



# EMPOWERING UNLIMITED FUTURES



**VCU** School of Education

# UNRIVALED

## Transforming lives and our communities for six decades

As we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education, we reflect on a legacy built upon our unwavering dedication to innovation in teaching, leadership, counseling, research and learning. Over these six decades, our school has stood as a beacon of transformation — continually shaping the futures of students, educators, leaders and counselors across urban communities and beyond.

In 2023, we introduced a powerful new tagline: **Our unrivaled approach to learning transforms lives.** This campaign captures the heart of our mission, reflecting our academic excellence and our work's profound impact on individuals and communities. This message inspires every facet of what we do, from classroom instruction to groundbreaking research and community engagement, instilling hope and inspiration in all we touch.

This past year, we deepened our focus on fostering a culture of belonging — a commitment that defines who we are.

Here, belonging is more than an ideal: It's the foundation of an inclusive community where every student, faculty member, staff member and alum feels seen, heard and valued. By prioritizing authenticity, mutual respect and accountability, we create a supportive environment where all individuals can thrive and contribute their unique strengths.

Our collective efforts have garnered national recognition. For the 2024-25 academic year, *U.S. News & World Report* ranked us as the 16th best public graduate school of education. Our external research funding remains robust, with more than \$44.7 million in funding, and we have ascended to #9 in the nation for research expenditures per faculty member.



Photo: Allen Jones, VCU Enterprise Marketing and Communications

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These accomplishments reflect our educational leadership and our continued ability to address the most pressing challenges facing schools, families and communities today. In this 60th anniversary year, we are not only celebrating past achievements but looking toward a future filled with unlimited possibilities.

Our faculty, students and graduates continue to lead efforts to solve critical societal challenges — from addressing teacher, leader and counselor shortages to tackling student absenteeism and mental health concerns and advancing inclusive educational practices.

Our research translates into real-world solutions that transform lives — ensuring that education remains accessible, equitable and transformative for all, instilling confidence in our ability to address today's most pressing challenges.

As we embark on the next chapter of our story, we remain guided by our commitment to belonging, excellence and impact. With the invaluable support of our faculty, staff, students, alums, donors and friends, we will continue to provide an unrivaled approach to learning that transforms lives and uplifts communities. We are deeply grateful for your continued support and belief in our mission.

With warm regards and in celebration,

**Kathleen M. Rudasill, Ph.D.**

*Professor and Interim Dean, VCU School of Education*

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Photos: LA Ricks

# Leadership



**Kathleen Rudasill,**  
Ph.D., Interim Dean  
and Professor



**Luciana de Oliveira,**  
Ph.D., Associate Dean for  
Academic Affairs and  
Graduate Studies, Professor  
of Teaching and Learning



**Tomika Ferguson,**  
Ph.D., Assistant Dean  
for Student Affairs and  
Inclusive Excellence,  
Assistant Professor of  
Educational Leadership



**Whitney Newcomb,** Ph.D.,  
Interim Associate Dean for  
Faculty Development,  
Professor and Chair of  
Educational Leadership



**Kevin Sutherland,** Ph.D.,  
Interim Associate Dean  
for Research, Professor  
of Counseling and  
Special Education



**Scott Stech,** M.Ed., PMP,  
SHRM-CP, Executive  
Director for Finance and  
Business Administration

## Our vision

To be a leader in responsive, needs-driven and research-based educational practices that transform the lives of those we serve in our communities, especially those who have been historically marginalized.

## Our mission

We advance learning and knowledge through impactful research, teaching and engagement to provide our students, professionals and communities with the tools to create progressive change. We prepare and support professionals to lead change and inform social, economic, health and educational policy and practice.

# FACTS

## OUR STUDENTS BY

**978<sup>1</sup>**

graduate and  
undergraduate  
students

**669<sup>1</sup>**

graduate students

**309<sup>1</sup>**

undergraduate  
students

# & FIGURES

## THE NUMBERS: A LOOK AT 2023-24\*

**36%**<sup>1</sup>

of students identified  
as underrepresented  
minorities

**42%**<sup>1</sup>

of undergraduates were  
Pell Grant eligible

**41%**<sup>1</sup>

of entering undergraduates  
identified as first-generation  
students

**43%**<sup>1</sup>

enrollment growth  
over five years

**10 STATES AND  
5 COUNTRIES<sup>1</sup>**

locations of our entering  
students fall 2023

**134,785**

field experience hours  
contributed to partner school  
divisions by licensure students

## WHAT OTHERS SAY

### *U.S. News & World Report* 2024 Rankings of Schools of Education<sup>2</sup>

**#16 BEST** public school  
of education

**#2** **BEST** education school  
in Virginia

**#17** **BEST** public special  
education program

**#45** **BEST** online master's  
in education program

**#15** **BEST** online  
master's in education,  
administration and  
supervision

### *U.S. News & World Report* 2024 Research Rankings of Schools of Education<sup>2</sup>

**#9** total amount of funded  
research expenditure per  
faculty member

**#18** total amount of  
externally funded  
research

Shanghai 2023 Global  
Ranking of Academic  
Subjects: Education

**TIER 51-75<sup>3</sup>**

1 VCU Institutional Research and Decision Support  
Enrollment Dashboard, Census II fall 2023

2 *U.S. News & World Report* 2024 Best Education  
Schools

3 (Shanghai Ranking) 2023 Global Ranking of Academic  
Subjects: Education

\*Student statistics based on fall 2023 data

## RESEARCH

## ALUMS

**\$152M\***  
in active cumulative research  
grant funding in FY24

**\$44.7 M**  
represents funding in FY24

**62%**  
increase from 2019 to 2024

## DEGREES and CERTIFICATES

**Counseling** Ph.D. / M.Ed.

**Leadership** Ph.D. / Ed.D. / M.Ed. / B.A. /  
Graduate and post-graduate certificates

**Special Education** Ph.D. / M.Ed. /  
B.S.Ed. / Graduate and undergraduate  
certificates

**Teaching and Learning** Ph.D. / M.T.  
/ M.Ed. / Post-master's certificate / B.S.Ed. /  
Graduate certificate

**Foundations of Education** Ph.D. /  
Graduate certificate

**18,074**  
total living alums

**600**  
alums are current Virginia public  
school educators who graduated  
from our school from 2019 to 2023

**47%**  
of these 600 educators are working  
in Virginia's Title I schools (public  
schools receiving federal funding  
to support high-poverty students)

