# The University Next Door: Developing a Centralized Unit that Strategically Cultivates Community Engagement at an Urban University

Valerie L. Holton, Jennifer L. Early, Meghan Resler, Audrey Trussell, & Catherine Howard

## Abstract

Using Kotter's model of change as a framework, this case study will describe the structure and efforts of a centralized unit within an urban, research university to deepen and extend the institutionalization of community engagement. The change model will be described along with details about the implemented strategies and practices that fall within each of the eight steps. The paper concludes with reflections and future efforts.

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is physically, socially and economically intertwined with the City of Richmond. From the university's inception, community engagement has been an integral part of VCU's values and mission (VCU, 2014). In the process of creating VCU as a public institution of higher education for the city of Richmond, the Wayne Commission (1967) established that VCU would be "an urban-oriented university . . . unique in that its basic philosophy concentrates on meeting the needs of an urban population living and working in an urban environment (p. 12)." It is in this context that VCU has come to develop and refine its relationship with the region.

Since its founding in 1968, VCU has worked to live up to its calling as a public urban university. An early focus on professional programs in social science and health fields were VCU's entrée into bridging the educational goals of the university and the societal needs of its urban community. Overtime, the vision for VCU expanded as an institution that not only serves urban community members directly but also fosters partnerships across governmental and educational boundaries that provide the highest quality of service to its students and to the wider Richmond region. [For more information on the history of the university and its commitment to engagement, see Bonis, Koste, Lyons and Curtis (2006); Howard and Allison (2004); and Trani and Holsworth (2010).] As a result, numerous organizational changes and initiatives have been undertaken that reflect VCU's commitment to institutionalizing community engagement as a means to educating the citizenry and generating new knowledge while also having a positive impact on its communities.

### Evolution of Engagement Infrastructure at VCU.

In 2006, VCU established the Division of Community Engagement (DCE), a centralized administrative unit that resides in the Office of the Provost and is responsible for institutional progress related to community engagement. Prior to that, efforts and programs related to engagement were housed in a larger administrative unit along with other programs and offices such as continuing studies, summer programs, and international education. As community engagement gained prominence across the university and was increasingly seen by the leadership as core to VCU's mission and values, Dr. Eugene Trani, the president, and other senior leadership established the DCE as the first unit with a sole focus on engagement and a university-wide scope of responsibilities. While the DCE has gone through a series of name changes, the word "community" has been included in each as a signal to the university and broader community that

VCU values engagement. The DCE has grown and strengthened its role as the primary coordinating structure for supporting and advancing community engagement for all academic and academic support units across the university. Using Kotter's model of change, this paper will review the strategies used by the DCE to extend and deepen VCU's engagement with and impact on our communities.

**Kotter's Model for Organizational Change**

John Kotter (1996) identified a set of principles for leading organizational change. These principles, outlined in eight steps, are based on his many years of leading long-lasting change initiatives in large companies: (a) create a sense of urgency, (b) form a powerful guiding coalition, (c) create a vision, (d) communicate the vision, (e) empower others to act on the vision, (f) plan for and create short-term wins, (g) consolidate improvements and produce still more change, and (h) institutionalize new approaches.

In general, the steps are considered to occur in a sequential order leading to institutionalized change. Skipping a step, or getting too far ahead without a solid base, can create problems. At the same time, the dynamic nature of complex organizations often necessitates tackling multiple steps at once. Therefore, Kotter (1996) emphasizes the importance of the first four steps for preparing organizations for transformation. Steps five through seven introduce new strategies and practices to the organization. The final step anchors, or institutionalizes, the change into the organizational culture (Kotter 1996).

Although Kotter's steps do not seamlessly translate from corporate to academic settings, the framework is useful for examining and describing change implementation, spread, and institutionalization in higher education (Furco & Holland, 2013). The model has been used to effectively describe the transformation processes of universities and colleges that have redesigned their promotion and tenure systems (Seifer, et al. 2009; Harris, et al. 2003); enacted curricular reform (Susman & Pascoe, 2001, Bland, et al. 2000, Guze, 1995); and facilitated educational innovation (Viaggiano, Shub & Giere, 2000). We employ Kotter's change model as a framework to describe the DCE's strategies and practices that have enabled and deepened the institutionalization of community engagement at VCU. To do this, we describe each of the eight steps in the change model, situate each step within the context of VCU, and describe implemented strategies and practices within each step.

**Create a Sense of Urgency**

Kotter suggests that most successful change efforts begin when an individual or group examines circumstances of the organization and its environment, such as potential threats or developing opportunities. When these circumstances are broadly and dramatically outlined, especially with respect to potential crises or great opportunities, a sense of urgency is created (Kotter, 1996). This sense of urgency is crucial to gaining the needed cooperation and motivation (Kotter, 1995).

The establishment of the office that later became known as the DCE occurred during a time when the United States saw an increased interest in and exploration of the connections between institutions of higher education and their communities (Welch & Saltmarch, 2013). Several articles released over this time captured and helped to propel this movement. Ernest Boyer's seminal work, S*cholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990) challenged the traditional notion of scholarship and proposed an emphasis on engaged teaching and research. In *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution*, The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (1999) outlined both the challenge of public

engagement and the ways in which institutions must mobilize to respond. Soon after, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities released, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* (2002) to serve as a guide for leadership to integrate public engagement throughout the institution.

A new mechanism for institutions to be recognized among their peers began in 2006, when the Carnegie Foundation awarded its first cohort of colleges and universities with an elective classification for community engagement. Receipt of this classification continues to be based on evidence-based documentation of institutionalization of engagement, and offers an opportunity for validation of efforts that are not necessarily recognized in other ways, such as through *U.S. News* rankings (Jaschik, 2006). Similarly, multiple professional organizations were launched to advance the national dialogue around the role of higher education in their communities. For example, Campus Compact, a national collation of nearly 1,100 colleges and universities committed to the public purposes of higher education, first convened in 1985 (Campus Compact, 2015). In 1989, the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) was founded to advance the integration of urban universities with their immediate environment. Today, it is the longest running and largest organization committed to serving and connecting the world's urban and metropolitan universities and their partners (Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities 2015). Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) was started in 1997, and continues to promote health equity and social justice through partnerships between communities and academic institutions (Community-Campus Partnership for Health, 2015). And finally, Imagining America was formally launched in 1999 to encourage campus-community collaborations in humanities, arts, and design and advance public scholarship. Today it contains over 100 college, university and community organizations (Imagining America, 2015).

