

CURQ Web Vignettes

Supporting Undergraduate Research Through Targeted Alumni Groups

Kristi L. Haik and Keith Walters, *Northern Kentucky University*,
haikk@nku.edu

As new department chairs in the Departments of Biological Sciences and Chemistry at Northern Kentucky University (NKU), a rapidly evolving institution, we find ourselves trying to reconcile shrinking budgets, increased administrative responsibilities, and high scholarship expectations on our faculty. As a result, we have expanded the scope of our jobs to include fundraising. Since we both lead departments with strong undergraduate research programs, we constantly seek ways to raise funds for students' research stipends and modest supply budgets for their projects. Research on our student and alumni populations revealed two important factors that drove the thinking behind this project to target particular alumni as potential donors. First, NKU pre-med students have an excellent track record of placement in and completion of medical school (75 percent). Second, almost all of our pre-med students over the last 10 years completed an undergraduate research experience in one of our departments. In fact, over the last 10 years, NKU undergraduates who became medical students reported that their research experiences played a vital role in both their interviews for medical school and success in their coursework in medical school. Given that NKU now has more than 225 alumni who are physicians or are completing medical school, we have created a new group from our alumni pool called the "NKU Alumni Physicians." This model, including specific engagement activities for this group, is the first of its kind at NKU.

Beginning in 2013, we worked with an emeritus faculty member who started the NKU Pre-Med Review Board in 1974. This board reviews the progress of all upper-division pre-medical students at NKU, assists them in applying to medical school, and provides a written evaluation of their NKU careers to the appropriate medical schools. We identified 15 alumni, a few of whom were still in medical school, who have worked with the review board and who have been very involved with NKU since graduation and asked them to serve on a steering committee for the NKU Alumni Physicians. These alumni and their spouses or partners attended an exclusive reception in the fall of 2014 with the university's president, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, faculty members who serve on or have chaired the review board, and members of the NKU development staff.

As the chairs of departments in which a majority of pre-med students reside, we led a discussion at this event that was driven by alumni physicians' responses to three questions: (1) What helped you prepare for medical school while you were at NKU? (2) What does NKU need to do better to prepare you for medical school? (3) What activities should we raise money for to improve our pre-med program? The discussion and feedback was very meaningful and provided us with a roadmap to improve the program. Feedback from the administration was incredibly positive, with our president communicating that this model should be employed with other alumni groups.

The top fundraising priority identified was undergraduate research, followed by medical study abroad experiences, and funding for textbooks. Since the initial reception, we have held other events for the entire NKU Alumni Physicians group, including at basketball games in the president's suite. Since we had six biology and chemistry majors on the women's basketball team, we invited the NKU Alumni Physicians to one of their games and provided background information on these women, many of whom are participating in undergraduate research.

In each event with the NKU Alumni Physicians, we also involve current NKU pre-med students and key department faculty members, in hopes of establishing mentoring relationships with the involved alumni for our pre-med students. We recently mailed the entire NKU Alumni Physicians a solicitation for funds that included categories of giving based on the type of activity their donation would support. For example, "\$4,000 pays for a student's undergraduate research experience" and "\$2,000 allows a student to study abroad." Although our initial returns have not met our desired targets, we hope to improve our yield after additional activities during the coming academic year. A small group of these alumni will lead a study-abroad experience for our pre-med students and the chair of the Pre-Med Review Board in 2016. This small-group process for engaging alumni as donors can serve as a model for any group of alumni and has proven a success in raising money for undergraduate research and more. 

The VCU Quest: Forging New Paths to Support Undergraduate Research

Herbert Hill, *Virginia Commonwealth University*, hhill@vcu.edu

In 2011, Virginia Commonwealth University introduced a new strategic plan, "Quest for Distinction," which sought



to build upon our existing assets as a university and better realize our vision of VCU as a highly ranked public research institution with a strong commitment to student learning. The “Quest” steering committee developed a framework for the strategic plan grounded in four central themes:

Theme I: Become a leader among national research universities in providing all students with high-quality learning/living experiences focused on inquiry, discovery, and innovation in a global environment.