## GIVING

**309%**  
growth in financial support of  
endowment in the past 10 years

**55.3%**  
of donations support student  
scholarships

# SIXTY YEARS and counting



**In the early 1960s**, as many as 50% of Virginia public school teachers were being prepared out of state — but change was coming.

This year, we're marking our 60th anniversary with faculty, staff and students — both past and present — celebrating our rich history of building knowledge and service in Virginia.

In 1964, Richmond Professional Institute, VCU's predecessor, opened our school to address the need for more teacher preparation programs in Virginia. By 1967, enrollment in education courses had grown rapidly, reaching nearly 1,000 undergraduate and graduate students.



"One consistent trend throughout our school's history is our dedication to addressing the concerns and challenges of the local community. In every decade, we've worked to ensure that these voices are heard and their needs are met. These strong relationships are a crucial part of our success," said Kathleen M. Rudasill, Ph.D., interim dean for the School of Education.

## A Special 60th Celebration

The VCU School of Education celebrated its 60th anniversary at the 2024-25 convocation event held at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture in August 2024.

Provost Fotis Sotiropoulos, Ph.D., greeted attendees and emphasized the School of



# VCU SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

## TIMELINE AT-A-GLANCE



Photos: LA Ricks

# 1964

Founded with focus on teacher preparation.

# 1967

Enrollment reached nearly 1,000 undergraduate and graduate students.

# 1980s

Continued enrollment growth in teacher preparation, establishment of Richmond Rehabilitation and Training Center and the Partnership for People with Disabilities.

# 1990s

Focus on local community partnerships, including founding of Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium as a research practice partnership with area school divisions.

# 2008

Introduction of education doctorate in leadership.

# 2011

Launch of RTR Teacher Residency to prepare teachers for high-needs and hard-to-staff school settings.

# 2019

Introduction of five undergraduate programs in educator preparation.



# DEPARTMENT Updates

## Counseling and Special Education

Patrick Mullen,  
Ph.D., Chair



- Welcomed our third Accelerated B.S. in Psychology to M.Ed. in Counseling cohort, a bridge program that encourages undergraduate students to enroll in masters-level courses to jump-start their entry into the field
- Revised the undergraduate curriculum to increase the flexibility and impact of our offerings and added general education courses for all undergraduate students. These changes, which assist these students in meeting cross-curricular requirements, led to higher enrollments in courses and programs.
- Increased access to mental health care, with counseling interns providing more than 10,000 service hours in Central Virginia, including school counseling, college counseling, couples and family counseling, crisis response, trauma-informed care, safety assessment, and more across 40 unique community, hospital, school, private practice and group settings
- Raised more than \$3,300 for student-related support during 2024 VCU Giving Day, generating our largest fundraising effort to date

## Educational Leadership

Whitney Newcomb,  
Ph.D., Chair



- Improved the quality of student experience and instruction with a focus on feedback loops, dashboards, instructional HUB, and Formative Assessments (Ed.D. program)
- Recognized as a finalist in the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) Program of the Year Award (Ed.D program)
- Graduated largest class to date, 58 students (Ed.D. program)
- Enrolled largest and most diverse EDLP class to date, 78 students (Ed.D. program)
- Received SCHEV grant, T3 :Transformative PD for Transformative Learning Experiences to Transform the Workforce to inspire students to explore professional pathways with AI, Jon Becker PI
- Engaged in Collaborative Online International Learning project with students from American University of Ras Al Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates (M.Ed. ADLT, 612)
- Forged a partnership with Participate Learning (M.Ed., LST)
- Admitted largest class to date (M.Ed., HE)
- Co-created School Leader Residency program (M.Ed., A&S, and PMC)
- Created and launched four new undergraduate, general education courses

## Foundations of Education

Thomas Farmer, Ph.D., Chair



- Established the online Learning Sciences graduate certificate
- Sponsored the Critical Quantitative Methodologies Series through the Research, Assessment and Education focus. The program hosted Jay Garvey from the University of Vermont and Wendy Castillo from Princeton University.
- Earned several significant grants for team projects to enhance STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, Medicine) learning for underrepresented groups: Christine Lee Bae and John Fife (Institute of Education Sciences); Kamden Strunk (National Science Foundation); and Maike Philipsen with colleagues across campus (National Institutes of Health)

## Teaching and Learning

Thomas Farmer, Ph.D., Interim Chair (current)\*



- Welcomed the inaugural cohort of elementary educators in RTR Teacher Residency's registered apprenticeship program
- Supported early career teachers through the Schaberg New Teacher Support Program
- Collaborated with the VCU College of Humanities and Sciences to develop new undergraduate programs in Secondary English Education, Secondary History Education and Secondary Mathematics Education
- Enrolled a cohort of Albemarle County, Va., teachers pursuing reading specialist endorsements
- Streamlined a pathway for Graduate Certificate in Elementary Education students to complete their Master's in Curriculum and Instruction

\* Whitney Newcomb, Ph.D., and Luciana de Oliveira, Ph.D., also served as interim chair of Teaching and Learning in FY24

# DEPARTMENT

# Updates

## Shaping Leaders, Transforming Communities: Our EDLP program makes its mark

At the heart of Richmond and extending far beyond, our **Department of Educational Leadership (EDLP)** is shaping the future of education and leadership across diverse fields. With more than 320 alumni leading K-12 schools and 259 others driving change in higher education, EDLP's impact is felt across communities in Virginia and nationwide. Whether transforming classrooms locally or championing innovation at universities nationwide, these graduates — 167 of whom are VCU employees — are committed to making a lasting impact.