Combined, these individual and organizational thought leaders created a sense of national urgency regarding the value of public engagement in the mission of higher education. Concurrently, a sense of urgency was developing locally. One issue was related to the rapid growth in VCU's student body and its physical footprint, which placed increasing pressure on the surrounding communities. For instance, in the early 1990s VCU prepared a master plan that involved expansion north into the Oregon Hill community. The residents adamantly opposed this expansion north and protested as the incoming president, Dr. Trani, came to campus. Dr. Trani responded by throwing out that master plan and establishing a community advisory board to foster better communication between the university and its neighbors (Howard & Allison, 2004). Physical expansion also significantly impacted another neighboring community. As described in detail in Howard and Allison (2004), VCU's relationship with the Carver community created both a need and opportunity for an intentional and mutually-beneficial partnership between the university and Carver. This partnership received significant support from Dr. Trani and other senior leadership and faculty across the university.

A part of this expansion was the desire for VCU to be seen as a critical and integrated part of the region's success. As such, Dr. Trani and other senior leadership saw the need for the faculty to be present in the community and recognized as solving real-world problems through their research. Similarly, it was important for VCU to be known for graduating the next generation of an engaged citizenry that was prepared to meet the challenges facing the region and world. Here we highlight two initiatives that developed from this: service learning and the community associates program. Service learning was seen as a way for students to have meaningful learning opportunities while contributing to the community. A faculty member was hired to develop service learning at the university, including its definition, approval process, and the training of the first cohort of service learning faculty. At the same time, the community associates program was

developed to support faculty who wished to engage in research and teaching that specifically met needs in the community (Howard & Allison, 2006).

Finally, it is important to note that these initiatives occurred during a time when there was increased funding to support engaged efforts. These funding opportunities allowed for and encouraged individual faculty and universities to initiate and build the infrastructure to sustain engagement efforts. For instance, VCU received funding from Campus Compact to support service learning and received a grant from Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)'s Community Outreach Partnerships Centers Program (COPC) to support the Carver-VCU Partnership (Howard & Allison, 2006).

**Form a Powerful Guiding Coalition**

Forming a strong guiding coalition involves assembling a group with enough power and legitimacy to lead the change effort. While major renewal programs might start with just one or two people, in order for a successful transformation to occur, a leadership coalition must form and grow over time (Kotter, 1996). This coalition develops a shared commitment to excellent performance in the area of change. In the most successful transformations, the coalition is comprised of individuals with powerful titles, information, expertise and reputations (Kotter 1996).

One of the continual challenges of community engagement efforts at large universities is coordinating efforts so that they become part of the institutional culture. Universities are often characterized as *loosely coupled* systems where units are somewhat responsive to each other but retain unique goals and values (Weick, 1993). In order to create a cohesive culture of change, universities must develop rational systems to coordinate constituent units' values and goals (Orton & Weick, 1990).

The challenges of the loosely coupled system manifested for VCU. As a large, urban university with two main campuses and an academic medical center, it was difficult to know the full breadth and depth of the engaged scholarship and outreach occurring across the university. Academic and administrative units separately organized and carried out their community efforts. Additionally, considerable engagement-related work was being led by individual faculty, staff and students. While the university was committed to excellence through engagement, no central mechanism charged with supporting this goal existed. Such a central mechanism was seen by the president as having the potential to not only be a champion of community engagement, but also facilitate internal capacity building for engagement among VCU faculty, staff and students; coordination of community engagement projects among multiple units; linkage of community interests with VCU's teaching, research and service interests; and enhancement of the quality of these efforts.

To address this, in 2006 VCU developed two organizing bodies around which to develop guiding coalitions: the Division of Community Engagement (DCE) and the Council for Community Engagement (CCE). Both were envisioned as aligning and supporting VCU's then strategic plan, *VCU 2020: A Vision for Excellence* and its goal of "maintaining VCU as a model for university-community partnerships." While this case study primarily examines the efforts of the DCE in influencing change, this section will also include a brief discussion of the CCE and its activities since the DCE provides the administrative support for the CCE.

*Division of Community Engagement.* The DCE was established as the primary coordinating structure for supporting and advancing community engagement across all academic and academic support units. It began as a small office, and over the past ten years has grown and strengthened
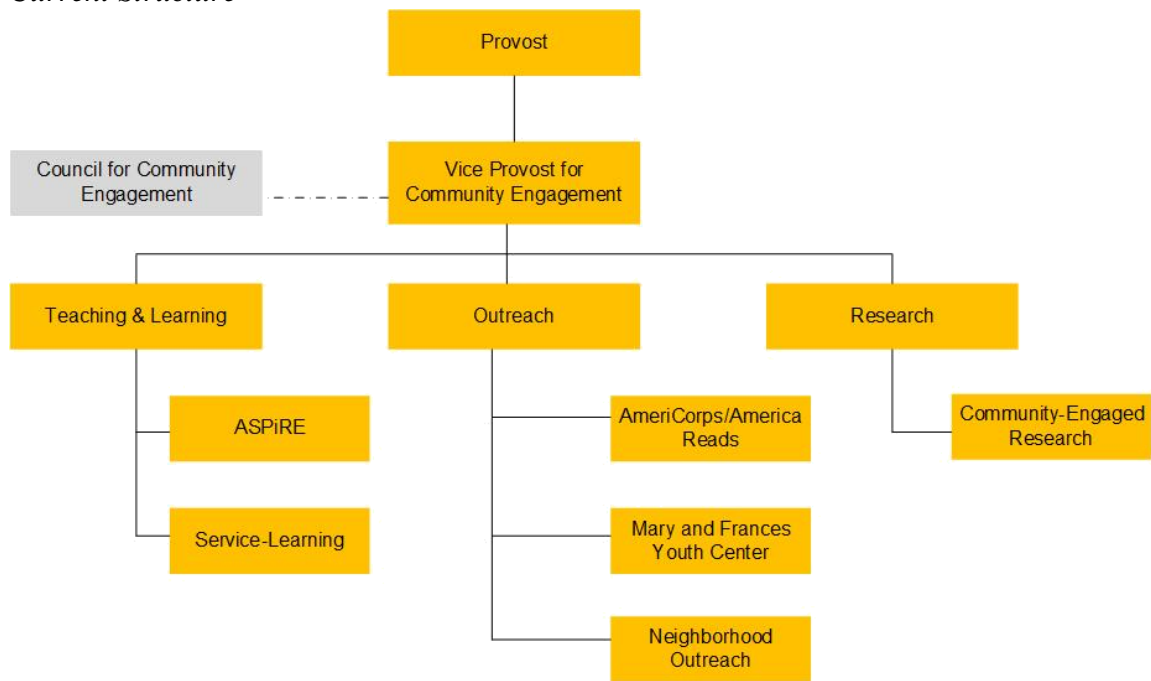
its role. It currently operates with a budget of $2.5 million—nearly three-fourths of which come from education and general funds.

Housed in academic affairs, the DCE was, and continues to be, led by a vice provost who reports directly to the provost. This organizational location has provided visibility and credibility within the university, as well as a "seat at the table" with other university leadership. This has enabled the DCE to advance engagement through critical opportunities such as strategic planning processes, development of policy, and strategic university initiatives.

