



# VCU

REAL Town Hall

February 22, 2019, 9:00am-10:30am

VCU Innovate Living-Learning Program 1231-1232

## Event Structure

Dr. Webster-Garrett and Dr. Golding began the event with a short briefing on the origins of REAL, the work that has been done so far including the REAL Summit in December 2018, and the structure of how the work associated with REAL might be managed going forward. They also walked the audience through several key concepts and deliverables associated with the REAL model to help them understand how the Task Force was approaching the interrelated problems of understanding and rationalizing the experiential learning already taking place at VCU, connecting different activities for the benefit of students and faculty, and providing a mechanism for departments to offer more or different experiential learning. Then the audience provided specific written feedback on exhibits illustrating some of these key aspects of the REAL Model. Then the audience broke into four groups to have a facilitated discussion around a series of prompts designed to get their feedback and concerns about REAL, the REAL model, and the concepts they'd been briefed on, so the REAL Task Force could use that feedback to further refine the model. Finally, there was a brief-out from each group and a period of general discussion.

## Themes – Group Discussion

- All groups discussed accessibility and equity for students.
  - One possibility is a 0-credit option for students who can't, or don't want to, pay for credit but still want to obtain the experience. This may include students who aren't accepted into funded programs. A related question was whether volunteering, which isn't usually for credit, would be included.
  - It was noted that VCU attracts a population of students with higher than average rates of PELL grant use and who represent many of the groups most likely to encounter barriers to accessing experiential learning, especially financial ones.
  - Having funding for these opportunities would make them more equitable, while failing to do so continues the cycle of need. Not only is there tuition to cover in many cases, there are costs associated with even 0-credit experiential learning, such as housing. There are special costs with international or domestic study-abroad opportunities. There's even the basic cost of transportation. Not all students have cars or money for mass transit.
  - Equity should be defined as not only ensuring all students can engage with experiential learning, but that all can take advantage of higher-level opportunities as needed. Equity is directly related to engagement, because students with barriers will assume the opportunity isn't for them anyway.
  - Perhaps there are ways to expand the reach of REAL to reach students who are gaining experiences outside of the VCU umbrella such as volunteer service or industry experience, even a part-time job, but then incorporating the lessons learned from those activities back into their education. The flip side of this opportunity is the challenge of

- ensuring learning outcomes from student-initiated activities on- or off-campus are captured, which may require resources for monitoring such activities.
- All groups discussed aspects of the challenge of engagement.
    - How can REAL help students understand the value of experiential learning, so that they find it compelling to participate rather than seeing it as an add-on? How would students be engaged as soon as they entered VCU, or even before, as they were selecting a school? Would there be any marketing of the value to parents? Students who don't usually think of these opportunities as being "for them" will need training and communication in terms they understand, so they understand that they are the target audience and how to apply. The ultimate goal is for experiential learning to be a default expectation, which will help bring even more students in.
    - How well would students be able to find experiential learning and identify those experiences as such? This may require some integrative tool or platform which brings every opportunity together and allows for easy searching. Another suggestion was an experiential opportunity fair.
    - There's a parallel between REAL and nationwide Gen Ed reform, because in both cases the issue is continuing to make the experience relevant and intentional for students. One way to do this would be to develop minors, electives, and/or pathways for experiential learning in addition to the Social Innovation Certificate. Any plan to do this would need to address academic restrictions and the time it would take to develop such an offering. One group even proposed aligning REAL with the new Gen Ed being developed at VCU.
    - Alumni would also need to be engaged so they can provide hosting for internships and other opportunities, donor funding to increase accessibility, and housing for opportunities outside of Richmond, among other things. Young alumni could also speak to the value of experiential learning, which would help engage students. One participant at the Town Hall noted that they have seen experiential learning transform lives.
    - Students will see faculty as being the most immediate contact for any experiential learning that they find, which requires identifying and engaging faculty champions in each unit. Additionally, there would be a risk that, without the right procedures and some support, faculty who did want to help would end up being swamped by interested students. Faculty would also need development opportunities, and the way REAL is explained should take into account that adjunct faculty will be less familiar with higher education theory.
    - Community partners would need to be engaged in a way that leverages existing relationships. They would consistent need baseline standards to follow for what an opportunity is at the different levels, and components of that like mentoring or integrative learning, and should be engaged in the development of those standards. They will also need training in how to manage their environment to meet the needs of students especially disadvantaged students, so they are set up for success.
    - These challenges are further complicated by the initial rollout in Fall 2019.
  - Three groups discussed the REAL Taxonomy.

