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Ram Opportunity

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RAM OPPORTUNITY

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PROJECT ABSTRACT

RAM Opportunity is a self-sustaining mentoring and experiential learning program designed to serve high school students in the local community through programs led by graduate student mentors. RAM Opportunity operates using a plug-and-play structure that can be implemented in the arts, business, education, humanities, sciences, or any other discipline. Partnerships will be formed with local high schools and their guidance counseling services to develop a pipeline for potential students to participate in the program. The program benefits VCU by enhancing engagement with the local community, generating interest in high school students pursuing post-secondary education at VCU, and developing graduate students by providing professional development funding and real-world teaching and mentoring experience.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

RAM Opportunity is a summer mentoring and experiential learning program led by graduate students serving high school students in the local community. RAM Opportunity provides a self-sustaining, plug-and-play structure that can be implemented in the arts, business, education, humanities, sciences, or any other discipline. Partnerships will be created with local high schools and their guidance counseling services to develop a pipeline for potential students to participate in a program. Students will apply to the program, paying a fee to participate. A fund will be created to offer scholarships for students who cannot afford to pay. The program will pair graduate students with high school students at a ratio appropriate to the discipline. The graduate students will work with faculty to develop a summer research experience 2-4 weeks in length resulting in a final deliverable/product from the experience. The graduate students will then facilitate the experience and serve as mentors for the high school students. The high school students will benefit by having access to VCU's resources, learning advanced skills in a discipline for their age group, and through exposure to the college experience. Graduate students will benefit by directing the funds gained to pay for their own academic development (books, conferences, or other materials), developing real-life facilitation skills in their discipline, and/or receiving academic credit. Faculty/staff time invested will be upfront in the design of the program with the graduate students, but minimal to none in implementation. As the program grows beyond an initial pilot, a graduate assistant would be brought in through the Graduate School to coordinate program logistics.

CONNECTING TO THE UNIVERSITY'S STRATEGIC PLAN

This team project cuts across two strategic plans as the university phases out its existing plan and moves forward into its new plan.

| Quest for Distinction | Quest 2025: Together We Transform |
|---|--|
| <p>Theme III: <i>Become a national model for community engagement and regional impact.</i></p> <p>Goal 2: Leverage the efforts of our students, faculty, and staff to enhance, integrate, and disseminate community-engaged scholarship, student service-learning opportunities and outreach.</p> | <p>Theme I: <i>Student Success - Transform the lives of our distinctive and diverse student population through a university culture that supports every student's success through inquiry, discovery, innovation, civic engagement, and creative expression.</i></p> <p>Goal I.1: Transform the undergraduate curriculum to ensure we offer a 21st century learning experience.</p> <p>Goal I.2: Prepare our students to be creative innovators and entrepreneurs who make a difference in an increasingly diverse and connected world.</p> <p>Goal I.3: Enhance the university culture supporting student success, including improved retention and graduation rates.</p> |

Following the Quest for Distinction Theme III, Goal 2, the RAM Opportunity program creates intentional outreach engagement with the community by creating a relationship with schools that encourages interest in postsecondary education and VCU, provides access to VCU resources that local schools do not have at their disposal, and develops both graduate students' and high school students' skills in research and career development.

The RAM Opportunity program more broadly cuts across all three of the Quest for Distinction themes. Theme I, Goal 1 speaks to recruiting and retaining diverse students. The program's focus on high school students opens new pathways to develop student's skills, interest in post-secondary education, and creates networks and connections that would bolster their success coming into the university if they decide to attend VCU. The program helps meet the goals stated objective of developing leaders in a well-educated workforce through its focus on developing and preparing graduate students to begin practicing their profession in meaningful ways during their time at the university. Theme II, Goal 2 is also highly supported by the program through the focus on growing both high school students' and graduate students' skills.

Following Quest 2025, Theme I relates to recruitment and retention of diverse students. RAM Opportunity's focus on high school students opens new pathways to develop student skills, interest in postsecondary education, and creating networks and connections that will bolster their success if they attend VCU. The program also helps meet the stated objective of developing leaders in a well-educated workforce through its focus on developing and preparing graduate students to begin practicing their profession in meaningful ways during their time at the university. Additionally, Ram Opportunity creates an innovative program for graduate students to help to prepare them to enter the workforce with developed skills of teaching and advising.

Lastly, under Quest 2025, the program model connects VCU to the community by bringing high school students from the surrounding area to the campus to learn and experience academic life, with the intention of drawing RAM Opportunity participants to apply to VCU.

PROJECT GOALS

1. Develop an outreach relationship between VCU and high school students in the local community that enhances access to resources; encourages interest in designated fields of study; develops practical and applied skills; and generates interest in pursuing post-secondary education.
2. Provide intentional academic and career development for graduate students through funding that supports their academic work, academic credit, and professional development earned by facilitating the mentoring experience.

