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A Concept Paper for a VCU Social Sciences Initiative

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Grace Harris Leadership Institute

INTERIM DRAFT

Project Description

This project proposes the development of a Social Sciences Initiative at the undergraduate and graduate levels that will provide educational, research and service opportunities for faculty and students. These opportunities are envisioned as interdisciplinary, with a focus on community issues and priorities, and with the potential to create new links among existing educational/research units within the University.

The development of a Social Sciences Initiative provides a direct link to the Mission of VCU through several of the Mission's intents:

❖ "activities that increase knowledge and understanding of the world and inspire and enrich teaching"
    The Social Sciences Initiative will expand current activities and promote innovative teaching in an interdisciplinary manner.
❖ "diverse educational programs"
    The Social Sciences Initiative increases the diversity of educational program offerings.
❖ "development of innovative approaches to meet the changing needs of our society"
    The Social Sciences Initiative will directly address the changing societal needs through support of interdisciplinary education, research, and service.

Further, this initiative is consistent with the VCU Vision in that it will "advance a climate of scholarly inquiry…serve as a model of diversity in higher education…addressing urban issues in the nation and the world…build upon its substantial foundations in the…applied social sciences." (VCU Strategic Plan for the Future of Virginia Commonwealth University, Phase II, 1998).

Background Information/Statement of the Issue

Recently, VCU began its Life Sciences Initiative to "support teaching and scholarship across the academic disciplines at Virginia Commonwealth University center(ing) around the study of the interrelationships among all the *biologic* components of life…address(ing) what is called "*biologic* complexity" ..." (VCU, pp. 1; italics added for emphasis). While this initiative is intended to involve "everything from genes to ecological environments to human behavior", there appears to be only limited focus on the social science aspects of behavior; i.e., the *social* complexity of the human being (VCU, pp. 1; italics added for emphasis). This team, therefore, proposes the development of a parallel and complementary Social Sciences Initiative.

Social science is a broad area that encompasses the study of how individuals, societies, cultures, and political systems operate. It is the science that examines the interrelationships among all social

components of life and the principles of interaction among these components. For the purposes of this paper, social science is defined as the:

- ❖ Study of human behavior in the context of multiple environments;
- ❖ Study of the social groups with which the individual is associated;
- ❖ Study of the systems in which the individual and group must function;
- ❖ Activities in which the individual engages.

Two other essential features are embodied in social sciences as conceived in this paper:

- ❖ It is an interdisciplinary science due to its complexity; and
- ❖ It encompasses the study of people in wellness, disability, and disease.

This area of science has traditionally included a myriad of disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, political science, anthropology, criminal justice, public policy and administration, social work, and multicultural studies. At VCU many of these disciplines are available, and there is the opportunity to broaden the circle of professional disciplines with missions and philosophies that run parallel to the definitions included here. These might include psychiatry, rehabilitation counseling, occupational therapy, mass communications, and medical journalism, to name just a few.

There is a clear imperative for VCU to develop a Social Sciences Initiative at this point in the institution's history. This imperative can be understood by addressing the three key questions of *why a Social Sciences Initiative?, why VCU?*, and *why now?*

