

**Diversity Audit Field Project: Villa Maria College**

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## **Introduction**

The diversity policies and initiatives of Villa Maria College, a post-secondary institution in Western New York, will be audited to determine the institution's alignment with progressive and effective diversity, equity, and inclusion policies as well as the integration of the mission. This paper will first provide some background information about the institution and then discuss the mission statement and compare it to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and accessibility policies, Achieve and Admissions programs, and support initiatives offered through the COVID-19 pandemic. Limitations and suggestions will also be discussed as a way to help the institution with improving diversity implementation.

The information for the audit was gathered through secondary sources. Programs and policies from the institution's website, press releases, and informational handouts as well as data already collected and presented through various sources were used to gather information about Villa Maria College. Secondary academic sources were integrated into the discussion to support the information which helped to save time and also to work with the limited access to students and employees as a result of the pandemic restrictions.

By using Villa Maria's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and accessibility policies, Achieve and Admissions programs, and support initiatives offered through the COVID-19 pandemic to audit diversity it hope to answer the following two questions:

1. How does Villa Maria College implement diversity, equity, and inclusion policies?

2. What aspects of Villa Maria College's mission statement are implemented within the institution?

### **Institution Background**

Villa Maria College is a small, private, Catholic institution located in Western New York on the border of Cheektowaga and Buffalo's East Side. Celebrating sixty years as an institution, Villa has utilized Felician core values and developed a "culture of innovation, student-centeredness, and flexibility" (Giordano, 2021a, p. 3). Serving a student body of roughly 500 students, Villa is focused on the ease of access, student success (*About us*, 2021), and individualized education (Giordano, 2019, p. 4). This is accomplished through a robust organizational culture and a creative use of limited physical space as organizations can "increase a resource's value by using it flexibly, in unexpected ways" (Fugazzotto, 2010, p. 246). Hatch (2018) also mentions that the areas of organizational culture and physical space can be understood as two interdependent features of higher education institutions, particularly when considering issues of accessibility, equity, and student success. These focal areas, combined with an active focus on being the "premier student-centered institution in Western New York" (*About us*, 2021, para. 1) and the creation of new, innovative programs, sets Villa Maria College apart from other higher education institutions in the surrounding area.

Villa Maria College was founded in 1961 by Felician Sisters with the goal of training other sisters as educators, originally granting associate's degrees in Arts and Applied Science (Monnin, 2021, p. 8). It wasn't until 1965 that laywomen were welcomed to attend the college and it took three more years for the college to open their doors to anyone other than women. Since then, the college has consistently added new, in-demand degree programs, both as two and

four-year programs, in addition to a select number of certifications (*Mission*, 2021). As of 2021, Villa Maria “offers its students 18 different majors, 26 minors, and 2 certificate programs in a wide range of academic programs” (Monnin, 2021, p. 8).

From the very beginning, Villa Maria has used the Felician tradition to identify three core ideals and five core values that act as guiding principles. The core ideals are truth, charity, and unity and connect to the core values of respect for human dignity, compassion, transformation, solidarity with the poor, and justice and peace (*Mission*, 2021). These ideals and values are incorporated into organizational and individual decisions throughout the college community, and a core value is chosen to be the focus each academic year (*Mission*, 2021).

Since 1972, Villa has been accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, a set of seven standards and fifteen requirements that must be renewed every eight years with a midpoint check in to ensure institutions are meeting the expectations (*Accreditation*, 2021). Middle States accreditation covers mission, ethics and integrity, student learning experience, support services, institutional improvement, and leadership and administration (*Accreditation*, 2021). The most recent Middle States approval occurred in 2018, and the accompanying visionary plan spans 2014-2024 following several of the same standards as the Middle States accreditation (*Mission*, 2021). These standards work in conjunction with Villa’s core values and student-centered focus, which is built into the organizational culture at the college. This goal is guided by the College President in a manner that is “transformational, meaning that it is responsive and adaptive [in] promoting change in the institution and its relationship with the surrounding environment” (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015, p. 671). Villa Maria’s current president, Dr. Matthew Giordano (2021a) credits the evolutionary nature of a young institution as a strength that has allowed Villa to “remain nimble, to innovate, and...to be

responsive to the changing needs of [the] students” (p.3). Maintaining core values and educational standards as a guide while also encouraging transformation and innovation has allowed Villa Maria College to remain dedicated to the Felician mission and student success (*Mission*, 2021).