"Our mission is to prepare leaders who not only adapt to the evolving educational landscape but actively shape it, focusing on equity, diversity and inclusiveness," said **Whitney Newcomb**, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Educational Leadership. "We believe in developing leaders with the knowledge, skills and critical perspective to drive meaningful and sustainable change."

Central to EDLP's mission is its unwavering commitment to equity and social responsibility. The department's unique approach combines theory with hands-on experience, empowering future leaders to tackle complex challenges and advocate for justice in their schools and communities. EDLP's doctoral students have



completed over 100 capstone projects with local organizations, providing nearly \$5 million in pro bono support. The digital library of these capstones is accessible at [scholarscompass.vcu.edu/edd\\_capstone/](http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/edd_capstone/), showcasing the department's commitment to accountability.

"Community engagement is central to our approach," Newcomb added. "We are deeply invested in partnering with community stakeholders to co-create solutions that enhance educational outcomes and build stronger, more inclusive environments."

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Whitney Newcomb, Ph.D.

Recent funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Quality Partnership program will enable EDLP and the Center for Teacher Leadership to expand the School Leader Residency program. This initiative recruits,

prepares and develops school leaders who can meet the evolving needs of Virginia's schools, providing hands-on experience and mentorship from seasoned educators.

To support ongoing professional growth, the innovative Leadership HUB offers tailored learning and support to organizations and leaders committed to making a positive community impact. "The HUB is a natural extension of our mission," Newcomb said. "It engages leaders at every stage of their journey, equipping them with the tools and strategies to navigate and influence a rapidly changing landscape."

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**Whitney Newcomb, Ph.D.**

With more than 320 alumni holding K-12 leadership roles and 259 in higher education, including 167 at VCU, EDLP's influence extends across educational and professional landscapes.

"Our graduates are not just leaders; they are the future," Newcomb said. "They embody our commitment to these values, and their work is a testament to the power of leadership grounded in inclusivity and equity."



Photo: Tom Kojcsich, VCU Enterprise Marketing and Communications

## Partnership supports teacher preparation programs for veterans and military families

Our school partnered with the **Virginia Department of Veterans Services** to include the **RTR Teacher Residency (RTR)** as a career opportunity for military members and their families.

The partnership creates a pathway for veterans and their families to transition into teaching. RTR reduces — or eliminates — the financial barriers for its teacher preparation participants, regardless of military affiliation. Placed in Virginia's 17 high-need partner school divisions, including Etrick Elementary School, where the agreement was signed, RTR aspiring teachers spend a year working alongside a mentor teacher, gradually taking on more teaching responsibility. RTR aspiring teachers agree to teach in a high-needs school after graduation.



"This partnership will help ease the teacher shortage by filling teaching positions with motivated, experienced and dedicated personnel," said Kim McKnight, Ph.D., RTR director. "We are thrilled to establish this opportunity for our military service members and their families who aspire to become educators. Our goal is to streamline the preparation, placement and hiring process and ensure a positive and seamless transition into the teaching profession."

# CENTER Updates

## Hands-on connections addressing real-world challenges

Our school's affiliated centers and institutes connect students and faculty to contemporary practice. In providing needed services, these organizations reach every corner of Virginia — and beyond — through research, training, resources and events.

### Center for Innovation in STEM Education

- Was awarded NSF Growing Research Access for Nationally Transformative Equity and Diversity (GRANTED) grant to designed to host three STEM convenings at regional universities, drawing over 200 attendees to advance the building of sustainable research infrastructure for emerging institutions
- Organized and hosted the second Metro Richmond Science and Engineering Fair for 135 students, with three advancing to the International Science and Engineering Fair; one team placing second in robotics and intelligent machines
- Empowered 88 students through the inaugural Chief Science Officer program to enhance leadership skills and conduct personalized STEM projects in their local communities and schools
- Provided research, outreach and training experience to VCU STEM undergraduate students
- Launched STEM study abroad program in Brazil in collaboration with Sao Paulo State University

### Center for Teacher Leadership

- Launched Virginia's first lab school, VCU x CodeRVA Lab School, a joint project between our RTR Teacher Residency and CodeRVA Regional High School
- Prepared teachers and school leaders for high-need settings across 19 partner school districts
- Provided professional learning opportunities to in-service teachers, meeting the needs of diverse learners across the state
- Was awarded multiple grants totaling more than \$3 million, including the Augustus F. Hawkins Center of Excellence, Virginia Department of Education Teacher Residency and Virginia Adult Learning Resource (VLARC) grant
- Provided professional learning opportunities and support to help pre-service and in-service teachers meet the needs of multilingual learners in the classroom
- Provided stipends to VCU students completing an education degree
- Received over \$1 million in collective funding from Virginia's Education and Aging and Rehabilitative Services offices and the Community College Workforce Alliance to

support quality instruction and access to training and higher education for adult learners statewide (VLARC)

- Delivered 250 hours of professional development during 87 training events to about 2,100 adult education instructors (VLARC)

