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Real Voices, Real Questions, Real Engagement: VCU Speaker Series

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Real Voices, Real Questions, Real Engagement: VCU Speaker Series

TEAM MEMBERS

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Daniel Woodward, Director, Executive Communication, University Relations

Project Sponsor: Marti Heil, Vice President for Development and Alumni Relations

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

You come here for something more than schooling. You come here for deep education and deep education is about learning how to die so that you learn how to live because when you examine certain assumptions that you have, certain presuppositions that you're holding on to, when you let them go, that's a form of death. And there's no growth, there's no development, there's no maturation without learning how to die and giving up certain dogma, giving up certain doctrine.

- Cornel West, Ph.D., VCU Siegel Center, Fall 2015

VCU is a large, public, urban research university situated in the middle of a capital city. Its faculty, staff, student body, alumni, and the surrounding community are remarkably diverse as are the academic offerings. It is, and should be viewed as, the intellectual and cultural engine of the region. Our project proposes the creation of a large-scale, high-profile speaker series designed to highlight emerging trends and provide students, faculty, staff, alumni and the Richmond community with a forum for conversation. The speaker series will cover topics that are critically engaging, have national relevance, and introduce ideas that propel the next generation of leaders. In addition to a large speaking engagement, the speaker series will also incorporate other activities to cultivate interactions and build relationships such as classroom lectures, book signings, and a dinner through the development office.

The speaker series will host at least one speaker annually, with the addition of a second speaker as the event builds momentum. At least one of the lectures will occur at the beginning of the traditional academic semester, allowing for the greatest opportunity for participation across VCU and Richmond. Internal support from VCU students, faculty, staff, and colleges will ensure that the project is connected to the mission, vision, goals, and pursuits of VCU. A speaker series committee will help sustain and coordinate efforts across the university and community. Committee members will include stakeholders that require buy-in and cooperation for activities that complement the speaker series (e.g., other lectures, panel discussions, classroom activities). A survey will be used to gain insights into topics and speakers of interest. The committee will review the survey responses in order to make informed decisions during the planning process.

The ongoing presence of hosting influential speakers will allow VCU to emerge into the national spotlight as thought-leaders. This speaker series will serve many purposes. First, the series will serve to inspire VCU students, faculty, staff, and the Richmond. Through frank and open conversations attendees will be exposed to new concepts and ideas. Second, the series will unite

the diverse groups that make up VCU and the Richmond community. The lecture series will expose attendees to new ideas and open doors for possible opportunities for collaboration through classroom and community engagement activities related to the topics discussed. Third, the series will serve as a cultural conduit, solidly connecting the VCU and Richmond communities around engaging ideas of importance. Opening a new market-place of ideas will ensure that the students of VCU interact with new information in exciting and transformative ways.

QUEST FOR DISTINCTION

The project will align with Quest Theme III. By hosting a national speaker series for intellectual dialogue, VCU will “become a national model for community engagement and regional impact.” By participating in the event, VCU and Richmond members will be inspired, engaged, and propelled into action. During the major speaking events and associated activities opportunities for alumni development along with opportunities for collaborations and partnerships among community groups and the VCU faculty, students and staff will be a natural by product.

PROJECT GOALS

1. Develop a large-scale speaker series project offered by VCU. The project will be designed to promote school pride, student spirit, and foster civic engagement.
2. Collaborate with VCU and Richmond leaders to encourage community engagement focus for the project.
3. Provide methods/models for sustaining a large-scale speaker series at VCU.

PROJECT STRATEGIES

The team met with VCU stakeholders and project mentor to explore project viability. These meetings led to the discussion and development of a logic model. The team strategized methods to collect data and decided to create and distribute a survey tool. The survey was disseminated to a variety of VCU based individuals such as undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff and alumni (Appendix A). The inputs collected from the survey led to further research into peer organizations with similar programs in place to determine what barriers, opportunities and elements could be incorporated or eliminated. Over the course of planning, the team used the data collected to formulate a final project, including identifying impediments, constructing the project design, planning the event logistics, and devising financial proposals.

ACTION STEPS

- Discussed and gauged interest in the project with students from VCU Emerging Leaders Program.
- Obtained sponsorship from Marti Heil, VP of Development and Alumni Relations, and discussed the vision for the project and its viability; met with Chuck Klink, Vice Provost for Student Affairs, to discuss a potential partnership with the Provost’s Office.
- Developed and collected data from faculty, students, staff, alumni, and Richmond community members to assess the need for a speaker series.
- Identified key units to be represented on the steering committee and potential corporate sponsors.
- Identified a mock-up of the archival website.

