

Universities and Community: Forming Partnerships that Encourage Youth

Universities are often organizations that can greatly influence and affect communities, especially in an urban setting. Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA prides itself on partnerships with many community organizations. In the last year, the bike program in the Office of Sustainability has put a greater emphasis on being a resource not only for students, faculty and staff, but also for the city at large. Through valuable partnerships, it has been able to bring city youth into the bike shop while creating opportunities for VCU students to help deliver beneficial biking programs for youth in their communities.



Creating Youth Programs with Student Support

Office of Community Engagement and the School of Social Work

The Office of Community Engagement offers connections between service learning courses and local non-profits or other VCU departments. Service learning students complete 25 hours of community service per semester. VCU RamBikes partnered with the Social Work 200 class to find students that were interested in helping in the bike shop and with programs in local elementary schools.

Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) is a national organization that promotes walking and bicycling to school through infrastructure improvements, enforcement, tools, safety education, and incentives. SRTS partnered with VCU RamBikes to design and deliver a program for 4th graders to learn riding skills at local elementary schools in Richmond. SRTS was able to provide supplies like helmets and bikes through grants and additional partnerships.

Communities in Schools

Communities in Schools (CIS) supports K-12 students in Richmond City high-poverty neighborhood schools. Through early interventions and enrichment opportunities, CIS works with the community inside schools to help students succeed. VCU RamBikes partnered with CIS to find the right students for the new biking programs being developed in schools.

Groundwork RVA

Groundwork RVA is a non-profit organization that encourages youth to think innovatively about their community in after school and summer settings. Groundwork RVA created a bike shop on the grounds of a community center and partnered to provide the space to host an after school program and find the youth who would participate.

Connecting Partners

VCU RamBikes worked with the Safe Routes to School coordinator to design a bicycling program for elementary students in Richmond. VCU students in a Social Work 200 course signed up to help deliver this program. Program participants and space were coordinated by partnering with Communities in Schools in an East End school and with Groundwork RVA in a South Side school.

Bringing Youth into the Shop

Mayor's Youth Academy

Mayor's Youth Academy is a City of Richmond program designed to provide development opportunities to youth throughout the city in order to develop Richmond's future workforce into determined, successful citizens and leaders. VCU RamBikes hosted two high school youth for six weeks in the shop over the summer. MYA participants helped the bike shop staff overhaul the rental fleet, refurbish abandoned bikes for a new long-term rental initiative, and created various media for the bike program.

Mary and Frances Youth Center

The Mary and Frances Youth Center is a youth center at VCU that provides programming and training to enhance the lives of youth in the Richmond metro area. VCU RamBikes taught multiple sessions during their summer Discovery Camps, allowing youth to use the shop to learn about repair and bike basics.

Connecting Partners

In the last two weeks of their session, the Mayor's Youth Academy interns helped lead the workshops taught at the Discovery Camps. This reinforced the skills they had learned while offering them valuable leadership experience.

Takeaways

- The opportunity for older youth to take the reins in educating younger folks is an empowering experience and contributes to a generational attitude shift.
- Finding partners to help with access, supplies and location can make creating and implementing a beneficial program much easier to do.
- Creating interconnectedness among programs and program partners offers a more robust experience for students and supports potential program expansion without duplicating efforts.

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