In his inauguration address when Dr. Giordano was appointed as the first layperson president of Villa Maria College in 2019, he reiterated the values and missions of Villa Maria, emphasized the importance of the Villa Way, and spoke to the dynamic and diverse student body (*Mission*, 2021). He summarized his approach to leading the organization when he stated, “higher education exists to change and improve lives. By providing students the opportunity to learn more about themselves and their world, higher education sets them on the road to a better life” (Giordano, 2019, p. 4). By shifting the focus away from typical higher education markers of success – institutional income, SAT scores, and faculty research publications, to name a few – Dr. Giordano highlighted the ways in which small schools can make a real, tangible difference while also reiterating the strong culture that unites Villa Maria’s students, faculty, staff, administration, donors, and stakeholders (*Mission*, 2021).

## **Analysis Criteria**

### **Mission, Core Values, and the Villa Way**

One area of focus for a diverse organization is the mission and values of an institution, as well as how well their actions align with their mission and values. Villa Maria is dedicated to the mission and values outlined by the founding Felician Sisters. The current student to faculty ratio at Villa Maria College is 9:1, with small class sizes, an open enrollment program, and multiple policies in place to support a “higher percentages of Pell grant recipients, of African-American

students, of students with learning differences (Giordano, 2021a, p. 5). Combined with these organizational culture values, there are also facilities dedicated to supporting students, including an art and woodworking shop, an athletic center, a dining hall called the Villa Bistro, the Sister Mary Josette Food Pantry which serves both the college and the surrounding community, and the Paul William Beltz Family Art Gallery which features exhibits from faculty and staff, current students, and local high schools (*About us*, 2021). Simsek and Louis (1994) mention that a particular dominant paradigm, structure, strategy, culture, leadership, and individual role accomplishments are defined by this prevailing worldview and can create challenges with creating diverse and inclusive settings. At Villa, it certainly appears there is a dominant paradigm or culture that supports a diverse student population.

The culture of Villa Maria College is guided by the mission, core values, and the Villa Way. All the policies relating to access, equity, and easing the burden stem from these beliefs and the idea that mission statements communicate and organize people around common purposes (Fugazzotto, 2009). Desmidt (2015) found that in most cases mission statements are positively related to individual acceptance. Rozado and Atkins (2018) reviewed mission statements from elite educational institutes and found that diversity was almost always mentioned, however they also noticed that diversity was only mentioned because it was a requirement by law. They further argued that if educational institutes wholeheartedly followed through with the diversity aspect they outlined, it would benefit students and employees and even protect individuals from experiencing violent encounters (Rozado and Atkins, 2018). From that mission also flows strategy, organizational structure, and mechanisms for gauging performance (Fugazzotto, 2009). The common purpose outlined by the mission is “to provide students with a rigorous and enriching educational experience” (*About us*, 2021, para. 3). The educational experience at Villa

includes “empower[ing] students to realize their intellectual, creative, professional, and spiritual potential” and using the “five core values as a guide to ensure that every decision made is done in [the] students’ best interests” (*About us*, 2021). One of the first actions supporting the mission and core values was the opening of the Sister Mary Josette food pantry to serve students, employees, and the community in 1987 (*Mission*, 2021). The food pantry was the first to be located at a college in Western New York, and continues to serve the community today. The mission is incorporated into the Villa Way, the core values, and the overall institutional culture and represented not only in writing, but also in the actions of the Villa Maria community.