## Child Development Center

- Provided more than \$150,000 in Child Care Access Means Parents in School Programs tuition funding
- Increased enrollment by over 90% to promote high-quality education for staff, faculty, students and community members
- Applied a \$1 million gift to transform classrooms and the playground, which will be completed in 2025
- Hosted education faculty and students to conduct research and observe meaningful interactions through the Learning Lab opportunity
- Hosted a Virginia Early Childhood Foundation event to advocate for childcare investments in the Virginia General Assembly
- Included in the VQB5 education initiative, which allows for Classroom Assessment Score System observation to enhance teacher-student relationship quality, leading to a new curriculum

## Institute for Collaborative Research and Evaluation

- Led impactful projects on teacher preparation and induction models, STEM education, student mental health and work-based learning
- Provided methodological support to faculty and students while facilitating professional learning opportunities on research methods and evaluation
- Positively influenced educational systems and community outcomes, driving improvements across local and state levels and enhancing opportunities for underrepresented groups

## International Educational Studies Center

- Developed several inaugural academic agreements to recruit international students, specifically for undergraduate programs in early childhood education and physical education and seamless transitions for international students to pursue VCU graduate degrees
- Resumed short-term programs to create pathways to our academic programs
- Hosted two international internship programs with National Changhua University of Education in Taiwan
- Received VCU Global Partnership Impact Award to enhance our collaboration in teacher education between VCU School of Education and Universidad de El Bosque School of Education through an innovative community-based project

## Family and Community Empowerment Center

- Offered free individual and family counseling to members of the Richmond community
- Launched a YouTube page and the “Parent Cafe” series, in partnership with the Child Development Center, to provide brief psychoeducation and information for topics identified by parents with young children enrolled at the center

## Partnership for People with Disabilities

- Secured 64 external awards totaling \$18.25 million, developed 45 new products for community partners, and published 18 articles/book chapters
- Provided 7,158 participants with continuing education and trained over 20,000 people
- Delivered 2,984 hours of technical assistance via our team of 120 staff/faculty, 26 trainees, and 60 volunteers
- Supported people with disabilities and families through multifaceted, culturally diverse outreach efforts

## Rehabilitation Research and Training Center

- Was awarded 16 new and continuing grants and contracts totaling \$13 million
- Assisted 270 consumers with disabilities with supported employment services, including Business Connections
- Impacted more than 212,750 individuals through projects, programs and services — including three conferences, 64 courses (14,677 registrants) and 27 webcasts (9,700 participants)

- Expanded knowledge translation efforts by increasing social media engagement, allowing researchers to connect with a broader audience. In 2023, RRTC websites attracted 178,000 visitors, and our social media platforms have 11,000 followers with 321,000 views
- Faculty and staff published more than 30 peer-reviewed articles and other scholarship

## Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium

- Led collaborative research and training with public school division partners focused on pertinent topics, including supporting mental health in schools, AI, adolescent THC usage, literacy and school dropout prevention
- Engaged with over 60 Ph.D., Ed.D., master’s and undergraduate students to offer real-world research skill development, transdisciplinary collaborations and authorship on reports designed to inform local policy and practice
- Hosted a workshop with the new ERA.NOVA partnership at George Mason University to consult on strategies for establishing and facilitating a successful RPP with multiple school division partners
- Co-hosted the National Network of Education Research Practice Partnerships (NNERPP) annual forum in July and led conversations across the NNERPP community about peer review processes in research practice partnerships



Photo: Adobe Stock

## VCU researcher makes the case for improving employment for people with disabilities

In the workforce, individuals with disabilities are chronically underrepresented: Just 40.5% were employed in January 2024, compared with 77.3% of people without disabilities.

**“Work outcomes should not be different for Americans simply on the basis of disability.”**

Lauren Avellone, Ph.D.

“People with disabilities who have complex support needs are at the highest risk of being unemployed or working in jobs below their potential,” said **Lauren Avellone**, Ph.D., associate professor at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC). “They often end up in segregated facilities where only people with disabilities are employed, performing repetitive tasks for very little pay.”

Avellone’s research and clinical work focuses on helping individuals with disabilities access education and employment.



In February, she testified before the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging about the importance of competitive integrated employment. Her goal was to support the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act, which aims to end the unfair practice of paying people with disabilities below the federal minimum wage. The act also would assist agencies in transitioning people with disabilities from being paid subminimum wages to competitive integrated employment.

The RRTC helps people with complex support needs find jobs that are comparable to those obtained by people without disabilities.

# RESEARCH

## Grant Highlights

### National Institutes of Health

Pathways for Authentic Teaching of Health Sciences | **Elizabeth Edmondson**, Ph.D., PI | \$1,342,148 | Build health literacy knowledge and skills supported by a culturally responsive lens. The five-year project will provide teachers and students in historically underserved rural and urban Virginia communities with career awareness for various educational paths and opportunities in health professions, as well as engage 60 secondary teachers in a model program that provides curriculum and professional development.



### National Science Foundation / GRANTED Project

Building a Regional Research Ecosystem among Emerging and Minority Serving Universities and Community Partners | **John Fife**, Ph.D., PI | \$99,846 | Inform the design of a regional research ecosystem that can transform the research enterprise through coordination, collaboration and transformation of research sharing across emerging and minority-serving universities and with the community.



### Social Security Administration

Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) Training and Data Center (NTDC) | **John Kregel**, Ph.D., PI | \$5,119,946 | Operate NTDC, a comprehensive training, certification, technical assistance and ongoing professional development program that annually serves over 2,000 Work Incentive Counselors. The counselors assist over 30,000 Social Security disability beneficiaries to achieve their personal employment and economic self-sufficiency goals. The WIPA NTDC is a unit of our Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.



