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Paying it Forward: A Strategy for Developing a Culture of Lifelong Engagement and Inclusion for First-Generation Students

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PAYING IT FORWARD: A STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF LIFELONG ENGAGEMENT AND INCLUSION FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

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Project sponsor: Allison Toney, Director, Student and Alumni Engagement

PROJECT ABSTRACT

This project aims to propose a strategy for VCU to increase the engagement and connection among First-Generation VCU students to create lifelong commitment as alumni through VCU's Office of Development and Alumni Relations (DAR). The team proposes to expand DAR's outreach through collaboration with key VCU stakeholders (e.g., YOU First at VCU). By developing a positive undergraduate experience, students' loyalty to VCU will result in greater engagement as alumni, paying it forward.

RACIAL EQUITY

Although the overall rate of participation in higher education in the United States is one of the highest in the world, higher education is characterized by persistent racial and ethnic inequities. These inequalities manifest by the disparities in access, experiences, and outcomes experienced by First-Generation and minoritized students. The college completion rate by minoritized groups is lower than that of whites and Asians¹. When comparing individuals 25 years old or older, only 19% of Latinos/Latinx and 26% of Black/African Americans have completed a bachelor's degree or higher, while 40% of white and 58% of Asians have completed a bachelor's degree or higher² (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Although enrollment of these minoritized groups in colleges and universities keep increasing, the statistics clearly show that these groups still experience inequitable access to higher education. The nature of the higher education system presents additional challenges for First-Generation students from minoritized groups that prevents them from fully participating in the college experience. Racial equity will be realized when the distribution of college degree recipients from first-generation students and minoritized groups matches the racial and ethnic distribution of the United States population. It is the expectation that this project will contribute to reduce some of the inequities of the higher education system.

Specifically, twenty-seven percent of VCU's students are First-Generation, and of this group most (seventy-one percent) are minority, underrepresented students. Addressing and supporting the

¹ : Cahalan, M., Perna, L. W., Yamashita, M., Wright-Kim, J. & Jiang, N. (2019). *2019 Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: Historical Trend Report*. Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania.

² U.S. Census Bureau (2020). *Current Population Survey, 2019 Annual Social and Economic Supplement*. <https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/data/tables/2019/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html>

needs of these students will primarily benefit a significant number of First-Generation minority students during their college career and into the future through alumni engagement.

QUEST 2025: TOGETHER WE TRANSFORM

This project aligns with VCU's Quest 2025 by focusing on continued engagement of First-Generation students along their journey to become VCU alumni. More specifically:

Theme II: National Prominence – Distinguish VCU as a preeminent urban public research university by growing areas of strength as researchers, innovators and educators.

II.3 Achieve national distinction through our successful engagement with and graduation of diverse student populations

VCU maintains a First-Generation student support network led by the Strategic Enrollment Management and Students Success office and its related You First program, along with various alumni networks, and colleges and schools providing identity or shared interest, which may include First-Generation support. However, there is not a clear pathway for First-Generation students to engage with VCU during the graduation transition from student-to-alumni (S2A). Through increased and deliberate collaboration among and across existing networks supporting First-Generation students as a secondary focus, VCU DAR will provide First-Generation VCU students increased opportunities to be engaged on-campus while students, which will support continued engagement as VCU alumni.

PROJECT GOALS

The goal of this project seeks to provide DAR with a strategic framework to increase the connection among First-Generation VCU students to create lifelong engagement as alumni. Robust First-Generation engagement will increase the visibility and national prominence of VCU through First-Generation populations which share equity and inclusion with other population identities and shared-interests.

Supporting this strategy are three pillars: **identifying and understanding** the First-Generation student population; developing **collaborative focus** across First-Generation VCU stakeholders; and developing and sustaining a culture of **lifetime engagement** among First-Generation students and alumni. These combined pillars serve to develop “RAMS 4 Life.”

First-Generation college students are the future First-Generation alumni. Twenty-seven percent of VCU's students are first generation, and of this group most (seventy-one percent) are minority, underrepresented students. However, only seventeen percent of VCU graduates were First-Generation (sixty-seven percent of those were minority) in 2019-2020.³ Without dedicated engagement with First-Generation students, VCU risks losing these students before they ever reach graduation.

