

Interview with Vance Graves  
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Davidson, NC

By Lily Burdick  
Transcribed by Taylor Drake

Lily Burdick: Hi.

Vance Graves: Hello.

LB: Recognizing that our identities are complex, in flux, and especially evolving and changing in college, how do you think about and describe your identities?

Graves: In terms of race, I think that is something that has become very salient for me since I've been in college. I had, like, I've always known that I was black, like, that's just something that I can see when I look in the mirror. But when it comes to, like, recognizing the ways that my blackness is seen as different from other people, that's something that I didn't realize until I got to Davidson, or it's something that like I didn't like, consciously think about mentally. And I think part of that is due to Stride. Because coming in as a first-year being like, you're at a PWI like these are the ways that you might be treated differently. Like that really made me think like, oh, like, things are like things might be different for you because of your skin tone. Because I think my especially with my dad was raised in a way where he was like, raised like a colorblind family, because his family is like very mixed. Like he has a wide variety of like skin tones and races and his family. And so it's just like, he wasn't really raised to see that. And then like, I wasn't either for a lot of my childhood, but like coming to college, maybe see like, well, I'm black, and like, some people aren't gonna like that. And these are the ways that I can help other black people because colorism is definitely a thing like I benefit from being light-skinned. And then just the ways that like, people of color on this campus are treated differently in general, like that's something that I have noticed as I've moved through my Davidson experience. Like, just the other day, like I was at a party at F, and I remember I was like trying to

get into an apartment. And there were these two guys like guarding the door. And like, I understand that they were like, oh, we're like I was trying to get in. And they were like, oh, we're at capacity. And at first I was like, okay, that's fine, because I know that the police like check that sometimes. But then like, some white dude goes up to them, and they immediately let him in. And I was like, I was standing there. And I was like, so you just let that other guy in but not me? And they were like, "oh, well, he's like the twin of a brother. Like, he's related to somebody in the frat." And I was just kind of like, "Okay, well, if you're at capacity, you're at capacity, like familial ties don't really matter." And then they let a huge group of girls go in. And I was just like, hmm this seems kind of suspect. And eventually, I just kind of like, busted my way through because I wanted to see if my friend was in the party. And of course, they weren't so immediately after I was leaving, like I flipped them off as I walked through the door, because I was like, I don't want to deal with this. So like just noticing the ways that like students of color on this campus are treated or even like, made to seem different. Like, we were talking about the fact that like a lot of white students don't feel comfortable in the BSC. And it's just like, you guys are fully welcome here. Like I don't understand why you wouldn't be. Or even like I've seen moments of people in like the town like I remember, we had one of our meetings at the flagpole as we often did freshmen and sophomore year, whenever things were going wrong in this country in terms of like police brutality or like discrimination at other schools. And I remember, I can't remember who exactly it was, but they had like a sign talking about, like, just racial injustice in general. And this old man in the Union, this old white dude, literally, like spat on her sign. Like he had to get kicked

out of the Union. So like, Good move on the college's part. But also, it's just like, these people are still very much in our community. Umm. do do do. And in terms of sexuality... Can you repeat the question?

LB: How do you think about and describe your identities recognizing that they're complex, in flux, and evolving and changing in college.

Graves: Um, hmm, I don't know. With my sexuality, like I've known from a very young age that I wasn't straight, I'd say probably around, like, seventh or eighth grade. And I came out to my parents at that point, like, I was like, you know, this is me. And I came up to them as bi even though now I'm, I'd say, I identify as gay or queer. But I came out to them as bi because I was like, still kind of figuring it out. Like, I was really unsure and kind of scared. And their response was, "No, you're not your first girlfriend just wasn't the best." And that's I was just like, whoa, okay, well, I'm really like, made me take it back from people that I had told. And so then there was just like, a lot of questioning about like, there wasn't even questioning on my part, it was just like a, like, I know who I am. But like, are they comfortable with who I am? And so I really had to like, wait until I got to college to really, like, fully be myself, and explore who I am. And, like, that's still the case that like my parents, and I like, our relationship with my queerness is still kind of very in flux. Like, whenever I go home, it's like, kind of an unspoken thing. It's not that they like don't know, it's just that we don't talk about it. Like, we've never spoken about it since then. And I'll get to that eventually. But like, college has become the space for me where I can, like, explore that and kind of play with who I am. Which is why I said, like, I'm debating between how I identify as being gay or just queer in general, because I feel like I've talked about this in GSS classes before to how like, gay has a connotation of like white,

like, upper middle class, slim, fully able-bodied men. And it's just like, that's not necessarily like, that's not me. But because of the like, for a while, it was the only word that I had to describe myself. And so I'm still kind of like tied to that word. But lately, I've been like identity, like leaning more towards queer or just like, it's just an easier. I don't know. It leaves more room to like, do more. It's harder to pinpoint. For people that don't necessarily that aren't me. Like, I feel like gay is like, that's a guy that likes guys. But like queer, I like the mystery that it holds I would say. So I'm debating between identifyin gas one of those two, which I guess kind of hits what you're saying about how it's in flux and ever-changing.

