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RamStart

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RamStart

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Project Sponsor: Ian Kunkes, Director, Office of Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity (SAEO)

PROJECT ABSTRACT

According to the 2015 Bureau of Labor Statistics, nationally, students with disabilities are less likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree and more likely to be unemployed.¹ At VCU, these students are served by the Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity Office (SAEO), which currently has only two case managers for 1500 registered students while the Association for Higher Education and Disabilities (AHEAD) recommends an individual case load of 350 or fewer students. While these students attend New Student Orientation, there are currently no programs or sessions specifically designed to address their needs. RamStart is a model for pre-semester transition workshops for new students who have been granted accommodations through SAEO for disabilities and their families which is designed to provide them with tools for self-advocacy and independence. The goal of these workshops is to help ease the students' transition to VCU by educating them and their parents about SAEO's services, their rights and responsibilities, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), campus resources, and University policies and procedures to improve their chances of success.

QUEST CONNECTIONS

This team project cuts across two strategic plans as the university phases out its existing plan and moves forward into its new plan.

Quest For Distinction	Quest 2025: Together we Transform
Theme I: Become a leader among national research universities in providing all students with high-quality learning/living experiences focused on inquiry, discovery and innovation in a global environment	Theme I: Student Success - Transform the lives of our distinctive and diverse student population through a university culture that supports every student's success through inquiry, discovery, innovation, civic engagement, and creative expression

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, The Economics Daily, People with a disability less likely to have completed a bachelor's degree. (2015, July 20). Retrieved September 19, 2018 from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/td/2015/people-with-a-disability-less-likely-to-have-completed-a-bachelors-degree.htm>

In order to meet *Quest 2025: Together we Transform Goal 1.3* for students with disabilities, RamStart is designed to help facilitate a smooth transition to VCU. In possession of the tools and information provided at RamStart, these students will be better able to begin life at college successfully and attain academic and social success thus improving their chances of retention and graduation.

PROJECT GOALS

1. Prepare students with disabilities for the college experience, socially and academically.
2. Support and retain students with disabilities at VCU.
3. Familiarize families with the resources available at VCU to assist students with disabilities.
4. Promote diversity within the VCU community by helping to recruit students with disabilities.

This project should be implemented because students with disabilities are retained and graduate at lower rates than other students.² Nationally, 55% of students with disabilities vs. 62% of students without disabilities attend post-secondary school and 29% of students with disabilities vs 42% of students without disabilities graduate from a 4-year college.³ Only 16% of adults 25 or older with disabilities vs. 35% of adults 25 or older without disabilities held a Bachelor's degree in 2014.⁴ One of the five central goals of the VCU 2017-2022 Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Action Plan is to "intentionally attract and retain a diverse faculty, staff and student body, with reflective and deliberate attention to community needs" and to "implement strategies for enhancing recruitment, retention and success." Therefore, as students with disabilities enroll at VCU, it should be the priority of the University to provide them with information and resources to support their academic and social success. RamStart will provide a specialized focus and approaches suited to their needs.

PROJECT STRATEGIES

The team focused on delivering a transition workshop which is implementable, sustainable, and delivers useful and accessible tools to the targeted student group and their families to enhance and ease their transition to VCU.

First, the team identified and reviewed data regarding the success rates of students with disabilities nationally. Unfortunately, VCU does not collect this data so the team was unable to gather VCU-specific information. However, the team identified all the stakeholders at VCU and determined their needs, goals, and desired outcomes through research and conversations with the team sponsor, students, and families of students with disabilities. These assessments were used to identify potential areas where the program could be of benefit to these students. The next step was to conduct a comparative analysis of Student Support Programs nationally to determine successful approaches, potential obstacles to success, and best practices. The workshop the team developed models successful programs at the Catholic University of America and the University of West Florida. Through conversation with the Director of SAEO, the resources available and allocations of SAEO to support this workshop was determined.

² Dowrick, P. W., Anderson, J., Heyer, K., & Acosta, J. (2005). Postsecondary education across the USA: Experiences of adults with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 22, 41-47.

