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The Artfulness Initiative: Art as a Tool for Mindfulness

TEAM MEMBERS

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PROJECT ABSTRACT

The purpose of the Artfulness Initiative is to help its users bring their minds back into the present through the use of arts-based practices as a way to reduce stress and burnout. In a nutshell, the Artfulness Initiative is website that houses a series of process-oriented art practices meant to help adults focus less on the stress of yesterday and tomorrow and focus more on being in the now. It's important to note that the art process is more important than the product, and that no artistic aptitude or experience is required. The Artfulness website, which was built by ALTLab on Rampages, is accessible to anyone with or without affiliation with VCU; however, the Artfulness Initiative is meant to be advertised to and piloted by VCU faculty and staff. In time the Artfulness Initiative can be implemented by community organizations, such as Boys and Girls Clubs or the Richmond Peace Education Center; in educational settings both within VCU through course offerings, and outside VCU, such as arts, mentorship, or after-school programs in K-12 public schools; and in community college programs and courses, or continuing education programs. Through the Artfulness Initiative, VCU is poised to develop and pilot an online modular curriculum in mindfulness through the arts.

QUEST FOR DISTINCTION

The Artfulness Initiative is ready to address aspects of the four themes of the revised Quest for Distinction.

Theme I: A faculty and staff body that is equipped to cope with stressors may be more creative, have better focus and lead more productive careers at VCU, which would impact Revised Goal 1.D (faculty/staff retention). Increasing mindfulness practices could have a positive impact on burnout rates among faculty and staff and, therefore, lead to increased retention rates and may lead to overall improved satisfaction and health. The inclusion of art forms from varied cultures and countries could enhance VCU's reputation as an institute that embraces diversity, and provide an opportunity to expand the Revised Goal 1.D (faculty/staff retention) initiative of developing multicultural academic and extracurricular experiences for supporting minority faculty and staff.

Theme II: Should VCU opt to continue with the Artfulness Initiative, they would also be well positioned to research the physiological benefits of art-based mindfulness. A body of research on mindfulness already exists and suggests that mindfulness practice may decrease responses in the right amygdala, the portion of the brain responsible for negative emotions and sadness. Engagement in research of this nature would support Original Goal II.B (research productivity)

and Original Goal 2.C (growth in new researchers). With the current emphasis on mindfulness as a tool for addressing productivity, burnout, and stress reduction, research in this area could generate significant interest and recognition. The National Institute of Health (NIH) has recently identified mindfulness as an area of interest.

Theme III: Theme III states the university's commitment to human health and the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. The Artfulness Initiative offers the perfect opportunity to collaborate between the health sciences and the School of the Arts, neatly bridging our two campuses and our premier programs. The practice of mindfulness may lead to better physical and psychological well-being. The personal health benefits of the Artfulness Initiative could include decreased blood pressure, decreased stress/anxiety, improved productivity, improved progress toward weight loss goals, fewer sick/personal days, and decreased likelihood of depression. The inclusion of arts practice as a way of accessing mindfulness offers a unique opportunity to add to the field of mindfulness research already in existence.

Theme IV: The completed project could also align with Theme IV (community engagement) by sharing the online modular curriculum with community partners, such as K-12 schools in the neighborhoods near VCU. This could help with the sustainability of the project, as different units find ways to incorporate the curriculum into their work.

PROJECT GOALS

1. To reduce stress and work/life-related fatigue and improve retention among VCU faculty and staff through art-based mindfulness practices.
2. To maintain a website that allows for immediate access to mindfulness practices.
3. To build a product that has positive implications for VCU faculty and staff now, and hopefully Richmond Public Schools and other community-based organizations later.

PROJECT STRATEGIES

Team Two, which would later be known as Team Artfulness, identified a need at VCU for ways to reduce stress and burnout among faculty and staff as a way to improve satisfaction and retention. Team Two reviewed the current research on mindfulness practices and found little mention of art-based practice as a means of pursuing mindfulness. The decision was made to build a website with several different modules that allowed users to combat their individual stressors using their art practice of choice. The choice to make this a web-based product rather than a face-to-face product was based on that fact that having to build in a specific time each week to be somewhere may cause more stress than necessary. The curriculum includes options for painting, writing, drawing and body awareness. The modules are designed to need no unusual tools or prior experience with the art forms presented. Rather than focus on creating a product or improving artistic abilities, the exercises are designed to allow the art practice to clear your mind and create mindfulness.