LB: I remember having a lot of different fears and thoughts about what college was going to be like, do you recall what you might have thought about in terms of queer black life before you got to Davidson?

Graves: Um, I didn't have a lot of thoughts on like my blackness, because, like I said, before, I got to Davidson like, that was something that like, I recognized in myself, but it wasn't something that was like, made salient as different until I got to Davidson. So like, after, like, STRIDE, like, I was like, I wonder how this will go. But when it comes to like, my queerness, I distinctly remember being really afraid that my freshmen year roommate was going to be a homophobe. Like, I was friends with someone who was on the same, like, backcountry Odyssey as them. And like, my friend was like, Oh, your roommates at some really sus stuff, like on their backcountry Odyssey. And I was like, well, shit. like, that's really scary. Like, I don't know how he's gonna react, like, if I'm going to be able to like, be comfortable being myself in our, in our shared room, we're going to be living for this guy for a year. And like, it took a lot of courage for me, like working through freshman year to work up to like, coming out to him. And it wasn't

one of those like, here I am, I am queer moments where it was like a proud like exclamation, it was more of just to like, we had, like, my freshman year roommate, and I were not like, best buds. But like, we were, like, cordial, we were nice enough to each other. And we were supportive of each other, like, I was on dance ensemble, and he would come to the dance ensemble performance and be like, oh, I can't wait to see you kill it. Like he was super sweet. And like, I was supportive of him. And so it got to the point where like, I remember one night, he was talking about like, relationship, drama stuff that he was going through. And I had been going through similar stuff. And I was like, Well, I don't want to leave this conversation. Like one-sided. And so finally, I was like, Oh, yeah, I've been going through these things with this guy. And he was just like, oh, shit, I'm sorry to hear that. Like, he wasn't. Like my fears were completely unfounded., which was really nice. Also, kind of sucks that, like, my friend told me that he might be a homophobe. And he totally wasn't. So I was like, holding back on sharing things with someone. But um, and then, like, I had hadn't really worried about Davidson as a space. I remember, one time I was on a tour as a prospie. And, like, I wasn't super worried about being out on campus, except for the roommate thing because I remember actually, being someone who's local and from Concord, I had the ability to like visit Davidson often, and I remember there was one night where I did an overnight, and I had connected with a queer student in the past, before coming here for the overnight, and they had mentioned something about YANASH, you're not a stranger here. And so like, I had communicated with them, like prior to my overnight, and they were like, oh, there's a YANASH meeting coming up like, while you're going to be here, like, do you want me to, like, pick you up from your host? And you can like, come to this YANASH meeting and like, meet some queer students? And I was like, Yes,

absolutely. And so even then, like, I was still kind of concerned, and how am I hosted react to me, like, going to some gay thing and so like, I'm chillin with my host on his hall, or just like playing board games, or some stuff with his like, girlfriend and like, hallmates. And then like, I get a text from Adam, the kid who's coming to pick me up. And my, like, host, like, takes me outside to like, meet him. And I go, and that's that. And like, my host thought nothing of it. Like, even when Adam like, brought me back to where I was staying. I was like, 'Oh, I hope you had a good meeting.' Like, it was just like, super chill. It wasn't anything that was like thought about twice. But I think that I'm also like, very lucky in the people that I've gotten to know on campus that are all like, very accepting, because I know that there are other people who haven't been. But like, like I was saying, like, even when I was prospie like, I remember going on a tour one time, and I just had like a really awesome tour guide. And while I was on the tour, he like, his sister also went here, and we like ran into his sister and her friend. And both of them were wearing like shirts that said, like "Gay: fine by me" because his sister was like, bisexual and her friend was gay. And our tour guide was supportive both of them because one was his sister, and he was really nice, too. And so it's just like a space in which I felt comfortable. But even then, like, that's not to say that there haven't been moments where I've been like, who, that's a little uncomfy. Like, I was just like, walking with another male student one night. And like, the other student wasn't even queer. I'm fairly certain. I'm pretty sure you might have had some homophobic tendencies. But we were in a class together. We were talking because we were both drunk. And like somebody else that walked by us called out to him was like, yo, you're such a fag. And it's just like, those moments that like, bring you back. Like, even though you think the space is safe, you're like, Oh, well, shit. It's not as safe as I thought it was, or umm, I

