

VIP: Transforming Students' Learning with Vertically Integrated Projects

Overview

Vertically Integrated Projects (VIP) Program enables everyone to work together on Research, Creation and Exploration allowing to overcome 3 forms of fragmentation in Higher Education (Figure 1). The experience of our students, especially for undergraduates is fragmented by time in terms of semesters and most of them do not get the opportunity to have a curricular experience that goes through their entire time on campus. Faculty time is divided among teaching, research, outreach and service activities. With a 4/4 teaching load the "extra" research labor of faculty members often goes unacknowledged. Finally, centuries of tradition have produced institutional silos, reinforced by layers of policy and cultural differences between academic departments, between colleges, and between academic and non-academic units. VIP, offered as a set of courses offers a solution to overcome the above-mentioned fragmentations in Higher Education. Students earn academic credit and can participate for multiple semesters, with returning students taking on mentoring, leadership, and/or additional responsibilities relevant to their fields of study. Faculty build VIP teams around their own interests of research and exploration and VIP courses can be part of their work load. VIP enables long-term, large-scale, multidisciplinary project teams leading for collaborations among different disciplines and departments.

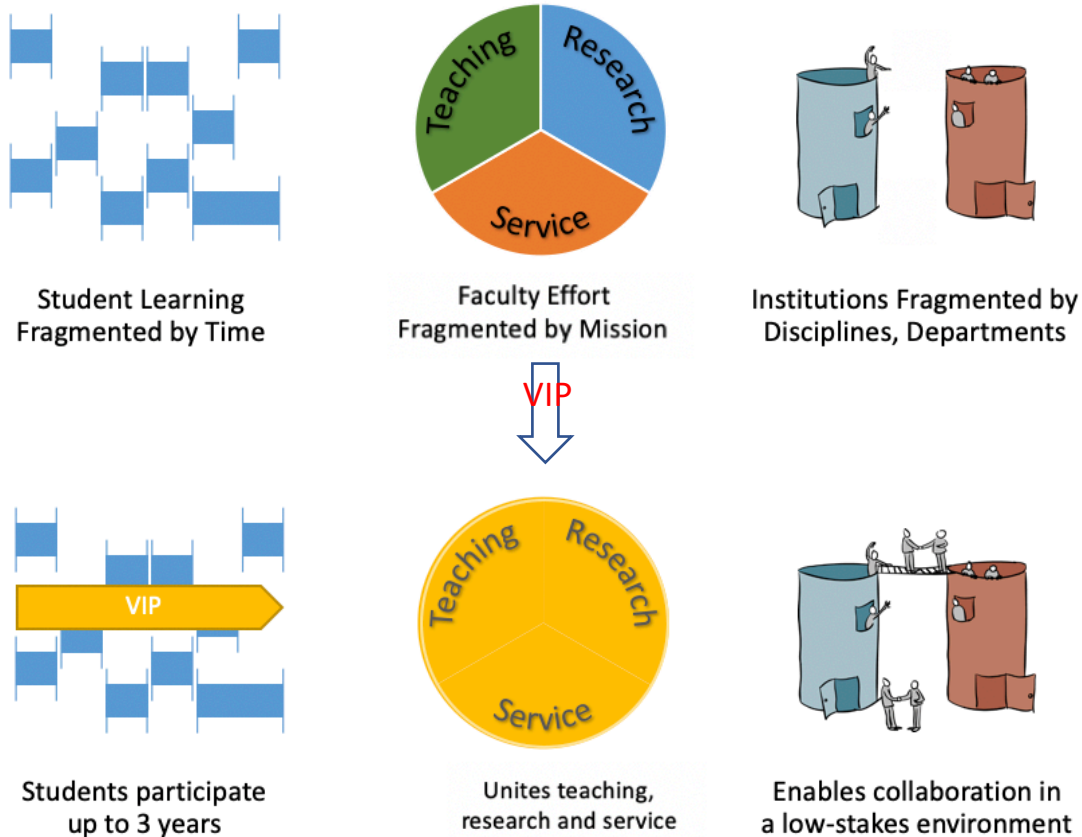


Figure 1: Vertically Integrated Projects (VIP) Program Philosophy

Why now?

