or lack thereof, of the organization. BIPOCs do not want to be your lab test, so do not hide information about the legacy or history of your organization. Share the past and what steps the organization is taking to improve.

1. Community engagement is much easier once you, first, broaden and then, streamline your advertisement and communication. People need to be able to identify your organization/event, then know how to get in contact with you. Your organization needs to have a specific and tailored approach to social media posting as well as traditional avenues (i.e. flyers, tabling). Here are some different ways to advertise:

- Department Listservs
- Sadler Televisions
- Tribelink & WM Events
- Facebook - Interest Groups, Inviting Friends
- Flyering storefronts of businesses in Colonial Williamsburg (make sure to ask!)

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Tokenism (continued)

On Outreach(continued) :

- 2.It is very important for Non-MCOs to use all of the resources available to them. Let's take the CSD for example – This Office is meant for Diversity in all forms, so that may be race, gender, socioeconomic status, neurodivergence, and much more. So, if your organization has a question about how to be more accommodating to a certain area of Diversity, you all should definitely reach out.
- 3.Instead of reaching out to MCOS specifically to recruit members, collaborate and get to know the organizations. By building meaningful partnerships, your organization will be seen as a welcoming place by their members which in turn will make you more desirable to those groups. Genuine relationships are a must for member retention.

On Environment:

It's hard to measure inclusivity if you do not have an outspoken membership. A great way to get a feel for the organization's culture and comfort-level of members is to conduct semesterly, anonymous climate reports that address points of discomfort, overall perception of the organization, among other things. This way your organization's Executive Board can get an unfiltered look at how your members are perceiving the environment that is being created and go from there to change it or keep doing what you're doing.

- 1.The INTENT vs. IMPACT of an organization/event is very important because you don't want to make students feel like they were tricked into something that they didn't want to do.
 - Intent – If your organization/event is only for an exclusive group, then say that. Ex. A specific religion or political affiliation
 - Impact – If you don't specify the intent, your organization is now preying on a population.

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Tokenism (continued)

On Environment (continued):

2. In terms of religious groups, clarify if the organization is open to people in other religions OR if it is strictly for practicing members of that faith.
 - If your organization is a mix of practicing and non-practicing, in advertisement of events, it's very much ok and preferred to say this event is more geared to practicing members of the faith while another event may be more general and better to open up to the entire community. As an org, you have that option to be dynamic and have that duality, but never try to prey on people because your intent and impact didn't align.
3. Bonding is important to help build relationships. Host more optional, but highly recommended, activities outside of the organization's regular business time to encourage those relationships, which will foster inclusivity. (Make sure the activities are easily accessible and low cost – talk about accessibility in planning these outside activities.)
4. Be self-aware. Make sure you are objectively reviewing your organization to make sure you are not contributing to the discriminatory, racist culture. Take steps to counteract this through making realistic D&I goals, collaborating with MCOs, and being accountable for your organization's shortfalls and adequately correcting them.

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Collaboration

In regard to collaborating with Multicultural & Identity organizations anything goes. You can really collaborate on any event with any organization if you are creative enough to make the connection. It's probably easier to start with MCOs that are within your discipline and since you do the same thing, it's easy to combine talents. However, if there's a certain organization that you'd like to collaborate with that isn't necessarily in your discipline take the plunge and reach out! Cultural and identity-based organizations have members with vast interests, so you never know what may happen.

On Graduate Organizations:

It's often easy for graduates to separate themselves from undergrads and as a result both parties lose insights that can be gained from one another. Graduate organizations should definitely interact more with undergraduate organizations and are also responsible for implementing D&I practices, the same as any organization.

1. Ex. BSO collabed with BGSA for a panel about Graduate School. So, the connections are really easy to make if you just think about it for a second.
2. Additionally, just because your organization is based in grad school doesn't mean that has to be the focus of the event. Social events between the different levels are also important because of the perspective and insight that can be exchanged from both parties

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Collaboration (continued)

On Building Relationships:

The first step is to learn about the organization. Take the time to read about their mission and values and what they primarily do on campus before you approach them about anything. You, as a non-MCO, have a responsibility to respect them enough to at least do some preliminary research beforehand – but honestly this goes for when you're trying to build a relationship with any org or office on campus. Know what they do and how they typically do it BEFORE you come with the ask. The first contact should not be them explaining to you what they do because that is insulting if you are asking to collaborate with them.

1. Whatever you're asking for – have very clear goals and intentions, which goes back to INTENT vs. IMPACT. Are you asking them because you support their mission, or they are the most available and easily accessible org and they likely wouldn't say no?
2. On first reach out – explain what your organization does. Worst thing in a collaboration is to assume the org/office on the receiving end knows who you are. Great if they do – but you have to do some backtracking if they don't so have a paragraph in your initial ask about what your org is and what y'all do.
3. To sustain a relationship, encourage your membership to support the other org's events and fundraisers. A very easy thing to do is come to events, and if you cannot do that, then repost them on your personal and org social media.
4. If an organization rejects you, that's also fine. You shouldn't pressure an org if they do not want to do a collab with you. Don't take it personally and move on.
5. Don't prey on MCOs for a pet project. Find an org that you truly believe in and want to have an equal partnership with. The interaction shouldn't be transactional.
6. It's great if the mission and goals of the two orgs line up, so there is a genuine connection point and purpose in collaboration.
7. Consistently check in with the org – whether that be formally or casually. Check-ins are great as well to sustain the formal relationship and consistency is key

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Administration Q&A

1. What resources does William & Mary have for increasing diversity and inclusion within our organization?

- Here's a resource for clubs and organizations compiled by SLD and the Center for Student Diversity: [Moving Your Group to Action: An Anti-Racist Allyship Resource for W&M Student Organizations](#)

2. How can we as students support the hiring of diverse faculty? What are the best ways we can directly advocate for diversity within our department?

- Write to your department heads and coordinate your efforts! A large outcry from their students cannot be ignored. More than that, advocate for students to be part of the hiring process! It's been proven in studies that when students are part of the hiring process the candidates selected are more diverse. This extends beyond a mock class, an interview panel with students can be very beneficial. The CSD for example, had each candidate do a second interview with a panel of students. To get a more diverse pool of students within a given department the biggest obstacle is the environment. There is no formal process to streamline communication between students and professors and hiring, so creating that mechanism may be effective.

3. How can the school's administration better support diversity & inclusion through action? Given that diversity & inclusion isn't necessarily seen in the administration.

- Administration can hire more professors/admin/staff of color. More specifically hire professors of color outside of ethnic/cultural disciplines. For existing faculty & staff, provide them with resources, diversity & inclusion needs to encompass everyone. As a campus we need to put our money where our mouth is and better fund ethnic/cultural studies and promote those majors and classes rather than relying solely on student promotion. Most importantly, they must hold those accountable who do not uphold W&M values and Fire/Punish professors/students engaging in racism, sexism, etc.

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Dear W&M Community,

If you made it this far without skimming, congratulations! If not, go back and read this document in its entirety, sit with it, learn from it, and take action. This document is dense, but so are the themes within it.

Yours,
Loni Wright & Keyyatta Bonds
(BSO Co-President)