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Mechanisms for Increasing Federally-Funded Research at VCU: A Pilot Study of Forty Faculty in Pursuit of NIH Funding in Women's Health

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MECHANISMS FOR INCREASING FEDERALLY-FUNDED RESEARCH AT VCU: A PILOT STUDY OF FORTY FACULTY IN PURSUIT OF NIH FUNDING IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

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Project Background/Rationale: The Strategic Plan for Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) describes research as an integral and essential component of the University. The Plan promotes scholarly activities of VCU faculty and encourages research in all areas that demonstrate potential for faculty growth and development. Specifically, one of the goals in the VCU Strategic Plan is to achieve ranking among the top fifty universities in the United States in terms of external funding for research. The Office of the Vice President for Research has played a lead role in this initiative. Current economic concerns and budget deficits in the State of Virginia have had a significant impact upon State institutions, including VCU. Substantial budget cuts have adversely impacted University operations as well as faculty and student motivation and morale. It is within such an economic climate that external funding of research becomes even more important. Not only must VCU safeguard existing grant resources, but it must continue to identify and support mechanisms that will increase external funding of faculty research.

Project Description: With the support of the Institute for Women's Health (IWH) and the Office of the Vice President for Research, our team project focused on identification and evaluation of alternative strategies for increasing federally-funded research at VCU. Based on evaluation data from a pilot study and subsequent four-month follow-up with workshop participants, critical elements were identified as beneficial in the support of faculty motivated to obtain external funding for their research. The project synthesized available data to provide low-cost recommendations for increasing the number of faculty interested in pursuit of research funding. In addition, a more intensive model was developed, which incorporated several of the recommendations and themes identified through the pilot evaluation data. We believe this model could serve as a template, and that initial investment of economic resources may quickly be restored as additional faculty are successful in obtaining external grant funding. If successful, the proposed model could make an important contribution in the VCU effort to increase its portfolio of externally-funded research.

Project Goals:

The primary goals of this project were to:

- 1) Better understand the factors that contribute to faculty willingness and ability to pursue external funding of research; and
- 2) Utilize this information to develop general recommendations to foster research efforts and opportunities at VCU.

Strategies: The impetus that led to the current team project was a one-day training workshop sponsored by IWH. The workshop “On the Road to NIH Funding”, took place on May 31, 2002, in the Medical Sciences Building on the MCV campus. The purpose of the workshop was to encourage externally funded research in women’s health. The workshop offered an overview of NIH funding, with specific information about priority areas germane to women’s health. Five NIH representatives made formal presentations and participated in a small group roundtable luncheon with faculty interested in their specific areas (i.e., mental health, cancer, drug abuse). Forty faculty members from seventeen departments participated in the event. All participants expressed interest in women’s health research and wanted to learn more about NIH funding opportunities.

A novel feature of this training event was that each workshop attendee was paired with a more senior faculty mentor and workshop coordinators recommended that the mentors and mentees establish an ongoing relationship to maintain motivation to pursue research funding. Our workgroup recognized that such a model, if effective, could be generalized to many areas of research and may offer a low-cost method to increase institutional support for faculty who want to pursue external funding for their research.

Thus, our project focused on the pre- and post-workshop feedback from the training participants and their mentors. In addition, a 4-month follow-up was carried out to look more specifically at the utility of the one-on-one mentoring component of the model.

Action Steps:

Three action steps were completed for this group project:

- 1) Initial NIH 1-day standardized course evaluation data for the participants (Total N=40) were summarized and reviewed by our work group. Information was obtained pre-and post-training workshop attendance (e.g., 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM). Pre-workshop measures included previous grant writing experience, attitudes about grant writing, VCU infrastructure for research). Similar measures were collected post-workshop, with additional items about quality and helpfulness of the presentations, changes in motivation or perceived ability to write a grant).
- 2) Four-month follow-up data were collected to examine the mentoring component of the NIH day. Data summaries, compiled by IWH, were reviewed by our team. Both subjective (e.g., faculty ratings of current motivation to write a grant) and more objective (e.g., number of contacts with assigned mentor, progress with grant writing [submitted a grant since the NIH training, working on a first draft, etc]) measures were studied. Changes in barriers or support for research were also assessed.
- 3) Evaluation data, feedback from several mentors who participated in the NIH training workshop, and comments made during informal discussions with several Department Chairs and other VCU faculty members were reviewed and formed the basis for our workgroup recommendations. Specifically, strategies for increasing faculty ability and motivation to obtain external grant funding were identified. Our work group supported the model used in the IWH-sponsored training workshop (one-day training followed by one-on-one mentoring), and potential strategies for adapting the model to other areas within VCU were highlighted. In addition, a more intensive model was proposed that would simultaneously minimize barriers in the pursuit of research funding while

maximizing positive factors that increase faculty motivation. While this model requires an initial investment of financial resources, it is hypothesized that such an investment could quickly be restored as additional faculty are successful in obtaining external grant funding. If successful, the latter model could make an important contribution to VCU's efforts to increase the institutional portfolio of externally-funded research.