VIP provides a platform for students and faculty to connect with each other on points of interest, and the institutional support of the QEP will forge stronger connections between students, faculty, and Georgia College at a time when students and faculty are disengaging from colleges because of pandemic stress and resentment. One aspect of the VIP Program is students can get involved with VIP teams outside of their major or department but still can get academic credit. For example, a marketing or computer science student from the College of Business who is interested in renewable energy can work with a VIP team working on solar energy and get academic credit for their efforts. In the meantime, faculty member who may need students with different academic training to work on their project benefits from this structure. Within VIP structure, students can choose the respective teams based on their interest. Creating such opportunities with institutional support by giving students and faculty a chance to work on projects they get excited about will address the lack of motivation in these challenging times. This leads to more student and faculty engagement that may help to alleviate the stress, burnout, and exhaustion students and faculty have been experiencing since the pandemic. As Georgia College venture into new initiatives including Digital Humanities and Aquatic Center (Aquatic life is already a VIP team), VIP provides an excellent spring board for all of us to come together not only help our students but also to reenergize ourselves and find the joy in learning.

Another positive aspect of the VIP Program for faculty members is that this can be part of their 4/4 working load. It is true that most of us are engaged in our research and exploration solely because of our passion and love for what we do. Some faculty and students are already doing some of this work outside of the credit/load system (for example, Trax on the Trail Project of Dr. Dana Gorzelany-Mostak). Doing these projects without full institutional support is draining for faculty and often inequitable for students. VIP program offers a solution to disengagement and the extra research labor of students and faculty that often goes unacknowledged by being a for-credit program. It is important to quantify, assess, and give credit for these research experiences which is crucial for faculty retention and student equity and inclusion in the program.

VIP Program at Georgia College is still in the initial phase and as of now do not have any quantitative data to support the impact of the program on GC students. However, data from Georgia Institute of Technology show that VIP leads to higher job placement for VIP participants and leads to equity.

Figure 2 below shows that the overall job placement prior to graduation is higher for students who were part of the VIP Program and there is a substantial difference for non-Co-Op students (8.1% higher) in terms of job placement if they were part of the VIP Program.

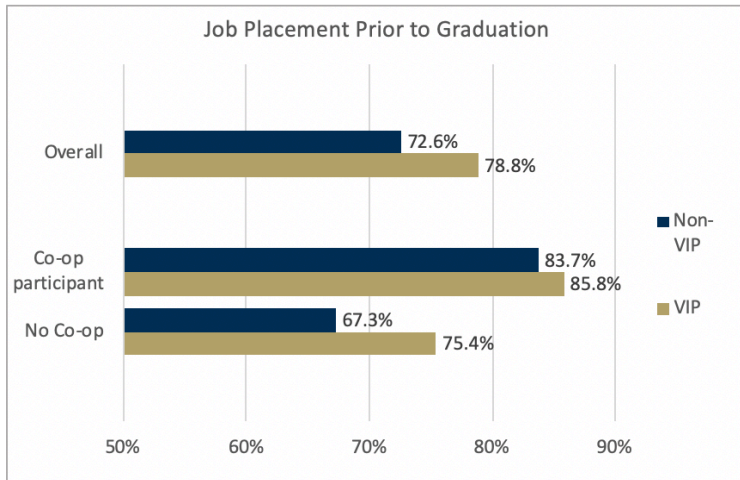


Figure 2: Comparison of job placement for VIP vs non-VIP students. (unpublished data- private communication)

Figure 3 shows the inequity of job placement where white students had a preferential advantage over their underrepresented minority and Asian peers. There are gains for students of all races/ethnicities in their job placement prior to graduation if they have taken VIP courses but the compensatory gains for underrepresented minority and Asian students eliminated inequity as can be seen in Figure 3 below.

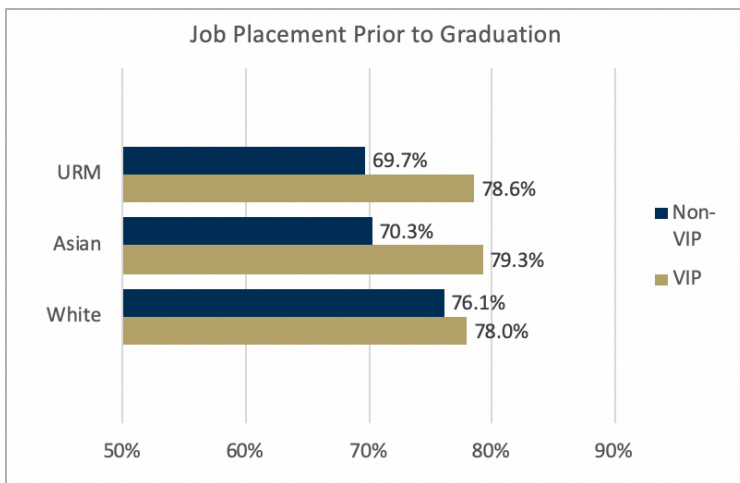


Figure 3: Comparison of job placement for VIP vs non-VIP students based on their race and ethnicity. (unpublished data- private communication)