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Brain Trust: Students for Students: VCU to RPS Mentorship Program

The Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Commonwealth University, gehli@vcu.edu

Diana Burkett
School of Education

Thomas Gresham
University Public Affairs

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

The Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute at Virginia Commonwealth University, Diana Burkett, Thomas Gresham, Courtney Harris, Mark Meadows, Laura Morgan, Susan White, and Tiffany Williams

STUDENTS FOR STUDENTS: VCU TO RPS MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

TEAM MEMBERS

Diana Burkett, Director of Communications and Enrollment Management, School of Education
Thomas Gresham, Assistant Director of News Operations, University Public Affairs
Courtney Harris, Assistant Professor, Interim Chair of Dance, School of the Arts
Mark Meadows, Director of Engineering Enrollment, School of Engineering
Laura Morgan, Associate Professor and Vice Chair of Education, School of Pharmacy
Susan White, Administrator, Proposal and Research Development, L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs
Tiffany Williams, Assistant Professor, Department of Pediatric Dentistry, School of Dentistry

Project Sponsor: Lynn Pelco, Associate Vice Provost for Community Engagement, Division of Community Engagement

PROJECT ABSTRACT

As a public, urban research institution, Virginia Commonwealth University embraces the importance of developing university-community partnerships that generate innovative solutions to societal challenges and prepare engaged citizens of tomorrow. The *Students for Students: VCU to RPS Mentorship Program* provides a model that will connect current VCU students to current Richmond Public Schools (RPS) students through a formal, multi-year mentorship. The ultimate goal of this program is to support and positively influence RPS students, while providing current VCU students with an opportunity to give back to the community while developing their mentorship skills. The mentoring relationship will seek to motivate RPS sophomores, juniors and seniors to improve school performance, graduate on time, and craft a post-high school path.

QUEST FOR DISTINCTION

Theme I: Become a leader among national research universities in providing all students with high-quality learning/living experiences focused on inquiry, discovery, and innovation in a global environment.

This program will provide current VCU students and RPS students with opportunities for growth based on mutual learning, service, and the mentor-mentee relationship.

Theme III: Become a national model for community engagement and regional impact.

This program will develop a model to engage and better equip high school students in the Richmond area and improve their educational pipeline experience. The program will support future student success by modeling successful college pathways of current VCU students and providing tangible tools for RPS students to navigate higher education pathways.

PROJECT GOALS:

1. Support and positively influence RPS high school students; improve retention, performance, and on-time graduation rate; help them envision and craft a post-high school path.
2. Provide meaningful service-learning and growth opportunities to VCU students.
3. Create a stronger student pipeline to VCU and local community colleges.

PROJECT STRATEGIES

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) statistics illustrate the challenges faced by RPS high school students in pursuing a higher education pathway. VDOE data indicate that only 54% of RPS students who graduated went on to enroll in any public institution of higher education, compared to the state average of 72%. In addition, the overall RPS on-time graduation rate of

80.5% remains well below the state average of about 90% and trails neighboring Chesterfield (90.2%), Hanover (95.5%) and Henrico (89.9%) counties, according to the most recent state data (2014). Of equal concern is the fact that RPS's drop-out rate still ranks among the highest for the 131 school divisions in Virginia with high schools.

Given that VCU resides in the midst of these struggling schools, this project seeks to develop a mentoring program that would contribute to the improvement of outcomes for RPS high school students, helping them pursue and succeed at an institution of higher education, while giving current VCU students the opportunity for hands-on learning and service to their community.

The theory of change behind *Students for Students* is based primarily on Daphne Oyserman's research (2006) that examines how we construct our "possible selves"¹ and argues that present behavior can be motivated to pursue either positive or negative outcomes based on how we see ourselves in the future. The primary intervention structure set up from a possible selves' framework is Identity Based Motivation (IBM).² The design of this mentoring program incorporates the social congruence element of IBM by matching VCU mentors who are former students in urban or high-needs schools with current RPS students who would recognize future selves in the VCU students.

ACTION STEPS

- Identify a theoretical model to base the mentorship program on
- Identify best practices for recruiting, training, and supervising mentors (in partnership with Virginia Mentorship Program)
- Identify possible community partners working with RPS high schools (Communities in Schools of Richmond and RPS Future Centers)
- Identify possible "home" at VCU to house and oversee the program
- Identify prospective RPS high school to serve as pilot (Thomas Jefferson High School is a candidate)
- Propose the selection strategy for VCU students to become mentors in the program and overall design of the program (length of commitment for VCU students, screening and matching criteria, training resources, etc.)
- Propose a marketing strategy to enroll VCU students in the program
- Propose an evaluation plan for the program
- Budget projections for year one of the mentorship program

OUTCOMES

As an anchor institution, VCU has a responsibility to affect positive change and growth for our neighbors and the surrounding region. According to the University's promise to lead in and through community engagement, its primary mission is "to apply long-term, place-based economic power, in combination with human and intellectual resources, to better the welfare of surrounding communities over time, with a particular focus on communities of moderate and limited incomes." The *Students for Students* program provides a tangible and effective way for VCU to establish mutually beneficial partnerships that inspire both the mentee and mentor and contribute to the well-being of both the community at-large and VCU itself.

¹ Oyserman, D., et al, 2006. Possible Selves and Academic Outcomes: How and when possible selves impel action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 91(1) 188-204. American Psychological Association

² Oyserman, D and Destin, M. 2010. Identity-based Motivation: Implications for intervention. *The Counseling Psychologist* 38(7) 1001-1043. Sage Publications

SUSTAINABILITY

Once the initial program has been implemented and evaluated, the program model can guide the development of a core service-learning initiative that could be adopted by appropriate academic programs and perhaps as a core component of Division of Community Engagement. There is an opportunity to expand the program to multiple RPS high schools.

FINANCING AND RESOURCES The training of mentors and mentees would be conducted by the Virginia Mentoring Partnership. They charge a fee of \$300/per 2.5/hour session for up to 25 people. This would be an annual cost for new mentors and mentees. After launch, the following costs are expected:

- Print promotional materials - up to \$500/year
- Produce recruiting videos or other media - up to \$2,000 every two years
- Purchase t-shirts/giveaways for participants - for an estimate of 25 mentors plus 25 mentees up to \$1,000/year
- Purchase lunches for group meetings - up to \$1,000/year
- Reimburse transportation costs for mentors - up to \$2,000/year

RECOMMENDATIONS

The team has established relationships with several potential community partners, including Richmond Public Schools, Communities in Schools Richmond, and RPS Future Centers. Due to recent turnover in the RPS system, new relationships would need to be forged with members of the new administration. Considering this, we make the following recommendations for next steps:

- Determine the VCU division/unit/office to host/own the program to ensure success and longevity
- Select the initial RPS high school with Thomas Jefferson High School identified as the potential pilot site
- Select the initial community partner, Communities in Schools or Future Centers, based on the VCU home of the program
- Establish an advisory board consisting of members from the VCU host office and RPS that can finalize the details of the initial implementation and shepherd the program forward;
- Use Virginia Mentoring Partnership guidance and best practices in outlining the mentor and mentee selection and evaluation process
- Evaluate the program after the first mentor-mentee group completes 6 and 12 months, then annually

FINAL PITCH

The goal of the *Students for Students: VCU to RPS Mentorship Program* is to provide meaningful service-learning opportunities to VCU students while positively influencing RPS high school students and their outcomes. This mentorship program is consistent with VCU's mission as an anchor institution to better the surrounding community. Finding the appropriate host for the *Students for Students* program will be important to its success and longevity.