Implementing the project ties together all of the major Quest for Distinction themes and goals in a resource efficient model that can be applied in disciplines across the enterprise.

PROJECT STRATEGIES

The idea for the project came from an understanding that across the university, depending on the department, there are limited opportunities for graduate students to engage in practical teaching and mentoring experiences during school and that funding to support graduate students' professional development through conference attendance is also limited. In addition, the university currently has very few community engagement programs during the summer that could help to create a pipeline of student's interested in post-secondary education at VCU. RAM Opportunity was developed as a program to bring these two pieces together.

In forming the program, the primary stakeholder was identified as the Graduate School. The Graduate School serves as an ideal hub, since the program revolves around graduate student facilitated programs. The project team worked with the Graduate School to identify all of the key components of the program: program submission and review structure, recruitment of graduate programs and graduate students, recruitment of high school students, program fees, fiscal management processes, needs assessment and evaluation, and marketing.

Once all of the components of the program were identified, the team identified a pilot opportunity through a lab at Massey Cancer Center. The team developed draft materials for the program outlined above, recruited a graduate student to develop and lead the pilot, and honed a relationship with a local school to recruit students to apply and participate. The Graduate School assisted with setting up the fiscal management aspects of the project. The pilot program then ran for two weeks in August 2018. Participants in the program completed pre and post-assessments on their experiences and a focus group at the end of the pilot. The high school students indicated the program enhanced their interest in lab research and college, while the graduate student indicated the teaching and mentoring experience, along with professional development funding, was valuable to them.

Based on the initial efforts, the team then partnered with the Graduate School to integrate it into their core operations, reaching agreement to have a graduate assistant with the Graduate School administer the program, developing a manual to guide program administration, creating initial marketing materials, setting up fiscal management processes, and determining timelines for graduate program proposals, review of proposals, marketing to potential student participants, acceptance of participants, facilitation of programs, and evaluation of programs.

ACTION STEPS

The Graduate School has agreed to integrate the program into their operational model over the next year. On the Graduate School side, the following action items need to be taken for the program to reach sustainable fruition:

- Finalize a manual to guide program administration.
- Identify a graduate assistant to coordinate program administration.
- Settle fiscal account management process for broader program implementation.
- Set-up a review committee to consider and approve graduate student program applications.
- Finalize marketing materials for the program.

On the department side, VCU departments with schools interested in running an experience through the program would need to:

1. Review marketing materials, program requirements, and timelines for the program distributed by the Graduate School.
2. Receive departmental support and submit the initial application materials for consideration and approval by review board.
3. Set-up a program fiscal account through the Graduate School.
4. Coordinate participant recruitment with the Graduate School and local high school guidance counseling services.
5. Run the program, including pre and post-experience assessments.
6. Coordinate graduate student facilitator disbursements for professional development from accrued program funds.

OUTCOMES

The project has achieved a number of key outcomes. A relationship with the Graduate School has been established to house program administration moving forward and make the program sustainable, including staffing by a graduate assistant to administer the program, marketing support, fiscal account support, and a commitment to establish a review committee for potential programs to ensure quality programs.

In addition, the project has completed a number of resources to support the functions mentioned above. A framework was developed for implementing a research-oriented experience for high school students led by a VCU department and facilitated by graduate students that could be easily applied across disciplines, including sample applications, sample syllabi, checklists covering key preparation items, sample pre and post-assessments, participant certificates, sample marketing materials, and an initial fiscal account management setup that can be applied to other programs.

A pilot program was completed through a lab in the Massey Cancer Center, consisting of three high school students and one graduate student facilitator. The students were given pre and post-assessments and participated in a focus group. The feedback gained from the pilot program participants showed that the high school students gained valuable real-world research experience while also boosting their interest in the field and pursuing post-secondary education. The graduate student facilitator indicated that they gained meaningful experience developing and facilitating instruction and mentoring, an experience not otherwise afforded to them in their graduate program. The graduate student also will be able to use the funding from high school student's tuition to fund conference attendance this year for professional development. The lab serving for the pilot has committed to continuing the program in the future and Massey Cancer Center has also committed to providing one scholarship per year to this or similar summer programs focused on cancer research.

