

2016

Ready, Set, Network! Research Speed Networking for Clinicians, Scientists and Engineers

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Ready, Set, Network!

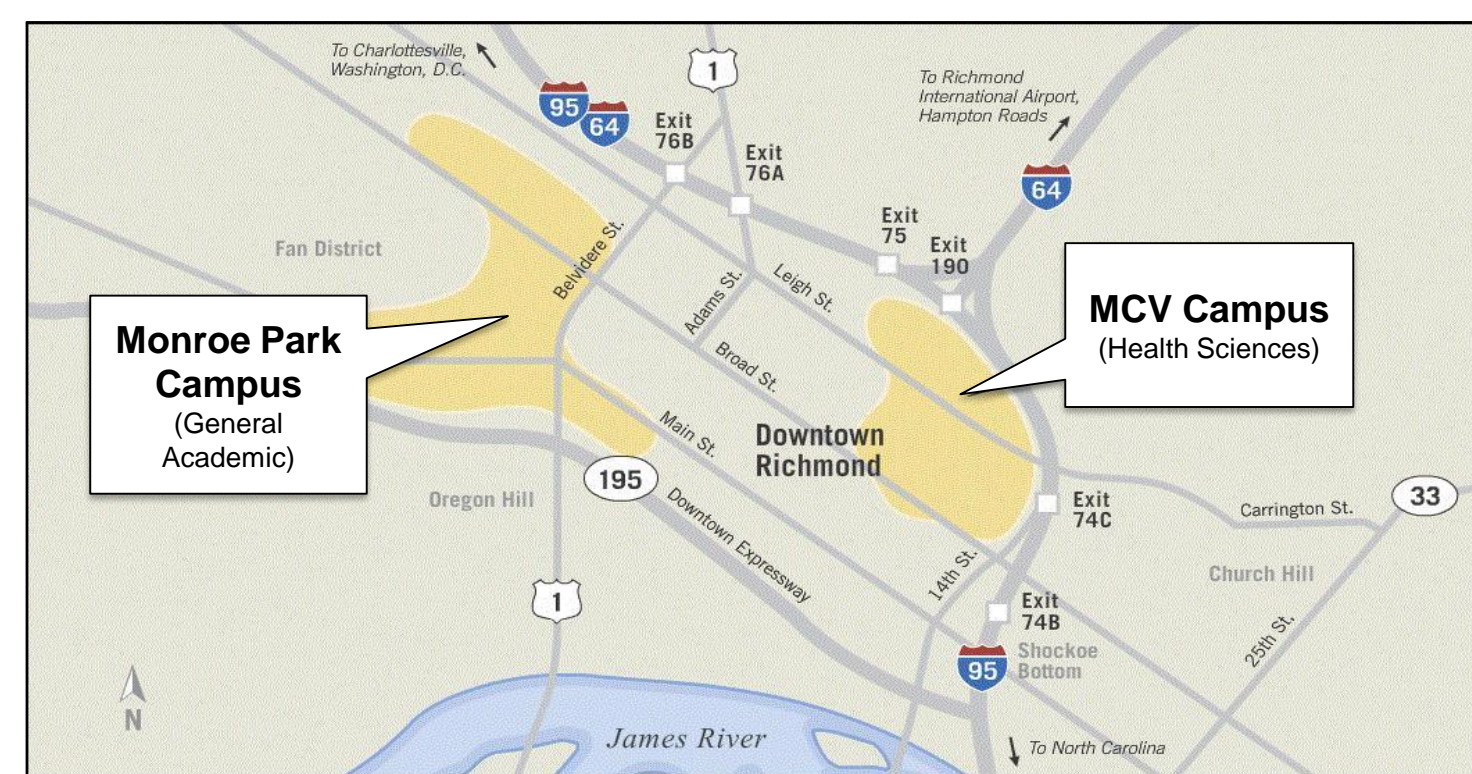
Research Speed Networking for Clinicians, Scientists and Engineers

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Background

In its 2013 report, the Institute of Medicine promoted team science, urging researchers to “engage in additional substantive and productive collaborations” to address important clinical and translational science questions. Collaboration can expand the scope of research, encourage efficiency among research resources and enhance the speed at which discoveries impact public health.

At Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), a public research university in Richmond, Virginia, there has been increasing interest in working collaboratively across disciplines. However, there have been limited opportunities to meet researchers across its two campuses. Its health sciences campus (MCV campus) includes a hospital system; schools of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, and allied health; as well as health-related centers and institutes. The general academic campus (Monroe Park campus) is located 1.6 miles west, and includes programs in biology, chemistry, computer science, mathematics, and engineering, among many others.



To encourage cross-campus collaborations among our researchers, the Virginia Commonwealth University's Wright Center for Clinical and Translational Research (CCTR) and Tompkins-McCaw Library for the Health Sciences (TML) hosted a speed networking event, specifically targeting clinicians, basic scientists, and engineers.

