

# Innovate Through Crowd Sourcing

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## ABSTRACT

In March 2012, Virginia Commonwealth University's VP for Finance and Administration created a team of innovators called team IMPACT. The task for team IMPACT was to create a viable methodology for vetting innovative ideas and to brainstorm ideas to push through this methodology. One of the ideas that came out of this project was to implement a system by which the team could gather the ideas of the entire university community. The team began the task of procuring and implementing a crowd sourcing solution. In February of 2013, team IMPACT began piloting a program called VCU Ideas, powered by IdeaScale. Through this product, team IMPACT can capture the ideas of the university as well as allow the university community to vote on the ideas. Crowd sourcing enables team IMPACT to keep their fingers on the pulse of the university.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.3 [Computers and Society]: Organizational Impacts  
*Computer-supported collaborative work*

## Keywords

Support, Operating Systems, Mobile, Customer Satisfaction, Virtualization

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) sits in the heart of Richmond, Virginia, enrolling more than 32,000 students and employing close to 18,000 faculty and staff members. Since its establishment in 1968, VCU has expanded to include two downtown campuses in Richmond, as well as six satellite locations throughout the state of Virginia, and one site in Doha, Qatar. Offering 216 degree and certification programs through 13 separate schools and one college, VCU has been able to provide students with a full range of courses, from sculpture to microbiology, engineering to foreign language, business to philosophy, and many others.

In March of 2012, the Vice President of VCU's Finance and Administration put together a team of individuals to focus on innovation throughout the university. This team is named IMPACT.

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## 2. WHAT IS TEAM IMPACT?

IMPACT is a team composed of members from all of the departments within VCU's Finance and Administration Division. The team's mission is "To utilize creativity and collaboration to identify initiatives that result in innovative improvements in support of VCU's Quest for Distinction." The concept for team IMPACT came from the Skunk Works team, which was founded in Lockheed Martin's Advanced Development Programs [1]. The idea behind a skunk works team is to have a team that can work with autonomy and free from bureaucratic encumbrances. The team started out with a membership of 12, though currently the team operates with membership of 10 (Figure 1). The role of IMPACT was to work together to promote innovative projects within VCU's community. Though the team is sponsored by the VP for Finance and Administration, who is now the Chief Operating Officer for the university, the team was to have freedom to brainstorm, research, and bring forth projects without directives from the administration at the university.

The first hurdle that the team had to overcome was group formation. As with any group, this can be the greatest challenge and took up a good portion of the first year of its existence. However, once the group got over this hurdle, it dove head first into project brainstorming and vetting.



Figure 1 – IMPACT Team

### 2.1 Project evaluation

Once the team moved from formation to production mode, a process had to be in place for efficiently vetting ideas. The team chose to vet the ideas on a simple Risk vs. Benefit matrix (Figure 2). This allowed the team to rate various risks versus various benefits on a scale of 1 – 5. For Risk the scale was 1 being the highest risk and 5 being the lowest risk. For Benefit the scale was 1 being the lowest benefit and 5 being the highest benefit.

Risk factors being evaluated were:

- Time Frame
- Cost to implement
- Change to operating procedures

- Other hurdles to implementation
- Perceived Administration Support

Benefit factors being evaluated were:

- Alignment with VCU's Quest for Distinction
- Savings to the University
- Student experience
- Enhanced facilities
- Improved safety/security
- Customer Service
- Organizational transparency

The evaluation took place through a project evaluation subcommittee that consisted of three members of team IMPACT. For the first round of projects that would be moved forward in the team's process, only those projects which fell within the upper right quadrant of the matrix would be selected.

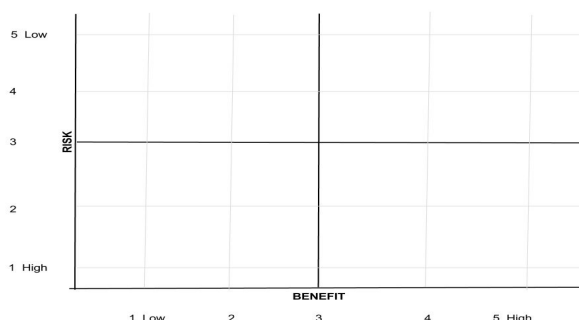


Figure 2 – Evaluation Matrix

## 2.2 Phase two and beyond

Once the project is vetted, it is then to be processed through a rigorous evaluation, which includes reaching out to departmental stakeholders to assist in determining the viability of the project. Once that is complete, the team assembles a project team consisting of members from team IMPACT as well as the departmental stakeholders. A full project committee then begins work on setting timelines and deliverables for the project. The final step in the process is to present the case for the project to the senior leadership of the university to obtain buy in and funding to put the project into motion.