SUSTAINABILITY

Following the successful pilot program completed in August 2018, program sustainability is dependent on the Graduate School providing administrative oversight and assisting in recruiting graduate student mentors. In support of this goal, the Graduate School made continuing RAM Opportunity one of its strategic goals for the 2018-2019 academic year, as well as agreed to assign a graduate assistant to oversee the program. Finally, the pilot program experience will be used to create a detailed program handbook describing the steps necessary to implement the program, which will be provided to the Graduate School by October. The Graduate School will have primarily administrative oversight for the program, including marketing, fiscal administration, application management, and program approvals, while participating department's will bear the responsibility for application materials, program planning, high school student participant recruitment, and program assessment for their developed learning experience

FINANCING AND RESOURCES

The Graduate School has committed to resourcing for the program administration aspects of the program. The individual program experiences themselves fall under a self-developed and self-sustaining model and paid for through participant tuition or other funding sources, including departmental donations or scholarships. All money generated through these sources will be used to provide professional development funds for participating graduate students, to cover incidental program costs, or to provide scholarship support to future high school student participants. Administration of funds will be provided by the Graduate School in conjunction with hosting departments.

| Item Description | Justification | Cost |
|---|--|---|
| Graduate Student Professional Development Funds | Graduate students will be provided with financial professional development support as an incentive for participation. Funds will both help recruit graduate student participants, and also provide graduate students with an opportunity to attend academic conferences. Funds will be available as a reimbursement for approved professional development expenses. | Varies based on program; pilot program was \$2,400 (\$800 per high school student) The primary funding source is participant tuition. Future funding sources could include scholarship funds or dollars donated by departments. |
| Incidental Program Costs | Costs associated with program administration, (e.g., laboratory coats, marketing, studio supplies, background checks for program administrators). Funded through participant tuition or other funding sources. | Varies based on program arrangements. The pilot program direct cost was about \$90: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ \$26 for two background checks▪ \$64 for three lab coats Funded through participant tuition, scholarships, or department donations. |
| Graduate Assistant - 10% of time | A graduate assistant will be provided by the Graduate School to administer and oversee the program. The student will spend approximately 10% of their time on the program. | 10% of a graduate student stipend. A typical graduate student stipend ranges from \$10,000 - \$17,000/year depending on the award, so the cost would be approximately \$1,000 - \$1,700. |
| <i>Total varies based on program. Costs met through participant tuition, department donations, and potential scholarship funds.</i> | | |

RECOMMENDATIONS

To develop a sustainable model, the program must be integrated into the operations of the Graduate School. Central to making the program easy to develop and implement is the creation of a program process manual to guide both the Graduate School and academic programs running the program in their area, which the project team is currently working on an initial version to hand-off to the Graduate School. In addition, a partnership with the Graduate School needs to be developed to advertise the program to graduate students and graduate programs, using targeted email communications, a program brochure, as well as written and video testimonials from the pilot program. The project team is also assisting in developing initial marketing materials to hand-off to the Graduate School. Based on interest, the creation of a database of departments willing to host the program would continue to foster future sustainability and engagement in the future. The Graduate School has indicated they are investing in this commitment with funded graduate assistant time for overall program administration and ancillary support from existing staff members for items such as fiscal administration and marketing.

A partnership between the Graduate School and Undergraduate Admissions would aid in recruiting local high-achieving high school students. Such a partnership could leverage existing contacts and relationships and come with little people time investment and little to no other costs.

For long-term program development and participation, it would be key to solicit scholarship support and develop a fundraising mechanism to create opportunities for students to participate in the program who cannot afford the tuition. While not a requirement, this would increase program access to a larger pool of potential high school students in the community and serve to bolster their perspectives on the value of post-secondary education. Depending on the scale at which this avenue was desired, the primary costs would be people resource time.

While there is a commitment from the Graduate School to continue the program through administrative oversight, the biggest potential remaining barrier will be interest and willingness from graduate students to develop and facilitate new programs and a willingness of their departments to sponsor and support their efforts. As a self-driven and self-sustaining model, it will only persist and continue to grow from continued volunteer ownership.

FINAL PITCH

The goal of RAM Opportunity is to provide graduate students with an opportunity to pursue professional development opportunities essential to their education while also providing hands-on, skills-based mentoring experiences to local, high-achieving high school students. The program is not specific to any academic discipline and can easily be adapted to numerous settings and subjects. RAM Opportunity aligns with two of VCU's strategic goals: providing students with unique, experiential opportunities and supporting the Richmond community.

RAM Opportunity benefits VCU and the departments that use it as the program design minimizes administrative work, uses a funding model that is self-sustaining, and puts the time and focus on the learning and development of the graduate students facilitating the program and high school students program was successfully piloted and found a supportive partner in the Graduate School. The program also benefits VCU by creating heightened engagement between the university and local community, developing the skills of existing graduate students, and creating a potential pipeline of students to attend VCU.

The program benefits graduate students by providing teaching and mentoring experience that may not otherwise occur during their graduate school experience, while providing funding to support their present and future career development.

The program benefits high school students by providing experiential learning experiences in fields of interest that may not otherwise be available to them, while also creating exposure and interest in pursuing postsecondary education.