OUTCOMES

Short-term outcomes of the Speaker Series project include participation in a unique opportunity; medium-term outcomes include reengagement between VCU and potential donors and increased relationship building across stakeholders. Intended long-term outcomes include (1) greater institutional identity and reputation amongst VCU stakeholders (2) greater retention of students

(3) solidification of a speaker series as a tradition at VCU (4) increase in faculty, staff, student, alumni, and Richmond community member engagement in VCU events (5) contributions to the cultural scene in Richmond (6) and greater innovation in research, education, health care, and service associated with series theme. Research of past speaker events resulted in limited evaluation data to inform the proposal. Hence, proposition of a thorough assessment before the development of a speaker series to establish the planning phase of the event and post-event to evaluate intended outcomes and inform future events.

SUSTAINABILITY

Early efforts to build support and buy-in from both the VCU and Richmond Communities is required. Working directly with faculty will be beneficial for building support on-campus while engaging in outreach efforts with community groups will lead to a broader impact in the Richmond area. Identifying and connecting with community groups and organizations will establish an audience in the community.

Positive audience member experience is essential for continued success. Word of mouth advertisement along with VCU member enthusiasm will be effective marketing strategies. Assessment tools measuring audience impressions and feedback will enable successful future planning. Longitudinal assessments developed and used to measure the impact of a speaker series on community engagement activity will improve alignment with community needs and interests.

Development of and funding for full-time project staff will ensure the logistics of the event are well managed. Using VCU's Event Planning service for the bulk of event planning and operating a small staff provides a single point of contact for internal staff and external speakers. Project staff working with the Office of Community Engagement and Alumni Relations will be responsible for distribution, collection, and analysis of assessments for the speaker series. Additionally, the project staff will manage and maintain the website with archives of speeches and events. Access to these recordings will be essential for the growth and development such as use in classroom settings or in the community to further the message presented. In addition, the website will provide a space for engagement across the years for speaker series, serving as both a rallying point and resource center.

FINANCING AND RESOURCES

Three potential partners have been identified all of whom could provide various levels of resources. First, the Provost's office has a vested interest in generating conversation that will enhance the lives of VCU students. Second, the Office of Development and Alumni Relations, recognize that this project will enable VCU to build stronger relationships with alumni. And third, the medium sized corporations in the Richmond area, who could benefit either by gift funding as a tax deductible donation, or as a sponsor in exchange for tangible benefits, such as branding the series or heavy advertisements in the program. Outreach to corporations like the Martin Agency, Carmax, Westminster Canterbury, and Genworth is planned.

To organize an ongoing speaker series at this level, the creation of a steering committee with members from key units on both campuses and including faculty, staff, students, community members and corporate sponsors. The committee would operate similar to the Common Book Committee, being responsible for identifying both relevant themes and potential speakers. Some members would provide vision while others would operate akin to "working board members," who would work to organize the event and volunteer on the day of.

Project Budget

Item Description	Justification	Cost
Speaker Fee, includes speech, travel costs, direct student engagement via classroom activities, book signing, and archival rights for the website	Top tier speaker requires higher speaker fees	50,000
Dinner/Reception, includes space, catering, staffing, and alumni outreach	Build rapport with donors	18,000
Venue includes staffing, space, security, and parking	Logistics	4,000
Marketing includes branding, signage, and advertising across multiple media platforms including social media, print, and radio	Gain national recognition and build VCU identity through branding	3,000
Total		\$75,000

RECOMMENDATIONS

Next steps for this project are to seek funding from an external source to offset the costs associated with an event of this size. Team TBD recommends to limit the project to having one big-name speaker in the first year of the project to learn more about the organizational process necessary for success and take time to build a following for the event. In the following years it is recommended that one big-name speaker be flanked by one or two other mid-range speakers throughout the year.

FINAL PITCH

At this time, peer institutions offer some type of large speaker series. While some are focused on topical areas of interest it will be important that VCU's speaker series address the unique needs of a growing arts and sciences campus located in an urban area. The speaker series should address both VCU and Richmond community needs and serve as an opportunity for thought provoking conversations and potential relationship building among VCU and the Richmond community.

As the speaker series continues to grow so too will VCU's community cohesiveness. Through unique learning and development opportunities this program will provide connection for potential alumni donations.

Appendix A

Needs Assessment Survey

Data was from an eight-item survey to VCU undergraduate students (n=25), graduate students (n=7), staff (n=18), faculty (n=10), alumni (n=3), and Richmond community members (n=4) to assess the potential need for a speaker series at VCU (Appendix A). Three individuals identified as "Other". We found that 76% (n=53) of those surveyed indicated they would attend a speaker event, while another 23% (n=16) said they would maybe attend the event.

