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Bridging the Gaps: Building a University Link Tank


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Bridging the Gaps: Building a University Link Tank

A Proposal by Team Collaboration
Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute
VCU Leadership Program 2008

Team Members

- Christian Barrett, Internal Medicine
- James Frazier, Department of Dance and Choreography
- Dale Jones, Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs
- Kelly Lockeman, Office of the Provost
- Brigitte Sicat, School of Pharmacy
- Donna Steigleder, Health System Human Resources
- Linda Zyzniewski, Department of Psychology

Project Description

One of the seven strategic directions which guided the development of VCU 2020 is to leverage strengths and build bridges through interdisciplinary activities. Just as a chain is comprised of interconnected links, we are proposing the University Link Tank as a mechanism by which to build bridges between employees via a network of small groups. Participation in the Link Tank would be voluntary and open to all VCU and Health System employees. The program would be modeled similarly to the Faculty Learning Community (FLC) program, which is administered by the Center for Teaching Excellence, but it would concentrate on issues that are *not* specifically related to teaching. Topics would be solicited annually, and interested employees would apply to participate. Incentives for participation could include perks such as a yearly stipend, time allocation for service, or credits toward the tenure and promotion or merit evaluation process. The program would also concentrate on effectively utilizing existing VCU resources to resolve issues.

Project Goals

Team Collaboration has four goals for the University Link Tank:

- to develop strategies to bridge gaps caused by the size and diversity of VCU, including the Health System;
- to work toward solutions for problems, issues, or opportunities identified by the VCU community;
- to facilitate the opportunities for collaboration among different areas of the VCU community; and
- to enhance a feeling of community and pride in VCU.

Strategies

Since the 1990s, there has been an extraordinary increase in new federal, state, and local government initiatives across the nation requiring inter-organizational collaboration. Organizations in the non-profit sector and private sector, including higher education institutions, are relying on collaboration to accomplish goals. Faculty and staff who seek employment in an academic environment usually do so because they have an interest in acquiring, generating, and disseminating knowledge, a process that frequently results from collaboration with colleagues. However, in many cases, faculty and staff at VCU and the Health System are unaware that others share their interests and/or challenges. Upon hire, new

faculty and staff receive a general orientation from Human Resources and a formal or informal orientation within their departments. However, once settled into their new role, interaction with other members of the University community is limited. VCU and the Health System could foster a greater sense of community and facilitate learning by helping link individuals with common interests and challenges.

Action Steps

1. We met as a group for the first time in February and brainstormed about ideas for a problem that we saw at VCU. We quickly identified a common theme of fragmentation among members of the university community.
2. At the GEHLI retreat in March, we came up with a loose concept for a program that would be aimed toward helping university employees develop better connections. With our own VCU leadership program as a model, we discussed methods of offering such an opportunity to a broader audience. Our ideas included large group sessions with invited speakers and small groups with facilitators. We debated whether the program should be targeted toward all employees, new employees only, or faculty with interdisciplinary research interests. We struggled with figuring out how to engage or motivate faculty and staff to participate in such a program.
3. We met with our project sponsor, Dr. Francis Macrina, Vice President for Research, in April. He liked our concept and expanded on the idea by discussing the struggles that his own office has encountered in its effort to persuade faculty to utilize GENIUS, a database that would enable faculty to easily find collaborators with similar interests.
4. We met again as a group early in the summer. We continued to debate who should be served, whether there would be enough interest, whether there were existing programs that already addressed the needs that we sought to fill, and how we would execute a program. We concluded that existing programs address some of our concerns, but a comprehensive program is lacking.
5. At our next brief meeting in June, we began to have trouble solidifying our objectives and moving forward. We discussed the possibility of surveying faculty and staff to get a better sense of needs and interest, but we didn't formalize any plans, and the process floundered over the summer.
6. When the leadership program resumed in the fall, we met again as a group and came to the decision that the FLC program was a sound model, and we began fleshing out our plan.

Process Observations and Outcomes

Within the team, individual members gravitated to different roles (leadership, substantive support, energetic contribution) in a natural way. Each team member had a voice and involvement, but modes of participation varied due to the scheduling complexities of busy people. As a group, we easily identified broad challenges and issues, and we came up with a general solution for the problems we perceived. However, without fully understanding or articulating specific goals, the team had difficulty formulating a concrete design for a program. Following a healthy level of disagreement, the group finally managed to arrive at a theory that addressed each team member's concerns. Ironically, as we struggled with uncertainty and indecision, we began to understand that our diversity was the primary reason we could not agree upon a universal solution, and we realized that the key to resolving our own differences was incorporating this diversity instead of eliminating it.

