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University Without Walls: Creating a Culture of Community Engagement

Team Members: Ellen Byrne, Carlton Edwards, Martha Lou Green, Sharon Jahn, Marlene Kustesky, Marilyn Miller, Kate Mohr, and Nancy Strange.

Team Sponsor: Dr. Stephen Gottfredson

Project Description:

Given the urban location of Virginia Commonwealth University, the true campus of VCU can be seen as the City of Richmond. This campus location provides many educational opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and the larger community in real-life settings. The vision of VCU is a public, urban university that is fully integrated with and interdependent upon the community. This project sought to focus on the enhancement of that two-way, mutually beneficial relationship, by bringing down the walls between the community and the VCU campuses.

Project Goals:

- To perform a needs assessment of the pre-existing perceptions of “community engagement” on the VCU campuses.
- To develop a common definition of community engagement.
- To suggest an action plan for developing a culture of community engagement.

Strategies:

The VCU 2020 Vision for Excellence Plan includes three initiatives that were identified with interest by the team. All three include the idea of engaging the VCU campuses with Richmond and the surrounding community. Integration of the three initiatives into a developing a “culture of community engagement” at VCU was chosen as the team project topic. This topic decision was facilitated by the team sponsor, Dr. Stephen Gottfredson, and Dr. Catherine Howard, Director of Community Programs. Team discussions led to the belief that defining our “culture of community engagement” was necessary. Once the topic could be defined then the team could develop an action plan for implementation or use of our “culture”.

Action Steps:

1. The team identified the project topic by use of the VCU vision statement and the 2020 Vision for Excellence.
2. The team sought to define “a culture of community engagement” by developing an interview-style, needs assessment instrument. The instrument consisted of three questions:
 - a. How do you define the culture of community engagement?
 - b. Would you support and reward it?
 - c. If yes, how? If no, why not?

3. The interviews were assigned and administered in the summer to targeted administrative officers:
Dr. Trani, VCU President; Dr. Gottfredson, Provost, CEOs, Vice Presidents, Deans, and Center Directors.
4. The forty-five interviews were examined and common themes identified by the team.
5. The common themes lead to a composite definition of the project's topic:
"A culture of community engagement at VCU is a mutually beneficial commitment to the community. It must be reciprocal, respectful and support the human cause."
6. Once a definition was obtained an action plan was developed.

Outcomes:

The team learned a lot about each other throughout the project. The interviews of the VCU administrators allowed the team members to meet and interact one on one with the leaders of the university administration. Another outcome resulting from the interviews was that there are many in the campus community who are currently and successfully engaged with the community, but that campus-wide knowledge of these varied projects is limited. The major outcome of the project was the development of the action plan. Of course, it primarily establishes a centralized office for community engagement with a considerable marketing mandate. Also, this office will prepare an annual report of activities, identify contacts at VCU and scan the environment for new projects and community needs.

Recommendations:

The team project's action step as described above is the team's recommendation for next steps. The Office of Community Engagement needs to be established. Its natural placement belongs in the Office of Community Programs.

Conclusions:

VCU is an urban university that must have on all its campuses a culture of engagement that is a mutually beneficial commitment. It must be reciprocal, respectful, and supportive of the human cause. A centralized office of community engagement can administer, market, and monitor the many and varied engagement projects and community needs.