As the needs of the university and community have changed over time, so has the DCE. It currently employs over twenty full-time faculty and staff members appointed directly to the division, who are experts in community engagement, along with other part-time staff and students. Currently, the DCE organizes its work around improving the impact within three core elements of VCU's mission: 1) outreach, 2) teaching/learning, and 3) research. To better evaluate and understand VCU's efforts in each of these domains, the DCE also leads and contributes to institutional research regarding university-wide community engagement activities and impact. Here we highlight selected the DCE programs that are currently active and show how they relate to other institutional initiatives and priorities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

*Current Structure*



**Community Outreach**

Community outreach involves the application and provision of institutional resources, knowledge or services to directly benefit the surrounding community (VCU Community Engagement Terms and Definitions 2013). As an urban university, VCU's people and programs literally and figuratively blend into the cultural fabric of its surrounding neighborhoods and the broader

region. Therefore it is critical that the university work collaboratively with its contiguous communities to develop mutually-beneficial relationships through various community outreach programs.

**Neighborhood Outreach**

The DCE employs a full-time neighborhood outreach director to work closely with the community. This position originated through the previously mentioned COPC grant through HUD in 1998, and has been sustained by the university since then. Currently, the director works with the five surrounding neighborhoods and in partnership with the VCU Neighborhood Team. With liaisons from each of the surrounding neighborhoods, this team strives to share information and resources, pursue common goals and develop activities that enhance the communities. They meet regularly to facilitate communications between university and neighborhood leadership in order to align and connect efforts and voice needs and opportunities. Additionally, they participate with other community members in the annual VCU Neighborhood Forum that is hosted by VCU's president and is open to the public.

*Mary and Frances Youth Center.* The Mary and Frances Youth Center, opened in 2007, maintains two private tennis courts and classrooms designed for youth programming and youth-centered training. In partnership with the The United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg, the Center also manages the implementation of the Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI), a quality improvement process for out-of-school-time service providers across the region. Utilizing the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality system, the process encourages and supports education and human service leaders to adapt, implement and scale best-in-class, research validated quality improvement systems to advance child and youth development (Mary and Frances Youth Center, 2015).

*VCU AmeriCorps Program.* The DCE has also hosted the VCU AmeriCorps Program, the longest-running and largest AmeriCorps program in Virginia, for the past two decades. The VCU AmeriCorps Program has a literacy focus with the goal of helping improve the academic skills of students attending Richmond Public Schools. The Program provides VCU students an opportunity to make a difference in local communities through a commitment of one year of service.

**Community-Engaged Teaching/Learning**

Community-engaged teaching connects students and faculty with activities that address community-identified needs through mutually beneficial partnerships that deepen their academic and civic learning (VCU Community Engagement Terms and Definitions, 2013). The first cohort of faculty was trained in service learning, one example of community-engaged teaching/learning, in 1998 and has since become one of the university's signature pedagogies. The Office of Service Learning was established within the DCE with the hiring of its current director in 2008, and is responsible for increasing the number of high-quality service learning courses for undergraduate and graduate programs. The DCE also led the development of ASPiRE (Academic Scholars in Real Environments)—a living-learning program promoting community engagement through academic coursework and co-curricular experiences. The mission of VCU ASPiRE is to enrich and deepen students' understanding of their capacity to create positive change in communities and address critical societal needs through long-term sustainable partnerships (VCU ASPiRE, 2015).

The Office of Service Learning is guided by the VCU Service Learning Advisory Council, composed of faculty, staff, students and community members who have expertise in service learning pedagogy and are committed to making a positive difference in the community. This council meets twice a year to oversee the implementation of the Service-Learning Office's strategic plan and to provide the Service-Learning Office staff with guidance and advice. Annually, all council members give presentations within their academic units to increase their colleague's knowledge and awareness of service-learning at VCU.

**Community-Engaged Research**

Community-engaged research (CEnR) is a collaborative process between the researcher and community partner that identifies the assets of all stakeholders and incorporates them in the design and conduct of the different phases of the research process (VCU Community Engagement Terms and Definitions, 2013). The goals of CEnR are to create and disseminate knowledge and creative expression, while contributing to the discipline and strengthening the well-being of the community. The DCE's Office of Community-Engaged Research was established in 2012. Under the full-time direction of a faculty member, the office works in collaboration with other units to support and advance CEnR activities across VCU's schools, centers, and institutes. A major goal of this office is to stimulate collaboration, identify synergy, remove barriers and broadly promote the science of CEnR.

*Institutional research.* The DCE's Office of Community-Engaged Research is also responsible for institutional research related to university-wide community engagement efforts. It is therefore responsible for developing infrastructure to identify and assess the impact of community engagement activities within the DCE and across the university, as well as the university's impact on its surrounding community. Included in this responsibility is the management and evaluation of the Council for Community Engagement (CCE) grants program and VCU's annual application to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll.

*Cross-Unit Entities.* While the DCE organizes its work internally around outreach, teaching/learning, and research, it also facilitates two cross-unit bodies, each charged with supporting and promoting community engagement. These two entities are the Council for Community Engagement and the Federation for Community-Engaged Research.

**Council for Community Engagement**

In 2006, the DCE partnered with the Office of the Senior Vice President for Health Sciences, which oversees the academic medical campus and center, to form the Council for Community Engagement (CCE). The CCE is comprised of appointed representatives from all schools and colleges, as well as key support units, research centers and institutes. Each CCE member is charged with supporting and promoting community engagement within their home units

The CCE helps the DCE to promote collaboration and coordination of engagement activities across the university by facilitating the exchange of information and resources across units and campuses. As an illustration of the value placed on engagement across the university, the CCE is co-chaired by the vice provost for community engagement and associate vice president for health sciences, student initiatives and inclusion. Under their direction, the CCE (1) builds and maintains a network of liaisons across units, (2) receives and disseminates information and resources that promotes and supports community engagement, (3) gathers information from the community on critical needs and opportunities, (4) recognizes accomplishments of university-community partnerships, and (5) assists in the coordination of events designed to engage the VCU

community with community partners to address community-identified needs. Currently the work of the CCE is organized in under three standing CCE committees: Grants and Gifts, Awards and Recognition, and Community Connections.

