

A Recognition Of Excellence

BY DAVID JONES

NACAS AWARD WINNERS DEDICATED TO CHARITY, COMMUNITY, AND AUXILIARY SERVICES

As Stephen Barr, CASP, prepared to receive the NACAS award for Innovative Achievement in Auxiliary Services just a few weeks before Thanksgiving, it was somewhat fitting that he gave others on his team much of the credit. By all accounts, Barr is the ultimate team player.

Virginia Commonwealth University's auxiliaries wanted to create a better way of giving potential students a clearer look at the university – and how they might fit in. That's where Barr and his colleagues came in.

They created a virtual reality-type system, including 360-degree photos, to allow students virtual campus visits before arriving on campus.

"I am hoping everybody tries to copy it," he jokingly said. "Maybe nobody will, who knows? What we always talk about is the old cliché of a picture is worth 1,000 words. A lot of times we use two-dimensional photos in brochures. But everybody does that, right? You are stuck in a sea of monotony that's out there and everybody gets to see the same thing, but it doesn't really stand out. What we are all about is expanded marketing."

AN IDEA THAT TOOK OFF

"We decided why not take it a step further? Why don't we do a 360 degree photo and let people experience our spaces before they ever stand in our spaces, and make it something memorable?," Barr said.

Barr's group decided to show prospective students in a clear picture what to expect, allowing them to arrive at a resource fair with the ability to view where they will live, and other resources, before they actually see them.

"We wrote it up in 360 images and put them in some VR headsets," he said. "Folks who came to other booths wanted to ask about the technology store, or the book store, or the dining hall, and we just let them see it. They can stand there and view it like they were standing in the middle of the space.

"At that point, we put some of our photos on our website, so you can go to the Google maps section and type in our technology store - which is RAM TECH - and click on some of the photos. You can actually experience our store at your own home at 2 a.m. and try to figure out what type of computer to get."

You can actually see everything that is there, as if you were standing in the middle of the store.

"We thought it would be a great opportunity to obviously introduce ourselves, let folks get more comfortable with the space when they come in, and



"We go out and see these really cool things and we go back to the institution and say how can we make this an experience [at VCU]? A lot of people are about to spend a lot of money on campus and we want to make sure they can see all these things. "The funny thing about our department, our department ranges in experience levels. So we've got folks in our office that have been there for 46 years. And we've got folks who have been there for maybe two years now. But the one thing, what makes our team work well, nobody dismisses anybody's idea when it is thrown out on the table. Everybody goes, Okay this could have legs, let's flesh this out."

-Stephen Barr, csp, Virginia Commonwealth University

not be such a learning curve in their first college experience on campus," Barr said.

New students know what many of the areas have to offer before ever stepping foot onto campus.

STUDYING GREAT IDEAS

So how did this all come about? Collaboration, Barr said.

"We've got a talented team of folks and we kind of sit around and we look at what current things are happening out in the world, and say why can't we do this for a college campus," he said. "Technology-wise, it seems daunting to get this 360 image and put it out there. It's actually very simple."

Barr and his colleagues produced their own video and showed others at VCU what they wanted to do.

"We were starting to get just as many of the other departments at the resource fair coming over to our booth to look at our VR station as we were getting parents and students," Barr said.

The 360 concept led other VCU workers to spread the word to others about this "really cool" concept.

"So we knew we may be onto something once it was out there," he said.

The camera is the most expensive part of the project. The one they just purchased is about \$400. Other equipment included some \$20 VR head sets purchased from Amazon and used Samsung Galaxy phones from Ebay.

The display is like being in another room when it's being used. Barr said the creation says something about the VCU experience as well.

"It's interesting to watch people's equilibrium because when you take the device down it's like 'Am I really? OK I am in this room here,'" Barr said. "When you put your head up, down, it's the full picture."

Barr, who is 39 and completing his third year at VCU after spending 9 ½ years in auxiliaries at Louisiana State University, said a key to success is gathering ideas from others, then collaborating with his own team about ways to implement creative ideas on his own campus.

"We go out and see these really cool things and we go back to the institution and say, How can we make this an experience (at VCU)?," he said. "A lot of people are about to spend a lot of money on campus, and we want to make sure they can see all these things.

"Our department ranges in experience levels," he added. "So we've got folks in our office that have been there for 46 years. And we've got folks who have been there for maybe two years now. But the one thing that makes our team work well is that nobody dismisses an idea when it is thrown on the table. Everybody goes, 'Okay this could have legs, let's flesh this out!'"

There were four or five people involved in the creation that earned the NACAS award. The idea was sent to the group for consideration after one of the managers, Jay Phinizy, ran across an article addressing the subject. Diane Reynolds, the NACAS 2016-17 president, submitted the idea.

"It took her just a few seconds to jump at the idea," Barr said. "She takes one look, nods her head and says, yes."

Reynolds' leadership of the idea is just one example of how auxiliaries can make a huge impact on college campuses. And Barr agrees "there is always the next step."

"Right now this is a static image, but we do have the capability of running video," Barr said. "So we were thinking of the idea at the next level, why not do 360 tours of a space? You could virtually turn your head and look at all the merchandise that's right there."

The VCU auxiliary service department is just starting to expand its work for the school.

"There is so much more to do with this idea," said Barr, who in the fall was placed on a NACAS regional program development committee. "Universities are starting to touch on these virtual tour type things.

Barr said the group would likely have a little celebration when he returned from the C3X annual conference with the award.

Then get back to the future. ■