was in Cunningham the other day like sitting there doing, like, work on a scene that I was in. And there was like another group of like boys in the green room. And they were just like talking. And they got like, really annoyed at the fact that they're like, Hall was doing a program for like self-care, which I guess like self care is so yeah, like facemasks. And one of like, I remember them talking. I was just kind of sitting there in silence cause I was like, this is so uncomfortable. But they were talking about how like, there was the face mask thing on their Hall, and their like, Hall counselor had messaged in their group meeting like, "Oh, yeah, guys, there's the self care of them tonight, like, be there if you can." And like one of the other men that live in their home was like, Oh, that sounds lovely. Like, I'll be happy to be there. And they were like about to roast this kids were saying it sounded lovely. And I could have sworn one of them was about to say that he sounded like a faggot. And I don't know what I would have done. Like, I was just, I think that's one of those moments where like, instinct just takes over. And I would have fought this fight out who was gigantic, because I would have been so mad. It's the same thing like if, like me, and my friends were all black. So we can say the N word, all we want to because that's our word to reclaim. But if a white person were to call me the N word, I don't know what I would do. I literally like might fight a person. And it's the same thing like. So I like to think that like, Davidson has very much been a space for me to explore myself and figure myself out. But that's not to say that there haven't been moments that disrupt that coziness. But overall, I'd say that it's been a positive space, and I've gotten very lucky, like working in the Lavender Lounge and the Center for Diversity and Inclusion. And being a GSS minor, where they're like a bunch of queer faculty in general that I can identify with like, that doesn't hurt. But it also sucks that like, a lot of the times like marginalized groups are kind of pushed to study in these areas that are



like our areas like black students are often pushed to study like Africana or Sociology and like queer students are often like you see them in GSS classes and Sociology classes and stuff like that. Like you don't see them in Econ classes, like rarely or like, STEM classes, but hopefully that will change.

LB: As you know, I am working on a project for an independent study called the "Queer Black South". And I'm particularly interested in recuperating documents from the recent past that talk about the intersections between queer and black (identities) at the college. How would you describe queer black life at Davidson today? And what have your experiences been?

Graves: I'd say queer black life at Davidson is very different from queer whiteness at Davidson. I don't know it seems more underground. I feel like there are a lot of queer people of color specifically, like queer black people, who just like aren't really open with their sexuality to others or like don't interact with queerness in the same way that queer white students do. Like queer white students are the ones who are in Q&A, queer white students are the ones who are in YANASH, queer white students are the ones who are in the queer mentorship program. But because queerness looks different on different bodies, like we are often the ones who are like seeking out familiarity. And it's hard. Like I've heard from other queer students of color that like, it's hard to connect with queer white students sometimes. Because like, yes, you might have that queerness in common, but fundamentally, like, there are times where our differences really like come to light, especially because like intersectionality we experienced things differently. And so, yeah, I'd say like queer blackness is something that is not I don't want to say hidden because like it exists, it's just if you're not a part of that community, it's hard to see.

Which is like, why we have things now like the Queer People of Color Dinners. But like, even then, like some queer people, like queer black people, like may not be comfortable being out fully and so they're not going to come, like even if they're in a space with other queer people that are people of color, they still might not be comfortable being there. And like, I've definitely seen that in the interactions that I've had with queer black people on this campus. Like, it's either something that like, is known among other queer black students like, the other, like queer black students that I know. Like, we'll talk about other people that we think are queer and black. But, uhh I just lost my train of thought...But it's just like, that is something for us, you know, like, I can speculate with queer white students about whoever is queer. But it also often seems like a lot of the time. A lot of the time I feel like queer white students, or even just white students at Davidson, in general, live in a completely different world than and black students at Davidson, sometimes it feels like, and like we were saying earlier, like it's just is I feel sometimes more likely for black students at Davidson to have a white friend than white students at Davidson to have black friends, if that makes sense. Like, I remember, and this isn't about like Davidson in general, but it applies. Like I remember one of my friends from home, posted a picture on her Facebook from her Spring Break trip with her friends the other day, and there was like a group of like, 12 people, and I was like, fun. Where are the people of color? Like, do you know any students of color, like it's just like, at all like maybe for a dollar name one. I feel like that's often the case on Davidson's campus too, like, I can't name a single friend of color who has gone to Carolina Cup, like, that these are just experiences that like are not universal. And it's the same with like, queerness, like, black queerness looks different than white queerness. And they often don't run in the same circles. I'm like, sometimes you have to

like, because they work in the Lavendar Lounger, like I'm able to kind of straddle that line of like, which one I am a part of. But that doesn't deny, like me existing and interacting with one part of it does not deny the existence of this other part of me. Because the way that I interact with other black queer students is completely different than the way that I interact with white queer students. Even if there are more white queer students, just because of the makeup of Davidson in general.

