

SPOTLIGHTS



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Victor Valley College

“Engaging” with Peers and “Poaching”
Ideas from Others

The PRT Process: A Two-way Street

Victor Valley College (VVC) has been working on its professional development efforts for quite some time.

Three areas of focus, in particular, were on President Dan Walden’s and Vice President of Instruction Todd Scott’s minds: developing and implementing strategies for training and development, establishing a faculty academy, and building a flex calendar to better offer learning opportunities for faculty and staff.

VVC is no stranger to the PRT process, having requested three PRTs over the past seven years. As a repeat customer, Dr. Walden declared, “I just love the appreciative inquiry process; it is positive, engaging, and makes one feel more efficacious about finding solutions to challenges.”

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an important technique for college engagement in problem identification and resolution. AI is an expressed component of team training each year. (More about AI later.)

“I was specifically interested in engaging with peers in the system to learn from other institutions to improve our college methodologies in how we become better and serve students,” said Dr. Scott.



Student engagement centers foster greater dialogue between student services professionals and students.

THE PARTNERSHIP RESOURCE TEAM (PRT) component of the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative (IEPI) provides technical assistance at no cost to institutions approved for support in self-identified Areas of Focus (AOFs). The PRT process uses a positive “colleagues-helping-colleagues” approach to work with institutions to improve effectiveness.

This vignette is one in a series of college Spotlights on the experiences and benefits gained from participation in the IEPI. It highlights the reciprocal relationship between Client Institutions and the PRT throughout during the process.

Dr. Scott also noted the importance of having a whole team there to gather broader perspectives on VVC's potential plans and what they intended to do.

"Every time you get a chance to engage with another institution and how they are doing things, whether through strategic enrollment management outreach, accreditation review, or the PRT process, it's one more avenue to connect and network with others to learn and improve," added Dr. Walden.

Drs. Walden and Scott have not only received PRT services as representatives of a Client Institution, but they have also led and participated in PRTs at other institutions.

Dr. Walden explains the phenomenon of being at a receiving institution and being part of a separate team this way: "Being a part of both sides of the PRT Process helps one be able to actively and reflectively listen to make sure that you're hearing what people say and then finding ways to validate them".

"We were fortunate to have Matt as our PRT Lead for this PRT," said Walden.

Matt is Dr. Matthew Wetstein, President of Cabrillo College, who led the PRT visiting VVC.

"It's really a two-way street. I freely 'poach' ideas as a PRT Member. If there is something good going on at the Client Institution, whether part of the areas of focus for the PRT or something outside the process that we are grappling with at home, I'm taking it with me," joked President Wetstein.

"I'm not kidding. I remember that VVC was trying to implement a "Ram" coaching model for new faculty, and I remember our team being really impressed with that," stated Wetstein. The Ram is the VVC college mascot.

Sue Ellen Warren, a faculty member on the VVC PRT, agreed: "The PRT Process taps into our own methods of developing wisdom, but it does so in a collegial and collaborative way, and that has an impact."

SOUP TO NUTS

As mentioned, VVC was specifically curious about an online faculty academy, given its location in the High Desert.

"We developed a fully online academy that covers the process of being a faculty member, from soup to nuts, how to do a census, classroom management, lesson presentation, and content delivery. It is quite

comprehensive, about 15 to 18 modules," related Vice President Scott.

Because of the growth in the area, the demand for new faculty at VVC has risen dramatically; twenty-one new faculty members have been hired in the last few semesters alone.

"Given all of the new faculty hires, Dr. Walden and I wanted to take a little time out to get to know the faculty before they got busy in their courses and before their busy non-classroom duties began," observed Scott, "so we wanted to get them off-site, so we could just sit down and get a chance to sit with them." PRT helped us here greatly.

"I also want to get to know them not in their roles as vice president and president but on a personal level," said Scott.

Drs. Walden and Scott envision a time for a personal connection, to get to know each other as people, not just as college leaders. The pair used some of the seed capital to carve out this important time and then launched them into the new Faculty Academy.



Faculty and administration personally connect before the beginning of the new academic term.

It is about mindfulness and developing a work-life balance, according to Scott.

PIVOTING AND PRIORITIZING

The PRT Process offers a flexible approach to problem identification and solution because things change and priorities adjust.