These values, ideals, and guiding principles combine to form what is known throughout the organization as the Villa Way. This is mentioned by Hatch (2018) and the concept of organizational culture in that the Villa Way creates and outlines a “shared framework or context of belonging” (p. 193). It is an application of the mission described as “the guidelines that dictate how we behave as part of the Villa community” (Giordano, 2019, p. 6). Community, in this context, is used to encompass not only students, faculty, and staff, but also the organizations where graduates will be employed, the East Side of Buffalo surrounding the campus, and the entire Western New York region. In his inauguration address, Dr. Giordano (2019) summarized his dedication to supporting and implementing the Villa Way throughout his presidency when he explained:

For the sake of our community, we need the Villa Way. To fulfill the promise that Buffalo Schools and Say Yes provide to our city’s children, we need the Villa Way. For the East Side of Buffalo to continue its momentum as part of the Buffalo Renaissance, we need the Villa Way. For the prosperity of Cheektowaga, Erie county, and the region, we

need the Villa Way. To help bring about the spiritual renewal of the world, we need the Villa Way. (p. 7)

Organizational culture is often guided by leadership in higher education institutions and “should embody the ability to inspire others to believe in and achieve a worthy goal” (Karkouti, 2016, p. 411). By combining existing core ideals and values into a dynamic, unified framework of action called the Villa Way, there is a clear expectation of the organizational culture and a direction for stakeholders to live the mission, be it participating in the Service Day, donating to the Student Emergency Fund, running a 24-hour animation competition, or staying late to prepare facilities for an event the following day (Giordano, 2019, p. 6). The idea of using a framework was mentioned by Kotalik, Covino, Doucette, et al, (2014) and explained that it focuses on ethical decision-making to ensure diversity was being upheld could be a helpful tool as it can guide ethical decision-making lead to increased staff engagement and recognition which accounted for increased employee satisfaction in the workplace. The organizational culture is such that stakeholders are dedicated to the students and the success of Villa Maria College, and act with the Villa Way and core values in mind.

## **Diversity Initiatives**

### **DEI, Achieve, and Accessibility**

Diversity is another component that is necessary in creating an organization that creates a positive work environment. This includes how they view diversity, equity, and inclusion policies as well as the accessibility within the organization. At Villa Maria the concept is present in the diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility policies, programs, and beliefs. The core values, particularly respect for human dignity, compassion, and justice and peace, guide the



organizational culture and decision making within these initiatives as valuing diversity can actually strengthen institutions and increase their likelihood of continued success due to the reliance on associations between groups (Wolfe & Dilworth). This is also supported by Ely and Thomas (2020) who explained that organizations can benefit from increased diversity but they must be willing to change the corporate culture and power. These types of policies also have the potential to transform institutional culture and pedagogical practices in higher education (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002). Strategic plans, mission statements, and core values, are necessary and important, but they cannot stand on their own, independent from organizational outcome. The goals that have been outlined on paper also need to align with the organizational culture and the actions of the institution. If these goals do not align with what has been outlined then the organization needs to reevaluate their values, beliefs, and missions to ensure they are in alignment and be held accountable (Brown, 2017). Villa Maria College is active and outspoken about the shared beliefs behind diversity and accessibility, and highlights the organizational culture in a variety of ways.

For the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 academic year the core value was justice and peace. This core value was found to align with some of the most intense acts of injustice and unrest in the United States, like the incidents including the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery and the resulting protests around the nation. Dr. Giordano was not silent in these matters and not only issued a statement, but also directly sent his message to the entire Villa Maria community, also included was the Board of Trustees, speaking out against the injustices that were happening. This is important for organizational culture as sometimes, regardless of their awareness and concern, numerous administrators are reluctant to publicly bring attention to marginalizing campus issues for fear of political backlash or job loss (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015).