## 2.3 What projects came out of the team?

After brainstorming, the team came up with a potential list of 72 projects. Of those, four projects made it through in the initial round of deliverables. Those projects were a Combined Server Center for the University, Comprehensive Space Utilization, DIY workshops for the university community and an Employee Appreciation Week. Shortly after these grew into project teams, a few more projects made it to phase two evaluations. Those were: a Centralized Training System, University Wide Utility Management, Centralized Contractual Services, and Maximizing Underutilized Resources and Expertise.

## 3. WHY THE NEED FOR CROWD SOURCING?

It became quickly apparent that though the team was generating many viable project ideas, that it would be impossible for a team of this size to reach its fullest potential without reaching out to the university community. With that said, the team embarked on looking at ways to capture the ideas of the entire university community. Ideas were brought up of using online forums, social

networking, email, and crowd sourcing to capture these ideas. Though all of these processes allow the team to capture ideas, it was apparent that to manage the multitude of ideas, an idea management system was needed.

### 3.1 Which solution was selected?

Initially the team put together an RFP committee and received proposals from three vendors. Through the RFP selection process, the team procured a system. In the initial RFP process, IdeaScale was a close second to company that was awarded the contract. This was based primarily on cost effectiveness. After issuing the award to the initial company, that company revealed many hidden costs that were not detailed in their initial RFP. As a result of this, the initial reward was revoked and the team put out a new RFP with stronger wording for what was to be delivered. Through this RFP process, IdeaScale was procured.

### 3.2 What does IdeaScale do?

IdeaScale is a full service idea management system. This allows the IMPACT team to reach out to the university community and enable community submissions and voting on ideas. By allowing the voting, it would quickly allow the team to put their finger on the pulse of what is most beneficial to the community. It also allows for campaigns to be created targeting specific types of ideas. While the IMPACT team will allow free flowing ideas to be generated, at times there may be a need to target certain groups, or certain ideas within the university community. Once the idea is submitted, the system enables the community to comment and vote on the idea. Once the team has evaluated an idea, it allows moderators to change the status of the idea to reflect if it has been moved into production, put on hold, or any other appropriate status change.

## 4. PILOT!

The IMPACT Team set up a custom install of the system for testing (Figure 3). Before rolling out a new system like this at VCU, a testing and pilot implementation has to take place. Team IMPACT opened up 200 spots for people to test the system. To entice participation, the team offered up the opportunity for testers to win an iPad Mini. To qualify, testers had to meet criteria which included actively participating in the system through idea generation, voting, and commenting. Those who actively participated were entered into a random drawing.

Within the first week of the test system being online, the community had over 50 ideas with many comments and votes. At the end of the test phase, a survey was sent out to the participants to evaluate the viability of having a system such as this on campus. The response was very positive with nearly all participants eager to see a system like this implemented. After the testing phase was complete, the team began preparation for full roll out. To phase this in and get buy in from other administrative areas, the initial campaigns for the system would be limited to ideas centered around Finance and Administration innovation. This began in April of 2013 and will continue for three months. Once that phase is complete, the campaigns will be expanded to include all areas of the VCU community.

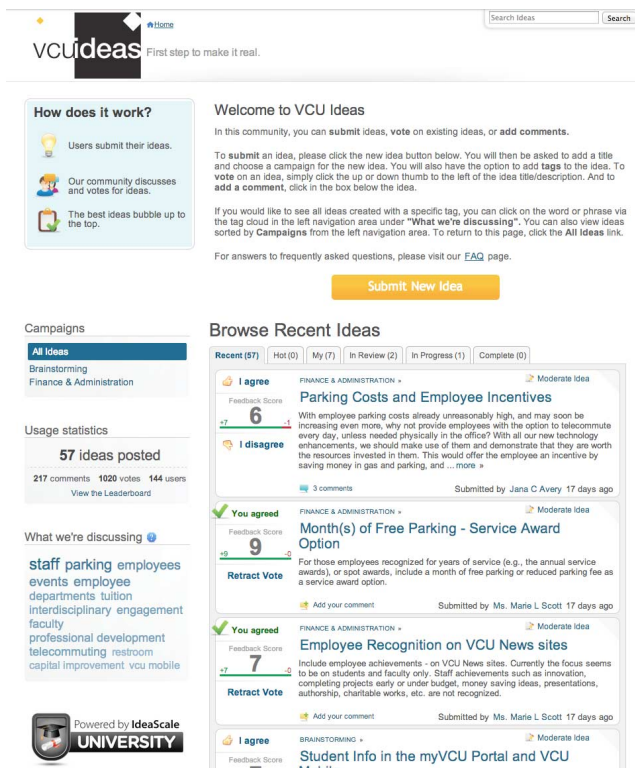


Figure 3 – VCU's IdeaScale Install

#### 4.1 How does it work?

Simply put, users submit their ideas by clicking on a large button that says Submit New Idea. After that they are presented with a simple form popup asking for the Title, Description, Campaign, and Tags for the idea (Figure 4). By asking for their ideas in this manner, it makes for a very simple and pleasant user experience. The selection box for campaigns is useful when multiple campaigns are underway. Tags allow for ease of searching when looking for ideas which cross over to ideas already submitted.

