



NAASS Member: Virginia Commonwealth University

Initiative Title: Summer Scholars Goes Virtual

Award Category: COVID Challenges & Solutions

Description:

Summer Scholars is a 5-week on-campus academic program designed for first-generation students, and the main purposes of this program are to give students the opportunity to earn college credits early, to get to know faculty and staff, to form friendships, to become familiar with the campus and resources, and to get to know local neighborhoods through community engagement events. Unable to proceed with in-person due to the pandemic, VCU staff considered suspending the program. However, previous students in Summer Scholars assured staff leadership that an online version would still be immensely valuable, and encouraged VCU to move forward. Major concerns for virtual programming included the ability to engage students, getting students to form community with each other, allowing students to form connections with staff and faculty, and giving students the opportunity to learn their way around campus before they arrived in the fall. Summer staff, however, were quick with solutions.

First, VCU split the one-day orientation into shorter sessions across three days. The University hired an outside company which conducted a 90-minute team-building program. These introductory activities were intended to prepare students for online classroom interaction.

Second, while the online program established initial engagement and watched students form early connections, staff knew ongoing opportunities were needed to deepen and maintain these accomplishments. Students were therefore required to register for a one-credit experiential class that met once a week. This class was broken up into 10 small groups so that students would be more likely to participate in class. Peer mentors, to whom each student was assigned, attended these as well. Activities included using campus resources virtually, such as meeting with an academic coach and attending workshops on topics such as the science of learning, mindfulness, and getting involved on campus.

Third, to get students acclimated to the campus before setting foot on it, staff had them complete a scavenger hunt using Google Maps. They were asked to use the street view to move around campus in search of their destinations, then paste the screenshot of their find into the assignment document.

Overall, the online version of Summer Scholars was a success. It required continuous intentionality and check-ins from staff, but it was worth every bit of effort because students reported positive experiences and maintained connections they made with their peers.

For more information about this initiative, contact:

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