Why a Social Sciences Initiative? Given the fundamental role of higher education to impart knowledge for the betterment of humanity, few question the role of universities as vehicles that promote leading edge learning, innovation, and forward thinking. It is such forward thinking that has resulted in VCU's development of the Life Sciences Initiative. However, the Life Sciences Initiative does not fully address all aspects of human complexity. The Social Sciences Initiative would serve as a companion to the Life Sciences Initiative, rounding out VCU's mission. Whereas the Life Sciences Initiative has a major emphasis on the biological, cellular, and molecular processes that underlie human function and dysfunction, a Social Sciences Initiative offers an emphasis on the person within the many layers of environment. The Life Sciences Initiative has the potential to extend life; the Social Sciences Initiative has the potential to contribute to improvement of the human condition; to understand more fully the life we extend. The complementary relationship between the Life and Social Sciences Initiatives at VCU is depicted in the following diagram:
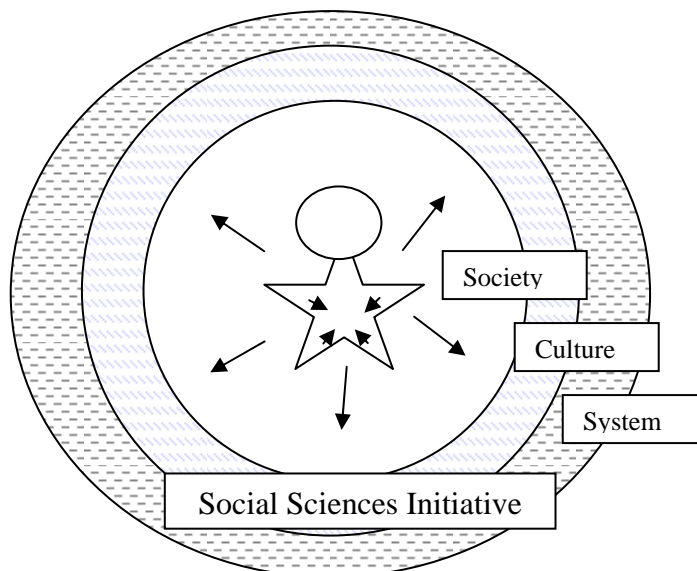
Why VCU? A Social Sciences Initiative at VCU, aimed at promoting interdisciplinary education, research, and service, could capitalize on existing accomplishments and excellence across both campuses and many schools, divisions, and departments *and* complement the Life Sciences Initiative already underway. Right now, VCU has a wealth of colleges, schools, and/or departmental programs that alone form the foundation for the study of various aspects of social science. For example, historically, VCU has had nationally ranked Schools of Social Work, Medicine, and Arts that when considered together offer compelling single discipline anchors upon which a Social Sciences Initiative can be built. For example, each of these disciplines has a pivotal role in social science. Social work by definition promotes adjustment of the individual in her/his environment; medicine in its effective practice incorporates many social science components; and art plays an instrumental role in depicting, and therefore, reflecting the human experience within cultural and social contexts. In addition, VCU offers many other outstanding single discipline social sciences programs (psychology and criminal justice, to name just a few). Thus, the single discipline richness needed as a foundation for a Social Science Initiative already exists at VCU.

Besides the extensive foundation of single discipline excellence that already exists here at the university, VCU has established itself as a leader in interdisciplinary study. VCU already has a host of degree programs that are premised on the value of interdisciplinary learning, such as the Bachelor's and Master's degree programs in Interdisciplinary Studies (e.g., Women's Studies) in the College of Humanities and Sciences, and the Ph.D. in Urban Services Program in the School of Education. Similar to these formal interdisciplinary degree programs that the university offers, VCU has a number of centers (e.g., the Center for Women's Health, the Center for Public Policy, the Center for Environmental Studies, and VCU/MCV New Academic Center for Excellence on Youth Violence, to name just a few) that foster research, learning and service that transcend traditional discipline-based lines, attempting to deal with human challenges in more holistic and integrated ways.

VCU has also begun to expand the role of technology in the delivery of critically needed information, for example, Telepsychiatry for clinical information, and academic information in its extensive use of web-based curricula (e.g., Rehabilitation Counseling and the Health Related Ph.D. Programs in the School of Allied Health Professions on the MCV campus). The idea of a "global classroom" offers many opportunities to place VCU-based curricula into social milieus that will begin to stretch the bounds of conventional social science pedagogy, and provide new venues to evaluate the application of social science knowledge.

Beyond the discipline-based foundations (single and interdisciplinary) and technology-driven pedagogical tools that position VCU well to develop a Social Sciences Initiative, VCU is also particularly well-situated due to its urban personality. VCU's urban character is what accounts for the numerous collaborative partnerships that VCU enjoys with the greater Richmond community (e.g., the Carver Neighborhood Initiative and the Youth Matters' AmericaReads Richmond, Chesterfield, Henrico Initiative), as well as other communities across the state (e.g., the Medical Education Campus in Springfield, Virginia Project), and international communities (e.g., Qatar Project). Such partnerships are illustrations of the narrowing gap between theory and practice as VCU attempts to apply all knowledge gained in the academic institutional environment to "real world" challenges.

Why now? It is no secret that the social demands that individuals must navigate today are far more complex than ever before. For example, advances in life sciences have brought into focus new

possibilities in areas such as human cloning. Amid times when we have the technological prowess to clone humans, the more important ethical questions surface as all-important issues to be grappled with. Social science then, can begin to shed some light on such complex issues. Therefore, the social science mandate is clear: to produce understanding and coping strategies that bolster individuals' ability to live successfully in the increasingly complex social landscape. Given a sense of urgency around addressing complex and multifaceted social issues, the opportunity for the social sciences to begin answering the tough questions is now. And, the extent that VCU is successful in developing a Social Sciences Initiative to begin this work, is the extent to which VCU can become a national leader in both life and social sciences research, teaching and service.