Theme II: Attain preeminence as an urban, public research university by making contributions in research, scholarship,

creative expression, and clinical practice to advance knowledge and enhance the quality of life.

Theme III: Achieve national recognition as a fully integrated research university with a commitment to human health.

Theme IV: Become a national model for community engagement and regional impact.

The Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) was institutionalized within the VCU Office of Research and Innovation in 2010 just prior to the introduction of the four-themed strategic plan. The program was well positioned to meet the call to provide students with opportunities for

experiential learning and to support research faculty members through our Fellowships for Undergraduate Research and Creative Scholarship. Fellowships are a common component of many undergraduate research programs, and ours offers funding for undergraduates and faculty mentors to partner on original research projects. With an initial budget of \$50,000, the program was a solid foundation on which to build, and the strategic plan created the impetus for new campus partnerships and innovative strategies to meet the goals set forth by Quest.

Like any journey, ours did not unfold without challenges, as the implementation of our strategic plan coincided with a significant decrease in our annual state funding and an uncertain economic climate in higher education in general. While VCU has been fortunate to receive grant funding for student research programs in the past, the VCU Undergraduate Research Advisory Committee envisioned the strategic plan as an opportunity to build new systems of campus support for a broader array of undergraduate research experiences.

To bring this vision to reality, the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program identified potential partners among our campus units that shared the goals of UROP and Quest but did not historically support students' engagement with undergraduate research. We asked these units to provide financial support for a number of "themed fellowships" that aligned with both the mission of each partner and the themes of our Quest strategic plan. Our inaugural group of campus partners for 2013-2014 included the Global Education Office (GEO), the Division of Community Engagement (DCE), and the Center for Clinical and Translational Research (CCTR). With the addition of our newest partner, the Office of Inclusive Excellence (OIE), these units pledged continuing support in the amount of \$16,000 (for a total of eight undergraduate fellowships) through 2014-2015.

Each themed fellowship corresponds with the mission of its respective campus patron. The GEO fellowships support proposals with a focus on global learning that show evidence of significant engagement with a non-U.S. culture different from the applicant's native culture. The aim of the fellowships is to increase the student researcher's knowledge, skills, and experience in order to demonstrate successful functioning across a variety of borders, including national, linguistic, cultural, or religious. The Division of Community Engagement offers funding

for collaborative community-engaged projects that create and disseminate knowledge or creative expression with the goal of contributing to the discipline and strengthening the well-being of the community. The Center for Clinical and Translational Research awards proposals that translate scientific discoveries into improved human health and wellness. And the OIE fellowships support projects focused on "diversity" as it relates to ideas, cultures, backgrounds, and experiences through the lens of gender, race/ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, disabilities and/or international issues.

Our selection of campus partners was based on their status as "administrative" rather than "academic" units. Administrative units serve as supporting infrastructure for the implementation of institutional policy and initiatives, but they do not directly intersect with undergraduate education. By providing a proven model in the form of the UROP fellowships, we offered a method by which these units could engage with undergraduate education by offering their own respective brand of funded experiential-learning opportunities. The administrative units were also able to satisfy a number of their Quest strategic goals through supporting the new themed fellowships. And because they also provide support to research faculty on campus, our new partners were well positioned to assist in identifying potential mentors for interested undergraduate applicants and stakeholders for proposal-review panels.

The student research fellows develop original research proposals under the mentorship of VCU faculty members and ultimately embark on summer research that culminates the following spring semester with their presentations at the VCU Poster Symposium for Undergraduate Research and Creativity. Many fellows go on to present their scholarship at national conferences and symposia and publish their research in both undergraduate and professional journals.

Through these campus partnerships, we have been able to increase the level of institutional funding available to undergraduate researchers and their faculty mentors. The arrangement carries the added benefit of moving us closer to realizing our shared goals by providing our undergraduates with high-quality, experiential-learning opportunities through research, a central component of our strategy at VCU to grow the next generation of civic and globally engaged scholars, innovators, and professionals. 