Team Artfulness met with representatives from the Office of Continuing and Professional Education, Human Resources, the Wellness Resource Center, and College Behavioral & Emotional Health (COBE) to identify initiatives already in place and potential homes for the Artfulness Initiative. After multiple conversations, Team Artfulness felt that the most logical home for the Artfulness Initiative would be Human Resources. to complement the stress management seminars offered periodically by Training & Development. However, at the time this report was due, Team Artfulness had not been able to meet with Human Resources to present the Artfulness website. The team also identified potential future partners, including the Office of Community Engagement and the College of Humanities and Sciences.

ACTION STEPS

- Create curriculum of art-based mindfulness practices in conjunction with professors in health sciences, the arts, and education foundations.
- Collaborate with current practitioners and champions of mindfulness practice to gain buy-in and insight.
- Work with ALTLab to create additional web modules for users to follow. Users will need to have a list of materials needed for each exercise.
- Understand that the Artfulness Initiative is not meant to be therapy and that the user's process is more important than the product.
- Disseminate the Artfulness Initiative website to VCU faculty and staff for use in reducing stress and encouraging a healthy state of mind.
- Measure the usefulness of art-based mindfulness as a means to reduce stress among VCU faculty and staff. The Artfulness Initiative offers the opportunity for interdisciplinary research, which would help add to the ever-expanding body of knowledge surrounding the practice of mindfulness.
- Consider connecting the Artfulness Initiative to health insurance benefits. Evidence supporting the practice of art-based mindfulness may lead to the incorporation of mindfulness practice into the MyActiveHealth program through the Virginia Department of Human Resource Management.
- Once the curriculum is piloted and tested, consider expanding the reach to VCU students and community partners.

OUTCOMES

The initial goal of the Artfulness Initiative is to create a an online, self-paced, modular toolbox, to help VCU faculty and staff bring themselves back into a present and calm state of mind through art practices. The Artfulness website on Rampages allows for easy access by varied users at any time. This accessible resource is designed to help improve satisfaction and retention of “widely diverse faculty, staff and senior leadership with the skills and talents to advance teaching and learning and high impact research at all levels and disciplines.” (Quest, 2015) The hope for later implementation includes use by Richmond Public School and community partners, as well research into the physiological benefits of art-based mindfulness.

SUSTAINABILITY

After multiple conversations, Team Artfulness felt that the most logical home for the Artfulness Initiative would be Human Resources to complement the stress management seminars offered periodically by Training & Development. However, at the time this report was due, Team Artfulness had not been able to meet with Human Resources to present the Artfulness website. The team also identified potential future partners, including the Office of Community Engagement and the College of Humanities and Sciences.

FINANCING AND RESOURCES

Already provided by Team Artfulness:

1. Web hosting on Rampages, through the ALTLab
2. Web design and framework for the full course
3. Full build out of one module
4. Curriculum design for remaining three modules
5. Promotional video

Startup Requirements: approximately \$5k for faculty compensation and website completion.

Sustainability Requirements:

1. Server hosting = currently provided free by ALTLab
2. Faculty course coordinator/adjunct = approximately \$1000 per semester (cost of buying out one one-credit course), to answer user questions and ensure content is maintained and functional.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The next steps for the Artfulness Initiative are to advertise the resource to VCU faculty and staff, as well as VCU students, to encourage mindful practice and reduce stress and anxiety. A way to encourage faculty and staff to take advantage of the Artfulness Initiative is to tie it to CommonHealth of Virginia, which is maintained by the Virginia Department of Human Resource Management (DHRM), or the MyActiveHealth program, a health tool provided by the Commonwealth of Virginia Health Benefits Program. Ideally, eligible faculty and staff would be encouraged to practice art-based mindfulness as a means to improve their well-being and receive a reduction in their monthly insurance premiums.

Potential barriers may include faculty and staff failing to take advantage of the Artfulness Initiative as a way to improve their mental and physical wellbeing. Additionally, research may suggest that mindfulness incorporating the arts does not improve the physiological response to stressors the way traditional mindfulness has suggested.

FINAL PITCH

The Artfulness Initiative has the potential to be a highly interdisciplinary, low-cost, high-impact tool for the reduction of stress and improvement of satisfaction and retention among faculty and staff at VCU. With the web-based artfulness tools already supplied by Team Artfulness, the university is receiving the foundation of a solid resource. When the potential for grant funded research is added in, as well as the collaboration opportunities between health sciences and the School of the Arts, the Artfulness Initiative brings together all of the best qualities of VCU into one project.



Artfulness (ahrt-fuh-l-nes): Attention to the present moment by means of artistic practices and sensory experiences.











