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# Improving Recruitment and Retention of Honors Students: Multidisciplinary Course Modules

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## IMPROVING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF HONORS STUDENTS: MULTIDISCIPLINARY COURSE MODULES

### **Team Members:**

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David Dubofsky, Professor & Department Chair, Department of Finance, Insurance and Real Estate

Donna George, Director of Nursing, Transplant Program, VCU Health System

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**Project Description:** The University of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is in the throes of a paradigm shift, breaking free of the last century's discipline-bound model of education. VCU's Strategic Plan clearly articulates this forward-thinking concept: "...to promote interdisciplinary studies within the University, to bring new perspectives to bear on complex problems, and mobilize creative energies and expertise in meeting the needs of society and individuals through its unique role as Virginia's major urban university." In addition, the Strategic Plan goes on to envision the Honors Program as a "leader for excellence in undergraduate education". Our project utilizes the Honors Program to create interdisciplinary cross-campus experiences. Implementation of the proposal will enhance the Honors Program, increase Honors students' exposure to VCU's graduate and professional programs, and indeed, initiate an innovative, modern educational model for the entire University. Moreover, our project recommends an integrative experiential learning experience in a subsequent Honors module, either through research or community service. The proposed Honors module would expose students to issues that range across both campuses, and in particular to subsequent opportunities in graduate education in our professional programs. Two specific modules are proposed initially, in psychology/women's health and pharmacy. In our design, a directing professor coordinates a team-taught honors module in which students learn about an interdisciplinary range of scholarly and professional issues relating to a specific umbrella topic (such as psychology/women's health or pharmacy).

**Project Goals:** Our goals are

1. To increase the awareness of VCU's honors students about the opportunities available in our graduate professional programs.
2. To foster cross-campus interdisciplinary relationships, and increase cross-campus awareness of the honors program and faculty activities in research and teaching.
3. To attract and retain honors students and increase diversity in the program, particularly with respect to out-of-state and under-represented student groups.
4. To increase honors students' participation with faculty & graduate students in public service, outreach and research activities.
5. To expand experiential opportunities for honors students through service learning and undergraduate research.

**Strategies:** Initially, we engaged in a great deal of debate concerning which of our project ideas we should adopt, and looked for similarities or ways to consolidate our ideas. We settled on

one suggested by the mentor of two of our team members, Dean Victor Yanchick: how to interest honors students to continue their education in VCU's graduate professional programs. Our first approach was to explore ways to increase their experiential learning (community service learning and research opportunities). As time passed and we discussed our thoughts with other interested parties, we modified our proposal to concentrate on interdisciplinary teaching of honors modules. Moreover, while we initially thought that we would propose modules in several areas, we narrowed the focus down to just two "trial areas", in psychology/women's health (with the vision that students would go on to enter our graduate psychology program) and pharmacy.

**Action Steps:** We met with Honors Program Associate Director Anne Chandler (twice) and Director John Berglund (once). These meetings increased our understanding of the honors program and reshaped our proposal to focus on interdisciplinary teaching of honors modules. Building on the strengths and interests of our team's members, as well as the support of Dean Yanchick, we narrowed the focus to two "trial areas", in psychology/women's health (with the vision that students would go on to enter our graduate psychology program) and pharmacy.

We met as a team many times. We examined sources on the internet for information on other universities' honors programs. We proceeded to break our team into two groups, one that focused on the psychology/women's health module, and one that focused on the pharmacy module.

We discussed our ideas with School of Pharmacy Deans Victor Yanchick and Tom Reinders, the chair of the Psychology Dept. Everett Worthington, and Sandra Gramling, director of the Honors in Psychology Program. We had a third and final meeting with Anne Chandler to explain our vision.

**Outcomes:** We are proposing the development of two interdisciplinary pilot seminars, in Pharmacy and in Psychology/Women's Health. The proposal specific to the Psychology/Women's Health module is attached as an appendix. Collaborating disciplines for the Pharmacy module might include business, chemical engineering, biomedical engineering, chemistry, women's health, psychiatry, biology, nursing, medicine, and allied health professions. Participating disciplines involved in the women's health module might include psychiatry, psychology, sociology, African American studies, economics, social work, gynecology and obstetrics.

The modules would be in a seminar format. Students would be expected to write an integrative summary paper, viewing one perspective from the six faculty presentations, and linking it to the other disciplines. Resources needed to fund the modules would come from the appropriate Dean, Provost's and President's offices. Additional funding opportunities for expansion of this strategy would be identified with Samantha Marrs in VCU's Office of Corporate and Foundation Giving. Costs for the course would include support for the faculty who coordinates the module, and for a graduate student to oversee the subsequent experiential learning projects.

We envision that the faculty responsible for the modules will send out a call for participation from the other Schools, departments, and other colleagues at VCU. The coordinator would choose at least five other participants for each module. The chosen faculty participants would agree to mentor one or two students during the semester and to make one seminar presentation on their research or practice as it relates to the module topic. Faculty would be asked to discuss related issues in professional development within their specific discipline as part

of their seminar presentations. We would also request that faculty attend and participate in at least one additional seminar class, and perhaps to participate in Blackboard discussions over the course of the semester.

Students would be encouraged to continue in a related research project or service learning project in a subsequent semester. Indeed, a student could write his or her final paper in the first module to serve as a blueprint for the project in the second module. The student's mentor would ideally help the student in the second module.

Students would also be encouraged to present their research or service learning experiences at a seminar or conference at which they would further benefit from hearing about others' interdisciplinary work. There is one such undergraduate research conference held at VCU each year.

**Recommendations:** We recommend that School of Pharmacy Dean and the Psychology Department chair each identify one faculty member to coordinate their respective modules and seek the other individuals to form the "module team". Students would learn that pharmacy and women's health are very broad areas of interest and study. Once the University is beyond the current fiscal crisis, the Honors Program office might support the development of other multidisciplinary topics for future modules, as we believe that our pilot represents a model for further interdisciplinary honors modules. Perhaps the Honors Program could offer an interdisciplinary module development forum each year, to foster interdepartmental cooperation in this endeavor. Based on outcome evaluations of these new modules, we envision development of marketing support to increase the Honors Program's outreach to out of state and other under-represented student groups.

**Conclusions:** The economic downturn that has so adversely affected VCU should be taken as an opportunity to make changes where change is often difficult. Historically, sustained faculty and student interactions linking the two campuses have been limited. Our project offers a model of teaching and learning that spreads learning across our two campuses. Increased interaction is critical to the creation of new knowledge and economic opportunities. We view our proposal as building on the interdisciplinary potential of the Life Sciences and Social Sciences Initiatives, and as lending itself to a new kind of learning.

Several parties will benefit from the implementation of our proposal. Honors students will benefit from learning how a seemingly narrow topic or field is actually interrelated with so many other areas. Faculty will benefit from learning how activities on the other campus are actually closer to their own interests than they ever imagined. Our professional schools will benefit by having more of our high-quality honors students go on to get their graduate education here at VCU; if the students go on to study at even more prestigious institutions, then VCU's reputation will be enhanced.