LB: Yah, the makeup of Davidson's pretty white.

Graves: Pretty white.

LB: What do you think? Your senior, you're graduating, congratulations.

Graves: Thank you.

LB: What do you think you're going to remember about Davidson queer/black / queer black life after you graduate and there's been some separation and like the little things might still be there if they might pop out.

Graves: I will be thankful that Davidson has offered me the space to explore myself more, because like, I'm really, at any college you can do that. It's kind of what you make it, and like, I've been fortunate enough to have experiences in college that I have defined and are like, clued me into like, this is what I don't like in a guy, and this is what I do. Like, these are sexual experiences, experiences that I do or don't like. And like I'll remember fondly like the friends that I made here. In terms of like queerness, like through YANASH and the Queer Mentorship Program or like, Tinder, and Grindr and all these things, just like ways of meeting other queer individuals, like, I've definitely made friends because of that. And also, like I said, like, the other experiences that it's taught me. And in terms of blackness, like, I'll definitely look

fondly back on like, STRIDE, like, because that's the thing that really clued me into the way that the world might see me different, and has really inspired me to like, want to make a difference there. And so like, plus it is because of STRIDE that I have, the friends that I do at Davidson, like without that I would be a completely different person. I don't know if I'd be friends with the people that I'm friends with, like I hopefully would, I'd like to say that I would, like we all went through that experience together, and so because of that, like I know them, and they're my best friends. And even like, surprisingly, a very large portion of my like, STRIDE friend group freshman year ended up being queer. And so it's just like, funny seeing the ways that queer people gravitate towards each other, even when we don't mean to. And like may not be out or like aware that we're even queer at that point in time. But we just happen to find each other. So I mean, I'll definitely look fondly back on those things too. I'm thankful for the lessons that STRIDE has taught me and the people that it has exposed me to. Yeah, I don't know if I've answered the question.

LB: What does queer mean to you? I mean, you kind of talked about that. Yeah, I feel like, like I was saying earlier, like queer...

Graves: I also, like, have many feelings on it. I don't know, I've read I've done a lot of reading on like, the academic-ness of the word and how it's been co-opted by academia, and how it shouldn't be. But I don't see any issue with that. But I just think it means like... on one hand, it can be used as an umbrella term, like how the CDI uses it is like the Lavender Lounge is a space for queer and trans resources for students to use that are queer and trans. But on the other hand, like I kind of see it as like a something that is kind of unable to be defined or unable to be kind of pinpointed specifically. But it's also like, I see, I don't know, like, I'm just thinking

of a bunch of like, random adjectives, Instead of a full definition, like, powerful, resiliency, love, like things like that. Instead of like, this is like, I can't give you a full, like, queer is defined as "da da da da." Like, it's just genderless but also gendered. It's just so much of an enigma. Do you know what I mean? So its strength, its softness, its love, its power, its hate, its anger, like it's all of these things; and how they interact with one another, and how they interact with bodies, and how, like, I feel, you know? So, yeah, that's how I would define it.

LB: Is there anything else you'd like to say about the queer davidson life Davidson life and experience?

Graves: I guess, one thing that I thought about in my early years here was, I was like, wow, this place kind of sucks being a queer student, sometimes, like as much as I, as much as I've gone on, and about how much I love Davidson, and I'm thankful for it. Yeah, you're also in a small town like, and especially I guess, this is kind of like, any prospies who might listen to this, like, you're in a small town, like, there's not going to be much to do, especially in terms of like, in general, like, there's not much to do in Davidson, which is why we have like programming every week through Union Board, but on the other hand, like, as a queer student, there's even less to do sometimes. But like, you will make those connections that will sustain you because like, I remember, I thought about, I didn't necessarily think really hard about transferring, like I knew that Davidson was where I wanted to be, I applied ED. But even when I was here, I was like, shit, this, this really sucks sometimes. Like, I'm just bored, like I want. Like, I see friends that are going to school in New York, and going to like drag shows and clubs and like, balls and things. And I'm just like, Wow, that looks amazing. But on the other hand, I'm like, my education is kick-ass. Like, at the end of all this experience, I will have a degree from Davidson

College, which holds some weight, and that kept me going and then the fact that like, I have made so many positive friendships here, with other queer individuals, or even just like, other individuals in general, like, even though I'd say a lot of my friends are queer now that I think about it. I can.. I have straight acquaintances, but a lot of like, queer friends. And just like looking at those relationships, like I wouldn't want anything different from that. So I guess advice to a prospective queer student or a first-year queer student or the sophomore or the junior or even the senior who's looking at leaving like, it might suck sometimes, but you will make those relationships that make it all worth it in the end.