

LLOYD ABSTRACT: 2019 ELAM Institutional Action Project

Project Title: Creating and implementing a communication plan for VCU Center on Health Disparities research training programs

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Collaborators and Mentors: Anita Navarro, Erin Lucero, Sarah Golding, Peter Buckley

Topic Category: Education

Background, Significance of project: The VCU Center on Health Disparities (COHD) has had 3 research training grants from the NIH/NIGMS since 2010. These programs are designed to increase the likelihood that scholars from underrepresented groups enter and sustain biomedical science careers. Four levels of scientists are supported: undergraduates, post-baccalaureate scholars, PhD students and postdoctoral fellows. The programs have been successful, and have been renewed. However, an improved communication plan is required to reach a growing and complex web of stakeholders, including ~50 current trainees, ~100 alumni, research mentors, VCU leaders, and candidates/applicants for the programs. In the past 9 years, the COHD faculty team has learned how to run the individual programs well, and now needs to expand impact by generating a better understanding of the programs' goals.

Purpose/Objectives: The communication plan is needed to maintain and expand support for the programs in a competitive NIH and institutional funding climate. The plan emphasizes to stakeholders the programs' value. The purpose is to highlight major trainee and program accomplishments, and the favorable position of the programs for future continued success and expansion. The goals include: to better facilitate networking of current trainees with alumni and near peers, to recruit program candidates, to educate VCU faculty and administrative colleagues about the programs' value, to maintain and expand fiscal and other support.

Methods/Approach/Evaluation Strategy: A communication plan was drafted and critiqued by mentors and collaborators, a trainee and alumni LinkedIn group was started, a slide show of trainee photos and successes was prepared, an alumni and trainee networking event was organized, and the COHD team met with the new VP for Research. In the next year, we will: provide trainees with near peer mentors, design SOM webpage diversity tab content, submit a new NCI grant to expand the programs, and have a 10-year COHD anniversary event and internal and external advisory board meetings.

Outcomes/Results: The LinkedIn group has more than 70 active current and alumni trainee members, and has been used to promote student success stories and increase applicant pools. The trainee slide show was shown at the VCU 50-year anniversary celebration symposium, and the VP for Research joined the Internal Advisory Board. Measurable results for the near future will include the number of meetings between mentor-mentee pairs, number of alumni meetings with trainees, number of trainees getting jobs or applying to programs under advice of alumni, number of applicants to the programs, and the number of new mentors recruited for the NCI grant.

Discussion/Conclusion with Statement of Impact/Potential Impact: The communications plan project taught me how to craft messages that emphasize the strengths and uniqueness of the COHD training programs, and also the successes of individual trainees to put a face on the programs. Ultimately, the impact of the plan will be measured by whether the current grants are renewed, whether new research training grants are funded, by increased participation in the programs by faculty mentors, and support for the programs by administration.



Creating and Implementing a Communication Plan for VCU Center on Health Disparities Research Training Programs

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Presented at the 2019 ELAM® Leaders Forum



Background/Significance: The Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Health Disparities (VCU COHD) has 3 research training grants from the NIH/NIGMS. These programs are designed to increase the likelihood that scholars from underrepresented groups enter and sustain biomedical science careers, and have been funded since 2010. Four levels of scientists are supported: undergraduates, post-baccalaureate scholars, PhD students, and postdoctoral fellows. The programs have been successful, but an improved communication plan is needed to reach a growing and complex web of stakeholders, including ~50 current trainees, ~100 alumni, research mentors, VCU leaders, and applicants. The COHD faculty team now needs to expand impact by generating a better understanding of the programs' goals.

Purpose/Objectives: Create a communication plan emphasizing the programs' value, by highlighting major trainee and program accomplishments. Use communication plan to maintain and expand support for the programs in a competitive NIH and institutional funding climate. The goals include: to better facilitate networking of current trainees with alumni and near peers, to recruit program candidates, to educate VCU faculty and administrative colleagues about the programs' value, to maintain and expand fiscal and other support.

- **Communication Goal:** Illustrate to stakeholders the major accomplishments of the VCU Center on Health Disparities Research Training Programs and inform stakeholders about our favorable position for future continued success
- **Business Goal:** Maintain NIH and institutional funding for existing COHD research training programs and expand our reach by developing additional programs
- **Key Message:** VCU is among a small, select group of institutions that have a mature network of programs that support the development of underrepresented biomedical scientists, from undergraduate to postdoctoral training, with excellent trainee outcomes.