³ Newman, L., Wagner, M., Knokey, A.-M., Marder, C., Nagle, K., Shaver, D., Wei, X., with Cameto, R., Contreras, E., Ferguson, K., Greene, S., and Swarting, M. (2011). The Post-High School Outcomes of Young Adults with Disabilities up to 8 Years After High School. A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) (NCSE 2011-3005). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, The Economics Daily, People with a disability less likely to have completed a bachelor's degree. (2015, July 20). Retrieved September 19, 2018 from <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2015/people-with-a-disability-less-likely-to-have-completed-a-bachelors-degree.htm>

Thereafter, the team evaluated the information and data gathered to determine the best fit for VCU using brainstorming and alternative and option assessments. Then, the team designed and drafted the workshop agenda and had it reviewed by the Director of SAEO. Based on his feedback and suggestions, the team revised the workshop agenda and provided additional resources for his office including a letter of invitation for workshop presenters and a draft budget. The workshop is now ready to pilot in the 2019 academic year, testing the model for acceptance by the target population, viability based upon stakeholder satisfaction, and sustainability focused upon resource availability

ACTION STEPS

Appropriate steps to ensure a successful workshop are as follows:

- Create an agreement with VCU housing for early move in for students.
- Identify a strategy for enrolling students with SAEO office prior to orientation.
- Create communication about SAEO workshop sessions and send it to registered students.
- Identify dates for program and send invitations and confirmations to speakers from SAEO and other units.
- Identify strategy for recruitment of prospective student ambassadors.
- Contract room reservations, catering, and preparation of materials.

OUTCOMES

The desired outcome of the team project is to create a program model for a RamStart workshop for students with disabilities that can be offered to students starting in Fall 2019.

As students register for accommodations with the SAEO office, they will receive invitations containing information about the workshops, which will also be available on the website for prospective students. The full-day orientation workshop for the Fall and a half-day workshop in the Spring when enrollments are lower, will be led by the SAEO office and supported by other campus partners. The workshops will incorporate interactions with student ambassadors. The SAEO staff will recruit student ambassadors from among registered students who have made a successful transition to VCU socially and academically.

The proposed workshop schedule provided to SAEO describes topics covered in each workshop session and includes a list of suggested presenters. The program will begin with a mixer with SAEO staff, student attendees, their families, and student ambassadors the evening prior to the workshops. The day-long workshop will begin with breakfast and a discussion of the differences between high school and college led by the SAEO staff and the student ambassadors. The second session will be led by representatives from the Dean of Students office and will cover the resources available to students in Student Affairs with a focus on student conduct and Title IX issues. The third session will focus on academic success and will be led by staff from the Campus Learning Center. Families will say goodbye to their students at this point and the students will have lunch with the student ambassadors at Shafer Court Dining Center. Following lunch, there will be a session on student health and wellness led by representatives from the VCU Counseling Center, Student Health Services, Rec Sports, and the Well. Then, SAEO staff will conduct a workshop on self-advocacy. The day will end with team-building activities and games with the students and student ambassadors led by Rec Sports. Other products provided to SAEO include draft letters of invitations to facilitate recruitment of the presenters, a secured commitment of the presenters for the Fall 2019 workshop, a plan for assessment of the workshop, and a draft budget.

The team anticipates two immediate positive effects on the incoming students. First, students with disabilities and their families should make a smoother transition to VCU and face fewer adjustment difficulties. Second, VCU students with disabilities should have an improved on-

campus experience because they are more connected to the SAEO office and student ambassadors. In the long term, the team hopes that the retention of students with accommodations will improve, leading to higher graduation rates.

The team is optimistic that RamStart will contribute to VCU becoming a more attractive and preferred choice for prospective students with disabilities.

SUSTAINABILITY

The identified stakeholders in this proposal include individuals, groups, and organizations impacted by the outcome of the project.

Students with disabilities: Higher retention and graduation rates among students with disabilities, as well as their success on campus and later in the workplace are critical to personal and professional competence and the economic future of educational institutions. Satisfied students and working graduates lead to, among other things, individuals who: feel good about themselves and their alma mater; can service their enormous student debt; generate interest in their academic home among prospective students; and become donors.