Dr. Giordano created a unified response that encouraged a collective responsibility for combating prejudice and discrimination through a gained understanding of these issues during education, training, and engagement with others by bring attention to the demographics, missions, and organizational culture in relation to the issues of injustice (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015, p. 671). The protest movement did not go unnoticed as the organizational culture at Villa Maria demanded a response that would show support for the students and staff members who could recount their personal, lifelong experiences with institutionalized oppression and discrimination and highlighted that at Villa Maria it reflects the disproportionate racial makeup that characterizes and contributes to the racial and class disparities that have always affected the United States (Giordano, 2020). Rather than acting as though the unrest did not make its way to Villa Maria College, the organization was transparent about how the many concerns were present in the microcosm of this small, private college with a diverse background. The act of leadership and support for the organizational culture encouraged future changes within the college that would better represent the core values in forward thinking DEI and accessibility initiatives.

A significant result from this event was the transformation of Villa Maria College's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion committee, who have been working on a variety of projects related to creating a DEI dashboard, including demographic reporting for students and staff, strategic hiring, advocating for person-first language when discussing students with learning differences, and the creation of a new inclusion statement to accompany all job postings and onboarding documents (D. Schier, personal communication, December 8, 2021). While many of these beliefs are causally represented in the organizational culture, and many of the practices are embedded in documents throughout the college materials, there still remains a need for a unified, substantial representation of DEI values and practices that should be front and center on the

institute's website. Particularly within higher educational institutes, diversity can promote a positive attitude towards accepting, tolerating, embracing, and ultimately respecting differences (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). These initiatives, among others, are at the cabinet level with anticipated approval this academic year (D. Schier, personal communication, December 8, 2021). An annual event that was developed because of the shared organizational culture's increased need for action surrounding DEI initiatives is the Unity Walk. Students and administrators created the Unity Walk to symbolize the rejection of all forms of hate and dehumanization (*Unity walk*, 2020,). The Unity Walk also symbolizes the College's responsibility in creating and sustaining an environment that values individuals regardless of identity (*Unity walk*, 2020,). This core belief in the organizational culture at Villa Maria College, and members of the community volunteer to represent these ideals not only in the DEI committee, but also within their daily expressions of the core values.

The creation of Villa Maria's Achieve Program for students with learning differences is one tangible and measurable development that stems from the strong organizational belief in support of equitable and accessible education. While all higher education institutions are actually legally required to provide accommodations for their students, the Achieve Program goes above and beyond what is required by law in order to help their students with learning differences succeed (*About Achieve*, 2021). Achieve works with students, faculty, and staff to create plans that will support all parties to communicate effectively and work toward the common goal of educational success. The organizational culture at Villa supports the idea of changing society and environments in order to accommodate people who live with impairment, instead of changing individuals with impairment to accommodate society (Collins et al., 2018). A fundamental part of Villa Maria's mission is not only in respecting, but also celebrating diversity in all of its

forms. The Achieve Program provides students with resources and the skills that encourage success and also relies on the support and buy-in from the organization and its stakeholders. In addition to this, the Achieve Program also works with students to develop the skills they will need to succeed in their chosen career paths which is a vital component of developing inclusive education (Collins et al., 2018). In order for any institution to be successful, diversity must be continuously and consistently cultivated; the elite college must change, adapt, and grow along with its changing student body (Jack, 2019). Celebrating, recognizing, and encouraging, the diversity and uniqueness of Villa's student body is something that is built into the organizational culture and core values at the College, and the institution is continuously working towards finding new ways to support students, beyond what might be expected or what is required by law.

### **Admissions and Easing the Burden**

Affordability can be a barrier when considering post-secondary as there can be a financial burden for potential students, particularly minority, first-generation, and low-income students, as there can be unexpected costs while steering through the admissions process. While there are many different options for higher education, for many underprivileged populations these options are not always available to them (Iloh, 2018). In other words, higher education institutions need to consider the perception and the reality of opportunity (*Financial aid*, 2021). At Villa Maria College the Financial Aid department reports that awards grants and scholarships are received by 96% of its students and 99% of students receive some form of aid (*Financial aid*, 2021). Beyond that, about 75% of students at Villa Maria College are Pell eligible, with about half of the students having an expected family contribution of zero (Giordano, 2021). Villa Maria College, along with a handful of other higher education institutions in the Western New York area,

provide what is referred to as “full last-dollar tuition scholarships” and for an unlimited number of Say Yes students, all this is done at a considerable cost to the institute (Giordano, 2021). The dedication to financial assistance, no matter what the impact is on the college, is something that Villa Maria implements to follow the Villa Way which also supports the original mission of the institution.