The universal **identifying and understanding** of the characteristics of the First-Generation population and the elements of alumni loyalty among First-Generation stakeholders represents the foundation of this project. This understanding comes first through clearly defining and identifying the First-Generation population. First-Generation students are generally those students whose parent(s) or legal guardian(s) have not earned a bachelor's degree.⁴ First-Generation students often lack established networks, connections, and social capital (i.e., information, support, and resources, including financial) which is typically found among non-First-Generation students, correlating to lower college completion rates among First-Generation

³ Virginia Commonwealth University (2021). *Institutional research fall 2020 enrollment report*. Internal working documents.

⁴ DOE, Common App, VCU.

students.⁵ First-Generation students may also be reluctant to identify themselves as First-Generation, fearing a negative connotation of being viewed as low income, less sophisticated, or less capable. Together these contribute to “lower levels of belonging and greater experiences of exclusion” in college when compared to non-First-Generation students.⁶ Studies show that “...alumni, who are more satisfied with their educational experience and outcomes, and who are more involved in student life as undergraduates, have greater involvement in alumni activities...”⁷

The sustainable success of developing a culture of lifelong engagement and inclusion for First-Generation students requires **focused collaboration** among VCU stakeholders. This collaboration brings together resources from various identity-focused and shared-interest groups across VCU to effectively and intentionally communicate, promote, and support this specific population group encouraging involvement. Resources offered by these groups include formal mentoring (student-to-student, alumni-to-student), career services (resume and interview skills), support based on shared experiences, and navigating campus life. Alumni-student mentoring programs have been found to provide benefits to the student and alumni organizations, as well as to the university sponsoring the programs.⁸ The You First at VCU program (Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success (“SEMSS”)) provides an identity focused resource for First-Generation students and demonstrates VCU’s commitment to First-Generation students. VCU has also been recognized as a First Forward Advisory institution by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), demonstrating continued commitment to the success of First-Generation students. Within the alumni organizations of DAR, schools and colleges offer shared-interest support and resources to develop a relationship with students based on a primary identity or academic discipline that continues as students transition into alumni. Through focused collaboration among university stakeholders, these resources and support can be efficiently communicated and provided to First-Generation students.

The final pillar of this strategy is to foster, encourage, and sustain a **culture of lifetime engagement** with VCU. This culture of engagement ideally begins during pipeline programs, recruitment, orientation, and their first year at VCU where First-Generation students are proactively connected with support resources, either through the identity of being First-Generation or through a shared interest at VCU. This mentoring engagement by upper-level First-Generation students, faculty, and staff develops relationships and encourages involvement in VCU, resulting in an increased sense of belonging and a desire to remain engaged as First-Gen students continue their journey to graduation. As alumni, this established relationship with VCU will encourage support of the next generation of First-Generation students. Relationships formed as students rather than through random transactions based on need develops a strong a culture of lifetime engagement and creates generations of “RAMS 4 Life.”

⁵ Schwartz E.O., Kanchewa, S.S., Rhodes, J.E., Gowdy, A.M., Stark, A.M., Horn, J.P....Spencer, R. (2018). ...

⁶ “I’m having a Little Struggle With This, Can you Help Me Out?”: Examining Impacts and Processes of a Social Capital Intervention for First-Generation College Students, *Am J Community Psychol* (2018) 61:166-178; Sarah E. O. Schwartz, Stella S. Kanchewa, Jean E. Rhodes, Grace Gowdy, Abigail M. Stark, John Paul Horn, McKenna Parnes, and Renee Spencer

⁷ *Understanding Alumni Giving: Theory and Predictors of Donor Status*; Jeff E. Hoyt, Ph.D. Director, Institutional Research Utah Valley State College

⁸ Dollinger, M., Arkoudis, S., & Marangell, S. (2019). University alumni mentoring programs: A win-win? *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*, 41(4), 375–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2019.1617657>

PROJECT STRATEGIES

The team blended academic research, local stakeholder interviews, and a review of First-Generation engagement initiatives of peer institutions to develop an initial strategic framework. The key action steps of the team included the following:

- Gathering VCU data on expanded First-Generation student population; capturing this student population as an aggregate, as well as by race.
- Identifying and reviewing peer national universities with identifiable and comprehensive alumni organizations specifically addressing First-Generation alumni.
- Reviewing current literature related to First-Generation student engagement.
- Meeting with VCU stakeholders, including DAR, Office of Strategic Enrollment, YOU First, and VCU Alumni groups.