Virginia Commonwealth University: Colleges and universities must do more than educate students in the classroom. VCU will need to focus on the whole student experience. A quality academic experience, no matter how thoughtfully conceived, is not enough. Well-educated but miserable students may transfer to another institution. Even if the dissatisfied students stay and graduate, they may not feel institutional allegiance. Prospective gift-giving will evaporate. Secondly, success with this project may demonstrate VCU's commitment to diversity and inclusion, as well as a higher retention and graduation rates among a diverse student population. Successful institution-parent community partnerships are not stand-alone projects or add-on programs but are well integrated with the school's overall mission and goals.

Parents of students with disabilities: In many cases, parents are the primary financial and personal support system for college students. Their 'buy-in' for this project demonstrates a significant amount of trust in VCU to guide their students with disabilities and offer tools for success in the real world without daily parental supervision.

Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity (SAEO): SAEO will assume responsibility for coordinating, implementing and managing the program. RamStart will be the first established program specifically designed to address the needs of students with disabilities and their parents. The success of this program supports the intended goal of SAEO to create an environment where all students have equal access to the University's programs.

Student Ambassadors from SAEO: Returning students can be potential products of program effectiveness. They can share their experiences (both positive and negative), as well as possibly serve as role models and resources for new students. Increased membership can create a formal and informal peer support group. This group also provides an opportunity for students to develop leadership skills, transferable to the classroom, social and workplace settings.

Division of Inclusive Excellence: Involvement of the Division of Inclusive Excellence provides an opportunity to support a welcoming, inclusive, and equitable learning environment where the differences of others are honored and respected.

Student Centers (Student Success, New Student and Family Programs, Student Affairs and Strategic Enrollment Management): The student centers are available to all VCU incoming and returning students including students with disabilities.

High Schools: Local high schools are primary recruitment areas for VCU. Establishing a program which supports the transition of students with disabilities for post-secondary enrollment increases viable recommended options for after high school planning into college and later a competitive workforce.

Commonwealth of Virginia: Employed college graduates are contributing citizens to a healthy economy.

A collective effort from stakeholders listed above creates an opportunity to provide academic and social support to students with disabilities and eliminate barriers to attrition and graduation. Sustainability is best achieved with an identified primary program owner. SAEO serves as the most appropriate source and will assume responsibility for program implementation including the budget. Collaboration with other VCU areas (i.e. Inclusive Excellence, Student Success, New Student and Family Programs, Student Affairs and Strategic Enrollment Management) for a comprehensive approach to student success will contribute to program sustainability. While new student orientation is a current practice for VCU, RamStart is seeking to provide an addition to existing programming, which includes a component specific to the needs of students with disabilities.

FINANCING AND RESOURCES

At this point in time, the Director of SAEO feels existing budget and personnel are sufficient to hold this workshop. In addition, personnel from the Campus Learning Center have already indicated availability to present at the workshop and will not require compensation. Since the program includes students, space in the Student Commons for the workshop can be reserved at no cost. Student Ambassadors will be asked to volunteer their time for the benefit of other students. Therefore, the only real costs included in the budget below are printing materials, food, refreshments, and workshop memorabilia. Based on discussions with SAEO office, the initial batch of students for Fall 2019 is estimated to be 30. If the number of student attendees increases over time, costs will rise and other sources of revenue may be required. If SAEO is no longer able to pay the associated costs from their budget, they can solicit contributions from Student Affairs or follow the model at most other institutions and charge a registration fee of students and families to cover operational costs.

Item Description	Justification	Cost per Student	Number of Students	Total Cost
Food and beverages	Evening reception, breakfast, and lunch	\$35 per student and \$20 per parent	30 students and 60 parents for reception and breakfast	\$1,650
Printing costs	Brochures and other supplemental information	100 copies		\$100
Marketing materials (VCU gear)	Giveaways for the workshop	\$20 per student	30	\$600
TOTAL				\$2,350

RECOMMENDATIONS

RamStart aims to smooth the transition of students with disabilities to a university setting and hopefully aid in the support and retention of these students at VCU. With these objectives in mind, we recommend that the SAEO office be established as the suitable project home given its mission of supporting these students at VCU. The Director of SAEO has already agreed to this. We further recommend that initial focus be placed on recruitment of students into the workshop.