The DEI at this institute has led to creative solutions in removing barriers and misconceptions simply by easing the burden of paying tuition, SAT and ACT tests, deposits, application fees, textbooks, and supplies. The admissions process at Villa Maria College does not depend on an application fee, completing the SAT or ACT, or even applying by a specific deadline (*Admissions*, 2021); instead they have flexible and rolling admissions options because of the importance in altering the structure of opportunity [and] to allow students who might find these spaces as viable pathways (Iloh, 2018). This is another approach that adds to the mission of a student-centered institution as it works with students who are exploring college as an option for the first time, or searching for a college that will work with their needs. In the Fall 2020 another initiative was started to make college even more affordable and accessible for all students and is now including free textbooks and supplies as part of the cost of tuition; this is currently the only college in Western New York area to accomplish this for their students. The Assistant Vice President for Academic Success, Elizabeth Kerr was quoted saying, “Students and faculty alike are excited to start learning on day one, knowing everyone has equitable access to the materials” (Schober, 2021, p. 14). The DEI initiatives at this institution have united in easing the burden on students and focusing on education, student empowerment, and inclusive education.

Villa Maria College has a number of different initiatives that are beneficial to their student population and it is apparent that they have continued to find ways for students who

attend their institution a little easier and perhaps even less like a burden. The initiatives discussed all focus on “creating a welcoming and engaging culture for students for whom going to college is an ambitious and risky proposition” (Giordano, 2021b, para. 5). Hatch (2018) explained that culture can enhance organizational effectiveness and research also suggests the same.

Admissions and Financial Aid departments are continuously being reevaluated to find new ways Villa Maria offer assistance to their students, all as a result of the shared organizational culture committed to supporting the diverse student population attending Villa Maria College.

### **COVID-19 Support**

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Villa Maria College followed state and national guidelines and moved all instruction online and remote. Although this was a challenge for all institutions and individuals, due to the hands-on nature of Villa Maria’s art and music programs and the student demographic, many students did not have the necessary resources to complete their courses remotely. To rectify this situation, the college faculty and staff dismantled computer labs, refurbished computers, and distributed them to students, sometimes even delivering them to their house. Over 25% of the student body was assisted in this way (Villa Maria College, 2020a). Support services like the Student Success Center tutoring, Care Center counseling, and Financial Aid meetings were all moved online, in addition to student life and clubs holding virtual events. Notably, the yearly Red Carpet Night for Digital Filmmaking students was streamed online so that students were still able to celebrate their successes at the end of the semester, and in alignment with the mission and core values, the event raised funds towards the WNY COVID Relief Fund (Villa Maria College, 2020d).

As a small campus, Villa Maria College was able to establish a phased reopening plan to get students back on campus as soon as it was safely possible to do so. This included rearranging

classroom spaces to ensure social distancing, moving larger courses to spaces like the athletic center and auditorium, and even dividing class meeting times to follow a hybrid model and get students back on campus (Villa Maria College, 2020c). Additionally, increased cleaning procedures, mask mandates, health screenings, and required social distancing practices were enforced upon returning to campus (Villa Maria College, 2020c).

While many of these changes have lessened with the creation and distribution of the vaccine and the full reopening of campus, there are still some policies that have continued to the present day. The option for virtual or remote meetings with campus offices is still available for students, even during registration. Additionally, the admissions changes focused on easing the burden of the application process which were piloted during the height of the pandemic are now permanent policy adjustments (Villa Maria College, 2020b).

