Project Title: Creating and implementing a communication plan for VCU Center on Health Disparities research training programs
Name and Institution: Joyce A. Lloyd, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine
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 recruits 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.
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.

Key Message:
• 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 the 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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Purpose/Message</th>
<th>Future Plans &amp; Timing</th>
<th>Metrics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trainees</td>
<td>Highlight new student success stories, including team building and career accomplishments. Create and end of the academic year social event to help reach your career goals.</td>
<td>-Make monthly posts to LinkedIn group</td>
<td>LinkedIn group engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>