The success of RamStart is contingent upon students actually attending the workshop. Based on interviews with VCU's SAEO Director Ian Kunkes and research findings, students with a disability are often unwilling to identify as having a disability⁵, thereby creating an obstacle for the success of RamStart. To overcome this potential impediment, we propose a multi-pronged focus on recruitment of students with disabilities, including the design of both a webpage for the SAEO website promoting the workshop for prospective students and their parents and the design of a brochure promoting the workshop that can be distributed to community colleges and high schools around the state. A further recruitment tool will be the incentive of early entry to the dormitories.

Other recommendations include creating an email that can be sent annually to representatives from various University organizations that will be asked to present during the orientation workshop (including, but not limited to, Campus Learning Center, Writing Center, Counseling Center, Rec Sports, and Dean of Students' office, as well as evaluation of the program after the first pre-semester transition workshop, and then annually. Evaluation will solicit participant feedback on usefulness of workshop sessions and track retention and graduation rates of students with disabilities who attended the workshop and those who did not.

FINAL PITCH

College students with disabilities are a historically marginalized and at-risk student population. In service to VCU's institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion, RamStart will help SAEO better meet the needs of these students. These pre-semester transition workshops are designed to ensure students with disabilities the same high-quality learning experiences available to other VCU students by providing them with tools, transferable skills, and information to make a successful transition to college. This programming would be especially beneficial for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as 80% of students with ASD fail to complete their college degree.⁶ Based on the success of such programs at other institutions and the expertise of the team sponsor, the team believes this program could improve recruitment and retention rates of students with disabilities at a relatively low cost.

⁵ Marshak, L., Van Wieren, T., Ferrell, D., Swiss, L., & Dugan, C. (2010). Exploring Barriers to College Student Use of Disability Services and Accommodations. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 22 (3), 151-165.

Newman, L., Wagner, M., Knoke, A., Marder, C., Nagle, K., Shaver, D., & Xin, W. (2011). The Post-High School Outcomes of Young Adults With Disabilities up to 8 Years After High School A Report From the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). U.S. Department of Education.

⁶ Trevisan, D. and E. Birmingham. (2016). Examining the relationship between autistic traits and college adjustment. *Autism*, 20, 719-729, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1362361315604530>; Ydq#Khhv/#1/# r|vrq/#

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RamStart

A pre-semester transition workshop for students with disabilities and their families



Team members



Team

- Marc Aiello, Financial Management Analyst 3, Office of Budget and Resource Analysis
- Justin Alexander, Interim Associate Chair and Assistant Professor, Department of Music
- Marie Greenwood, Director of Human Resources Information Systems, VCU Health System
- Jeannetta Hollins, Director of Student Services, School of Nursing
- Melissa Johnson, Chair and Associate Professor, Dept. of Focused Inquiry, University College
- Lukasz Kurgan, Vice Chair and Professor, College of Engineering
- Christine Mowery, Undergraduate Program Director and Assistant Professor, Sociology, College of Humanities and Sciences
- Grayce Palmer, Senior Performance Improvement Coordinator, VCU Health System

Sponsor

Ian Kunkles, Director of Office of Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity (SAEO)

Quest Connections

Quest for Distinction:

Theme I: Quest 2025: Together We Transform

Transform the lives of our distinctive and diverse student population through a university culture that supports every student's success through inquiry, discovery, innovation, civic engagement, and creative expression.