VCU COHD Trainees



VCU Postbaccalaureate Scholars

Methods/Approach/Evaluation Strategy: A communication plan was drafted, critiqued by mentors and collaborators, and finalized. As shown in the example below, the communications plan consisted of a Table with a row for each target audience. The 16 target audiences include trainees, alumni, research faculty mentors, VCU administrators, etc. Some of the planned activities have already been carried out, but the plan extends through 2020. The Table includes purpose, mode of communication, future plans and metrics for each audience.

Outcomes/Results: The LinkedIn group has >75 active current and alumni trainee members, and has been used to promote student success stories and increase applicant pools. The trainee slide show was shown at the VCU 50-year anniversary celebration symposium, and the VP for Research joined the Internal Advisory Board. Measurable results for the near future will include the number of meetings between mentor-mentee pairs, number of alumni meetings with trainees, number of trainees getting jobs or applying to programs under advice of alumni, number of applicants to the programs, and the number of new mentors recruited for the NCI grant.

- Developed communications plan for 2018-2020 (example in Table)
- VCU 50th anniversary symposium: Slide show/panel discussion
- Summer COHD training retreat
- Alumni and trainee networking ice cream social
- LinkedIn group to announce scholar successes and opportunities
- Recruited VP for research to VCU COHD internal advisory board
- Excellent score on postdoctoral training grant renewal
- Established framework for May 2019 NCI proposal to expand programs

Discussion and Statement of Impact/Potential Impact: The project taught me how to craft messages that emphasize the strengths and uniqueness of the COHD training programs, and of individual trainees to put a face on the programs. The impact of the plan will be measured by renewal of the current grants, funding of new research training grants, increased faculty mentor participation, and maintaining support from VCU for the programs. In the next year, we will: provide trainees with near peer mentors, design SOM webpage diversity tab content, submit a new NCI grant to expand the programs, have a 10-year COHD anniversary event, have internal and external advisory board meetings, and present the communications plan at the NIH/NIGMS Training and Workforce Development conference.

Conclusions: The long-term goal is to make the VCU COHD research training programs for underrepresented students at more mainstream, better understood by the VCU community, to attract more applicants to our programs, expand the programs, develop and accelerate the reputation of VCU as a welcoming place for underrepresented students interested in biomedical science careers.



April 2019 Alumni Networking Event



2018 COHD Training Summer Retreat

Table. Communication Plan: Example of 1 of the 16 Audiences

Target Audience	Purpose/Message	Channel or Mode	Future Plans & Timing	Metrics
VCU IMSD undergraduates (ug) (NIGMS Initiative for Maximizing Student Development)	Improving communication with and among trainees, including networking connections/ Connect with and use the COHD community of faculty, trainees and alumni to help reach your career goals	-First Annual Summer COHD Retreat in August 2018 for all COHD trainees, including team building and science talks -Email listserv to make trainees aware of opportunities for career and professional development workshops, job opportunities, etc. - COHD LinkedIn group with >65 members established in Feb 2019, connecting COHD faculty with trainees and alumni and providing information about student achievements and networking opportunities -Facebook to announce student successes and opportunities for training -First annual COHD alumni networking event scheduled in April 2019 (ice cream social) to show current trainees that alumni are successful in their careers - Joint and individual meetings with program director to monitor progress and provide counsel	-Add research mentors to COHD LinkedIn group -Continue to encourage current students to make LinkedIn accounts and join the group -Make monthly posts to LinkedIn group to announce student accomplishments, provide links to COHD website mentor-mentee stories, and announce career development and networking events -Assign each newly entering IMSD ug scholar to a more senior scholar as a near peer mentor (June 2019)	-Evaluate COHD summer research training retreat to assess student satisfaction, obtain students' ideas and make adjustments for subsequent years -Number of likes and re-posts of posts to the LinkedIn group -Number and percentage of current students and alumni participating in LinkedIn group (currently "two-thirds") -Number of students attending COHD alumni networking event -Evaluate student satisfaction with alumni networking event and get feedback for improvement -Evaluate student satisfaction with the near peer mentoring system