Recommendations

Before a University Link Tank program can be implemented, a formal study should be conducted to assess levels of interest and to identify issues that might warrant formation of study groups. If the assessment confirms Team Collaboration's appraisal, a university department should be identified to take ownership of the project and administer the program. Resources should be identified to fund incentives

for participation and administrative support. After these steps have been completed, a pilot can be initiated with one or two interest groups working toward solutions to common concerns.

Conclusions

Flexibility is necessary for faculty and staff with different interests and talents, from different campuses and backgrounds, to reach out to others with similar needs and create common interest groups to solve diverse problems. Our own success as a team illustrates this concept nicely. We each developed working relationships with individuals outside our daily circle, exchanged ideas, and developed a viable concept that could enhance the University community at large. In doing so, we reinforced our own pride in VCU and forged links that will remain long after the Grace E. Harris VCU Leadership Program has ended.

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for the VCU Leadership Program

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October 23, 2008

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The Challenges at VCU

- Size
- Diversity
 - Programs
 - Roles and responsibilities
- Infrastructure
- Geography

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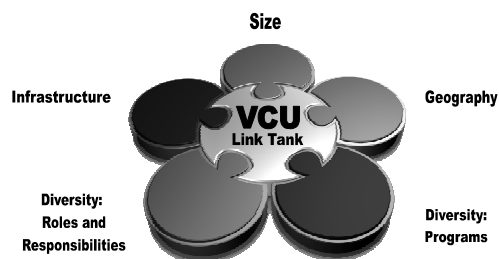
The Opportunities for VCU

- Size
- Diversity
 - Programs
 - Roles and responsibilities
- Infrastructure
- Geography

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Ideal World:

Challenges Can Build Links and Create Opportunities



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Project Goals

- To develop strategies to bridge gaps caused by the size and diversity of VCU, including the Health System
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- To facilitate opportunities for collaboration among different areas of the VCU community
- To enhance a feeling of community and pride in VCU

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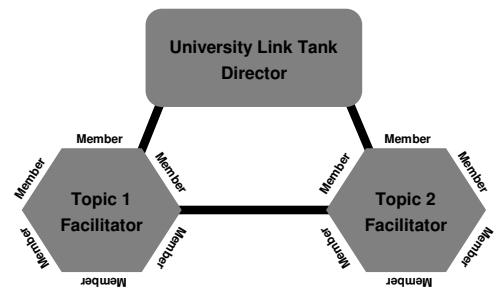
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University Link Tank

- A model similar to Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs)
- University Link Tank
 - Open to all VCU/VCU Health System employees
 - Share common interests in a University need, issue, or opportunity
 - Yearlong program and environment that promotes learning, collaboration, development, and community building

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University Link Tank Structure



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University Link Tank Components

- Participants
 - Open to all VCU/VCU Health System employees
 - Share common interest in University need, issue, or opportunity
- Director & Facilitators
 - Mission & purpose
 - Curriculum/Content
 - Administration
 - Connections
 - Meetings & activities
 - Scholarly process
 - Assessment
 - Incentives/Rewards

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Sample Link Tank Groups

- Full utilization of GENIUS (Global Expertise Network for Industry, Universities and Scholars) by VCU faculty and staff
- Promoting the practice of professionalism among faculty, staff, and students
- Best practices for new employee orientation programs
- Exploration of issues related to geographic separation of campuses and buildings

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Recommendations

- Assess interest
- Obtain the backing of administration and faculty/staff
- Locate resources for participant and administrative support
- Identify a University Link Tank Program Director
- Identify issues, needs, and opportunities for Link Tank groups
 - faculty and staff may propose topics
- Initiate a pilot with one or two Link Tank groups
- Develop an application process
- Select Link Tank Facilitator(s)

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Potential Outcomes

- Bridge gaps caused by the size and diversity of VCU
- Capitalize on opportunities identified by the University and Health System communities
- Facilitate the opportunities for collaboration among different areas of VCU
- Enhance a feeling of community and pride in VCU

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