1.3 Enhance the university culture supporting student success, including improved retention and graduation rates

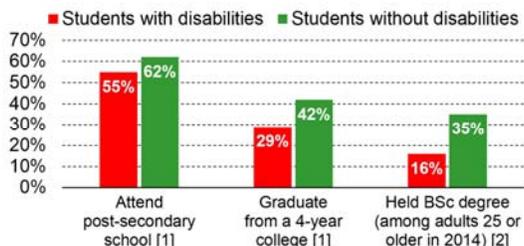
SAEO Office

SAEO supports and serves any student with a currently documented disability

Examples of disabilities and physical/mental impairments may include, but are not limited to:

- **Medical conditions**, including cancer, fibromyalgia, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and sickle cell anemia
- **Visual impairments**, including retinitis pigmentosa, optic neuritis, retinal detachments
- **Hearing impairments**, including moderate to severe hearing loss and deafness
- **Mental health conditions**, including bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression
- **Traumatic brain injuries**, including recent moderate to severe concussions
- **Neurological disorders**, including, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities
- **Developmental conditions**, including autism spectrum disorder
- **Mobility impairments**, including cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, and spinal cord injuries

National data



[1] National Center for Special Education Research
[2] Department of Labour

VCU data

1500 (5%)

Students have self-disclosed a disability with the SAEO Office, compared to **11%** of undergraduate college students reported in 2011-2012 [1]

2.5

Caseworkers at the SAEO Office

[1] NCES

Goals



1. Prepare students with disabilities for the college experience, socially and academically.
2. Familiarize families with the resources available at VCU to assist students with disabilities
3. Support and retain students with disabilities at VCU.
4. Promote diversity within the VCU community by helping to recruit students with disabilities.

Stakeholders



1. Students with disabilities
2. Parents of students with disabilities
3. Student Ambassadors from SAEO
4. SAEO office
5. Division of Inclusive Excellence
6. Student Centered Units:
 - a. Student Success
 - b. New Student and Family Programs
 - c. Student Affairs
 - d. Strategic Enrollment Management
7. High Schools and Transfer Institutions
8. Commonwealth of Virginia

RamStart Agenda

Project Strategies



1. Review of current success rates of SAEO registered students.
2. Needs Assessments of the targeted students and their families - similar programs elsewhere, challenges/events for SAEO students.
3. Determine Best Practices nationally - review of existing successful programs.
4. Assess relevant resources and allocations at SAEO - budgets, human resources, and time.
5. Determine Best Fit and Design - brainstorming and metric determination.
6. Test.

Research on programs with ASD Focus

Mentorship (No Fee) Programs



- Students typically meet weekly with a peer mentor
- Usually a social event once a semester

Formal Fee Based Programs



- Students follow a specified curriculum
- Programs include a peer mentorship program
- Social, informal components included in fees

Action Steps



1. Secure agreement with housing to allow students to move-in early to residence halls.
2. Students register with SAEO before orientation.
3. Send information about workshop to registered students (schedule and early move-in).
4. Select dates for program (~1 week before classes begin); invite and confirm speakers.
5. Recruit prospective student ambassadors.
6. Book space, order refreshments/food, and prepare and print materials.

Resources Required

SAEO can conduct this workshop with its existing budget.

Item Description	Justification	Cost per Student	Number of Students	Total Cost
Food and beverages	Evening reception, breakfast, and lunch	\$35 per student and \$20 per parent	30+60 parents for reception and breakfast	\$1,650
Printing costs	Brochures and other supplemental information	100 copies		\$100
Marketing materials (VCU gear)	Giveaways for the workshop	\$20 per student	30	\$600
Total				\$2,350

Outcomes



1. Detailed schedule for the full-day orientation workshop for the Fall and for the half-day workshop in the Spring.
2. Draft letters of invitation to facilitate recruitment of the presenters.
3. Secured commitment of the presenters for the Fall 2019 workshop.
4. Plan for assessment of the workshop.
5. Draft budget for the workshops.

Outcomes



Short-term benefits:

1. Students with disabilities and their families will make a smoother transition to VCU and face fewer adjustment difficulties.
2. VCU students with disabilities will have an improved on-campus experience.

Longer-term benefits:

1. Retention of students with accommodations will improve, leading to higher graduation rates.
2. VCU will become a more attractive and preferred choice for prospective students with disabilities.

Recommendations



1. Establish SAEO as the project home.
2. Design webpage and brochure promoting the workshop.
3. Create email to be sent annually to workshop presenters.
4. Minimal costs of workshop to be covered by SAEO's operating budget.
5. Evaluate the workshop on an annual basis.