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FOREWORD

The Body of Liberation

Chantel J. Vereen

I am so honored to be chosen to be completing this year's forward for The Vermont Connection 43rd edition. "The Embodiment of Liberation" is a theme that celebrates the importance of revolutionizing the utter disappointment that is the foundation of higher education.

For me, prior to my experience within the UVM HESA program, the thought of liberation was not something that I quite understood. I thought people could feel liberated. As if it were some sort of essence in our universe that only some select individuals can hold on to. But as time progressed, I found that there is still so much more to unpack within this community found within higher education. Liberation can be more than just a feeling. It can be the beauty and complexity of subverting oppressive systems. It is the blossoming of a true and transformative revolution. There is so much more that can be done, especially within the realm of higher education for all individuals to feel and hold the idea of liberation. My hope is that this foreword can showcase my perspective of liberation and its realities. I want you all as the readers to consider the grandeur of abolition. In order to discuss this, this foreword will talk about fatness in higher education as it connects to the ideologies of liberation.

Whenever we enter a new place, all we ever want is to fit in. Or in some spaces we wish to stand out. I always found myself wanting to just fit in. Like a book tucked away neatly on a bookshelf. And in college specifically, that's all I ever wanted. And in order to have myself fit in, I shrunk myself. But as time progressed on, I found myself understanding that there is more to life than shrinking down to size for others to express the importance of difference. And the beauty of my differences and identities. As a professional, I was waiting and hoping that the celebration of difference would exist for me and be in my favor. I wanted to stand out and be myself and be this incredible student

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affairs professional that I always knew I could be. But the system of higher education had so many other plans. When diving deeper into the world of higher education through new positions and job interviews, I found myself being judged and disregarded by my fatness. When people asked me what kind of workouts that I enjoyed doing, I would comment by saying stretching and yoga. And white professionals would continue to laugh at “my joke” and then provide the unsolicited advice of “how I should try more” or “it’s really important to push myself more.” But my body can only do so much. I tried to hold myself and understand that my body was enough and that my body was different. And that’s when I felt that shrinking feeling again.

It’s difficult to exist in this student affairs world as a fat individual because the identity of fatness is silenced and ignored. When we center wellness within our departments and divisions, we center exercise. Departments that will commit to running 5 miles each morning as a bonding opportunity. When we don’t center exercise, offices grapple with the idea of self care from a capitalist perspective through expensive activities like weekly massages, spa trips, etc. In higher education, white student affairs professionals echo their so-called “well intended” thoughts on wellness and wellbeing for all but in reality, they are promoting their privilege. We center this very fake and superficial dialogue of wellness. We never sit with ourselves fully to think about the intersectional ways of caring for one’s self. It baffles me, truly. I found that when it came to my fatness, I was put in a cage and confined to this idea that assimilating to white thin faces was the only way to be free.

As much as higher education pretends it celebrates difference, I find that we as professionals exist in the same vicious cycle of “censored difference” or as I call it “palatable difference.” People can be different within venues of higher education but you still have to be palatable in your appearance, your mindset, your beauty standards, and your values in order to be accepted. Student affairs divisions cradle the mission statement of inclusivity but in order for spaces to actually be inclusive, you need to have acceptable forms of radical thinking.

But I am fat, Black queer femme. I am more and far better than your palatable acceptance.

Fatness is beauty. It is complex. I find myself struggling with the intersectional oppressive dialogue that exists within higher education. Liberation is the acceptance of uplifting all identities and the desire for equity of all identities.

Fatness in higher education and being a fat professional in higher education is an identity that goes silenced time and time again. There are little to no conversations regarding fatness and the role that it places within an individual's personhood. Office cultures within the divisions of student affairs can be more accepting and inclusive to the ideas of fatness. The politics around beauty and desire seeps so much into the field of student affairs more than we know. Subconsciously, thinness is the ideal. It is the palatable item of acceptance when it comes to how we perceive the body. In order for us to lean further towards liberation we need to interrogate anti-fatness and dismantle the thought of centering what it means to be "well" and to be "healthy." One example that comes to mind is the privilege of placing activities for wellness (e.g. getting a facial, taking on an outdoor sport, pushing to do a 10K). Since when was stillness not enough? The body is deserving of stillness.

Our bodies are remarkable beings. All bodies should be able to exist and be radically accepted and radically loved. "A world for all bodies is a world for our bodies...How we show up to life reflects how we show up to ourselves." (Taylor, 2018). Your body is a beautiful act of rebellion that deserves to be honored and loved. I want our fat bodies and our identities to be freed unapologetically.

Dashaun L. Harrison's *Belly of the Beast* takes an incredible look into the duality and interrogation of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness. The literature really pushes the reader to understand and to sit with the notion on how anti-fatness is so incredibly normalized within all avenues of society.

This was one of the first reads once I completed my graduate program at UVM HESA. One thing that I found to be a profound moment is Harrison's narrative on liberation through the lens of the criminal justice system.

"At the root, liberation must mean cultural revolution as well as destruction of the sociopolitical institution that hold these systems in place, which means that abolition cannot be the end; it must only be the beginning...Systems are built by an idea and the power to actualize the idea, which means that if abolition is only about eradicating systems or providing resources to people within the World through which those systems are created, it cannot be and is not enough" (Harrison, 2021).

Liberation isn't even the end goal. It is the cultural reset for something more. It is actually the origination and the emergence of so much more. Liberation is the start to the revolution. It is the precipice of abolition. If we cannot be a community to and for one another, then we cannot commit to liberation and commit to wanting a betterment for all. The system of higher education holds too much power and as professionals we must commit to bringing down these systems that cage us and keep us from being free.

Higher education has potential for us to move progressively toward the compelling journey to liberation and abolition. A revolution is upon us, especially if we devote to pushing toward the beauty of a fomenting insurrection. The system of higher education was not built for all of us, but it was made to be dismantled and investigated by all of us. "If it takes a village to raise a child, it certainly takes a movement to undo an occupation?...and if it takes a movement to undo an occupation, it certainly takes a community to build a new reality" (Gilmore, 2006; Harrison, 2021).

We have the opportunity right now to begin a new reality.

I am excited to see the excellence and beauty that these authors have provided when it comes to liberation and the dialogues that they bring to this edition of *The Vermont Connection*. For you as the reader of this publication: sit with these narratives, reflect, commit to learning, always be willing to fight for justice, and above all else -- continue to push for freedom outside of the confinements of the higher education cage.

References

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