The team first met with sponsor Allison Toney of DAR to discuss the topic, desired outcomes, and current known activities related to this topic. Ms. Toney suggested that this project's goal is to create a network focusing on the unique aspects of First-Generation students to encourage involvement with VCU based on established relationships developed as students. *The recommendation was to develop a proposal which sets forth methods to better support first generation graduates, which in turn, supports stronger alumni networks and in the process, determines blind-spots and opportunities for collaboration among VCU stakeholders.*

The team then surveyed academic research related to First-Generation students and alumni, student engagement with an institution, and alumni engagement.

The team worked with various VCU stakeholders with shared interests in supporting First-Generation students to develop an understanding of existing organizations offering resources and support based on a shared identity and relationships aligning with the project focus. Additionally, the team researched peer institutions and those with strong First-Generation alumni organizations to identify a common framework supporting alumni engagement among First-Generation populations.

From these meetings, the team synthesized efforts currently taking place at VCU with primary or shared interest with First-Generation populations. Affinity alumni organizations (e.g., African American Alumni Council, Asian American Alumni Association, Latinx Alumni Council) provide alumni mentorship programs and scholarships specific to the primary group with which they identify, though not specifically with First-Generation students. In addition, You First at VCU has a number of worthwhile areas of outreach directly to First-Generation students, including Alumni Mentorship, a website with a number of informational resources for First-Generation students (including blogs, newsletters, instructional videos, and common concerns and strategies for adjusting to college life). Programs of shared interest for First-Generation students at VCU include the Altria Scholars Program (which targets specifically First-Generation students in engineering and business, including coaching and scholarship opportunities), the TRiO program (which provides a variety of educational and social programming that will build self-efficacy and academic success), Summer Scholars, and the VCU Pipeline Program.

The team also explored resources and programs offered to First-Generation students at QUEST 2025 peer institutions, and noted a number of recurring themes from highly successful programs. For one, institutions developing and supporting centers and organizations specifically empowered to focus on First-Generation student success; for example, the Harvard Primus program is a student organization specifically dedicated to easing First-Generation student transition to college, building a strong and supportive community, and providing a voice to First-Generation students. Second, providing academic resources and leadership specifically targeted to First-Generation students, such as a First-Generation honor society (Alpha Alpha Alpha) at the University of South Carolina (USC), and a dedicated Assistant Dean of First-Generation students

at Virginia Tech. Third, developing robust guides and outreach materials to help First-Generation students acclimate to the college environment, including podcasts and guidebooks from USC and the University of South Florida, and workshops at the University of Louisville. Fourth, having a shared experience for First-Generation students to build a sense of community and camaraderie, including single-house living for these students at the University of Cincinnati, peer mentorship and a “First Generation Institute” at Virginia Tech, and shared classes at the University of Louisville. Fifth, engage First-Generation alumni not just in mentorship, but help to engage and fund programs for current First-Generation students, such as initiatives at Virginia Tech.

Throughout the duration of this project, the team continued to have weekly discussions and meetings with stakeholders, and to discuss current findings, overall progress, and next steps. Synthesizing first-hand stakeholders’ information, academic research, and relevant information developed a strategic framework for DAR to implement to develop a culture of lifelong engagement and inclusion for First-Generation alumni.

OUTCOMES

A three-pillar strategic action plan was developed:

1. Identifying and understanding the First-Generation student,
2. Focused collaboration, and
3. Sustaining a culture of lifetime engagement

This three-pillar plan will be achieved by defining the First-Generation population; identifying VCU stakeholders and available resources; sponsorship by DAR; and collaboration among DAR, SEMSS, and other campus partners.

The key VCU stakeholders are DAR and SEMSS. All primary identity and shared interest groups are directly connected or supported by these organizations. Through these offices, stakeholders shall identify a point of contact for First-Generation collaboration, connecting the primary interest to the common First-Generation interest.

The Vice President of DAR is the recommended sponsor for the implementation of this project, supported by SEMSS. The primary aim of this project is building an active, engaged alumni network among the First-Generation population. The deliberate and consistent partnership and involvement by DAR and SEMSS are essential in developing and sustaining a culture of lifetime engagement with VCU, which begins as students with support from alumni.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through awareness of the characteristics and unique challenges for First-Generation underrepresented students, and through focused collaboration, we aim to enhance the support structure for this group. Supporting these First-Generation students will reduce opportunity gaps, awareness gaps, and achievement gaps. The effect of this will be better equalization of graduation and attrition rates, thus improving racial equity amongst students at VCU.

