



Vanier College Students' Association Social Justice Committee's Memoir On Bullying and Intimidation

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." - Martin Luther King, Jr.

Vanier College is an English-language public college located in the Montreal borough of Saint-Laurent. It was founded in 1970 and offers over twenty-five programs of study in both two-year pre-university and three-year technical fields. With 6,500 daytime students from over 90 different nationalities, Vanier College is one of the most ethnically diverse colleges in North America and is a leader in protecting human rights and fostering multicultural and ethnic harmony within the college.

Vanier College has a large Language School dedicated to teaching English as a second-language and was the first college to create a Women's Studies major centered on women's and gender issues. Through its "Open Door Network", Vanier College is committed to creating a safe environment for LGBT students, faculty and staff. The College also has a Respectful Learning and Workplace Environment policy as well as a Zero-tolerance policy and a policy on Cyberbullying. Vanier College's history of dealing with harassment goes back to 1983 when it was the first college in Quebec to create a policy on sexual harassment and appoint a conciliator to oversee it. The 1983 policy even preceded government legislation on holding employers liable in this regard. Over the years that first policy evolved into policies on discrimination and harassment.

The Vanier College Students Association's Social Justice Committee is pleased to present its memoir as part of the provincial government's public consultation on bullying and intimidation. The V.C.S.A. has historically been extremely active in raising awareness about many different social issues. For example, earlier this year the V.C.S.A. approved a new healthier eating policy that saw the College ban the sale of fried foods and soft drinks on campus. The V.C.S.A. has also taken many measures to promote sustainability at Vanier College, including banning the sale of bottled water on campus and planting a community garden. It therefore stands to reason that the V.C.S.A. would also like to help raise awareness about the issue of bullying and intimidation, which continues to be a major social problem that has had detrimental effects on the lives of many students in educational institutions across Montreal, Quebec, Canada and the rest of the world.

We feel that Family Minister Francine Charbonneau's decision to hold a public consultation on these issues will allow our student association to get involved as part of an attempt to elicit real societal changes.

For several years Vanier College has launched numerous initiatives designed to raise awareness about bullying and intimidation. For example, in 2013 the College produced an anti-bullying



awareness campaign called “Stronger than a Rock”. On September 18th 2014, Vanier Graduate Alexis Lahorra, who organized the campaign, won an award at the Forces Avenir Gala in recognition of her work. As well, in previous years Vanier organized Pink T-shirt days in support of anti-bullying initiatives.

For the purposes of this memoir the V.C.S.A.’s Social Justice Committee plans to explore the themes of efficient intervention strategies for dealing with bullying and intimidation. Using the slogan “Help a Bully Save A Victim” the goal of this approach is to examine the root causes of bullying in order to better understand the societal forces that may cause an individual to engage in bullying activities. The ultimate goal is therefore to address these root causes and engage in early-detection interventions while offering as many resources as possible to potential bullies in order to prevent them from acting out. We feel this approach is unique since many anti-bullying campaigns focus mostly on providing support and assistance to victims.

We feel that by participating in the public consultation process launched by the Quebec Government, Vanier College will continue to play a leading role in terms of sensitizing the public to this ongoing social problem. Ultimately our goal is to raise awareness about these issues while also providing students with tools and support that can empower them and ensure adequate resources continue to be available such as psychological support for those in need.

While our goal is to look at efficient intervention methods when dealing with bullying we also feel it is important to propose certain recommendations that could be effective in terms of stopping or diminishing incidents of bullying and intimidation.

In order to sensitize the student population to the issues of bullying and intimidation, the V.C.S.A.’s Social Justice Committee organized a student panel on the topic. The panel discussion was held on November 19th and was designed to explore students’ perceptions about the problem. The event was open to the entire Vanier community and focused on several key themes including:

- How students define bullying at the college level and whether they thought people have different perspective of what exactly bullying is;
- If they felt high school bullying is different from college bullying and whether they thought there are different motivations for bullying in general;
- If they felt cultural background plays a role in terms of whether or not somebody engages in bullying.

As well, the panel discussion sought to focus on the tendency to blame bullies without trying to understand the motives behind their actions. In other words, the question often arises as to whether bullies should also be considered as victims. For example, should there be more attention paid to treating bullies as victims who are in need of help for personal issues related to their cultural or family background rather than merely disregarding them and negatively labeling



them as dysfunctional members of our society? We feel that focusing on this question in particular can possibly help reduce the number of bullying victims by getting to the root of the problem and addressing it at its source. In fact, that is why the V.C.S.A. chose its theme of “Help a Bully Save a Victim” for the purposes of this memoir.