Entertainers (n=46), scientists (n=38), social activists (n=37), political figures (n=34), and artists (n=32) were all deemed interesting speaker categories. In addition, thirteen respondents indicated other speakers and/or types of speakers that appeal to them including educational leaders, sustainability leaders, successful women in business, and vegan lifestyle icons. Specifically, respondents named Joel Salatin of Polyface Farm, Joe Lamp'l from Growing a Greener World, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, Ron Clark, Geoffrey Canada, Oprah Winfrey, Sheryl Sandberg, Marianne Williamson, Black Girls Code founder Beverly Bryant, Tim King founder of Urban Prep, Les Brown, Eric Thomas, Brene Brown, Milo Yiannopoulos, Jamie Heywood, Seth Godin, and Ben Shapiro.

When asked about reasons for not attending a speaker series event, respondents noted conflicts with other events or work, appeal of the speaker, parking, admittance cost and timing of the event. Respondents noted they would most likely attend the event in January/February (n=39), October (n=39), and March/April (n=38), as the event coincides with other major events such as spring and fall break.

Last, when asked about impact that a speaker series would have on VCU and the Richmond community, key outcomes included increased motivation, gaining new insights, greater knowledge, inspiring opportunity, increased awareness, and a break from the routine. Overall, our pilot needs assessment revealed great interest in a speaker series event from all stakeholders.

Q1. Please indicate your primary affiliation to VCU:

- A. Undergraduate student
- B. Graduate/Professional student
- C. Staff
- D. Faculty
- E. Alumni
- F. Richmond Community Member
- G. Other (please specify)

Q2. Which of the following classifications do you currently belong to at VCU?

- A. Freshman
- B. Sophomore
- C. Junior
- D. Senior

Q3. Which campus is most accessible to you?

- A. Monroe Campus
- B. Medical Campus
- C. Other (please specify)

Q4. Which of the following types of speakers would you most likely go hear in person? You may click more than one response option and/or write in any additional name(s) or type(s) of speaker(s).

- A. Scientists (e.g, Bill Nye, Neil deGrasse Tyson)
- B. Artists (e.g., David Baldacci, Nikki Giovanni)
- C. Political Figures (e.g., Elizabeth Warren, George W. Bush)
- D. Entertainment (e.g., Stephen Colbert, Ellen DeGeneres)
- E. Social Activism (e.g., Amal Clooney, Al Sharpton)
- F. Other (please specify types or names of speakers)

Q5. Would you attend an event that brought a national speaker to VCU?

- A. Yes
- B. Maybe
- C. No

Q6. What time(s) of the year would you most likely attend a national speaker event at VCU? You may select more than one option and/or write in other times.

- A. August/September (e.g., convocation)
- B. October (e.g., right before Fall break)
- C. November/December (e.g., winter commencement)
- D. January/February (e.g., start of spring semester)
- E. March/April (e.g., right before spring break)
- F. May (e.g., spring commencement)
- G. Other (please specify month, day, type of event, etc)

Q7: How would a speaker series impact you? (Open response item)

Q8. Are there any reasons why you would not attend a speaker event? If so, please explain below. (Open response item)

Appendix B

Inputs	Activities		Outcomes – Impact		
<i>What we invest</i>	<i>What we do</i>	<i>Who we reach</i>	<i>Short</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Long</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff time • Sponsorship • Volunteers • Security • Venue • Marketing/Public Relations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaker Lecture • Classroom Lessons • Book Signing • Donor Dinner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VCU Staff, • VCU Faculty • VCU Students • VCU Alumni • Richmond Community Members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VCU Staff, Faculty, Students, Community Members attend speaker event • Students engage in conversations and classroom discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donor dinner strengthens relations with alumni and partners to increases gifts to university • Relationship building through event participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater institutional identity and reputation amongst VCU stakeholders • Greater retention of students • Solidification of speaker series as a tradition for VCU stakeholders • Increases in VCU stakeholder engagement • Contributing to the cultural scene in Richmond • Stakeholders take ideas from speaker series and implement them within research, education, healthcare and service.
Assumptions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VCU and the Richmond community would benefit from a speaker series • VCU stakeholders want a speaker series on campus 			External Factors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other speaker events on campus • Events/activities that align with speaker series (e.g., The Common Book, etc.). 		

