VCU Acceleration: A Comprehensive Approach to Promoting First-Year Success of Pre-health Students
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VCU ACCELERATION BACKGROUND
- Program began in 2005 as a partnership between health sciences and undergraduate campuses at VCU
- Inclusive programming for all pre-health students, focus not limited to single pre-health group
- Program incorporates summer pre-matriculation session and academic year living-learning community

SUMMER PRE-MATRICULATION
- Four-week session focuses on acclimating students academically and socially to the university setting
- Academic portion includes: chemistry, biology, and mathematics instruction from faculty and graduate students
- Course placement decisions for the fall semester include consideration of performance during summer session

LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITY
- Focused around pre-health “theme”
- All students assigned to same pre-health advisor
- Students take a specialized “Introduction to the University” course taught by their pre-health advisor
- Program includes two learning communities, based on placement into science courses and pre-health concentration
- Students live on the same floor in residence hall

PROGRAM GOALS
The VCU Acceleration program evaluation is focused around the three main goals of the program:
- To improve the first year retention of pre-health students
- To improve graduation rates of pre-health students
- To increase the number of students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, educational, geographical) presenting competitive applications to health professions programs

PROGRAM PARTNERS
The VCU Acceleration program is administered through a partnership between the Division for Health Sciences Diversity and the Office of Pre-health Advising

CONTEXT OF PROGRAM
The VCU Acceleration program exists within the larger context of the VCU Health Sciences and Health Careers Pipeline. This series of programs endeavors to increase student diversity within each of the five health professions schools at the university. Each program within the pipeline is unique in its individual goals and objectives, however, each program strives to provide students with the knowledge necessary to promote informed decision making as they strive to reach their academic and professional goals. VCU Acceleration fills the need for a program designed for students as they transition to undergraduate study.

PROGRAM RESULTS

VCU Acceleration Retention and Graduation Rates

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Year Retention</td>
<td>91.4%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
<td>84.8%</td>
<td>89.5%</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
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<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>70.5%***</td>
<td>82.6%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>63.6%**</td>
<td>52.6%*</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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Table notes:
- cohort indicates the year the group entered VCU
- Overall VCU first year retention rates for 2005-2009 averaged 83.6% and six-year graduation rates for students entering VCU in 2004 were 50.7% (Chmura Economics & Analytics, 2011)
- *** Includes 2005, 2006, & 2007 cohorts only; ** = 4-5 year graduation rate; * = 4 year graduation rate

Program Results Summary
First year retention of VCU Acceleration students has consistently remained above 85%, which is the average first year retention at VCU. More than half of the cohorts have retention rates above 90%, with the overall program average at 91.4%. The six-year graduation rate for the first three cohorts (2005, 2006, & 2007) is a combined 70.5%, compared to the university average of 50.7%. Finally, longitudinal student tracking has indicated that many students remain committed to a career in the health professions, and have successfully received admission to health professions programs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL IMPROVEMENT AND ADVANCEMENT
The assessment of this program will contribute to the achievement of university-level metrics through informing the development and implementation of student learning communities and other models with residential components (e.g., living-learning communities, residential villages). The identification of demographic factors informs programmatic decisions based on the needs of a diverse student population. This in turn allows for the rigorous analysis of the program which adds value to the discourse grounded in student success such as: student achievement, persistence, acculturation, and the dynamics of peer-centric learning and support systems. While based on a residential model, there may be findings that are transferable to off-site students. An optimum value could be the development of virtual learning communities that stimulate aspects of campus life or deliver benefits of collaborative learning.