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Internet Safety: Positioning VCU as a National Leader in Internet Safety

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Internet Safety: Positioning VCU as a National Leader in Internet Safety

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Team Sponsor: Dr. Stephen Gottfredson

Project Description: While a multitude of information from a host of sources exists on how to keep children safe on the Internet, there is not a unified effort to combine it all and get it to the right people. This is not a plan to teach college students about Internet safety. This is a proposal to begin much earlier, targeting middle-school aged children and their parents, many of whom have no idea of the dangers – and opportunities – that exist in cyberspace.

Project Goals: There are many opportunities for collaboration within VCU, and those will be pursued, but the two crucial roles lie within these two domains.

- Working with the VCU School of Education to develop a curriculum and distribute it where it needs to be: with middle school-aged children and their parents.
- Working with advertising and marketing professionals to develop a public safety campaign for “Safe Surfing,” to support the curriculum. This can be a brandable effort akin to “Stop, Drop and Roll” or “Just Say No.”

Strategies: Team University sought to develop a meaningful project that could create a lasting legacy for the university in keeping with the VCU 2020 strategic plan. After much debate the team identified Internet safety targeting middle school age children and their parents with two main components:

- Internet safety curriculum for the identified group
- Public safety awareness campaign

Action Steps:

Curriculum development

1. Attended meetings in Richmond and Alexandria, Va., of the Attorney Generals’ Youth Internet Safety Task Force to determine the state and local activities and the task force membership.
2. Met with Dr. Beverly Warren, interim dean of the VCU School of Education, regarding the school’s potential interest as a collaborator in the Internet safety curriculum component. She and her staff leadership expressed a strong interest in serving as a clearinghouse and resource for developing a curriculum and working to include the additional content in area schools’ health and physical education preparatory curriculum.
3. Contacted the VA Department of Education and participated in a conference call with its leadership. In response to a General Assembly resolution adopted earlier this year, the department has produced a compendium of resources for administrators, teachers, students and parents with a companion Web site. Each school division then must decide how to integrate

this into its curriculum. Department of Education officials pointed out that Internet predators play to the psychological needs of children, and that children can be taught to recognize these tactics. They also noted that any message to parents about the Internet must, in addition to the risks, include its positive opportunities.

4. Attended Region I School Superintendent's meeting for the counties of Chesterfield, Hanover, Henrico and the City of Richmond to address the local need for an Internet safety curriculum. The superintendents enthusiastically pointed out a great need for a turnkey Internet safety product that targets middle school students and their parents. Furthermore, the superintendents ask that VCU serve as a resource for affiliated workshops for teachers.

Public Service Campaign development

1. Met with Rick Boyko, director of the VCU Adcenter, to obtain recommendations regarding key issues involved in a significant public service campaign. Boyko suggested that a meaningful campaign would cost around \$20 million and was reluctant to commit his students to such a project absent any funding. He suggested working with undergraduate advertising students in this regard.
2. Currently pursuing contact with advertising agency in the community that has expressed interest in such a project on a pro bono basis.
3. Identified existing public service campaigns targeting middle school children/parents.
4. Vice President Sue Ann Messmer expressed willingness to assist in identifying funding services for a public service campaign. Additional sources for potential funding include GOSAP, the Governor's Office for Substance Abuse Prevention; a pediatric physician's professional service organization like the American Academy of Pediatrics.
5. Suggest pursuing corporate sponsorships as another funding source, i.e., AOL; News Corporation, parent company of MySpace.com; Internet service providers.
6. Explore potential for student contest on public service campaign theme.
7. Explore potential for developing online safety quiz in conjunction with Web site hosts like MySpace and Facebook that would require successful completion of the test before a username is assigned.
8. Explore potential for developing a parental tool-kit for education on Internet dangers facing children and how parents can be aware and get involved.

Outcomes:

1. We have met with a lot of enthusiasm from the VCU School of Education for developing the type of curriculum we have outlined. They are eager to provide a turn-key curriculum and also to train Virginia teachers in how to teach it.
2. We have the support of Region 1 school superintendents for going forward with curriculum development on Internet safety for middle schools.
3. We have identified the Attorney General's Child Internet Safety Task Force as a possible partner for the ongoing VCU efforts.
4. We have stimulated interest in a public service campaign aimed at educating parents about the benefits and risks to kids on the Internet.

5. We have a lead on pro bono concept and design work for the public service campaign with Siddell Inc., a Richmond-based advertising and public relations firm.

Process Observations:

Our group process has been typified by the challenges that all groups face of balancing task completion with developing and maintaining the interpersonal relationships supporting the work to be accomplished. Early in the life of our group, lack of individual familiarity resulted in communication and processes that were transacted implicitly rather than explicitly. After a presentation on decision making, the group was able to move more directly into examining issues around decision making and leadership that appeared to propel the group past its initial stage of forming. The next phase of our group life seemed characterized by exploration of the confluence of individual agendas with a shared group purpose and vision. This process of negotiation, accommodation and moving toward a common collective experience assisted the group in developing more meaningful personal relationships, thereby facilitating attention to task. Each person contributed to this process in their unique way with their available capacity.

Recommendations: The School of Education has the expertise and desire to develop a curriculum for middle-school students on Internet safety and to deliver it to school teachers. VCU should serve as a clearinghouse for dispersing the information and providing workshops for teacher training. We recommend that the university encourage the school in these efforts.

We recommend that the public awareness campaign aspect be pursued vigorously in order to support and brand the curriculum. This entails securing sponsorship, creation and design. The university should pursue this with a national campaign as the goal.

Conclusions: Parents, schools and the university can all play important roles in teaching our youngsters how to be safe on the Internet. We propose that VCU take the lead in informing parents and educators about how they can promote safe behaviors in cyberspace, with educators educating educators.