The Social Sciences Initiative, as proposed here, would build on VCU's existing richness (i.e., strong single discipline and interdisciplinary programs, cutting edge use of technology in information dissemination, and urban attribute that promotes community collaboration in a number of arenas) and offer a vehicle through which further interdisciplinary collaboration for research, teaching and service could take place.

Project Details

A. Goals and Objectives

Goal 1. Provide a clear vision of what a Social Sciences Initiative could be at VCU.

Objectives:
1.1 Provide a clear definition of social sciences;
1.2 Articulate why a Social Sciences Initiative, why VCU, and why now;
1.3 Demonstrate how the Social Sciences Initiative fits other current VCU priorities (e.g., the Life Sciences Initiative).

Goal 2. Identify VCU's current level of readiness to develop a Social Sciences Initiative.

Objectives:
2.1 Determine what is possible in terms of a Social Sciences Initiative at VCU by understanding what other universities have done in this area;
2.2 Identify current VCU capacity that directly relates to development of a Social Sciences Initiative (i.e., current education, research, and collaborative efforts) in order to realize strategic positioning and/or existing momentum to build upon.

Goal 3. Suggest draft operational parameters to guide the first year development of the Social Sciences Initiative at VCU (see beginning draft in Appendix A).

Objectives:
3.1 Establish draft goals and objectives;
3.2 Develop a suggested one-year project development implementation plan;
3.3 Develop a suggested evaluation plan to coincide with the one-year project development implementation plan.

B. Target Population/Audience

    The main target population/audience for this project will be VCU faculty and students.

C. Methods

    Method 1. Develop a written document (i.e., concept paper) that outlines the conceptual parameters of what a Social Sciences Initiative could be at VCU.

    Method 2.1 Conduct benchmarking of other university-based Social Science-related initiatives;

    Method 2.2 Perform an assessment of current VCU activities related to teaching, research and service as follows:

> a. perform a content analysis of all undergraduate and graduate course offerings at VCU and map the connections,
> b. perform a content analysis of all funded research at VCU and map the connections,
> c. conduct an inventory of all VCU-community collaborative partnerships,
> d. conduct an inventory of all available resources at VCU and potential roles that would augment the Social Sciences Initiative development process.

    Method 3. Develop a written suggested framework to guide the first year of development of the Social Sciences Initiative at VCU.

Available Resources within the University

- Provost's Ad Hoc Committee on the VCU Social Sciences Initiative
- The Center for Public Policy's Grace Harris Leadership Institute Project Team
- VCU/MCV New Academic Center for Excellence on Youth Violence (one exemplar of the type of efforts that can evolve from the Social Sciences Initiative)
- The VCU Life Sciences Initiative
- VCU academic schools, divisions, and departments
- Office of the Vice President for Research
- The Center for Public Policy's Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory
- University Outreach, Division of Community Programs

Implementation Plan

Month One:

- Finalize VCU Social Sciences Initiative concept paper.

Months Two and Three:

- Perform benchmarking activity at other institutions.

- Perform assessment of current VCU course offerings, funded research and service.
- Finalize draft suggested operational parameters to guide the first year development of the Social Sciences Initiative at VCU.

Evaluation Plan

Evaluation will be an ongoing aspect of the work of this project team, which will span approximately three months. Responsibility for the evaluation activity will reside with the team members. It will be important to monitor monthly the extent that progress is achieved on the three main project goals and accompanying objectives. This will constitute the more formative aspect of this evaluation, as it will have principally an implementation focus, addressing the team's ability to appropriately adhere to the implementation plan. This assessment will be based on the adequacy and timeliness with which the specific project goals and objectives are accomplished by the team.

The bottom-line effectiveness of the work of the project team over the next three months will be determined by the VCU stakeholders charged with responsibility for the first year implementation of the Social Sciences Initiative. These stakeholders will use the products of the efforts of this project team (i.e., concept paper; the results of benchmarking; findings from the curricula, research, service, and available resources inventories and analyses; and the draft suggested operational parameters to guide the first year development) as initial inputs into their work. Therefore, the overall impact of this project team's efforts, the more summative component of this evaluation plan, will be assessed in that group of stakeholders primarily using quantitative data resultant from a survey of their levels of satisfaction with the inputs. The extent that the stakeholders charged with first year implementation responsibility for the VCU Social Sciences Initiative view the work of this team as an effective precursor to their work, will be the extent that this team's efforts will be considered to have been effective (i.e., had sufficient positive impact on the overall development process for the VCU Social Sciences Initiative).

