Curtin Volunteers! - A strategic approach to improving student retention through student-driven student-engagement

Marc Phillips
CurtinLife, Curtin University

Abstract

Student retention is a major challenge facing Australian universities, and research has shown that socialisation and connection with campus life is an important element in addressing student attrition (Clark, 2008). This paper explores a student-driven student-engagement approach to retention through Curtin Volunteers! (CV!), a volunteer hub based at Curtin University. Whilst we, as staff, are ultimately responsible for ensuring its success, student volunteer leaders take up key operational roles and drive many of CV!'s initiatives. We have observed that this approach benefits the University by enabling it to scale-up its extracurricular offering at a relatively low cost and also benefits students by offering opportunities to engage with campus life and connect with their peers, staff and the community. The positive impacts of this approach far outweigh the challenge faced in balancing the need to give student leaders autonomy in their roles and the need for staff to meet University targets.

Background

One of the major challenges facing Australian universities is student retention. Particularly vulnerable are students who enter via alternative pathways; students from low socio-economic backgrounds; "first-in-family" students; students from rural or remote areas; and students with a disability (Barnes, Macalpine & Munro, 2015).

Aside from these demographic factors, students face a multitude of other challenges which impact on retention; including relocation, finding work and balancing it with study, and establishing personal and professional networks (Kift & Nelson, 2005). Many students also enter university without a clear understanding of what their course entails and have expectations that may be incongruent with the reality of university life (James, 2002). Beyond the first year, students tend to face a different set of challenges including a perceived sense of inadequacy caused by unmet expectations of success and also a re-examination of their purpose of being at university in the first place (Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011). The multifactorial nature of student attrition necessitates the need for a wide range of strategies to be employed across institutions in order to address the issue. One strategy employed at Curtin University is to increase student engagement and a sense of belonging through involvement with Curtin Volunteers!.

Curtin Volunteers!

Curtin Volunteers! (CV!) is a student-driven initiative of Curtin University. Founded in 1994, CV! has grown and evolved through the years to emerge as a vital strategic student engagement initiative within Curtin's Student Experience Portfolio. By providing opportunities for socialisation and engagement with campus life, CV! plays a key role in supporting transition and retention strategies of the University (Clark, 2008). CV! also promotes social experiences which promote the opportunity for students to connect with their peers over a common bond

regardless of course of study, thereby helping to build a greater sense of belonging (Tinto, 2015).

Annually, over 100 volunteer activities are organised, engaging more than 800 volunteers who collectively amass over 18,000 hours of service to the community. The volunteer cohort is very diverse, with participants hailing from over 60 countries each year. Predominantly based at Curtin's Bentley campus, CV! runs volunteer activities in metropolitan, regional and remote Western Australia in partnership with external organisations from the non-profit, education and government sectors. Programs span a wide range of interests and include opportunities to volunteer in areas such as environmental protection, education, disability support, aged care and community development. Volunteer opportunities range from ongoing programs to one-off projects and are developed with accessibility, diversity, and mutual benefit for both volunteers and the community in mind.

To increase accessibility and manage the increasing number of volunteer opportunities, an online portal was introduced in 2013. This enabled us to manage our volunteer activities very efficiently and also provide students with a streamlined application process. The enthusiasm of our students to get involved is evident by the fact that our activities are often fully subscribed within hours of being launched. For example, in the first semester of 2016, 17 of 29 activities were full less than 24 hours after launch.

Studies have shown that a sense of belonging is an important factor in student persistence (Hausmann, L. R. M., Schofield, J. W. & Woods, R. L., 2007) and involvement in community service and volunteerism assists with student integration by building a sense of belonging (Soria, K. M., Troisi, J. N. & Stebleton, M. J., 2012). This in turn is a crucial factor to student retention (Krause, 2005).

Through participation with CV!, students are given opportunities to engage with their peers, University staff, campus life and the wider community. The programs are designed to enrich student learning and to contribute to the development of Curtin's graduate capabilities. There is also a focus on the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving and conflict resolution. Student participation of twenty hours or more is recognised via the Curtin Extra certificate. This provides official recognition of a student's involvement in extra-curricular programs that contribute to Curtin University life and their own personal and professional development.

Feedback received from volunteers, have been consistently positive. In 2015, over 96% of volunteer leaders (n=32) and over 97% of general volunteers (n=241) reported that they were "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their experience. Some feedback included:

> *My leadership and team building skills have improved vastly and I've made a lot of friends in the process. Joining CV! was the best experience I have had at Curtin University. – Student Volunteer Leader*

> *I rate this experience a 10/10! This trip has been absolutely amazing. I made friends for a lifetime and I gained so much knowledge – Volunteer, Remote & Indigenous Program*

Student-driven student-engagement: The challenges of increasing scale and maintaining connection

CV! operates on a student-driven student-engagement model. Whilst staff are ultimately responsible for the safe and successful delivery of activities, trained student volunteer leaders occupy key operational roles within CV! and drive many of its initiatives.