### U.S. Department of Education / University of Buffalo (SUNY)

UBTR - TQP Evaluation Subaward | **Jesse Senechal**, Ph.D., PI | \$71,482 | Evaluate a federal Teacher Quality Partnership program to evaluate the impact of a residency model on teacher retention and student achievement in Buffalo Public Schools.



## National Institutes of Health / University of Southern California

Evaluation of the Efficacy of a Physical Therapy Intervention Targeting Sitting and Reaching for Young Children with Cerebral Palsy | **Christine Spence**, Ph.D., VCU Site PI | \$80,096 | Maintain a reciprocal IRB and carry out the "Sitting Together and Reaching to Play: A Multicenter Clinical Trial for Children under 2 Years with Cerebral Palsy" study under the direction of the primary investigator. For eligible children, VCU engages in developmental assessments over the course of a year and one of two interventions for 12 weeks based on random assignment.



## Spencer Foundation / William T. Grant Foundation

How to QuantCrit | **Kamden Strunk**, Ph.D., PI | \$13,500 (\$6,750/sponsor) | This book project aims to equip users of quantitative data and research with practices to alter how they collect and analyze quantitative data. Using QuantCrit as a framework, this book will also develop the foundation for an iterative praxis to explore questions that research and assessment professionals and other data users can use as engaged critics in working toward a more just and equitable society.



## Institute of Education Sciences / Department of Education / SRI International

Effectiveness Study of BEST in CLASS | **Kevin Sutherland**, Ph.D., PI | \$1,000,000 | Train 90 teachers and coaches to implement BEST in CLASS in their preschool classrooms.



## Virginia Department of Education

Center for Family Involvement FY24 | **Dana Yarbrough**, M.A., M.S., PI | \$831,000 | Ensure families have informational and systems navigational support on the complexity of federal and state special education laws and regulations; support training and dialogue opportunities that will advance the VDOE's commitment to family/school partnerships.



## National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research

The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment of Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities | **Paul Wehman**, Ph.D., (PI) and **Jennifer McDonough**, M.S., CRC,(Co-PI) | \$875,000 a year for 5 years for a total of \$4,375,000 | Conduct research to improve rehabilitation methodology and service delivery; reduce high unemployment among those with intellectual and developmental disabilities by conducting multiphase studies to examine variables that could improve competitive, integrated employment outcomes.





Photo: Getty Images

## With school segregation persisting, professor urges a multifaceted, concerted effort to fix it

Research has shown that all students gain wide-ranging benefits from racially and socioeconomically integrated schools, which foster success through improved academic achievement, social mobility, civic engagement, and empathy and understanding.

So why does school segregation persist? **Genevieve Siegel-Hawley** said it starts with a lack of deliberate response from policymakers.

“There’s lots we can do because right now we’re doing so little. One general idea that would have a big impact would be to think about how we organize school district boundaries and do we need to update those more regularly. That gets at the importance of thinking regionally about issues of segregation.”

Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, Ph.D.

"A big message from the empirical analysis of suburban school segregation is that we're just not being intentional about any of it, through law or policy," said Siegel-Hawley, Ph.D., professor of educational leadership, who recently worked on a pair of reports focused on school segregation. "There's a real vacuum of response, and that is allowing segregation to spread and intensify."

In a National Education Policy Center brief that looks at how land use and housing reforms might reduce segregation in schools, she offered recommendations for federal and state policymakers that include ending exclusionary land use policies and establishing grant programs to support housing development near diverse, well-resourced schools.

"School and housing worlds are siloed, and too often policymakers in those two spaces do not interact," Siegel-Hawley said. "While we might have some momentum around the country for reforming land use and housing to build more affordable housing, too often access to high-quality, diverse schools has been left out of that conversation."

She also co-authored a UCLA Civil Rights Project report analyzing the scope of suburban school segregation. It highlighted how patterns of school segregation that policy and law have historically confined to central cities are spreading into suburban environments, with the growth of charter schools and school closures disproportionately affecting Black and Latinx students.

## VCU education professor explores how history can shift like the tides

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, news footage of bare store shelves prompted people to recall similar scenes from the Great Depression nearly a century earlier — a faulty comparison, according to **Gabriel Reich**, Ph.D., professor of teaching and learning.

After all, the Great Depression resulted from a complex mix of economic factors. But those empty shelves in 2020 reflected an overtaxed supply chain, not a shortage of actual goods or personal finances.

This is an example of historical consciousness, which Reich described as "how people use what they know about the past to make sense of what's going on in the present — or even to imagine what might be possible in the future."

During his fall 2023 study-research leave, Reich spent a month in Sweden gathering insights on his latest writing and research, offering professional development training for teachers, and visiting classrooms. At the annual History Educators International Research Network conference, he presented several papers on the ways that history knowledge impacts how people make sense of the world around them.





Photo: Adobe Stock

## VCU-led initiative to expand disability awareness for teachers, curricula in early childhood education

Workforce Ready is preparing Virginia community college students to better identify and support children up to age 5 with disabilities.

The five-year initiative is housed in our Department of Counseling and Special Education and the Partnership for People with Disabilities (PPD). A nearly \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education is funding Workforce Ready, directed by **Christine Spence**, Ph.D., associate professor, counseling and special education, and **Cori Hill**, the Virginia early intervention professional development specialist with PPD.



Workforce Ready focuses on four community colleges that frequently serve under-resourced communities. The research team includes additional faculty from VCU and two Virginia universities.

“Our immediate goal is to ‘grow your own workforce.’ If we provide more resources to faculty to support their students, the hope is that these students would then work in their home communities,” Hill said. “Our ultimate goals are to increase the number of certified practitioners in the local workforces and to increase their knowledge of disability in early childhood education.”