### **Conclusion**

As a higher education institution in Western New York, the success of Villa Maria College depends on how well it functions, how it interacts with stakeholders, and how successful it is at promoting and achieving its mission. Rather than continuing to have a traditional mindset about how an organization *should* run, new structures of DEI for organizational learning idealize how an organization *could* run (Fillion et al., 2015; Caldwell, 2012). That often involves renegotiating the culture of the institution, reexamining how physical space is utilized, and identifying where there is room for improvement culturally and academically. Organizational culture and physical structure in the relation of DEI are two vital aspects of organizational revolution, particularly for higher education institutions. It is necessary for these organizations to be aware of how the two can work together to sustain an institution's overall mission and goals.

## **Strengths**

For Villa Maria College, the strong organizational culture lends itself to supporting the mission, values, and DEI initiatives that encourage and ensure a student-centered learning environment with accessible and affordable education regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnographic background, or learning difference. The challenges of limited space are overcome by focusing on dedicated classrooms and labs for all programs and departments, symbolic open-door policies across all levels of administration, and small class sizes that allow for reorganization of space within the classroom. The five core values and the Villa Way do bring structure and culture into tangible forms, and physical space makes mission imperatives—and thereby structure and culture as well—more concrete (Fugazzotto, 2009). Because of this combination of unified organizational culture and the creative use of physical space, Villa Maria College can achieve the goals outlined in their mission and act as a truly student-centered institution, allowing it to stand out in an area with a multitude of other higher education options. The strengths of Villa Maria College are the strong dedication to the mission and core values, the expansive support with policies and procedures connected to DEI and accessibility, the diverse student body, and the continuing move toward a more diverse faculty and staff to support the goals.

## **Area of Improvement**

Despite the multiple areas of excellence within Villa Maria College's diversity, equity, and inclusion, there are still areas of concern that should be addressed. At the forefront of this is the disparate demographic makeup of the faculty and staff compared to the students. While the gender breakdown is fairly even with students being 44.4% male and 55.6% female compared to



faculty being 37% male and 63% female (College Factual, 2022). However, the ethnographic breakdown of students compared to faculty shows a disconnect. Among the student population, 194 students are white, 149 students are Black or African American, 40 identify as multi-ethnic, 40 are Hispanic, and 5 students are Asian (College Factual, 2022). This means that less than half of the students at Villa Maria College are white at 48.7% of the student body. Conversely, 90% of the faculty are white with 180 of the faculty identifying as such. Of the other 10%, 15 are Black or African American, three are Asian, and two are multi-ethnic (College Factual, 2022). Compared to the student population, these numbers do not reflect the diversity of the community or represent the goals of the DEI hiring practices. This is one area of growth that Villa Maria College should make a priority in the upcoming years, as it speaks directly to the mission, values, and goals of the college to help the community and increase diversity, equity, and inclusion practices at the institution. These areas of improvement would take time, but can be done immediately. Hiring faculty from diverse backgrounds can be something that can take place as faculty leave or need to be replaced. This would be something ongoing and take place as needed. It would certainly add value to the institute as the faculty would become visibly diverse.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include relying on published materials and information taken from the Villa Maria Website to assess the diversity and inclusion policies. Due to the shortened timeline of the summer courses, it was necessary to limit the research to what was accessible for all group members. There is also the possibility of unconscious bias influencing one researcher as they are currently employed by the institution and working directly with some of the examined initiatives. Beyond the limitations of the research and researchers, there are limitations due to the changes occurring within Villa Maria College itself. With the continued lifting of

COVID travel restrictions, there has been an increase of international students attending the college. The college president has also increased outreach efforts to community partners and increased the college's DEI efforts in hiring. With these changes, it is difficult to predict where the college will be in recent years. However, the main challenge for Villa Maria College is for the organization to adapt and adopt the change culturally and academically when it comes to long-term strategic planning and continue the implementation of the mission statement into formal policies.

In examining these strengths, areas of improvement, and limitations, future research questions should include:

1. Do students who utilize accessibility services feel supported in their classes and on campus?
2. What is the student, faculty, and staff experience on campus in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion?
3. How can hiring practices change so that the faculty and staff demographic better aligns with the diverse student body?

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