*Grants and Gifts Committee.* The CCE's Grants and Gifts Committee administers funds to encourage engagement and to initiate innovative collaborative programs and research that address community-identified needs. This and other grant making programs are described later in our discussion of how the DCE addresses barriers to engagement.
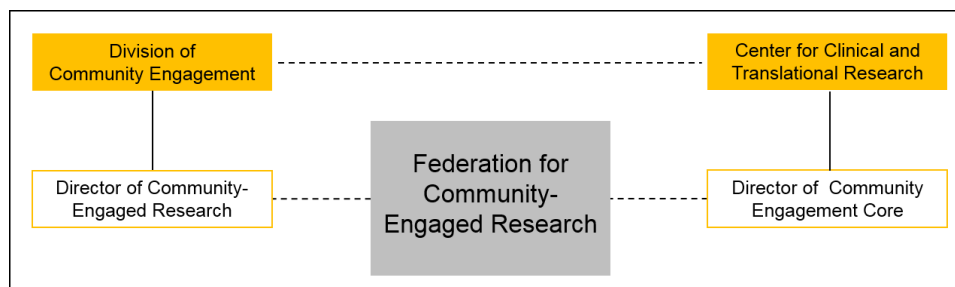
*Awards and Recognition Committee.* The CCE's Awards and Recognition committee helps bring attention to the community engagement activities of VCU faculty, staff and students. The committee oversees the nomination, selection and celebration of outstanding university-community partnerships through the annual Currents of Change awards program. Established in 2005, these awards are given in the categories of teaching, research, outreach and student-initiated. Recognizing outstanding university-community partnerships serves to publicly honor community-engaged programs at VCU and as a stepping-stone to external awards and grant funding. For example, VCU won the prestigious C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award in 2014 for its Pharmacist Collaborative Care and Outreach in the Community program—a program led by the School of Pharmacy that received the Currents of Change Award in 2010.

*Community Connections Committee.* The CCE Community Connections Committee creates the bridge between the CCE and the community. The committee develops and oversees service opportunities for VCU employees and actively promotes the use of community service leave (CSL). In accordance with state policy, twelve-month VCU employees are granted up to sixteen hours per year of paid CSL to provide volunteer services to eligible community-based agencies. Additionally, the committee collects VCU employees' CSL stories and pictures to use for news articles on the DCE's and university's website.

**Federation for Community-Engaged Research**

VCU also has a separate cross-unit entity to specifically support community-engaged research. The Federation for Community-Engaged Research is charged with promoting internal alignment of CEnR activities at VCU. The Federation is comprised of senior representatives from many VCU schools, centers and institutes with high levels of CEnR, including the schools of Medicine, Nursing, Education, Social Work and the Arts as well as the Office of the Provost. The Federation is co-chaired by the DCE's director of community-engaged research and the director of the community engagement core of VCU's NIH funded Center for Clinical and Translational Research (CCTR). The Federation's organizational structure is displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Federation for Community-Engaged Research

**Create a Vision**

In order for change efforts to have direction, a clear vision must be created with defined strategies for achieving that vision. The vision presents a picture of the future that is relatively easy to communicate, appeals to stakeholders, and goes beyond numbers and data. A clear vision elucidates the general direction for change by simplifying hundreds or thousands of more detailed decisions and motivating individuals to take action in the right direction. It also coordinates the actions of those individuals (Kotter, 1996).

One way that complex organizations like VCU create a vision for multiple small units is to develop a strategic plan. As previously described, the DCE was established to support and advance community engagement as specified in the 2006 strategic plan, VCU 2020. Soon after the arrival of the new president, Dr. Michael Rao, VCU launched its current strategic plan, *Quest for Distinction,* in 2011. This gave even greater prominence to community engagement and helped to maintain a sense of urgency and vision.

*Quest for Distinction* strengthens VCU's commitment to community engagement by explicitly committing to becoming a national model for community engagement – one of four strategic planning themes. Under this theme, VCU's goals are to (1) Expand community-engaged scholarship and service learning, (2) Create university-community partnerships with a focus on the key targeted areas of K-12 educations (with a focus on middle school), access to health and economic development, and (3) Provide strategic leadership in addressing sustainability challenges through curricular and service innovations and green facilities and operations. In 2015 *Quest for Distinction* was recalibrated, with community engagement remaining a primary theme (Table 1).

Table 1

*VCU's refocused themes and goals 2015-17*

| **Theme III** |
| --- |
| Become a national model for community engagement and regional impact |
| **Goals and strategies:** |
|    1.  Advance focused and strategic university-community engagement that addresses critical needs and opportunities in the region<br>      a.  Leveraging university strengths and assets and address community-identified needs and opportunities<br>      b.  Ensuring all students have access to innovation/entrepreneurial pathways that support regional economic development, cultural vitality or community well-being<br>   2.  Leverage the efforts of our students, faculty and staff to enhance, integrate and disseminate community-engaged scholarship, student service-learning opportunities and outreach<br>      a.  Embed, support and promote community engagement within university cultures, practices and structures |

**Vision Alignment**

In 2013, the DCE developed its own strategic plan to align with that of the university. The planning process included a review of similar units in peer institutions, particularly their structure and functions. In addition, input was gathered from nearly 100 university staff, faculty, administrative leaders and partners through interviews and input sessions. Five broad goals for the DCE were identified: (1) Develop, demonstrate, research and disseminate high-quality community engaged outreach programs, (2) Develop, implement, research and disseminate high-quality community engaged learning experiences, (3) Support rigorous community-engaged research that advances disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and contributes to the well-being of communities, (4) Develop, implement, research and disseminate the DCE Model of Excellence for University-Community Partnerships, and (5) Develop and align human and fiscal resources that support innovative programs and new initiatives that reflect the DCE Strategic Plan. This process also yielded updated mission and vision statements and operating principles (Table 2).

Table 2

*Division of Community Engagement Vision, Mission and Operating Principles*

| DCE Vision |
| --- |
|     VCU is a community of engaged citizens, working together, changing lives. |
| DCE Mission |
|     To mobilize university-community partnerships that generate innovative solutions to societal challenges and prepare the engaged citizens of tomorrow. |
| DCE Operating Principles <br>   1.  To value and respect the knowledge and expertise that exists within communities. <br>   2.  To support collaborative university-community partnerships built on trust and reciprocity. <br>   3.  To seek out, engage, and value diverse perspectives and experiences that forge practical and innovative solutions. <br>   4.  To advance and disseminate new knowledge and best practices through community engaged scholarship. <br>   5.  To develop and adopt a model of best practices in community engagement – The DCE Model of Excellence for University-Community Partnerships. |

Each program within the DCE and the CCE then created logic models to coordinate with the goals of the strategic plan and provide a clear purpose with measurable outcomes. As a result, the DCE and CCE shared a unified vision for community engagement that aligned with the larger university's vision and strategic plan.

**Communicate the Vision**

A vision that is only understood by a few people cannot lead to transformation. Similarly, transformation is impossible without the help of others. Thus, credible efforts utilizing multiple communication vehicles must be employed to convey the new vision and strategies to others (Kotter, 1996). A high level of consistent and clear communication of the vision is necessary for others to develop a common understanding and develop a shared sense of a desirable future (Kotter, 1995). In turn, these common understandings can help motivate and coordinate efforts that lead to transformation.

The vision of VCU as an urban, research university that prioritizes community engagement as a means to achieve its mission and positively impact communities is a consistent message, both internally and externally. For instance, the value of engagement is found across university's web presence and is a reoccurring theme in presidential blog posts and university-wide announcements (blog.president.vcu.edu/). The DCE's website, community.vcu.edu, is featured as one of only six direct navigation portals on VCU's main website. This location gives it prominence among over 600 VCU websites.