During the course of the panel discussion participants unanimously supported the idea that any attempt to deal with the issue must concentrate on offering assistance to those perpetuating the acts of bullying as well as the victims. Many of the participants in the panel discussion agreed that by offering support and resources to those more likely to engage in such acts can help “save” thousands of victims by wiping out the problem at its source.

The issue of Quebec’s multicultural society was also raised in terms of ensuring that proper education is offered to families arriving in Canada and Quebec from certain countries and cultures where bullying may be more tolerated. For example, during the panel discussion some students of Haitian and South American origins admitted that using force and violence as a disciplinary measure in their native cultures was tolerated and accepted. They said it was only after immigrating to Quebec that they saw how the local culture and practices were far different in terms of its disapproval of corporal punishment and condemnation of the use of violence for disciplinary actions.

At the same time, some participants in the panel discussion maintained that while some bullies may act out as a result of victimization at home or due to certain socialization factors not all bullies are in fact “victims” and that it was difficult to generalize as every case is different.

Finally, as part of our research we launched a comprehensive on-line survey in order to better understand both the reasons and impacts of bullying on a day-to-day basis and to better address the issue and provide support when incidences of bullying and intimidation occur. The purpose of the on-line survey was also to determine whether bullying and intimidation problems existed at Vanier College and to see whether there were any correlations between a person’s chances of engaging in such behaviours and the environment they grew up in. A total of 2,468 people responded to the survey over the course of a 9-day period.

Some of the conclusions of the survey were:

- 94,1% of respondents said they had never been bullied at Vanier;
- 48,4 % of respondents said they had been bullied at high school level;
- 18.5% of respondents said they had either “often” or “sometimes” witnessed violence at home;
- 91.5 % of respondents said they felt Vanier represents a safe and tolerant environment;
- 8.7 % of respondents agreed it is ok to send messages to someone about how you dislike him/her;
- 3,9 % of respondents agreed that they didn’t regret bullying as it has no long-term impacts;



- 8,2 % of respondents agreed that if their habits are hurtful to people there is no way for them to change;
- 61,4% of respondents said that their history with bullying has been mainly verbal bullying.
- 12.9 % of respondents said it's ok to call a friend "gay" as an insulting remark;
- 17.5% of respondents said it's ok to call a woman a "bitch" because she is rude to you.

Conclusions and recommendations:

Whether it was through the student panel discussion or on-line survey, it is abundantly clear that the Vanier College community has very strong opinions on the subject of bullying and intimidation. To begin with, according to the survey it doesn't appear students feel there is a major problem with bullying or intimidation at Vanier College. Nonetheless, Vanier College's Student Services Department does provide support and counselling to anyone who comes forward with a complaint that they have been victims of bullying, cyberbullying and/or intimidation on campus.

A high percentage of people who participated in the panel discussion also felt that society has a tendency to stigmatize bullies without first exploring the root causes that may cause a person to lash out at others. It therefore would appear evident that any efficient intervention strategy for dealing with these issues needs to focus on both victims as well as perpetrators of these acts of aggression. During the panel discussion several people came forward and admitted that their personal views about violence and bullying were largely influenced by their own personal experiences after they witnessed firsthand examples of violence at home between their own family members.

Therefore as part of our major recommendations we feel it is important for the government to provide close follow-ups for children who grow up in households where domestic violence is known to be an issue as rapidly as possible. Such early intervention strategies could subsequently be extremely useful by reducing risks of future acts of aggression against others.

We feel the multicultural character of Quebec society is an asset and that promoting tolerance and acceptance of a myriad of cultural minorities is extremely important. However, in the case of putting in place effective strategies for dealing with bullying and intimidation we recommend that the Quebec government take all necessary measures to ensure proper socialization can take place whereby it is made abundantly clear for families immigrating to the province that acts of violence, bullying and intimidation are unacceptable in Quebec society. This can be achieved via comprehensive outreach programs and public awareness campaigns. As well, we recommend that all future efforts by the government to address the issue of bullying and intimidation should seek to offer



resources and support to both victims and bullies in order to try to counter the problem at its source. The root of the problem lies in eradicating the social, cultural and psychological causes that may lead to someone engaging in such acts. Therefore any effort to deal with the problem that only focuses on the victims will likely not succeed as bullies themselves are also in need of programs and resources that they can avail themselves of in order to stop the cycle of violence.

Finally, given the results of our survey we recommend that the Quebec government should promote campaigns designed to raise awareness about gender equality and acceptance of sexual orientations and life-style choices. We feel the percentage of people who find it acceptable to use words such as “gay” and “bitch” in a casual yet derogatory manner is unacceptable. Sensitizing people to the deleterious effects of this language while they are younger could also help promote tolerance while reducing potential future incidents of bullying and intimidation.