 The screenshot shows the 'Submit Your Idea' form. It has a title field with a character count of 64 characters left. Below it is a description field with a character count of 500 characters left. There is a campaign selection dropdown menu currently set to 'Finance & Administration'. Below that is a tags field with a note 'Use commas to separate tags.' and a 'Submit' button. A red 'X' icon is in the top right corner of the form.

Figure 4– Submission screen

Once the user submits the idea, it goes into the database for others to view, vote up or down (Figure 5), or comment on (Figure 6).

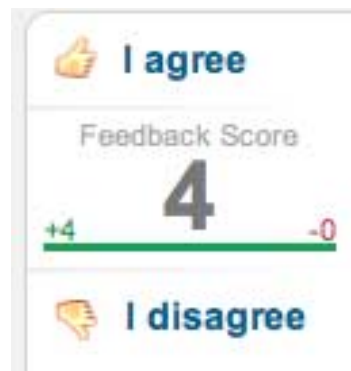


Figure 5 – Voting Options

 The screenshot shows the comment screen for an idea. It has a 'Comments (0)' header and an 'Add your comment' button. Below the button is a text input field with a placeholder 'Write your comment...'. There is a checkbox labeled 'Pin this comment on top of the thread.' and a 'Submit Comment' button.

Figure 6 – Comment screen

As the community votes on items, a feedback score is calculated to give a quick view into how the community perceives the idea. There is also a dashboard view of where ideas are in the process.

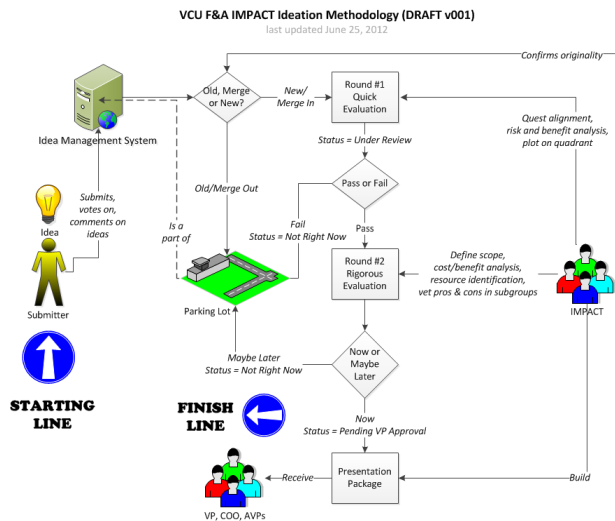
End users have the ability to flag ideas to alert the moderators of potentially inflammatory or offensive topics.

#### 4.2 Moderation

The IMPACT team has assigned three moderators for the initial roll out. The roles of the moderators are to insure that ideas submitted are on topic and well formed, to promote discussion of the the topics, and ultimately to move the ideas throughout the vetting process. Standard responses were created for the moderators to use to insure consistency in communication.

### 5. WHAT CHALLENGES EXIST IN ROLLING THIS OUT?

When designing the system, the IMPACT team spent many hours working out the process for how the information flows throughout the system (Figure 7



**Figure 7 – Methodology Flow**

Getting the flow down was the first challenge. Once this was established, a communications plan was needed. This involved how the team would communicate the existence of the system as well as how to market it. More importantly, guidelines for how to respond to ideas were needed. The team decided to let an idea sit in the system for ten days before the moderators began to move the idea through the process. This would allow ample time for the community to vote and comment on an idea. After that, it was determined that a 48-hour window would start for moderators to move the project to its next status. During this time if a project were to be moved to the next phase of development, a team would be created to begin phase two research into the idea. Projects would be deemed not viable at this point based on the vetting process defined above in section 2.1. Any project falling

in the upper right quadrant of the project evaluation matrix would be designated as not viable. While the project is not viable at this point in time, the idea would be reevaluated at a later date to determine its viability. If the idea was off topic or not viable at this point, the topic would be closed and moved to the parking lot of ideas to revisit later. A note would be pinned to the top of the comments for each idea indicating the next phase for that topic.

## 6. THE FUTURE

Once the pilot phase of this project is complete. The IMPACT Team plans to roll this solution out to the entire university. Rolling out the solution to the university will come with a new set of challenges. First the IMPACT team will have to meet with various stakeholders to discuss communication and action plans for when ideas are processed through the system. Second, the team will have to evaluate how to best organize the system so the system will be intuitive for the end user to get their idea submitted to the proper content area. Finally, the team will have to properly scale the moderation duties of the system.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Virginia Commonwealth University hopes to bring about a university-wide sense of collaboration and input from faculty, staff and students from implementing this system. The university community will gain a sense of ownership over what happens at the university.

## 7. REFERENCE

[1] <http://www.lockheedmartin.com/us/aeronautics/skunkworks.htm>