Outcomes: The initial evaluation questionnaire given to participants in the IWH-sponsored training workshop was completed by 35 of the 40 participants. The majority of participants were at the rank of Assistant Professor (69%) and over four-fifths of participants were women (83%). Overall, evaluation ratings were very favorable, and it appears that participants felt their time and effort had been used constructively. The majority of participants reported the training was useful (over 90% rated it very or somewhat useful), and the majority of attendees gave excellent or very good ratings for both scientific and practical utility of the information provided. The percentage of participants motivated to begin writing a grant increased when pre- and post-workshop responses were compared.

When respondents were asked to rate the different components of the VCU system in terms of facilitation and support for research activities, the majority of respondents stated that Department Chairs and faculty colleagues were very supportive of their research interests and efforts. In contrast, many participants reported that practical barriers, such as lack of departmental clerical and administrative support, had hindered their efforts.

Four-month follow-up evaluation focused primarily on the mentoring experience. To date, 21 trainees have participated in the survey. With regard to factors that facilitate or impose barriers to writing research grants, several workshop participants reported lack of support from department-level administrative staff. Many faculty members advocated for an increase in secretarial and administrative support resources for such tasks as copying, printing, shuttling of paperwork from one office to another or across campuses, etc. The response suggested that faculty felt too much time was spent on clerical tasks, which left insufficient time for the science and research design elements of their grants.

With regard to the mentoring model used in the NIH training workshop, three-fourths of respondents indicated that they met with their mentor at the end of the training workshop. Thereafter, 40% made no further attempt to contact their mentor, but in most cases they indicated the reason for this was that they either already had a good mentor or that they didn't need additional mentoring. For the other mentees, most reported having contact with their mentor 3 or 4 times during the follow-up period. The majority of contacts were either face-to-face or by email. Over two-thirds of faculty participants rated their mentor as very helpful, and an additional one-fourth rated the mentor as somewhat helpful. Only 5% of attendees reported dissatisfaction with mentor-related communication (e.g., mentor did not respond to phone calls or emails).

The most interesting finding was that when mentees who had already submitted a grant (prior to the NIH workshop) were excluded, over one-third of the remaining respondents (N=6) reported having submitted a grant in the area of women's health at some time during the 4-month follow-up period. Fifty percent of these cases were resubmissions, but the other fifty percent were new grants that had been written and submitted subsequent to the NIH training event.

Recommendations: The work group made three recommendations:

- 1) Continue follow-up with IWH-sponsored NIH workshop participants at 8 and 12 months post-training to monitor changes in mentoring relationship(s), rates of research grant submission, funding, and resubmission; etc.
- 2) Establish a plan for adapting the NIH training day curriculum to other interdisciplinary areas of research, with particular attention focused on the identification of alternative mechanisms for supporting the financial, administrative and academic aspects of such training activities; and
- 3) Establish a collaborative team (including members of the GEHLI work group, one or more senior members of the IWH, one or more department chairs with interest in the alternative research model, and a representative from the Office of the VP for Research), and initiate regular team meetings (minimum once/month). The mission of the team will be to discuss and refine the alternative model outlined by the GEHLI team, with an emphasis on fostering interdisciplinary research efforts from promising faculty. This team will develop a 3-year pilot proposal with particular attention to the economic and budgetary issues that may serve as barriers to project implementation.

Conclusions:

The current economic climate at VCU highlights the need to encourage and support faculty efforts to obtain external funding for their research. Multiple mechanisms must be considered. The evaluation data in this report highlight the positive outcomes associated with the one-day training workshop sponsored by the Institute for Women's Health (IWH). In particular, evaluation follow-up data for the workshop supported the utility of 1-to-1 pairings between VCU faculty mentors and workshop faculty trainees (mentees). Future efforts in this area should examine alternative, promising areas for collaborative research, and different mechanisms for funding and executing such workshops within the VCU system. In addition, the evaluation data for this project highlighted how certain components of the VCU infrastructure (e.g, department-level clerical, administrative staff) are viewed by some faculty members as contributing to the "barriers" in research grant submission, as they negatively impact faculty motivation and willingness to submit a research grant. It is important that VCU identify mechanisms to foster such support, it is hopes to develop and further expand the nature and scope of its federally-funded research portfolio. Alternative models, with sufficient organizational autonomy to overcome such barriers and thereby increase faculty motivation to apply for federal and other externally funded research grants, must be considered.