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Student Engagement

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Executive Summary: Student Engagement

Team Members

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Project Description

Over the past nine years, the Grace E. Harris Leadership Program has developed seven projects commonly grouped under the topic of Student Engagement. The projects reflect different approaches to school spirit generation, student retention, student mentoring and student financial aid. Of the seven projects that our team reviewed, six were implemented or partially implemented, as indicated by the *. It was not uncommon to see GEHLI team ideas incorporated into unrelated University initiative(s), basically achieving the goals of the project, but without the team involvement.

Student Centered University* 2004 (Jennifer)

A nationwide academic initiative spawned by the Kellogg report, "Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience" published by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges in 1997, the student centered concept sought to reorganize institutions of higher learning to view students as the end component, rather than as financial support for the university as an end component. This translated into greater enhancement of student life, smaller first year class sizes, centralized advising and the development of a mentoring environment. The GEHLI project associated with this study aimed to produce a report for VCU's Student Centered University Task Force.

VCU Virtual Community 2004 (Janet)

This was a project designed to provide a way for clinical and administrative faculties to connect with students. The team felt that teaching faculty interacted with students on a regular basis but the remainder of the University community did not. The team's idea was to provide a means for faculty to voluntarily register on a database, providing as much information (personal and professional) about themselves as they felt comfortable with. Students could then search the database using key words to identify someone that might share an interest, career path, etc. with whom they could connect. The database would track the contacts and keep statistics of usage. The team also felt this might be a way to connect the two campuses.

VCU Pride* 2005 (Janet)

The goal of this project was to identify what manifests a sense of pride on college campuses and identify how, specifically, VCU, could enrich the campus image, the campus experience and the campus environment to nurture and enhance institutional pride. This project had two overarching themes, Student Engagement and VCU Internal Alignment. For the Student Engagement portion, we focused on how the project creates a sense of place on campus which was represented by the Gift Catalogue, which lists suggestions for gifts to the University by the graduating class, and banners promoting

institutional pride and a common knowledge of rituals and traditions. The Banners were instituted along the closed section of Linden Street. The Gift Catalogue was not implemented because they ran out of time.

Monroe Park Festival* 2006 (Heidi)

This project proposed the creation of a unifying comprehensive fall festival tradition for *both* VCU campuses. The proposal responded to the VCU 2020 strategic plan by creating a festival designed to highlight VCU/community partnerships and promote “One VCU”. Theme V of the strategic plan emphasizes “maintain[ing] VCU as a model for university-community partnerships” and “develop[ing] collaborations between businesses, government agencies, [and] communities ...” Ideas from this project were implemented in the 2008 Monroe Park Festival which was a part of the 40th Anniversary celebration activities. Because of its success, the Monroe Park Festival, in some part, promoted the annual spring Multicultural Festival.

Discovery Mentoring* 2009 (Heidi)

This recent project proposed to build upon the University College (UC) advising program and efforts to create a small community feel in a large university. It will create a mentoring program between incoming students and current students. Undeclared first-year students will be matched with second semester sophomores to build on the sense of community thereby helping undeclared students connect more strongly with VCU through personal relationships with their peers.

Ram to Ram* 2008 (Reuban)

This project proposed the development of a mentoring program where VCU alumni would be matched with VCU students. With the use of a web based application process, the alumni would volunteer time to meet with a student in the same field of study. Targeted students would include those who are first generation college students, those who have finished their first year of study, and those with average grades. All departments can participate to create a unique program for their students. Both the School of Business alumni organization, the VCU Business Society, and the Department of Psychiatry became very interested in this program.

1% Campaign* 2008 (Mary Cate)

The purpose of this project was to raise scholarship funds for incoming freshman students who are VCU/VCUHS employee dependents. Ultimately, the team hoped to fund a full freshman year tuition to 1% of the incoming first year class, which they estimated at 30-35 students. Recipients of these funds would be called the Grace E. Harris Scholars, in honor of the Dr. Harris’ contributions to the University. The team also hoped that this opportunity would generate more local interest in VCU.

Contacts

The GEHLI 2010 team members contacted team members of each of the projects listed above. In some cases, several members were contacted; in others, it was only possible to gain input from one member.

Project Goals

The goal of the 2010 GEHLI project is to evaluate projects submitted between 2004 and 2009 that were gathered in the category of Student Engagement. Further, our goal is to analyze the path of the seven projects in this category and to present observations relative to project success, University impact and group dynamics.

Strategies

The team agreed to divide the assigned projects with each member getting one or two to investigate, analyze and report to the team. Attendance at meetings and critical moments proved to minimize a member's responsibility.

Action Steps

Project team members were interviewed in person and over the phone. Some interactions were successful via email.

Process Observations

- VCU 2020 had significant impact on likelihood of implementation
- Most teams reported no specific leader
- Several teams suggested that each team be assigned a GEHLI mentor, in addition to their project sponsor
- Teams tended to make individual assignments to accommodate busy work/life schedules
- Only one team elected a leader; they chose a project upon which they could have direct impact based upon the leader's role at the University
- Projects that were implemented tended to promote stronger connections among team members
- Teams reported limited motivation and participation to promote the project once the GEHLI program was completed

Recommendations

- Because a project's potential role in the VCU 2020 impacted its implementation and because we are currently in the process of recalibrating VCU 2020, the team recommends that individuals or a group from GEHLI should be invited to participate in the work group. This team believes that involvement in the work group could be of mutual benefit.
- Because project teams indicated that normative group dynamics were difficult to establish, the team recommends that more time in GEHLI sessions be spent on team teambuilding and less on exercises as a class.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2010 GEHLI team analyzed seven Student Engagement projects identifying likenesses and differences, particularly relative to responses gathered from team member interviews. Most teams functioned as independent work groups, leaning toward consensus-building without an established leader. Projects that were consistent with the goals and objectives of VCU 2020 appeared to gain greater support than others, and, thus, were more likely to be implemented, with or without the team's involvement.