The DCE serves as a model and consultant for best practices in communicating internally and externally about the division's and university's engagement activities. The DCE website, social media, print materials and other communications provide opportunities and support for units across the university to integrate university-community partnership language and vision into their own communications and operations. Similarly, the DCE has provided training so that others are exposed to best practices. The DCE's news blog provides stories and snapshots of university-community partnership activity across the university and encourages units to share their community-engaged stories in order to elevate the importance of community engagement at VCU. To establish a common language, the DCE, CCE and the Office of Planning Decision Support (OPDS), the university's institutional research unit, established VCU's official community engagement terms and definitions, which are included in university's glossary of terms. [For more information on the development of the community engagement terms and definitions, see Holton, V., Jettner, J. F., Early, J. L., & Shaw, K. K. (2015).]

Finally, the DCE promotes the use of engagement language in all aspects of university operations. For example, VCU's recruitment of potential students, faculty and staff notes that "We seek and support students who demonstrate intellectual curiosity, community engagement and out-of-the-box thinking" (Undergraduate Admissions, 2015) and "We take pride in our…engagement with the communities we serve…" (About VCU, 2015). This may help to establish a community-engaged foundation for VCU's identity even with someone's first impression of the university. Beginning with this initial exposure to VCU's engagement vision, the DCE then purposefully cultivates a continuum of opportunities and supports that shape approaches and expectations for teaching, learning, outreach and service among all students, faculty and staff. In short, the DCE fosters the expectation that community engagement is central to one's experiences at and with VCU. This, in turn, necessitates that the university to actively promote and remove obstacles to engagement.

**Empower Others to Act on the Vision**

According to Kotter (1996), even when urgency is high, a guiding coalition has been created, and a collective vision has been well communicated, many barriers may still exist to implementation. These barriers inhibit employees from carrying out the vision. The purpose of this stage in the change process is to empower a broad base of people to take action on the vision by removing as many barriers as possible. Here we will focus on DCE's efforts to mitigate or eliminate structural barriers, skills barriers, and systems barriers.

*Removing Structural Barriers.* Structural barriers stem from an organization's existing structure, particularly in terms of the structure's ability to support the vision once implemented. Faculty and staff constitute the most significant portion of the university's organizational structure. Recruitment and hiring practices shape their composition.

Hiring practices can influence perceptions of an organization's vision, as well as recruit potential employees who are committed to the realization of the organization's vision. When filling

leadership positions within the DCE, such as program or office directors, the DCE has preferred to hire individuals with earned doctorates. This practice both lends credibility to and legitimizes the offices within the university context in two ways. First, this qualification preference or requirement signals that VCU values these positions insofar as it must financially support higher salaries associated with terminal degrees. Second, the doctorate requirement signals that the directors have expertise in that area and are able to advance the scholarship associated with their respective fields, which allows the DCE to position itself as a leader in engagement.

More broadly, VCU prominently displays its designation as community engaged by Carnegie in its job advertisements for leadership positions. By highlighting its community-engagement status in these advertisements, VCU communicates to potential employees that it (1) values and practices engagement, and (2) would be a good fit for potential employees who themselves value engagement. The effect of these practices has been positive, with a record of successful leadership hires who value and advance community engagement.

*Removing Skills Barriers*. Empowering others to act on the vision ensures that as many people possible are equipped with the skills they need to follow through, and to be able to do so with some degree of autonomy and expertise. This type of empowerment requires that skill, or competency, building opportunities be provided by the organization on a regular and ongoing basis. The DCE has employed a continuum of competency-building opportunities as a key strategy to promote its vision of high-quality, high-impact community-engaged scholarship. These opportunities exist to ensure the university and its community partners are equipped to fulfill the DCE's vision of engagement.

The DCE views competency-building opportunities as falling along a continuum of exposure, experience and expertise (see Figure 3), which allows for the progressive professional development of VCU's faculty, staff, students and community partners. Community-engaged competencies can be developed through (a) individual skill-building opportunities that are both broadly available and targeted towards certain individuals, (b) learning networks and mentorships that make additional assistance available as well as promote interdisciplinary work, and (c) readily available guidance (Klein & Sorra, 1996). Aligned with the DCE's grounding in academic affairs, the DCE primarily targets its competency-building activities towards faculty and staff, with fewer opportunities for students and community partners.

Figure 3

*DCE Continuum of Support Strategies*



*Learning Networks and Skill-Building Opportunities.* To move individuals along the competency-building continuum, the DCE convenes people virtually and in-person to build learning networks

and skills around topic areas pertinent to engagement. Skill-building opportunities (e.g. workshops and trainings) provide specific opportunities for participants to increase their knowledge in certain topic areas. At the same time, participants in skill-building activities often develop learning networks with their peers. These networks, ideally comprised of diverse members with varied levels of interest in and experience with the topic area skill-building opportunities, enrich learning by providing feedback, support, and guidance to peers. While opportunities for creating learning networks are sometimes lacking at academic institutions (Israel et al. 1998), the DCE has considered its role of convening others as a strategic approach to introducing and refining community-engaged scholarship competencies in order to empower others to act on and move the DCE's engagement vision forward.

*Interest Groups and List-serves.* The DCE operates multiple listservs as a means of connecting with university and community partners. These listservs utilize email as a communication mechanism to build awareness, help facilitate potential collaborations, provide information on efforts to support and encourage engagement activities, and elicit suggestions to further deepen the work of university-community partnerships. Combined, these listservs reach over 1,200 members across the university. Additionally, the CEnR listserv is currently in the process of expanding its communication format to include a blog page with a public forum.

*Annual Institute & Workshops.* The DCE, along with the Center for Clinical and Translational Research, hosts VCU's annual Community Engagement Institute. The Institute helps faculty members, community partners, and graduate students to develop a basic understanding of community engagement. Participants are exposed to service learning and community-engaged research presentations, workshops, and networking opportunities. This annual, week-long event is offered free of charge to approximately 50-70 individuals.

Similarly, the DCE offers short workshops throughout the year that address a wide range of topics. These workshops have focused on competency related to community-engagement in general, as well as topic areas specific to service-learning and CEnR. For example, workshops related to partnership development for effective community engagement have focused on how to identify and develop partnerships, how to engage in community-university partnerships across one's career, and conflict resolution. Workshops related to service learning have included topics on the development of reflection activities and the syllabi and preparing students for service learning. CEnR workshops have been given related to CEnR grant search strategies, specific CEnR methodologies, and issues related to conducting ethical research.