VCU Speaker Series

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Team TBD

TEAM TBD - Who We Are

Daniel Woodward, Director, Executive Communication, VP University Relations

Juliana Rasmie, Director of Student Services, Office of Student Services, Associate Dean's Office

Ravi Perry, Associate Professor, Political Science, College of Humanities and Sciences

Danielle Parker-Mangum, Operations Manager, Graduate Medical Education, VCU Health System

Emily Hurst, Head, Research and Education, VCU Libraries

Susanne Fuhrman, Coordinator of Operations, Office of Learning Innovation and Student Success, Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Nital Appelbaum, Assistant Professor, Office of Assessment and Evaluation Studies, VCU School of Medicine



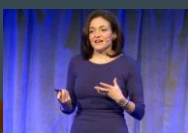
What we're doing

Bringing in the biggest names in the biggest national conversations. You know...like:



Stephen Colbert
To talk about the election

Sheryl Sandberg
To delve into
women's leadership



Neil deGrasse Tyson
To address global warming

What we're doing

Bringing in the biggest names in the biggest national conversations. You know...like:



Geoffrey Canada
To talk about K-12 education access



Amal Clooney
To speak about the refugee crisis

What we're doing

Marketing: all you need is five words...

Jon Stewart
Friday
Siegel Center

What we're doing

Why bring in someone to lead a big conversation if there's nobody there to hear it?



What we're doing

To be accessible...



It has to be free.



It has to be marketed.



It has to be big.



It has to be focused.

What we're doing

It's not just speeches...

Our film students could take a class from Ken Burns.



What we're doing

It's not just speeches...



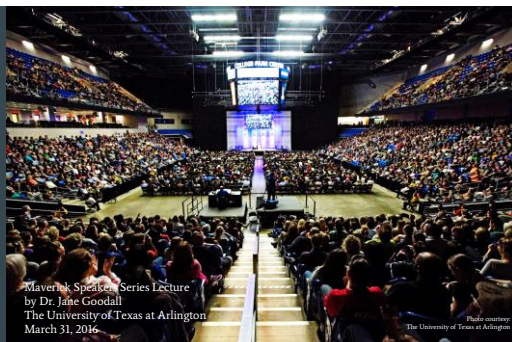
Our donors could have dinner with Bill Clinton.

What we're doing

It's not just speeches...



Our community could meet-and-greet Lin-Manuel Miranda.



Maverick Speaker Series Lecture
by Dr. Jane Goodall
The University of Texas at Arlington
March 31, 2016

Photo courtesy
The University of Texas at Arlington

Who we're doing it for

Quest Theme III: Become a national model for community engagement and regional impact

1. Advance focused and strategic university-community engagement that addresses critical needs and opportunities in the region
 - a. Leveraging university strengths and assets and address community-identified needs and opportunities
 - b. Ensuring all students have access to innovation/entrepreneurial pathways that support regional economic development, cultural vitality or community well-being
2. Leverage the efforts of our students, faculty and staff to enhance, integrate and disseminate community-engaged scholarship, student service-learning opportunities and outreach
 - a. Embed, support and promote community engagement within university cultures, practices and structures

Who we're doing it for

"Faceless man/woman"

Game of Thrones



Who we're doing it for



Who we're doing it for

VCU Students

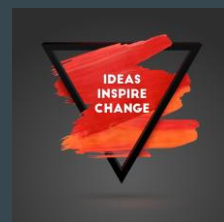
From both campuses



Who we're doing it for

VCU Students

Opportunity to create
inspiration and engagement



Who we're doing it for

VCU Alumni

- Richmond Professional Institute
- MCV Alumni Association of VCU
- Regional Chapters in 19 cities
- African-American Alumni Council
- GOLD (Graduates of Last Decade)



Who we're doing it for

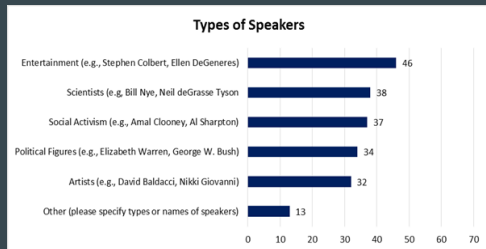
VCU Alumni

Opportunity to cultivate development




Who do our stakeholders want to hear?

Types of Speakers	Count
Entertainment (e.g., Stephen Colbert, Ellen DeGeneres)	46
Scientists (e.g., Bill Nye, Neil deGrasse Tyson)	38
Social Activism (e.g., Amal Clooney, Al Sharpton)	37
Political Figures (e.g., Elizabeth Warren, George W. Bush)	34
Artists (e.g., David Baldacci, Nikki Giovanni)	32
Other (please specify types or names of speakers)	13



Barriers to Attending the Event

- Conflicts with other events or work
- Appeal of the speaker
- Parking
- Admittance cost
- Timing of the event



- Conflicts with other events or work
- Appeal of the speaker
- Parking
- Admittance cost
- Timing of the event

[illegible]

How would a speaker series IMPACT you?