In alignment with the project goals of identifying and understanding (IU) the First-Generation population at VCU, focused collaboration (FC) among stakeholders, and sustaining a culture of lifetime engagement with VCU (SCLE), the following recommended strategies are provided:

Immediate (0-18 Months)

- Capture and identify current First-Generation students using VCU Institutional Research and Decision Support (IRDS), surveys, and self-report kiosks. Collaboration with shared interest groups will improve participation rates. (IU).
- Capture and identify existing First-Generation alumni by self-identification through surveys, mailings, and other marketing campaigns. (IU)

- Dedicate resources (personnel) to coordinate the updating of current DAR databases to add an identifier for First-Generation alumni. (IU, FC).
- Review and update current alumni records to clearly identify First-Generation alumni. Collaboration with shared interest groups will improve participation rates. (IU, FC).
- DAR and SEMSS will identify points of contact, coordinate and develop a communication strategy, and begin to elevate the positive attributes of First-Generation populations using social media; e.g., VCU Telegram, email listserv, and texting as the primary communication vehicles. (IU, FC).
- Develop training material available in VCU Talent or through SEMSS's web site for VCU stakeholders describing attributes of First-Generation populations for better service to this population. (IU, FC).
- Collaborate with VCU stakeholders in the development of structured resources for First-Generation students based on current programs and resources in use by other primary and shared interest communities. (FC)
- DAR to seek out low-dollar financial support opportunities for First-Generation students, such as event sponsorship; strength finder personality tests offered by YouFirst; gift cards for Starbucks or other eateries, Summer Scholars (FC, SCLE)
- DAR to offer internships and work study opportunities for First-Generation students. (FC, SCLE)
- DAR staff and alumni to offer skill-building opportunities, such as interview skills, networking, internships in local businesses through existing alumni network (SCLE)

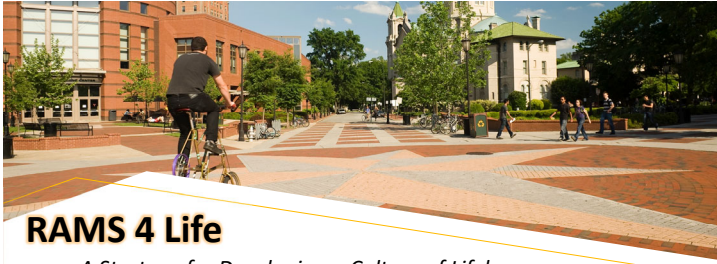
Short- Mid-Range (18-36 Month)

- Review and update Alumni and Student data-bases based on capture and identify methods. (IU, FC).
- Expand communication efforts to include presentations and presence at orientation, student events (FC).
- DAR to work with SEMSS to develop an alumni—First-Generation student mentor program (FC, SCLE)
 - This will require training for alumni mentors to prepare them for Title IX issues, dealing with trauma disclosed by mentees, protecting sensitive information, listening skills, personal wellness, existing support structures and sources on-campus
- Partner with VCU HR and Alumni donors to explore the creation and funding of an Assistant Dean of First-Generation Student Affairs in SEMSS. (IU, FC, SCLE)
- DAR to develop an Adopt-A-First Generation student program to include opportunities to gain work experience, financial support such as covering the cost of textbooks for a semester (FC, SCLE)
- Identify First-Generation donors or other donors to fund resources for First-Generation students. (SCLE).

FINAL PITCH

DAR is challenged to engage the segment of its alumni that are First-Generation college graduates. To solve this problem, DAR needs to begin by identifying existing First-Generation alumni, as well as current First-Generation students. First-Generation alumni may then be involved in initiatives to engage First-Generation students and to support their success under a “giving back” framework. DAR should also become engaged with other VCU stakeholders to broaden its support of First-Generation students. Supporting the success of First-Generation students contributes to reducing some of the racial inequities faced by these students, leading to greater graduation rates of this minoritized group. Successful and engaged students are more

likely to remain engaged as alumni and to seek out opportunities to support those coming along. This framework creates a cycle that can be repeated year-over-year. In this way, DAR will not only support its mission of creating a diverse and engaged alumni base, but will also be building generations of “RAMS 4 Life.”