*Faculty Learning Communities and Faculty Fellows.* The DCE co-sponsors a variety of opportunities for faculty to engage in learning as a cohort. Employing both faculty learning community (FLC) and faculty fellows models, the DCE has offered cohort experiences for faculty to collaboratively learn together, document what they have learned, and share their gained knowledge with VCU at large. Depending upon the nature of the topic addressed by the cohorts, the DCE has worked with co-sponsors from other VCU units to provide stipends for faculty participants.

*Faculty Mentoring Programs.* Faculty mentoring programs offered by the DCE provide guidance and support to faculty members who are developing or teaching new service-learning courses. Mentoring programs pair faculty mentees one-on-one with mentors who are experienced in service-learning pedagogy. The service learning mentor program is voluntary, with no stipend paid to either mentees or mentors. In partnership with VCU's Office of Research and the Center for Clinical and Translational Research, the DCE is developing a similar program for pairing less experienced community-engaged researchers with faculty with more experience.

*Readily-available guidance.* In order to build and maintain competence in engagement activities, resources to guide effective engagement endeavors must be offered and readily available at an institutional level (Calleson, Jordan, & Seifer, 2005). Employees must know where to turn for technical assistance, tools, and strategies for operationalizing the ideals of community-engaged activities within an academic institution. Guidance documents, bibliographies, and videos have been developed to provide permanent reference resources. These have been developed in collaboration with other units, and include topics relevant to partnerships (e.g. finding community partners, principles of engagement), service learning (e.g. what is service learning, incorporating service learning into a syllabus) and CEnR (e.g. what is CEnR, compensation of community partners, FAQs about CEnR and the IRB).

The DCE stores these resources in Scholars Compass, an open access publishing platform that hosts the intellectual output of VCU's academic, research, and administrative communities (http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu). Its goal of providing wide and stable access to VCU's scholarly products aligns well with the DCE's goal of ensuring a readily available and widely accessible collection of engagement guidance documents. The DCE, therefore, worked closely with the University's library to support the implementation of this online repository of materials. The DCE continues to populate the repository by regularly updating it with publications, scholarship, presentations, infographics, and videos developed within the DCE as well as materials from the Community Engagement Institute.

*Courses.* The DCE has offered several courses under a Community Studies designation. These courses are offered to both undergraduate and graduate students and develop student's knowledge, skills and abilities working in and with communities outside of the academy. There are also courses to develop students as service-learning teaching assistants. Through these courses, teaching assistants develop new skills, work closely with faculty, develop relationships with community leaders and participate in a wide variety of community initiatives. More recently the DCE has offered a doctoral-level, open-access course that explores the philosophy and techniques of CEnR using a connected learning framework (http://rampages.us/communityengagedresearch/).

**Removing Systems Barriers**

Systems barriers to change emerge when the existing systems and processes within an organization do not support the vision. Systems must therefore be in place to reinforce the idea that fulfilling the vision is not only expected, but will be supported and rewarded by the organization.

*Promotion & tenure.* Professional reward structures, manifested in higher education largely through promotion and tenure policies, reinforce institutional vision by explicitly outlining the types of activities expected, supported and rewarded by the institution and socializing faculty members to the values of the institution (Pelco & Howard, 2015). Some academic institutions do not regard community-engaged scholarship as equivalent to other categories of academic scholarship and achievement in their promotion and tenure strategies (Ahmed, et al., 2004). This presents as a major barrier to encouraging community engaged work by faculty, especially those seeking tenure. Thus, an important strategy for validating community-engaged scholarship is to explicitly recognize this work in promotion and tenure policies.

In 2011, VCU began the process of reviewing and revising its university promotion and tenure policies. The provost charged an ad hoc committee to 1) assess and highlight best practices in

higher education regarding promotion and tenure; 2) review current VCU guidelines to address dated materials and accuracy; and 3) suggest revisions to bring policies in line with the new strategic plan, including the stronger emphasis on community engagement. The DCE organized presentations exposing administrators to community-engaged scholarship, teaching and service, and retained an external expert consultant to work with key campus stakeholders around topics of community-engaged activity, including meeting with the deans to help them understand the nature and role of community-engaged scholarship within their disciplines. In May of 2013, a new university promotion and tenure policy was approved which explicitly includes the recognition of community-engaged research, teaching, and service as acceptable approaches to scholarship at VCU. The work to revise individual academic school- and unit-level policies to align with the university-level policy is almost complete.

*Intramural funding.* When offered as intramural grants, institutionally supported seed grants are effective incentives for faculty to partner with community members. These seed grants provide immediate gains for furthering the institutional vision, as well as long-term benefit. Past research has shown that faculty awarded these grants are more successful in obtaining other grants compared to those who are not awarded seed funding (Zuiches, 2013). Institutional support is also critical for successful partnerships with high levels of sustainability (Chadwick & Pawloski, 2007). In an evaluation of two seed grant programs at VCU, Leisey, Holton, and Davey (2012) found that grant funded projects had positive benefits for faculty, students, and community partners and were associated with enhanced service delivery, high-quality learning experiences, and published community-engaged scholarship. As such, the DCE has endeavored to ensure that intramural funding to support engagement activities is regularly available.

As mentioned above, the CCE oversees a grant making program with an annual funding pool of $100,000. Grantees receive one-year awards of up to $20,000 that support interdisciplinary university-community programs, or initiate new university-community partnerships, or continue the development of long-standing collaborations. Grants are intended to yield community-engaged scholarly products and to leverage external funding. The DCE provides administrative support for this program, including a yearly evaluation of its impact. In partnership with the CCTR, the DCE supports a CEnR Pipeline to Proposal Program through which CEnR Partnership Development awards up to $10,000 are intended to specifically support building and supporting research partnerships. Recipients of the Partnership Development grant are invited to apply for additional intramural funding through either the CCE community-engagement grants or through the CCTR's Endowment Fund. The CCTR's Endowment Fund provides individual research awards up to $50,000 and multi-school research awards up to $130,000 for health sciences research. Additionally, the DCE manages and awards Travel Grants in the amount of $1,000 to support the scholarship and professional development of service-learning instructors.

**Plan For and Create Short-Term Wins**

While major change takes time, Kotter asserts that most employees need to see compelling evidence within twelve to twenty-four months that transformational efforts are producing expected results (Kotter, 1995). Thus, it is recommended that short-term wins be systematically planned for and created. Short-term wins help to maintain the momentum necessary for the renewal of efforts required to implement the long-term changes necessary for real transformation to occur (Kotter, 1995).

Recognizing and rewarding organizational actions that enable the vision is one way to create short-term wins. The DCE has helped VCU to leverage both internal and external award opportunities. Internal awards and recognition communicate to organizational members that

community engagement is valued, respected, and celebrated (see earlier section on the Council for Community Engagement for a description of the internal rewards opportunities). External awards also communicate the value of community engagement efforts while creating a sense of pride for the organization and its members. Additionally, external awards also convey VCU's efforts to a broader audience.