This past year, the Workforce Ready team worked to gather baseline information and identify opportunities to broaden professional development for faculty. In parallel, team members conducted site visits to learn what faculty need, identify available resources and understand how families access programs and services.

“We’re making connections and learning about the community network,” Spence said. “We aim to build bridges and identify relationships that are sustainable.”



From left to right: Kume Goranson, Ed.D., executive director of CodeRVA Regional High School; Sethuraman Panchanathan, Ph.D., director of the National Science Foundation; U.S. Representative Rob Wittman (R-VA); and John Fife, Ph.D., director of VCU's Center for Innovation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Education

## Drawing national leadership for STEM education

In December, a panel discussion hosted by VCU featuring **Sethuraman Panchanathan**, Ph.D., director of the National Science Foundation, focused on preparing skilled workers and empowering tomorrow's leaders through STEM education.

**Kume Goranson**, Ed.D., executive director of CodeRVA Regional High School, and **John Fife**, Ph.D., director of VCU's Center for Innovation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Education and **U.S. Representative Rob Wittman** (R-VA) joined Panchanathan on the panel. Fife also is an associate professor of STEM education at our school. Kume — who holds three degrees from the School of Education — leads the VCU x CodeRVA Lab School.

The panelists discussed the importance of broadening participation, as well as initiatives and opportunities which promote equity, accessibility and inclusion across STEM.

“We need to bring 4 million additional people into our STEM communities by 2030 to fulfill critical needs of the U.S. STEM enterprise. NSF is committed to energizing and supporting this talent which exists in every corner of this nation. To do so, we will continue to scale established programs and introduce new initiatives in key areas around: workforce development, supporting a lifetime of learning, opening doors to STEM education, advancing careers in STEM and retaining STEM talent.”

Sethuraman Panchanathan, Ph.D.

# Capstone and Dissertation Winners Lauded



From left to right: 2024 Outstanding Capstone Project Award recipients Silvanus Thrower, Ed.D.; Jill Flynn, Ed.D.; Brandi Daniels, Ed.D.; and Jean Samuel, Ed.D.

At our Spring 2024 graduation ceremony, we recognized **Brandi Daniels**, Ed.D., **Jill Flynn**, Ed.D., **Jean Samuel**, Ed.D., and **Silvanus Thrower**, Ed.D., as the recipients of the 2024 Outstanding Capstone Project Award and **Imani Evans**, Ph.D., as the recipient of the 2024 Distinguished Dissertation Award.

## Education student researchers lead the way

Nearly 60 of our faculty and graduate students participated in roundtable discussions, gave presentations or presented posters during the **2024 American Educational Research Association conference**.

Held in Philadelphia in April, the conference focused on "Dismantling Racial Injustice and Constructing Educational Possibilities: A Call to Action." Our school also hosted a gathering for friends, colleagues and area alums during the conference.

## Exploring Adversity and Resilience: Trauma Research Garners International Honor

The research of **Naomi Wheeler**, Ph.D., navigates the intricacies of relational stress, childhood adversity, trauma, family dynamics and health disparities, drawing on her expertise to address these global challenges. As associate professor, director of the Family and Relational/Stress & Health (FReSH) Lab, and co-director of the Family and Community Empowerment Center, Wheeler is advancing understanding and support for individuals impacted by traumatic stress.



Wheeler's groundbreaking work earned her the 2024 Traumatic Stress and Resilience Researcher Advocate Award from the International Association for Resilience and Trauma Counseling. This award recognized her influential contributions to research worldwide and its positive impact on people and communities impacted by trauma.



Photo: Lucian Friel, VCU Rehabilitation Research and Training Center

## Parent-Johnson returns to VCU to direct acclaimed Rehabilitation Research and Training Center

The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) welcomed its new director, **Wendy Parent-Johnson**, Ph.D., who took over for Paul Wehman, Ph.D., now its senior research scientist, after leading the center since its 1983 founding.

The center conducts research and provides educational and employment resources for individuals with disabilities, their families and the professionals who work with them. Parent-Johnson previously worked at the RRTC.

"I learned so much working here early in my career and have always been so impressed by the research and resources produced at RRTC, the amazing people and the center's impact on the disability field internationally," she said.

Parent-Johnson is editor of the *Journal of Rehabilitation* and a member of the editorial boards of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* and *Developmental Disabilities Network Journal*.

She returned to VCU from the University of Arizona's Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities. As executive director, she co-developed the Circle of Indigenous Empowerment with Tribal Nations and communities in Arizona and Oyate' Circle in South Dakota focused on creating a central hub of information, resources and training to enhance employment and quality of life for Tribal members with disabilities. Parent-Johnson is eager to continue this work at VCU.



"I look forward to partnering with our Virginia Tribal Nations and expanding our work to be more accessible and responsive to the needs of Indigenous people and other marginalized communities," she said, "as well as supporting them to develop new models and resources that improve employment outcomes for these populations."

# UNCOMMON Transformational Impact

## VCU launches Virginia's first lab school, VCU x CodeRVA Lab School

The VCU x CodeRVA Lab School — a joint project between our RTR Teacher Residency and the CodeRVA Regional High School — launched in 2024.

The lab school, the first of its kind in the Commonwealth, provides an innovative computer science-focused comprehensive high school education, serves as a training site for teacher residents, and affords professional learning opportunities for educators across the state.

“Lab schools are a critical part of restoring excellence in the Commonwealth’s education system. This is the first step in giving parents new options for their kids to learn in innovative and creative ways and break the status quo of a one-size-fits-all education.”

Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin

“This lab school will empower students to see their own potential for a career that embraces innovation and computer science,” said **Kim McKnight**, Ph.D., executive director of RTR Teacher Residency. “We are excited to integrate the successes we have seen preparing teachers for classrooms through RTR with the cutting-edge academic programming CodeRVA provides.”

CodeRVA Regional High School prepares students for college and careers in computer science through personalized, integrated and applied project-based learning.

Photo: Kevin Morley, VCU Enterprise Marketing and Communications





Photo: Jud Froelich, VCU Office of Development and Alumni Relations

## The Schaberg Foundation's generosity and transformative impact

In 2024, the VCU School of Education received a transformative \$1.5 million gift from the Bob and Anna Lou Schaberg Foundation to establish the Anna Lou and Bob Schaberg Chair of Practice, further advancing the school's mission to address the critical need for highly trained teachers in Virginia. This generous donation builds on the foundation's history of support, which previously established the Anna Lou Schaberg Professor of Practice in Education, a role dedicated to the mentorship and professional development of early-career teachers.

### **Anna Lou and Bob Schaberg, Chair of Practice**

This newly established chair will focus on enhancing VCU's RTR Teacher Residency, recognized as a gold standard in teacher preparation for over 12 years.

Teacher residency programs, like RTR, are proven to produce educators with high retention rates — between 80 and 90% beyond their third year — especially in hard-to-staff schools. By focusing on these aspects, the Schaberg Chair of

Practice will ensure that VCU's teacher residency program continues to thrive, helping educators gain the necessary skills and mentorship they need to succeed and make a meaningful impact in their communities.

### **Anna Lou Schaberg Professor of Practice and the New Teacher Support Program (NTSP)**

The Anna Lou Schaberg Professor of Practice in Education, currently held by Kendra D. Johnson,

Ph.D., and the Schaberg New Teacher Support Program (NTSP) are both critical components of the suite of supports offered at VCU.

The New Teacher Support Program (NTSP) — led by Jesse Senechal, assistant professor and executive director of the Institute for Collaborative Research and Evaluation and Johnson — provides specialized mentoring for VCU alums transitioning from teacher-candidates to teacher-leaders during their first 3 years. This mentorship includes monthly cohort meetings, one-on-one guidance and classroom support to enhance teacher effectiveness, promote retention, and support diversity and inclusion efforts.

As the Anna Lou Schaberg Professor of Practice in Education, Johnson combines her research expertise with real-world impact. Her work addresses race, gender, and class dynamics in teaching and learning, with a focus on policy and power structures. Johnson was invested at a fall 2023 event. The Schaberg Foundation donated \$1.2 million to establish the professorship.

Her dedication to transforming classrooms through evidence-based strategies is exemplified by her partnerships with local school districts, where she supports teachers in integrating theory with practice. “I’m passionate about engaged scholarship that directly supports teachers and school communities,” Johnson said. “This professorship allows me to work hands-on with educators, ensuring they are equipped to meet the needs of diverse students and create meaningful change.”

A former elementary school teacher and residency coordinator of RTR Teacher Residency, Johnson previously served as an assistant professor of elementary education and taught in the masters of arts in teaching program at Bowie State University.

### **A comprehensive suite of supports**

With the addition of the Chair of Practice, the VCU School of Education offers a comprehensive suite of programs for teacher development that stands out in Virginia. The Schaberg Foundation’s commitment to VCU has created a unique opportunity to elevate and prioritize mentorship through teacher preparation and induction.



Anna Lou Schaberg’s career with Richmond Public Schools, where she coordinated programs for gifted students for nearly 25 years, inspired these initiatives. “The practice of teaching is an art best nurtured by classroom experience and the guidance of master teachers,” Schaberg remarked. Her vision continues to shape the future of teaching and learning at VCU, ensuring that teachers are well-prepared to meet the diverse needs of their students.

### **Commitment to equity and excellence**

The Schaberg Foundation’s support strengthens VCU’s teacher residency program and aligns with the School of Education’s broader mission to champion equity, inclusiveness and community engagement. By investing in these programs, the Schaberg Foundation is ensuring that VCU’s educators are prepared to excel in the classroom and equipped to lead the charge in transforming educational outcomes across Virginia.

# The keen eye of Chuck Harris is focused on his family's legacy of dyslexia research and student support



Photo: Jud Froelich, VCU Office of Development and Alumni Relations

As a third-grade student, Charles A. “Chuck” Harris struggled with reading, writing and spelling. After seeing those challenges, his mother, Ruth, launched a personal mission to find the resources he needed to learn in the best way for him.

Now, decades later, Chuck Harris is an accomplished independent film professional specializing in cinematography. He knows that without his mother’s perseverance and investments in learning about dyslexia and other learning disabilities, he may never have graduated from college, let alone worked with some of the biggest names in his industry.

That’s one reason he continues to nurture his parents’ commitment to support students like him. In 2010, Louis S. Harris, Ph.D., and Ruth Harris established the **Ruth Harris Professorship in Dyslexia Studies** at our school. Not only does the gift support research into a better

understanding of learning disabilities, but it also provides financial support for future teachers who bring emerging best practices to help these students in the classroom.

His mother’s early action was essential to getting Harris the resources to learn in the best way for him.

“We need more educators who are prepared to work with neurodiverse students. When I was young, that support was lacking, so I lost many years,” Harris said. “Our family’s guiding principle is that any gift should have a lasting impact and continue to grow and give back. This is why we

emphasize endowments rather than just a one-time gift. It's a significant part of how my parents shaped my thinking."

