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# Team Vision Focusing on the Future: Assessing Community Needs and Outreach

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## Team Vision

### **Focusing on the Future: Assessing Community Needs and Outreach**

As Virginia Commonwealth University looks to the future to achieve the themes in **VCU 2020: Vision for Excellence** the University is asking members of the community to generate solutions to address the thematic goals presented. The Grace Harris Leadership Institute Class of 2007 was given the challenge to address issues relating to Theme V: Maintain VCU as a Model for University-Community Partnerships. *Team Vision* was asked to recommend a process to direct the University on how to assess and respond to community needs.

Faced with this challenge, Team Vision took a multi-pronged approach toward generating a solution. The first prong looked internally to delineate the scope of the problem, define community and community engagement, and understand VCU's current commitment to community engagement. Next, looking external beyond the University, the team identified model institutions from which an approach for assessing community needs and determining appropriate projects could be garnered. Specifically, Team Vision, investigated Carnegie designated "Community Engaged Universities:" those institutions which have met stringent curricular and partnership criteria. The third step was to identify assessment tools and methods already in use at the University and in the City of Richmond. The final step was to come up with a series of recommendations that the University can implement.

VCU's definition of community, "Where the University has a sustained presence," is based upon the Carnegie Foundation classification of "Community Engagement." The Foundation term "Community Engagement" describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity<sup>1</sup>. VCU has demonstrated its commitment to maintaining this Carnegie Foundation classification through its multi-faceted approach toward community engagement. Of the 61 other institutions that also have this designation, Team Vision chose to investigate Portland State University, North Carolina State University, Michigan State University, Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis, and Elon University to investigate.

Team Vision approached each of these institutions with a list of questions (see Attachment 1) to determine best practices and models for assessing community needs and determining appropriate ways to respond to them. No two institutions were exactly the same; however there were some common themes. Community projects in most cases were chosen as a response to a particular problem. These problems were brought to the institution's attention both from external partners and/or internal sources. There were a limited number of assessment tools, including mapping tools, assessment mechanics, questionnaires, discussion groups, informational sessions, etc. Further, some database tools were found to be difficult to maintain and sometimes ineffective. However, there was a high level of community involvement and most universities had centers that focus on community engagement, e.g. Elon Kernodle Center, MSU National Center for Study of University Engagement, IUPUI Center for Community Engagement. However, one university had a decentralized community request system. Each university acknowledged the value of having a consistent effective way to determine how their institution could most effectively assess and respond to community needs. There was no particular model that these institutions followed, in fact Team Vision judged VCU to be ahead of other institutions. This is further demonstrated through the numerous community needs assessments that have taken place in the last six years.

These community assessments include the Richmond Community Needs Assessment (August 2001), the Comprehensive Community Plan for the City of Richmond (July 2004), the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=1213>

Prevention Needs Assessment for the City of Richmond (2004), Mayor's 2020 Vision – Report of the Mayor's Human Services Committee (June 2005), and the Health and Human Services Needs Assessment (August 2006). Five common methods were identified from how these assessments were executed. Focus groups and forums were found to be a good way to collect information and gather information from collaborators through the exchange of ideas. Surveys of stakeholders were another way to collect information. Analyses of current practices provided a mechanism to evaluate existing practices and current projects. For further description of the assessments please see Attachment 2.

Based upon the research conducted and information gathered Team Vision's recommendations are as follows:

- One central office or person should monitor community needs and action plans.
- There should be a single individual responsible for evaluating community requests, such as a community scholar, a member of the advisory council or other designee.
- A formal protocol should be established that describes the process of how requests are received, assessed, and acted upon. The protocol should be accessible, distributed and marketed to the university and community.
- A spokesperson from the community should also be part of the evaluation stage to assist in determining the true need and motivation for the request and to assist in establishing good solid relationships early.
- The documentation process should begin early and be carried through to completion (regardless of whether the project request is accepted or rejected)
- There should be constant collaboration between the two campuses to ensure the exchange of ideas, requests, methodology, information, etc. For example, sharing information from the Center for Translational Research to evaluate community health issues.

With respect to actually evaluating requests, after all information is gathered, rate the project based on three criteria:

- Does it fit into VCU and Division of Community Engagement mission?
- Is it feasible to be able to respond to the need?
- Are there existing organizations already involved? If so, determine if and how to align.
- Will it positively impact both VCU and the community? If so how?

It will be the role of the Division to examine the items listed above and provide a ranking to the project. In deciding how to respond to community needs, the Division, in conjunction with the Council on Community Engagement, should make an informed decision each year (or in a 2-3 year cycle) about taking either a geographical focus (e.g., Southside), or an issues focus (e.g., substance abuse) to engaging with the community.

Looking forward to next steps, the Division of Community Engagement should utilize GEHLI 2008 for a Phase II of the task

- Develop a repository of needs assessments generated by the community;
- Work on a synthesis of the needs assessments
- Develop a process for identifying key stakeholders in the community
- Use existing VCU databases to track faculty expertise and interest in scholarship, teaching, and service in a particular areas

Attachments:

Q&A Carnegie Institutions Spreadsheet

Community Assessment

The Engaged Scholar – journal published by Michigan State University