VCU has been recognized by several national entities that recognize community engagement. VCU was among the first cohort of institutions recognized as community-engaged by the Carnegie Foundation in 2006 and was reclassified in 2015—with the DCE leading the application process each cycle. VCU is one of only 54 universities to be designated by the Carnegie Foundation as "Community Engaged" with "Very High Research Activity." Also in 2014, again with DCE's leadership, VCU was admitted to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll for the eighth consecutive year and is one of 121 schools nationwide that earned the recognition of Honor Roll with Distinction. It was the second consecutive year for VCU to be named to the Honor Roll with Distinction.

Each year the DCE releases annual reports to celebrate the work of the DCE. This report highlights the "outstanding community engagement of VCU faculty, students, and staff" (Division of Community Engagement 2015, 1). The report outlines successes from the annual Community Engagement Institute and spotlights Community Engagement Grant and Currents of Change awardees. The annual report also highlights annual outcomes for efforts within ASPiRE and each of its outreach programs, as well as in the areas of service-learning, neighborhood outreach, and community-engaged research. The report is distributed broadly to both internal and external stakeholders.

Another way to recognize and advance organizational vision is to plan for visible performance improvements that can be measured and evaluated (Kotter 1995). To that end, the DCE has led the development and implementation of infrastructure to identify, track and assess VCU's community engagement activities and impact (see Holton, Jettner, Early, & Shaw, 2015; Holton, Early, Jettner & Shaw, 2015). Additionally, the DCE collaborated with the OPDS to apply an anchor dashboard framework to use as a reference in the broader conversation about maximizing VCU's positive impact on our community (Holton, Jettner, & Shaw, 2015). These efforts have enabled the DCE, in partnership with the OPDS and others, to launch two visible displays of information. The online community engagement data dashboard ([www.community.vcu.edu](http://www.community.vcu.edu)) includes and describes community-engagement activities across the university by year and unit. Additionally, the DCE is leading the development of a partnership map that displays all the partner organizations (VCU and community-based) and partnerships by geographic focus, activity, topic focus area and VCU unit ([http://communitynetwork.vcu.edu/partnerMap](http://communitynetwork.vcu.edu/partnerMap)). Finally, in collaboration with the OPDS, the DCE has launched a task force to further develop the community engagement data infrastructure and ensure that the information is used to support strategic decision-making.

**Consolidate Improvements and Produce Still More Change**

Leaders of successful efforts use the credibility afforded by short-term wins to take on larger challenges (Kotter, 1995). This might include developing new programs that can continue to implement the vision (Kotter, 1995). These programs reinvigorate the change process, and might even be larger in scope than earlier projects. Additionally, successful leaders tackle systems and structures that have not yet been considered, or are not consistent with the transformation vision (Kotter, 1995).

The DCE is a dynamic unit that leads the development of university-wide infrastructure. It has a strong record of incubating programs until they are self-sustaining. One such example is the Partnership for Nonprofit Excellence (PNE), an independent non-profit that helps to build the capacity and enhance the impact of other non-profits in the region. Three of the PNE's four programs were initially created and housed for several years under DCE. These include (1) ConnectVA, a one-stop communication network linking individuals with ideals, information and resources, (2) HandsOn Greater Richmond, a service that matches people and their interests to meaningful volunteer opportunities that create positive change in Central Virginia, and (3) Nonprofit Learning Point (NLP), a program that offers affordable classes, coaching, and programs for professional and leadership development for the nonprofit community.

The DCE also helps existing, successful projects and programs to improve. For example, as noted earlier, most professional development opportunities, such as the Community Engagement Institute, have targeted faculty and staff members or students. Upcoming CE Institutes will be designed for the explicit purpose of introducing university and community partners to one another to create opportunities for future work together. Organized opportunities for shared interest exploration and initial partnership development activities will be deliberately orchestrated throughout the event.

Another opportunity for expanding the purpose of the CE Institute is to begin to move away from promoting the compartmentalized community-engagement work of faculty, and towards a more integrated concept of "community-engaged scholars" at VCU. Faculty members have traditionally been identified as those who teach service-learning or conduct CEnR, but not necessarily as having expertise in multiple domains of community-engaged work. In the future, the CE Institute will be designed as a springboard to support faculty who are interested in multiple domains of community engagement. University-based participants, including graduate students, will co-learn the founding principles of community engagement alongside community members. Topics addressed might include foundational topics that apply to any manner of community-engaged work to include initiating and sustaining partnership, techniques for successful collaborations, and the importance of community engagement. These foundational topics will also be developed and presented as online learning opportunities, ideally as open source content. Once the CE Institute has concluded, participants will have the opportunity to continue taking learning modules, in either face-to-face or online formats, to build their community engagement competence, culminating in earning a community engagement certification. This curricular revision aligns with a national trend towards the development and recognition of integrated community-engaged faculty.

**Institutionalize the New Approach**

According to Kotter, "change sticks when it becomes 'the way we do things around here,' when it seeps into the bloodstream" of the entire organization (Kotter, 1995, p. 67). Once this kind of transformation occurs, practices that were once considered 'new' become rooted in organizational culture, including its members' norms of behavior and shared values, and operate as a powerful social force (Kotter, 1996; Kotter, 1995). In other words, deep institutionalization occurs when the vision is embraced by all organizational members and units. VCU actively seeks to achieve this stage, and, with DCE's leadership, is in the process of implementing several initiatives to deepen its institutionalization of community engagement. We conclude by highlighting three examples of these efforts.

*Attract and Retain Individuals Expecting Engagement.* By taking steps towards embedding engagement throughout the university culture and practices, VCU will achieve true

institutionalization of community engagement, manifested in its ultimate goal of VCU being largely recognized as the "best place" for engagement. In other words, faculty will recognize VCU as the best place to conduct community-engaged scholarship, students will recognize VCU as the best place to learn about community-engaged scholarship, and community partners will recognize VCU as a positive ally that benefits the community.

*Establish Strategic, Focal Efforts.* VCU is also exploring ways to leverage its strengths and resources in a way that aligns intentionally with community-identified needs and opportunities. One approach is to anchor, or embed, the values of engagement into institutional practice. This builds from the concept of "anchor institutions" which recognizes the organization itself as a powerful actor, and the role it can play as an economic and cultural driver in community well-being (Axelroth & Dubbs, 2010). VCU is currently exploring how its values of engagement are embedded within many of its institutional practices such as procurement, real estate development and hiring through the application of an anchor framework to measure VCU's impact (Holton, Jettner & Shaw, 2015) and participating in the larger national conversations with HUD's Anchor Task Force and the Democracy Collaborative. The concluding section on the future of the DCE describes another approach it is considering to establish strategic, focal efforts.