“We could see that the Ram coaches concept was going to adapt based on faculty need, and the flex calendar was going to take more time and more conversations than we originally anticipated, so we just pivoted,” said Walden frankly, “it’s part of the appreciative inquiry process and the listening I was talking about earlier.”

The PRT uses two key techniques when working with Client Institutions: Appreciative Inquiry and active listening.

Appreciative Inquiry utilizes a questioning process and dialogue between the team and the institution to help uncover existing strengths, plusses, or openings to build on what is already going well at the college.

All too often in education, analysis looks at gaps and deficits in performance, which can hamper creative thinking in more vulnerable areas of improvement.

Active listening, on the other hand, dynamically engages the team and college in what is being said and checks for understanding rather than moving from what one thinks is being said. This process keeps both the listeners and speakers keenly engaged in the conversation.

“We just figured that when we are ready for more detailed discussions on the flex calendar, we’ll ask for another PRT,” chuckled Walden.



Faculty and administration discuss plans for professional development and student success.

Peggy Lomas, the IEPI Project Director, concurs, “I like that because at times people come into a PRT thinking that the plan is set in stone and that institutions don’t have the opportunity to be flexible, but they do. With VVC, they’ve paved a road and built momentum, but when things change, you are not stopping; you pivot and still show success.”

This result is another by-product of an appreciative approach to organizational engagement.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Professional development was not VVC’s only area of focus for this PRT. In fact, it is common for colleges to identify two to three potential areas of focus and then let the discussions, Inquiry, and listening reveal what is best done in the cycle.

The second area of focus for VVC was increasing student engagement, “Specifically, increasing student persistence,” Scott interjected. With the movement of data from on-premises storage to cloud storage, VVC wanted to adopt a case management approach to persistence.

Scott observed, “There is a full spectrum of students. Some will succeed with very little help needed from us. There will be others that need a nudge here and there. There will still be others who will need some assistance and help.”

“We wanted to target our resources to the best use of time, money, and effort to increase persistence. So, we created four engagement centers.”

- Vice President Todd Scott

A program manager who has peer mentors and counselors assigned runs each center.

After matriculation, students are “handed off” to an engagement center, and the staff in the respective

center manages that student who is the center of their own success.



Student engagement centers help students identify barriers and hurdles early on the semester.

Each center interacts with the students who meet face-to-face with managers, come to the centers for events, etc. They have become really inviting spaces for the students.

VVC wanted the ‘early alert’ approach to be more decentralized, with all staff and students engaging to identify hurdles. This was also done through a lens of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access specific to VVC’s college culture and history.

“We have a multicultural center staffed, and we’re doing many other things, such as creating a safe space for our LGBTQ+ community here. Given our unique demographics in the High Desert, we engage with all of our communities and groups. We have not backed the courageous conversations in these critical areas,” said Scott.

VVC has four engagement centers: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), Public Safety and Industrial Technology (PSIT), Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) and Business, and Library and Academic Resources (BLAR).

Each engagement center has the appropriate guided pathways located there.

“We saw a natural evolution in the college thinking that came out of several themes, actually. Early alert, caring campus, and the expanded use of technology. It

was impressive,” concluded Wetstein.

WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND

“I tell you, we were right behind VVC and our own work at Cabrillo with the advancement in technology, specifically the movement from on-premises to cloud storage and the work with VVC helped us look at our own efforts with a wider perspective,” acknowledged Wetstein.

Wetstein continued, “Technology is the kind of thing that you do not really know how it will affect the PRT Process, and a college cannot adequately reflect on its own potential PRT work without prioritizing the technology efforts at the college itself. The integration of systems alone is daunting. Our work in the PRT has helped us think about our needs at home. So, the PRT work sure helped me.”

But it is in more than just the specific areas of focus.

“One of the particular virtues that showed up in the VVC visits was the adaptive thinking that took place to make the process a success,” noted Wetstein.

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- Dr. Matt Wetstein, PRT Lead

This reflectiveness is not specifically considered in the development of the plans and efforts that comprise the PRT structure and approach.

Wetstein continued, “There is a nice ability to adapt on the fly as you go through this process and have peers who are there to help you think about that adaptation.”

This fact will be highlighted in the next *Spotlights*, which turns the tables and examines Cabrillo’s recent PRT Process with Wetstein at the helm.

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