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The Student-Centered University: A Survey of Peer Institutions

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The Student-Centered University: A Survey of Peer Institutions

Red Group Team Members

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Background

Virginia Commonwealth University is a public institution of higher education located in a large urban setting. During the last two decades, the university has experienced rapid growth in student enrollment, faculty size, and physical plant. The university's recent successes are in no small part due to a visionary president who now declares that becoming a student-centered university is a top priority during the remaining years of his tenure. In the past, VCU was known as a commuter college, where a large portion of the student body lives off campus and may attend school part-time. As VCU aspires to become one of the best higher education institutions in the country, the administrators, faculty and student leaders desire to make it a truly student-centered university. What does it take to become student-centered? An answer to that question will help the university develop a strategic plan to achieve the goal.

Project Description

In January 2004, Dr. McDavis, former Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs created a task force to define what a "student-centered" campus means for VCU. With the addition of new housing facilities, a new dining center, and the development of the Monroe Campus, it was time to initiate discussion on the different type of campus environment that is emerging. The task force primarily collected information through focus groups on campus. Dr. McDavis suggested to our group that there was value in looking at peer institutions that have identified "student-centered" as part of their mission statement and identifying their best practices. This group took on that task by surveying and collecting data from peer institutions, with the goal of producing a report for the Task Force for Building a Student-Centered University that will serve as a foundation for the initiative at VCU.

Project Goals

The group established three project goals:

1. To examine student-centered peer institutions and to identify strategies and best practices toward that effort.
2. To determine the relevance of these strategies and best practices to VCU.
3. To recognize student-centered strategies and best practices that VCU might undertake.

Strategies

Survey research was the most practical method to discover "student-centered" institutions that were similar to VCU.

Action Steps

The group performed the following actions in order to accomplish our project goals:

1. Develop a five-question survey (see appendix A). Gain approval from Dr. McDavis to use his

- name on the survey, because of his involvement with the task force and his position at VCU.
2. Disseminate the survey electronically to the 24 Peer Institutions identified on the Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation web page.
 3. Collect responses from Peer Institutions.
 4. Assign team members to follow up with respondents to clarify and verify the information provided (e.g. telephone, email, web sites).
 5. Compiled results by (a) Institution (see appendix B) and (b) Survey Question (see appendix C).

Outcomes

Twenty-four (24) Peer Institutions were sent the survey and eleven (11) institutions returned the survey for a 45.8% response rate. The responding institutions include Boston University, University of Connecticut, The University of Iowa, Oklahoma State University, Wayne State University, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, University of Louisville, University of New Mexico, Syracuse University, University of Pittsburgh, and The University of Arizona. By using open-ended questions a wide range of descriptive information was received from these institutions. This is the first time that VCU has received feedback from peer institutions who define themselves as “student-centered,” or implement this concept on some level.

Recommendations

We hope that our project will be used as a foundation by Dr. Gottfredson, Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, as he makes recommendations to Dr. Trani as to how to move forward on this initiative. Here are the major areas identified as “student-centered” by VCU’s peer institutions. More detail is provided in the appendices.

- **Strategic Plan:** Universities that placed student engagement in their strategic plans appeared to be most effective at transforming into a student-centered university. Likewise, these universities measured their progress with surveys, retention rate, graduation rate, etc.
- **Facilities:** The most commonly mentioned student-centered effort in this area was student housing; programs and services are offered within the residential facilities to make them more than just a place to live. Others discussed additions and improvements to student commons areas, campus beautification, adding buildings for campus performances (artistic and athletic), improved bookstores, and fitness centers (often found in dormitories). Some facilities were designed to promote student-faculty interaction, learning communities, and service-learning opportunities, which in turn enhance student engagement in learning.
- **Programs:** Programs designed to promote a student-centered university fell into roughly two categories: academics and student life. In the area of academics, universities encouraged learner-centered teaching and student engagement, extended academic services (tutoring and supplemental instruction), honor's programs, specific majors, and courses designed to introduce the university to freshmen. On the student life side, universities support activities such as student government, student participation on university boards, student-run media, and community-service programs. These programs enhance student learning by further

engaging students in the university community.

- **Community:** When referring to strategies and practices, institutions consistently talked about creating a sense of community and actively engaging students, faculty, and staff intellectually, socially, and culturally. Service learning, internships, volunteerism, collaboration with the community were examples cited. One school appropriately described this effort as “the city is our campus.”

Conclusions

A student-centered university is a frame of mind and a commitment on the part of all involved: students, faculty, staff and administrators. The university community must all be convinced of the value of the change. In addition, we must recognize that many changes are already underway. This endeavor must be a grassroots movement rather than a top-down edict. Of course, sufficient funds must be available to see the project through in a reasonable timeframe.

*NOTE: Copies of the appendices may be obtained by contacting the
Harris Leadership Institute (gehli@vcu.edu).*