Challenges

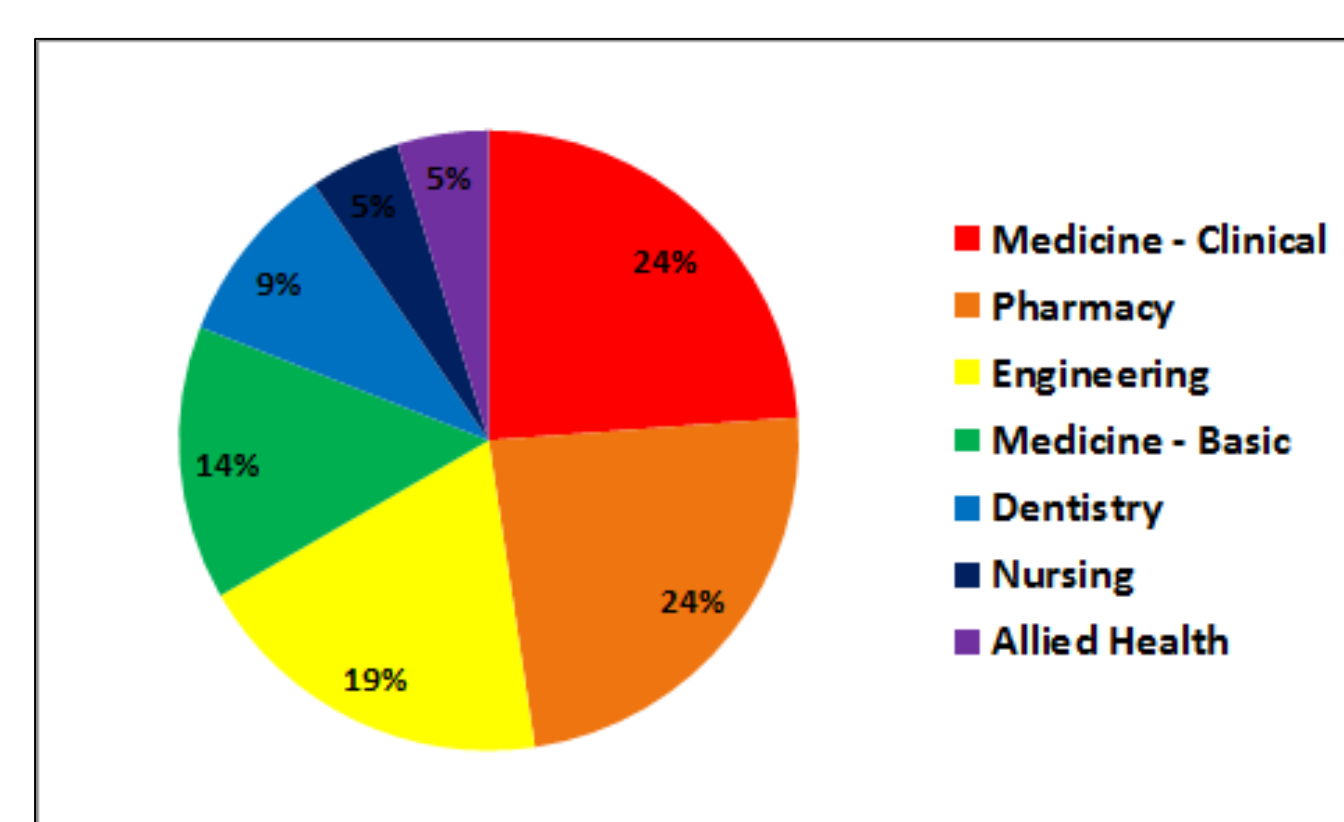
How do we ensure that all of the event attendees meet each other?
How do we provide enough time for everyone to meet without making the event too long?

Planning and Implementation: Attendees

Invitations to the speed networking event were sent to the research deans and department chairs of the health sciences schools, the School of Engineering, VCU Life Sciences, and the College of Humanities and Sciences, which includes VCU's Departments of Biology and Chemistry. Digital signs advertising the event were also posted within these schools.

Attendees were required to pre-register and provide basic information about their research interests. The goal was to have a minimum of 20 participants and a maximum of 40.