Each year over 90 student leaders are appointed to the CV! Leadership Team, generally through a competitive selection process. They are managed by 2.5 FTE staff and take on a variety of roles. They are provided training and ongoing support to ensure that they are well equipped to take on their roles. Senior volunteer leaders also manage and mentor more junior members of the team. In so doing, CV! builds on the practice of peer-to-peer mentoring and engagement to facilitate a student's sense of empowerment (Perrin, 2014) and belonging by actively encouraging reflection, sharing of experiences and support for each other. Their roles are similar in some aspects to academic peer teaching facilitators who, according to the Mapping Student-Led Peer Learning in the UK publication, reported gaining transferrable skills, developing social and cultural competencies and also building a greater sense of connection and belonging with the institution through their roles (Keenan, 2014).

As the staff coordinating the program we have found this model to be operationally effective and mutually beneficial for the University and students alike. It has enabled the University to scale-up and engage a large number of students in extracurricular activities at a relatively low cost whilst maintaining a sense of identity with the program and a sense of belonging to the University.

The student-driven nature of CV! ensures that it remains relevant to student needs and interests and provides a way for them to actively engage with their peers, the University and the wider community. Having student leaders in operational roles also makes the program more accessible as students often feel more comfortable in approaching a peer as opposed to a university staff member (Mitchell, J. & Soini, N., 2014). The connections that are forged allow many students to overcome a sense of isolation. Both formal and informal networks help connect students to a wide range of opportunities and support mechanisms from within CV! and across other extracurricular programs and the University in general.

The model provides real-world leadership experience for the student volunteer leaders as they are afforded the opportunity to develop skills that complement their classroom learning. Feedback received from student leaders in the past has overwhelmingly indicated that they found their experience to be enjoyable and beneficial:

> *I've gained quality leadership skills from this position and I think I'll continue to learn so much more down the track. It's been an amazing experience and I feel so much more confident about myself compared to when I first started. I have taken so many opportunities I never thought I would over the past year and I have not regretted one of them. Thanks to CV! and many other sources I am more willing to take on challenges and at least try before I say I can't do it!! – Student Volunteer Leader*

Engaging students in CV!'s leadership team and allowing them to influence operations has also benefitted us by ensuring they feel a sense of ownership thereby maintaining a high level of engagement with the program. Working alongside a leadership team comprising of students also ensures that we remain responsive to changing trends and the needs of students. They also act as great ambassadors for us as they are best placed to promote our activities to their peers. Each semester, we receive at least twice the number of leadership team applications than we

have vacant roles, which indicates that there is a healthy appetite for leadership positions amongst the student population.

We have observed that, through their involvement with CV!, many student volunteer leaders have developed lasting networks and a sense of connectedness with the University. They often opt to remain in CV!'s leadership team for multiple semesters and some ex-leaders return each year, even post-graduation, to participate in our activities.

The sustainability of this model is evident by the longevity of CV!. Over the years we have refined our recruitment, training and succession planning processes to cope with the inevitably high turnover of student volunteer leaders due to graduation.

Whilst one of the benefits of the initiative is that students gain leadership experience, this can present a challenge to staff who have to achieve student engagement targets of the University. It is therefore necessary for staff to strike a balance between giving students who have limited experience the freedom to make decisions, and being more directive. We have found that one way to achieve this balance is to develop a framework embedded with clear guidelines and procedures, but that also leaves enough room for students to exercise a level of autonomy and creativity in their roles.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the CV! experience, it is clear that the student-driven student-engagement model of operation has distinct advantages, but is not without its challenges. Through this initiative, the University is able to cost-effectively scale-up student engagement initiatives while offering students opportunities to develop skills and engage meaningfully with campus life. The main challenge that we face as staff is balancing the need to give student leaders autonomy in their roles while still meeting the student engagement targets of the University. We have observed that the key to getting the balance right is to operate within a clearly defined framework which still affords student leaders some measure of flexibility in their roles. It is imperative that the student volunteer leaders are recruited well and that they are provided with training, support, mentorship and development opportunities to enable them to perform the functions of their role to the best of their ability.

Discussion questions

What types of student engagement initiatives are run at your campus? How are they run? How successful are they?

One challenge of the student-driven student-engagement (peer-to-peer) model is balancing the need to give student leaders autonomy in their roles and the need for staff to meet university targets. How do you / would you approach this challenge in the peer-to-peer programs that are delivered at your institution?

Whilst the student-driven student-engagement model (peer-to-peer) is cost effective, funding remains an issue in this tight economic environment with much of our operations being "soft-funded". What types of funding models have your institutions adopted in running student engagement initiatives? Are there alternative sources of funding (e.g. sponsorship) that your institution have exploited to fund such initiatives?

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