- One group felt that there were too many levels and that Level 3 and 4 could be combined. Additionally, the structure may be too hierarchical, which gives the impression that the goal is to move step-by-step up the ladder. One solution would be to keep the Taxonomy internal instead of being student-facing.
- One group raised the concern that targeting experiences at particular levels during particular points in the academic career would leave out the unique needs of transfer students.
- One group emphasized how useful the course designation would be for faculty and students.
- One group had questions about who would submit the data at the unit level, who would have access to classify opportunities, and how many people would be needed to maintain the validity of data on an ongoing basis. It was noted that students who self-classify, such as with independent study, will think their opportunity is at a higher level than is justified.
- One group raised the challenge of how to tag different sections of an opportunity that are at different levels. It's already necessary to have different sections for different credit level, so this would add to the number of sections it's necessary to track.
- One group noted that what students get out of an opportunity, like a service learning course, is mostly dependent on what they put into it. Will that be reflected in the level, or will the level ignore that aspect of the outcome? To some extent, it's impossible to know what the student will get out of the opportunity until you know what the student will put into it and also the learning environment for that opportunity, especially something like an international opportunity. If the issue is that tagging the opportunity on the front end might leave out relevant information and create a false sense of knowledge, maybe the solution is to tag it on the back end, after the student has completed it.
- One group asked how contact hours would be standardized and how REAL would capture single opportunities versus semester-long opportunities. Perhaps a database or tool could be developed to allow a single place of tracking these for students. What would happen if a student didn't think their experience was worth what the process designated? How would experiential learning be marked on a transcript?
- One group asked whether departments need to create a new framework for their independent study opportunities and internships in order to meet REAL standards? Is it possible to have online experiential learning?
- Three groups brought up a larger question about institutional infrastructure and the potential burdens on units and faculty due to REAL. Assigning staff resources or graduate assistants would help alleviate that.
- Three groups discussed e-portfolios.
  - Would all the VCU programs which require these would therefore be graduating Ram Scholars? Or, if it was more unique, what distinguished them and made them impactful for students?
  - A platform for e-portfolios may make them easier for students and faculty to utilize.

- Students need to understand the best practices in employing e-portfolios and using them in their job searches and first-year students don't know this. There's the challenge of moving the student from simply tracking their activities to reflecting on them. Students who do utilize them well in interviews do better in finding work. One solution is to train faculty in best practices so that they can inform the students they work with.
- Two groups discussed the connection between experiential learning and social justice. It might be wise to use social innovation terminology instead, but experiential learning opportunities should be informed by social justice, especially those relating to service learning. It's as important to bring the local community to VCU as it is to bring VCU out into the local community. Students should see themselves as serving the communities they work with and as doing things "with" those communities instead of "to" those communities. The history of VCU's interactions with Richmond is complicated and students will be coming into the middle of that history. One way to accomplish this would be a field guide on designing sustainable community engagement that applies across disciplines, similar to the Division of Community Engagement's models.
- Two groups discussed certifications and badges. Will certifications and micro-badges be accredited outside of VCU or mean anything to other institutions or to potential employers? Can experiential learning link to badges that a student could use to highlight themselves as part of their job search or digital networking?
- One group discussed the Co-Curricular aspect of REAL and how to make it feel as valid to faculty members engaged in the process. There will be a need to break down barriers and assumptions.
- One group discussed access to opportunities across departmental lines. From a student perspective, a benefit of REAL is that it allows them to have experiences outside of their degree, but that may be a disadvantage to departments who want to conserve their limited resources for their own students. Additionally, some opportunities have course prerequisites. Would those be removed to improve access, or left alone?

### **Themes – Free Discussion**

- There is broad interest in seeing the results of the Opportunity Audit and using it to fuel collaboration across VCU, either at the instigation of individual departments or from the REAL Task Force. This could potentially be the source of another integrative event for REAL stakeholders.
- One comment was that community partners should be encouraged to see themselves as co-educators alongside faculty.
- Another comment returned to the theme of the administrative burden, asking if it would be possible to accomplish REAL without more than existing resources.
- A comment was that students will need training past the end of their experiential learning, to teach them how to speak to it and get the value from it in future job searches.
- One comment, given the strong theme of equity and access, was that VCU could have a liaison function for students with obstacles.

- A final comment was that the Town Hall only reached one section of the VCU community. It would be important to find other ways to obtain feedback from other segments of the audience.

### **Themes – REAL Exhibits**

Many of the comments on the exhibits mirrored comments which came up in the group discussion as well. A few additional themes did emerge though.

- There were multiple governance concerns, such as who approves co-curricular activities, ensuring the assigned REAL classification stays accurate to avoid curricular drift, and approval of the use of the code.
- Several suggestions related to specific offices, existing initiatives, or stakeholders who should be involved. A strong concern was reaching first-year students through the Freshman advisors and orientation.
- Multiple comments mentioned change to the General Education requirements and how that would connect to REAL.

### **Action Items**

- Exploring badging and credential innovation to address
- Exploring an experiential learning database solution
- Emphasize in subsequent communications with faculty that the taxonomy is faculty and administrator facing. This is a snapshot of how well we are doing in providing the opportunities, a score card for the institution.
- Poster Session to continue dialogue scheduled for April 5
- Community Town Hall scheduled for May 1
- Faculty Institute on Reflective Practice scheduled for May 16
- Pending budget initiatives, develop Faculty Fellows/Ambassador program as liaisons in the colleges/schools and units.