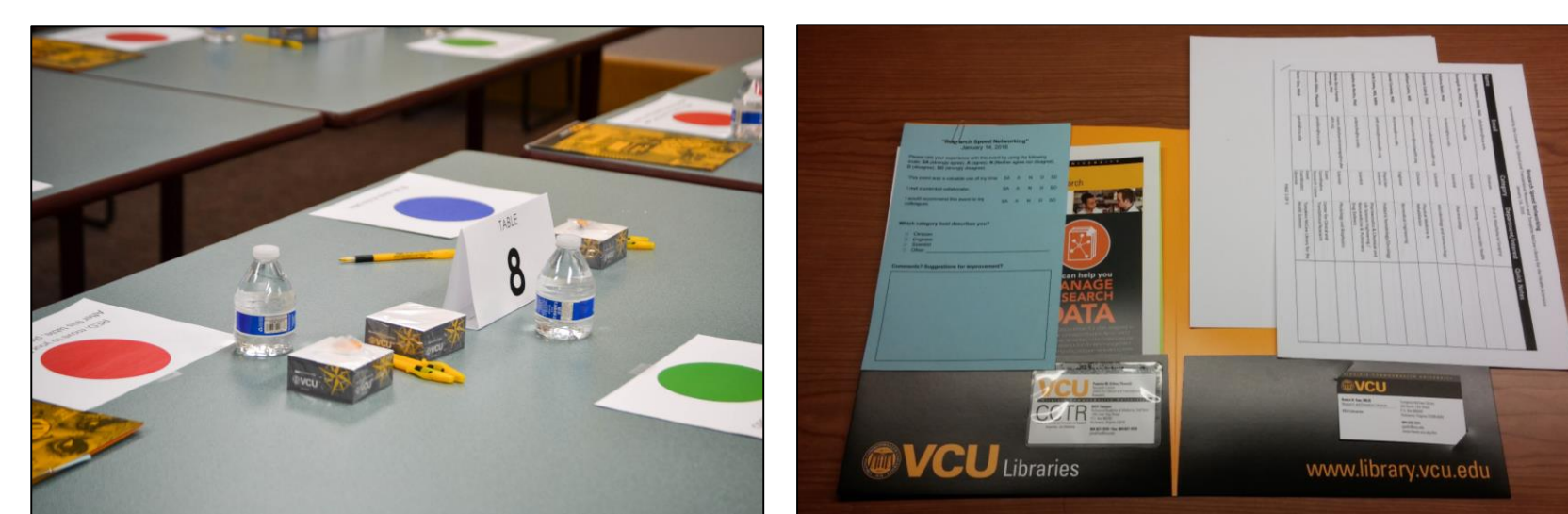
- 36 faculty researchers registered
- 21 faculty researchers attended
 - 57% assistant faculty
 - 29% associate professors
 - 14% full professors



Planning and Implementation: The Event

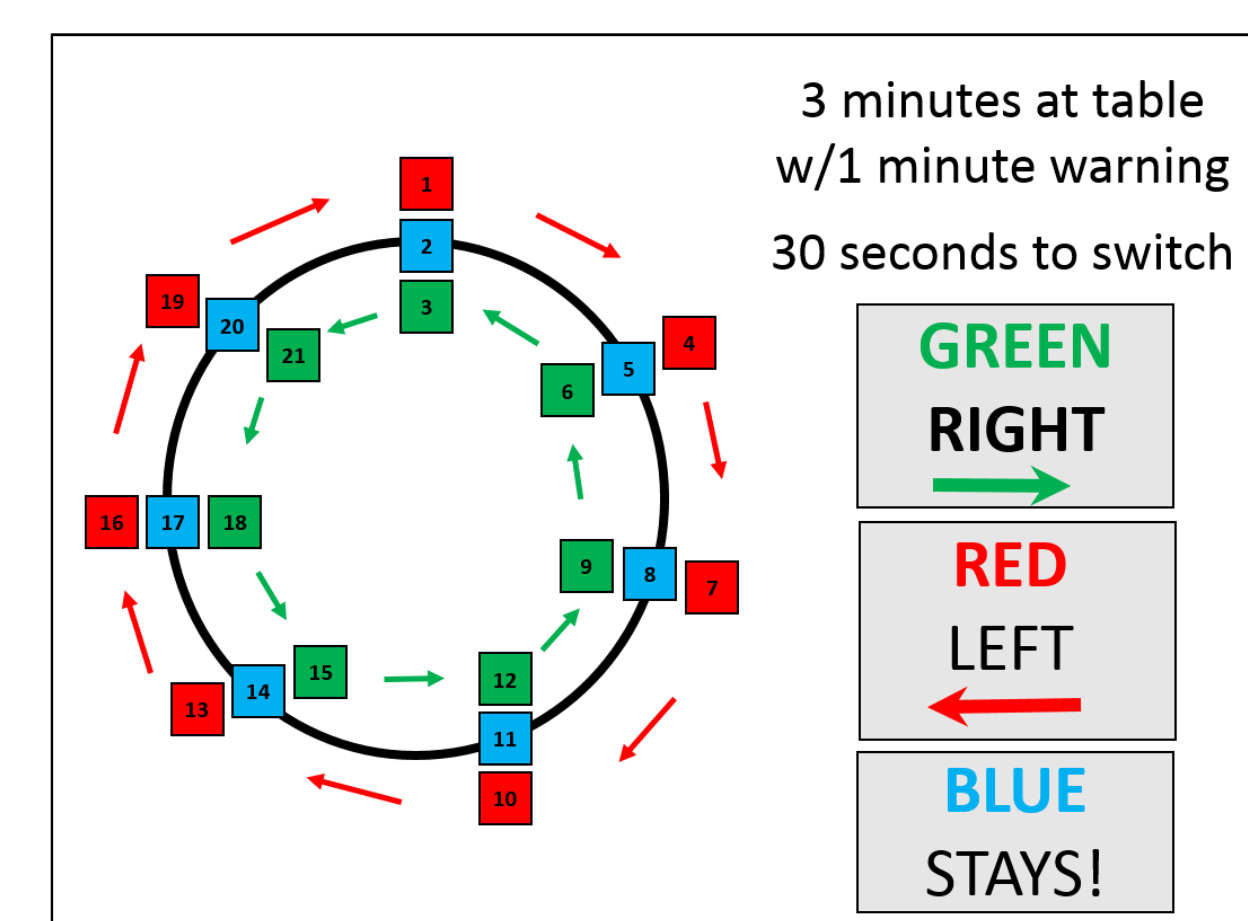
To maximize interactions between participants without increasing time spent at the event, researchers were divided into three groups, mainly based on their research expertise (clinicians, basic scientists, and engineers). One person from each group was assigned to each table and the event was planned so that each group would meet everyone from the other two groups.