RAMS 4 Life

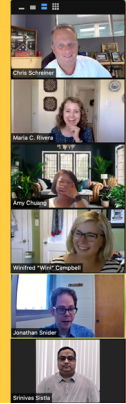
A Strategy for Developing a Culture of Lifelong Engagement and Inclusion for First-Generation Students



Sponsored by
The Office of Development and Alumni Relations

Meet the Team

- Christopher Schreiner**, Director, Academic Data Analytics, School of Nursing
- Maria C. Rivera**, Associate Professor, Department of Biology
- Kuei-Lan (Amy) Chuang**, Director, Animal Care and Use Program, Office of Research and Innovation
- Winifred Campbell**, Assistant Director, Contracts and Compliance, Procurement Services
- Jon Snider**, Neurology Residency Program Director, VCU Health System
- Srinivas Sistla**, Director of Laboratories, Dept. of Microbiology and Immunology, Stony Brook University



WHO

- VCU'S Office Of Development and Alumni Relations
Allison Toney, Director, Student and Alumni Engagement
- First-Generation Alumni
- Shared-interest Stakeholders



WHAT

Increased engagement and connection with First-Generation Alumni

Method:

1. ID and communicate with First-Generation Alumni
2. Support First-Generation students to decrease attrition rates
3. Collaborate with VCU's shared interest stakeholders



WHY

VCU's First-Generation students are mainly minority, under-represented students

By supporting these students and collaborating with VCU stakeholders, we support a diverse student body

Successful First-Generation students become engaged First-Generation Alumni



Quest 2025

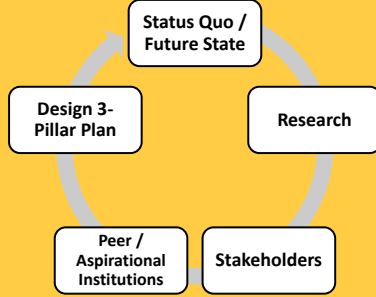
THEME 3

Achieve national distinction through our successful engagement and graduation of diverse student populations



The Approach

Weekly team meetings from February through September



Defining First Generation Students

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: students who enrolled in postsecondary education and whose parents do not have any post-secondary education experience.

COMMON APP: student has started the parent information section and is considered first-generation by default, or that neither parent has received a bachelor's degree or higher.



Defining First Generation Students

VCU's Definition

Those students whose parent(s) or legal guardian(s) do not have a bachelors degree.



Our Premise

"...alumni, who are more satisfied with their educational experience and outcomes, and who are more involved in student life as undergraduates, have greater involvement in alumni activities...."

Understanding Alumni Giving: Theory and Predictors of Donor Status; Jeff E. Hoyt, Ph.D. Director, Institutional Research Utah Valley State College



First Generation Student

- Opportunity
- Awareness
- Achievement



Student Preparation Leads to Access Success Completion



Challenges of First-Generation Students

- May lack established networks, connections and social capital
- Information to navigate financial aid
- Support from someone who's "been there-done that"
- Unmet financial needs
- Balance of work, school, and caretaker
- Student's perceived negative connotation of being 1st Gen



Equity Concerns

1947, President Truman's Commission on Higher Education
"If the ladder of educational opportunity rises high at the doors of some youth and scarcely rises at the doors of others, while at the same time formal education is made a prerequisite to occupational and social advance, then education may become the means, not of eliminating race and class distinctions, but of deepening and solidifying them."



Who are they? National Trend

- Proportion First-Generation First-Time Freshmen
 - ~24% undergraduate population
 - 28% white and Asian-American
 - 42% African-American
 - 48% Latino/Latinx
 - ~20% English is not the first language

Data from National Center for Education Statistics
<https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018421>



VCU Freshmen Enrollment Fall 2020

	% Freshmen	% First-Generation
First-Generation	33%	--
URM	38%	47%
Asian	17%	32%
Black/African American	20%	47%
Hispanic/Latino	13%	53%
White	39%	20%

Source: VCU Data Portal <https://data.vcu.edu/datadigest/>



College Outcomes

- 4X more likely to leave after the first year
- Six-Year Bachelors Degree Completion
 - 1st-Generation: 34-50%
 - Not 1st-Generation: 66%



Barriers to Success

Opportunity Gap → Increases inequality

- Race and ethnicity
- Socioeconomic status
- English proficiency
- Wealth: community and family
- Immigration status



Barriers to Success

Awareness Gap → Less information

- Outcome of the Opportunity Gap
- Parents without college
- Undergraduate journey
- Financial aid complexities



Barriers to Success

Achievement Gap → Less successful

Outcome of Opportunity and Awareness Gaps

Lower incomes. Less wealth.