Appendix A: Suggested Framework to Guide Further Development of the Social Sciences Initiative at VCU

- Draft goals and objectives of a Social Sciences Initiative at VCU
- A suggested one-year project development implementation plan
- A suggested evaluation plan to coincide with the one-year implementation plan

Draft Goals and Objectives of a Social Sciences Initiative at VCU

A. Goals and Objectives

Overall Goal: development of a VCU Social Sciences Initiative at the undergraduate and graduate levels that will provide educational, research, and service opportunities for faculty and students.

Goal 1. To educate undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students in the interdisciplinary field of social sciences.

Objectives:
1.1 To identify existing curricular/discipline areas at VCU that are relevant to the social sciences initiative (e.g., psychology, social work, psychiatry, and sociology);
1.2 To explore potential curricular/discipline areas that are new hybrids to meet evolving social science market demands, with an eye toward potential new advanced degrees. Examples might include behavioral health, social justice, violence (e.g., youth violence, domestic violence), and teen pregnancy prevention.

Goal 2. To promote interdisciplinary research in the social sciences.

Objectives:
2.1. Identify areas of potential interdisciplinary research collaboration in the social sciences;
2.2. Explore and create funding mechanisms to support these new areas of interdisciplinary social sciences research.

Goal 3. To demonstrate the utility of interdisciplinary social sciences in providing service to the community.

Objectives:
3.1. Identify community issues and priorities where the social sciences initiative can have an impact;
3.2. Identify methods for intervention;
3.3. Identify methods for prevention.

Goal 4. To link the Social Sciences Initiative to the Life Sciences Initiative.

Objectives:
4.1. Identify common areas;

4.22. Identify complementary areas.

A Suggested One-year Project Development Implementation Plan

Important to the overall goal of this effort, which is "development of a Social Sciences Initiative at the undergraduate and graduate levels that will provide educational, research and service opportunities for faculty and students", is the first year implementation activity. As a new initiative that will require a broad base of support within the university community to be successful, the following four principles are offered to assist the university community in understanding its role in assuming responsibility for leading this effort, and as such, should premise all implementation activities:

- Collaboration – promotion of teamwork and non-traditional partnerships to realize the synergy of working together.

- Self-determination – realization that the VCU community owns and directs this process, but this ownership must be understood in a manner that promotes full inclusion of all aspects of the university community as well as the greater Richmond community.

- Outcome focus – a focus on using strategies that yield net results that are empirically verifiable.

- Continuous improvement - promoting steady progress over time.

The first year efforts will necessarily be more developmental in nature as this Initiative unfolds within the broad context of the four main project goals and accompanying objectives. This implementation plan addresses who, what, and when for the first year rollout of this Initiative. The key activities, process steps, responsible parties, and timeframes for the first year implementation of this Initiative are suggested as follows:

Key Activities:

1. Establish key Social Sciences Initiative (SSI) decision-making entity and process within VCU

    Process Steps:

    -identify stakeholders for membership on the decision-making entity and assemble the group
    -determine the oversight role and operational parameters for the decision-making entity
    -establish key points of interface of the decision-making entity with the year one implementation process (i.e., rollout plan)

        Responsible Parties:

        -Provost

            Timeframe:

-Month 1 after adoption of VCU SSI concept paper produced by the Grace Harris Leadership Institute Project Team

2. Establish SSI work deployment and management entity

    Process Steps:

    -assemble the SSI Facilitation Team to take ownership of facilitating year one implementation for this Initiative
    -develop the team deployment strategy, work plan and management process
    -assemble actual work teams

        Responsible Parties:

        -SSI decision-making entity

        Timeframe:

        -Month 2 after adoption of VCU SSI concept paper

3. Develop data collection strategy

    Process Steps:

    -Determine data and informational needs and potential sources
    -Determine primary data collection approaches and secondary data manipulation strategies as applicable

        Responsible Parties:

        -SSI Facilitation Team

        Timeframe:

        -Month 3 after adoption of VCU SSI concept paper

4. Data collection

    Process Steps:

    A. Perform primary data collection:
        Build consensus on the optimal SSI manifestation at VCU via key informant interviews, focus groups, and large group consensus building sessions with key university stakeholders