When researchers arrived, they were given a name tag and an attendee list with the names and e-mails of the participants and a space for comments next to each name. Then, they were directed to their first assigned table.



During the first 5-10 minutes of the event, organizers welcomed the researchers and explained how the speed networking would work.

Seated at tables of three, attendees introduced themselves and discussed their research interests for three minutes. After each three-minute “meeting,” a computer-generated bell sounded to signal attendees to switch partners. The researchers were given 30 seconds to rotate according to their group's instructions. There were seven tables of three researchers and everyone was able to meet all of the researchers from the other two groups. The rotational arrangement requires an odd number of tables because an even number would result in repeat meetings.



To accommodate situations where researchers might be at a table alone, a few researchers from the CCTR were asked to serve as back-up participants. To be prepared for a situation where a table might have only one researcher, laptops and instructions on how to use Community of Science (COS) Pivot were provided during the event so participants could identify potential collaborators. With 21 participants, the laptops were not used.

Lunch was provided afterwards to give attendees an opportunity to follow up with potential collaborators or meet researchers from their own groups.

Three-way vs. Two-way Speed Networking

Advantages

- With 7 tables, the three-way speed networking sessions took just under 25 minutes for each researcher to meet 14 other researchers, a more efficient use of time than a two-way speed networking structure.
- Three people at a table were more likely to find common ground than two.

Disadvantages

- Because an odd number of tables are needed, additional planning is required to avoid situations where researchers are sitting alone at a table.
- The rotation patterns can be confusing if instructions are not clearly given.

Observations



- Fewer clinicians were interested in the event than engineers and basic scientists even though the event took place on the health sciences campus.
- More than half of non-attendees did not give any prior notice of being unable to attend, despite our registration form making it clear that no-shows might get charged a departmental lunch fee.
- Although we anticipated issues with understanding the rotational pattern, participants were clear on how to rotate because of the straightforward verbal and written instructions provided.
- Flexibility is essential; researchers were very accommodating when we needed to eliminate tables and change the group to which they belonged.
- Lingering beyond the 3 minutes allotted for each table was fairly common.
- Even when a researcher did not have mutual research interests with other researchers at the table, s/he often referred other researchers to department colleagues.
- Participants did not mingle as much as expected during lunchtime; most researchers sat at the tables at which they started or ended their rotations.

What we Learned (Feedback)

“Excellent overall. Needed a bit more time to interact.”

“Great idea!”

“I would have liked more formal time to circulate with my fellow ‘blues’ -- people didn't circulate much during lunch”

Using a 5-point Likert scale, all participants who answered our survey (n=17) selected “strongly agree” or “agree” in response to questions about whether the event was a good use of their time and whether they would refer a colleague to the event.

53% of survey respondents agreed “strongly” with the statement “I met a potential collaborator” at the event. The rest of the attendees were split between “agree” and “neutral.”

There were multiple requests for longer sessions at each table. However, one of the coordinators who participated observed that the total length of time spent at the event felt just right, noting that as a self-described introvert, drawing it out longer would have been exhausting.

Next Steps

- One year after the event, the number of successful collaborations between speed networking participants will be evaluated in terms of grants submitted/funded and publications generated.
- Additional speed networking events may include funds to support collaborative teams developed from the event who are collecting pilot data for competitive external grant applications.