Less likely to complete advanced degrees.

Higher education debt

10 years after college debt gaps > non 1st gens

Pew Research Center, May 2021, "First-Generation College Graduates Lag Behind Their Peers on Key Economic Outcomes"



Academic and Social Integration

- Less engaged in the academic and social experiences
 - studying groups
 - interacting with faculty and other students
 - extracurricular activities
 - university support services
- Live and work off-campus
- **Less engaged alumni**



Paying it Forward: Very important or essential

	First-Generation	Non-first Generation
Helping others in difficulty	83.4%	79.2%
Influence social values	51.3%	47.4%

Stolzenberg, E. B., Aragon, M. C., Romo, E., Couch, V., McLennan, D., Eagan, M. K., & Kang, N. (2020). *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.



First-Gen: More Engaged Alumni

- Opportunity Gap
- Awareness Gap
- Achievement Gap



Preparation
Access
Success
Completion



Peer and Aspirational Institutions



1. Primary / Shared Identity Resources
2. Dedicated leadership role
3. Programs to ease the transition to college life
4. Financial and academic resources



Primary or Shared Identity Resources

- Shared house living - U of Cincinnati
- Shared classes - U of Louisville
- First Generation honor society (Alpha Alpha Alpha) – U of South Carolina (USC)
- First Generation Institute – Virginia Tech



Dedicated Leadership Roles

- Dedicated Assistant Dean of 1st Gen student – Va Tech
- Primus program – Harvard
- STEP – George Mason



Programs to Ease the Transition to College Life

- 1st Gen College Institute – Va Tech
- Podcasts and guidebooks – USC and USF
- Workshops – U of Louisville



Financial and Academic Resources

- Three elite 1st Gen Scholarship Programs – U of Alabama
- 1st Gen alumni as donors – Va Tech



VCU Organic Resources

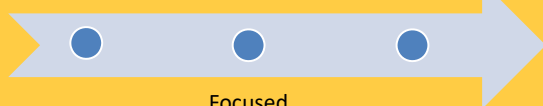
- You First:
 - Peer and Alumni Mentorship
 - 1st Gen Student Website
- Pipeline Programs
 - Altria Scholars (engineering and business)
 - TRIO Program
 - Summer Scholars (prep courses)
 - VCU Pipeline Programs (health sciences)
- Siloed Programs
 - African American Alumni Council
 - Asian American Alumni Association
 - Latinx Alumni Council



Three Pillars Plan

Identify & Understand

Culture of Lifetime Engagement



Focused Collaboration

Successful First-Generation students become engaged First-Generation Alumni



Identify and Understand

- Definition
- Attributes



Focused Collaboration

- Deliberately Identify Stakeholders
- Intentional Communication
- Identify Resources
- Understand First-Generation



Culture of Lifetime Engagement

Focus on relationships, not technologies

What kind of relationship do you want?

Transactional
Occasional
Impersonal
Short-term



Passionate
Constant
Intimate
Loyal



Desired Outcomes: 0-18 months

- ❖ Identify 1st Gen Alumni and update databases
- ❖ Communication campaign
- ❖ Reach out to VCU stakeholders: Strategic Enrollment, You First, existing Alumni groups
- ❖ Offer internship and work study opportunities
- ❖ Offer skill-building: interviewing, networking
- ❖ Low-dollar support: event sponsorship, gift cards



Desired Outcomes: 18-36 months

- ❖ Expand communication efforts: presence at orientation, student events
- ❖ Partner with Strategic Enrollment to develop 1st Gen Alumni—1st Gen Student mentor program
- ❖ Partner with HR and Alumni donors to create and fund Asst. Dean of 1st Gen Student Affairs
- ❖ Adopt a 1st Gen Student program



The Goal: Build a diverse and engaged Alumni base
In turn, build generations of **RAMS 4 Life**

The Strategy:

Supporting the needs of 1st Gen students
Benefits a significant number of minority students during college and into the future
Engaged students become engaged Alumni



Thank You

A sincere thank you to our project sponsor from DAR, Allison Toney, Director of Student and Alumni Engagement