*"Depending on the speaker and the subject he/she talks about, the series would either **inspire me** to get up and do stuff that matters, or **invoke a sense of introspection**."*

VCU Undergraduate Student

*"I would be **more likely to think that VCU had national recognition**"*

VCU Graduate/Prof Student

*"I would be **more likely**
to think that VCU had
national recognition"*

VCU Graduate/Prof
Student

The diagram features a central question at the top: "How would a speaker series IMPACT you?". Below this, two speech bubbles point to ovals representing different groups. The left speech bubble, containing the text "It would provide me with *new insight and information* in many area of interest.", points to a light blue oval labeled "VCU Faculty". The right speech bubble, containing the text "Learning new information and perspectives. Hopefully *further developing me as a professional and a person as a whole.*", points to a dark blue oval labeled "VCU Staff".

How would a speaker series IMPACT you?

"It would provide me with new insight and information in many area of interest."

VCU Faculty

"Learning new information and perspectives. Hopefully further developing me as a professional and a person as a whole."

VCU Staff

*“Learning new information and perspectives. Hopefully **further developing me as a professional and a person as a whole.**”*

VCU Staff

How would the event **IMPACT** you?

*“**Open my mind** and the mind of the youth I would bring with me. It would **increase my creativity and improve the way I approach everyday issues** at home, work, and my community.*”

VCU Alumni

VCU Alumni

How would a speaker series IMPACT you?

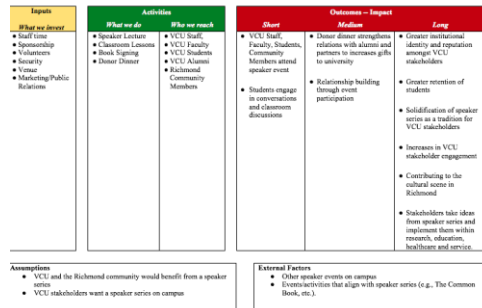
"To be able to speak in person with someone who is on a national scene and to build a personal relationship with them."

*"Finding **community**."*

Richmond
Community
Member

Richmond
Community
Member

Logic Model



How we're doing this



The Value



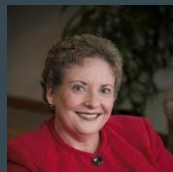
- National spotlight
- Build VCU school spirit and pride
- Unity between both campuses
- Develop classroom and community collaborations
- Building relationships
- Thought provoking ideas and conversation

How we're doing this

Partner with the Provost's Office and Development and Alumni Relations



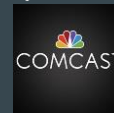
Dr. Gail Hackett
Provost & Vice President for
Academic Affairs



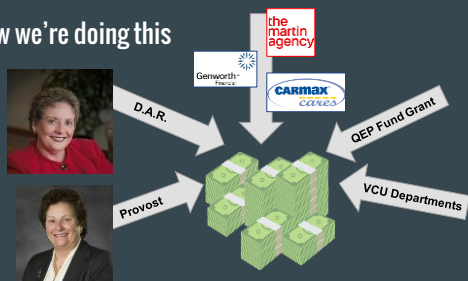
Marti Heil
Vice President for Development
and Alumni Relations

How we're doing this

Possible sponsors to partner with



How we're doing this



How we're doing this

Steering Committee



Making it Real, Making it Last



Starting Small, Thinking Big

- One or two big name speakers in year one
- Grow to at least one big budget speaker with two or three lower cost but well known speakers through the following years
- Potential to align other speakers on campus under a common topic for the year



Dedicated Staff

- Single point of contact
- Work with Event & Meeting Services to coordinate logistics



Assessment

- Track attendance
 - Quantitative
- Gather post-event feedback
 - Qualitative
- Data driven decision making
- Possibility for real-time feedback and interaction



Archival Website



Learn from Unknowns



Learn from what other universities are already doing

Improve based on what you learn from assessment and experience

Team Dynamics

- Clear roles and purpose developed at the start of the program
- Brainstormed solutions
- Used collaborative processes throughout the project
- Developed interpersonal relationships and trust between team members



Acknowledgements

Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute cohorts

Provost Office

Marti Heil

Chuck Klink

Nakeina Douglas

Olivia Barnes

