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VCU-UNITE: Identifying Recognition Mechanisms for University-Community Engagement

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Project Description

The aims of the project were to determine what process would be appropriate to recognize significant contributions of university and community partners to joint community engagement projects. Our view was that several different award ceremonies exist in VCU, none of which are well attended and suggesting that this form of recognition may not be a high priority for participants. Thus, we sought to determine the awareness and extent of involvement of VCU faculty, staff and students in community engagement projects, and to find out what format of recognition process would be appealing to both university and community participants. We gathered this information through surveys and focus groups, analyzed the data and determined that university and community partners had differing views on what types of recognition would be desirable. Next, we designed a web portal through which nominations could be made by members of the university and by the community. We propose a streamlined nomination and online review process, leading to a quarterly award consisting of a letter of thanks from the Division of Community Engagement, and a photograph and narrative placed on the VCU website. Recipients of quarterly awards would automatically compete for an annual award, such as P&T credit or additional community leave time (university), or a scholarship, a plaque, or recognition at a VCU event (community).

Project Goals

Our team identified the following goals:

- Gather background information about awareness and extent of, and enthusiasm for, VCU-community engagement projects
- Determine most desired mechanisms for recognizing participants
- Create a web portal for nominations, reviews and recognition
- Develop a suitable awards process

Strategies

In order to be able to propose a rational plan for recognizing VCU faculty, staff, students and community partners, we determined that we needed information from members of these groups. We felt this was necessary so that we could develop recognition mechanisms that would be acceptable to all concerned, and not just propose to hold another poorly-attended recognition event. Therefore, our strategy involved two discreet phases. First, we initiated an information gathering phase. This was followed by analysis of the data collected and the development of appropriate and desired mechanisms for recognition of VCU and community participants based on the results of our information gathering exercise.

Action Steps

We took the following steps to facilitate reaching our goal:

- Developed a survey for VCU faculty and staff
- Developed a survey for current community partners
- Held student focus groups
- Collated and analyzed survey and focus group data
- Developed a community engagement portal
- Developed a process for nomination, review and recognition

Outcomes

There are several outcomes as a result of this project:

- 70% of VCU faculty/staff aware of community leave entitlement, and 60% aware of partnerships with the community
- Around half do not view VCU partnerships with the community as a priority for them
- Important aspects of partnerships were: benefit the community; build mutual respect and trust; “make a difference”
- Worthy contributions include: initiating/facilitating partnerships; sustained participation; having a positive impact on the community; reaching a goal; growing partnerships
- Participation could be increased by helping identify partners/resources, organizing efforts and juggling work/study demands
- Forms of recognition desired by VCU and community partners differed although, for both groups, local advertising of their project/success had high priority
 - Community partners desired recognition at a VCU event, scholarships to the *Especially for Non-profits Program*, and their program displayed on a plaque
 - VCU participants requested a “thank you” note, credit towards P&T, and additional community leave time

Process Observations

From the start, our group displayed a high degree of collaboration, rational discussion, willingness to participate, division of workload, and a shared vision for the direction of the project. We learned to use individual talents and expertise for the group’s purpose. We also made use of contacts within the university, in order to achieve our goals. These were central to the success of our project.

Recommendations

Based on the outcomes listed above, we suggest a number of recommendations:

- Encourage all faculty, staff and students to participate in some form of activity with the community
- Facilitate participation by helping to identify partners and resources (bulletin board?)
- Raise awareness of ongoing and previous community engagement activities
- Promote the importance of community engagement projects to supervisors
- Consider including community service as a component of promotion and tenure reviews for faculty, of annual evaluations for faculty and staff, and academic credit for students
- Introduce a simple method for nominating candidates for community engagement awards, as well as a streamlined review process, through a web portal linked to the Division of Community Engagement and enabling centralization of other university awards.
- Establish recognition of worthy individuals at 2 levels: a quarterly award and an annual award

Conclusions

VCU participates in partnerships with the community, although around half of survey respondents did not view such activities as high priority. Increased participation could be facilitated by identifying partners and resources, and by helping faculty, staff and students to juggle their work and study commitments. Different levels of recognition are desired: a simple note of thanks rated highly, along with a published article about the partnership. Other types of award were also appealing, such as recognition of community partners or organizations at a VCU event, or a plaque. There was minimal enthusiasm or support for a dedicated recognition event: establishing such is not recommended.