        Responsible Parties:

        -SSI Facilitation Team

Timeframe:

-Months 4-7 after adoption of VCU SSI concept paper

5. Data analysis

Process Steps:

-Gather and compile data and information from data collection activities
-Perform manipulation of secondary data collected by Grace Harris Leadership Institute
Project Team (i.e., benchmarking results; content analyses and mapping of existing SSI-
related university curricula, research programs, university-community collaboration efforts,
and available VCU resources)
-Review/assess data gathered, and perform preliminary interpretation

Responsible Parties:

-SSI Facilitation Team

Timeframe:

-Months 8-10 after adoption of VCU SSI concept paper

6. Decision-making and further formulation of the VCU SSI

Process Steps:

-Final interpretation of data and information gathered in the previous step
-Determination of the structure and funding that will sustain the Initiative beyond
year one and establishment of a long-term oversight and
monitoring/accountability/financing mechanism
-Decision-making about further SSI formulation
-Clarification of the next phase of implementation of this Initiative and identification
of specific next steps/plan of action

Responsible Parties:

-Provost's Office
-SSI decision-making entity
-SSI Facilitation Team

Timeframe:

-Months 10-12

A Suggested Evaluation Plan to Coincide with the One-year Implementation Plan

Evaluation will be an ongoing aspect of this Initiative to determine the extent to which it is successful in meeting its overall goal of "development of a VCU Social Sciences Initiative at the undergraduate and graduate levels that will provide educational, research, and service opportunities for faculty and students." It will be important to constantly monitor the successes and ongoing challenges in the implementation of SSI activities. In addition, it will be important to document the impact of this Initiative once it is fully developed and operational. To this end, this evaluation will have two components.

1. *The implementation assessment* will determine the adequacy of the effort's implementation (i.e., the extent that the Implementation Plan occurs as planned).

2. *The impact assessment* will determine if, upon completion of the initial implementation and development period, the activities of the effort have accomplished its overall goal and four main goals and accompanying objectives. In some measure, this will also be the degree to which the SSI is beginning to exhibit buy-in among the VCU and greater Richmond communities.

The implementation assessment will represent the more formative component of this evaluation process and will occur throughout the Initiative. It is recommended that a subgroup of the SSI decision-making entity accept the responsibility for managing the evaluation activities for this effort. This should include a quarterly review of implementation progress throughout this Initiative's formal development period. Conclusions drawn during these quarterly implementation evaluation reviews will identify mid-course adjustments in SSI implementation activities that are warranted along the way.

The results of the quarterly implementation assessments throughout the development of this Initiative will be folded into a formal report called a "quarterly implementation progress report (QIPR)." QIPRs will be used as a management report/monitoring tool to systematically identify barriers to full implementation of this Initiative and strategies to overcome such barriers. QIPRs will be made available to the Provost and the full SSI decision-making entity, with both having the option to convene ad hoc groups of VCU SSI stakeholders to further confirm and discuss QIPR findings as needed.

The impact assessment will be more summative in nature and address the extent to which this Initiative meets its overall goal. The evaluation subgroup of the SSI decision-making entity should formally assess the successes of this effort annually. Final conclusions about the overall success and impact of the SSI will not be made until this effort has moved significantly beyond its initial development phase, and has been fully operational for a sufficient period of time. This is anticipated to be several years down the road.

The evaluation process will use an objectives-oriented approach in which each key activity and associated process steps from the "suggested one-year project development implementation plan" will match an evaluation objective, in the case of the implementation assessment. Similarly, the overall Initiative goal, and four major accompanying goals and objectives will match an evaluation objective, in the case of the impact assessment. Each evaluation objective will then have accompanying measurement domains and data collection approaches. Though the main implementation activities and project objectives, along with associated evaluation objectives, will

be identified prior to commencing the evaluation, the Initiative roll-out and continuous assessment process will be flexible enough to permit issues to emerge as the project and evaluation unfold. In this way, the evaluation activity will promote continuous improvement of the SSI activities.

Measurement activity for each evaluation objective will attempt to include as broad a base of input as possible from Initiative stakeholders and partners. Several types of data (quantitative and qualitative) and data collection methods will be used in this evaluation, including surveys, structured interviews, focus groups, and other approaches. A detailed evaluation plan that includes each project objective, a related evaluation objective, preliminary measurement areas, and data collection approaches will be finalized later.