*Ensure Consistent Recognition for Community-Engaged Work.* VCU continues to consider how to best ensure recognition of engagement work for the purposes of promotion and tenure. While official university policy recognizes community-engaged research, teaching, and service as valued approaches to scholarship, individual departments and units continue to develop their capacity for considering such work in their promotion and tenure practices. To ensure that the changes in promotion and tenure policy impacts the assessment of all faculty at VCU, a national expert has been invited to engage the university in critical conversations about the role of community-engaged scholarship in the academy as a whole, and specifically in the review of faculty for promotion and tenure.

## The Future of DCE's Role in Deepening and Extending the Institutionalization of Community Engagement

As VCU approaches the 10-year anniversary of the DCE, it is a time for reflection on the past as well as intense planning for the future. Using Kotter's framework for change, this case study highlights the role of the DCE within VCU in institutionalizing the value of community engagement. Next we briefly reflect on the current infrastructure before considering the upcoming challenges that the DCE hopes to address that will be important for fulfilling the university's mission and values. Welch and Saltmarsh (2013) conducted a review of the infrastructure of over 100 community engagement centers across institutions that received the Carnegie community engagement designation in 2010. Based on this review, the DCE has the essential components of a community engagement center as identified by other center directors: budgeted institutional funds, administrative support, programming staff, faculty development, faculty leadership/buy in, student leadership/decision making, assessment mechanism/procedures, full-time administrator, academic affairs reporting line, database/tracking system, adequate office space, define/designate courses, fund-raising mechanisms, communication/outreach, transportation coordination/policy, cross-campus collaboration, and course development grants.

These components will provide the ongoing infrastructure and support that will enable the DCE to continue to deepen and extend the institutionalization of community engagement. However, it is important to note that opportunities to enhance the division's infrastructure continue to exist. For instance, as public universities are facing an ever-increasing need to generate revenue, the

DCE is exploring ways to garner additional grant funding to support community engagement efforts through its office as well as across the university. Consistent with Welch and Saltmarsh's (2013) findings on the expanding role of engagement centers, the DCE is also assuming a greater role in risk management, which is requiring the development of expertise in a new area. For example, in collaboration with the university council and office of compliance, the DCE has led the development of an administrative policy regarding minors on campus. This policy addresses issues such as mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect; background checks, training, and supervision of faculty, staff, students, and volunteers involved in youth programs; and registering and tracking of all youth programs and activities on campus. To enhance awareness of and compliance with this policy the DCE developed an interactive online training that overviews the policy, assesses understanding through situational quizzes, and provides support through downloadable forms, templates, and contact sheets.

Finally, the DCE continues to explore systematic and ongoing mechanisms for genuinely engaging community members in honest conversation about the challenges they face. Moreover the DCE would like to facilitate opportunities for university and community members to collectively work together to meet those challenges. This type of engagement has traditionally emerged through approaches such as the establishment of advisory boards or inviting community members to join existing university committees (Field 2002). While these approaches can be meaningful, they often operate in uncoordinated silos. Such disparate efforts make it difficult to deeply engage in university-wide work that is high-impact and mutually benefits the community and university.

The DCE would therefore like to aid VCU in a new, university-wide approach that would align its university-based expertise and resources with community-based expertise and resources to identify and address critical needs and opportunities in the region. Ideally, this effort will bring together cross-discipline faculty, students, and community members to collectively target their work at a community-identified priority. The DCE envisions this effort as occurring on a university- and school/college-level as well as engaging individual faculty, staff, students and alumni. An enhanced focus such as this would help VCU deepen its impact in key areas, as well as provide opportunities for faculty, staff and students to engage in high-impact research and teaching/learning.

To achieve this goal, the DCE, along with the university, must first contend with many questions such as:

1. What is the best mechanism for identifying priority issues to address?
2. How can such an effort be coordinated across VCU's complex institution and Richmond's complex region?
3. How might this effort connect with other university efforts to ensure that the engagement is truly institutionalized?
4. How might this effort connect with other community-based work already underway?
5. What is the optimal way to engage students directly and indirectly in this approach?

The DCE is currently exploring best models and practices for this approach to focused, deep engagement. While such an approach is a challenging undertaking, the DCE is prepared to lead and support the university in deepening and extending its engagement.

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# Author Information

Dr. Valerie Holton is the Director of Community-Engaged Research in the Division of Community Engagement at Virginia Commonwealth University. In her current role, she leads and contributes to strategic initiatives that deepen and demonstrate the university's civic mission. She leads the division's involvement in building university-wide infrastructure to advance community-engaged research (CEnR). Additionally, she supports the development of the division and university's capacity to track and measure the impact of VCU's engagement.

Jennifer (Jen) Early works in VCU's Division of Community Engagement to support and advance CEnR as part of the university's strategic effort to align university-wide community engagement and impact. She assists in the identification, development and dissemination of CEnR resources for faculty, staff, students, and community partners. Jen is a doctoral candidate in VCU's Health Service and Organization Research program. Her research interests include the role of academic health centers, their relationships with surrounding communities, and how they interact to impact community health. She also has research interests in how organizational structure impacts individual and organizational performance.

Meghan Resler works in VCU's Division of Community Engagement to support the development of VCU Youth Policy and design the accompanying online, interactive training. Additionally, she visually represents the Office of Community Engaged Research's ideas and communications. With a Master in Social Work she recognizes the value of evaluation and assessment and with a Bachelor in Fine Arts she appreciates the power of visual storytelling.

Audrey Trussell works in VCU's Division of Community Engagement to deliver project management, strategic planning and implementation support to advance key community-engaged institutional initiatives. In her role she has developed and created foundational communication methodologies to strengthen the division's involvement in disseminating, discussing and supporting community-engaged scholarship and activities. Audrey is a candidate in VCU's Masters of Public Administration Program and will receive a Graduate Certificate in Nonprofit Management in December 2015.

Dr. Catherine Howard is the Vice Provost for Community Engagement at Virginia Commonwealth University and Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology. She co-chairs the VCU Council for Community Engagement and has focused on creating a culture of community engagement throughout the campus.

Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D., LCSW
Director of Community-Engaged Research
Division of Community Engagement
Virginia Commonwealth University
901 West Franklin Street
Richmond, Virginia 23284
vholton@vcu.edu

Jennifer L Early, BSN, MSHA, RN
Strategic Project Manager and Research Associate
Division of Community Engagement
Virginia Commonwealth University
PO Box 843062

Richmond, Virginia 23284
s2jlearl@vcu.edu

Meghan Resler, MSW, BFA
Youth Policy Coordinator and Visual Communications Specialist
Division of Community Engagement
Virginia Commonwealth University
901 West Franklin Street
Richmond, Virginia 23284
reslerma@vcu.edu

Audrey Trussell
Assistant to the Vice Provost
Division of Community Engagement
901 West Franklin Street
Richmond, Virginia 23284
atrussell@vcu.edu

Catherine W. Howard, Ph.D.
Vice Provost, Division of Community Engagement
Associate Professor, Department of Psychology
Virginia Commonwealth University
901 W. Franklin Street
Richmond, VA 23284
choward@vcu.edu