Today, the Ruth Harris Professorship of Dyslexia Studies supports faculty and doctoral student research that advances the study of reading disabilities, with a focus on dyslexia but also other language-learning challenges and new approaches that help these students succeed in the classroom. The endowment also funds workshops, events, presentations and the annual Dyslexia Symposium.

In addition to scholarships and professorships, the Harris Foundation has funded immersive, hands-on student learning experiences with the Ruth Harris Scholars.

"The primary focus for my parents and all the foundation board members is investing in student support that lasts in perpetuity," he said. "A college degree demands a considerable time and expense. We aim to provide ongoing support that ensures students have the resources to maximize the investment in their education."

## Increasing dyslexia awareness and support resources

The fall 2023 Dyslexia Symposium featured keynote speaker **Resha Conroy**, founder of the Dyslexia Alliance for Black Children. The event addressed inequities faced by Black children with dyslexia and related learning disabilities. The symposium drew 154 participants and featured six breakout sessions.



screening of "The Right to Read" with a discussion panel.

## Addressing teacher shortages through innovative apprenticeship programs

Our Center for Teacher Leadership is at the forefront of efforts to combat the teacher shortage by pioneering innovative teacher residency and apprenticeship programs.

In collaboration with nine Virginia school divisions, led by Prince William County Schools, we are advancing "Grow Your Own" initiatives that address classroom staffing needs while preparing future educators within their communities. The program provides opportunities for various candidates, including paraprofessionals already working in schools, dual-enrolled graduating high school seniors, and career switchers, offering a diverse pathway into the teaching profession.

The Grow Your Own program supports aspiring teachers as they earn their bachelor's degrees and fulfill licensure requirements, ultimately preparing them for full-time teaching roles.

Together with the Virginia Department of Education and the National Center for Grow Your Own, we are breaking new ground by expanding these registered apprenticeship programs.

Our collaborative approach ensures that communities can recruit and train well-prepared educators, reinforcing our unwavering commitment to innovative, impactful solutions for addressing critical needs in education.

# PROFILES

## Students and alums



### A passion for lifelong learning inspires an engineer to switch careers

Even as an undergrad aerospace engineering student at Virginia Tech, **Bakar Bey** was interested in education. As a sophomore, he founded a student organization to cultivate creative thinking and expression in education through cultural arts and technologies.

In 2011, Bey returned to Tech for his master's

in industrial systems engineering. His passion for education grew through his work as a graduate teaching assistant supporting a study abroad engineering course and from teaching foundations in engineering workshops.

Bey has worked as an aircraft structural design engineer and researcher, quality manufacturing

engineer, financial adviser, higher ed engineering instructor, math tutor, teacher and a habit and accountability coach. And now, before he turns 40, he is on course to complete his Ed.D. from our school in 2026.

"I entered the Education Leadership program as a passionate lifelong learner and career-switcher with a desire to integrate personal accountability training and intentional habit development into our education system," Bey said. "I look forward to following through with my expectations set before, during and after this journey."

Those expectations include licensing and developing his own accountability and habit-coaching systems to integrate into schools and businesses while teaching and publishing related material.

"My greatest expectation," Bey said, "is to positively grow and produce in a way that, after completing my program, I am extraordinarily unrecognizable to the man who made the decision to start this journey. And I mean it in the most positive way imaginable."

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## Ryan Getz feels at home in the classroom

**Ryan Getz** finds magic in "light bulb" moments his students experience when they grasp new concepts.

"Teaching is the love of learning new things, and I like to help others learn new things. I've wanted to be a teacher my whole life," said Getz, who earned his graduate certificate teaching elementary education in May 2023. "I want to make sure that students have a good experience. I want to be the safe space for them."

As a freshman at VCU, he pivoted from his dream of teaching, opting to major in psychology as a way to help others. However, he decided that, after graduation, he would refocus on education, which prompted him to take several cross-curricular courses such as education and adolescent psychology.

"It helped me form attitudes in the best way," Getz said. "I can help kids learn better."

Through our school's **RTR Teacher Residency** program, Getz taught third grade at Occoquan Elementary School in Northern Virginia, leading to a full-time role this fall to teach third grade. He is now pursuing his master's degree program.

Getz likes working with elementary school students for the chance to dramatically shape their education. "They are more moldable at this age," he said, noting the importance of addressing the pandemic's impact. "Some of their social skills are not developed fully, and you can tell."

While some educators eventually move into school administration, Getz has a more straightforward plan: He simply wants to teach. "I love being in the classroom," he said.



Photo: Contributed photo

# Adrian Petway proves it is never too late to chase a dream

When **Adrian Petway** decided to go back to school, she wasn't sure quite what to expect.

Petway had been away from the classroom — busy raising her children, pursuing her career and living her life. Finally, she felt like the timing was right to pursue her Ed.D. in educational leadership



Photo: Allen Jones, VCU Enterprise Marketing and Communications

"It was kind of intimidating in the beginning," she said. "I was concerned about my age and whether I was going to be able to keep up with the coursework and the other students. There was some imposter syndrome that came up at times."

But with hard work and some great mentors and classmates, Petway stayed the course.

Currently associate vice president for budget and finance at **Virginia State University** (VSU), Petway aims to serve as a community college president.

"I give community college the credit for my educational success," said Petway, who earned

her associate degree before completing her bachelor's and master's degrees. "I had a college professor probably 35 years ago who planted a seed in me that I would lead a school one day."

That seed seemed dormant for years before a conversation with VSU President Makola Abdullah, Ph.D., helped it take root. "Once [a seed is] planted, it's there, and it just takes someone else to water it," Petway said.

*"I give community college the credit for my educational success. I had a college professor probably 35 years ago who planted a seed in me that I would lead a school one day."*

**Adrian Petway**

Another mentor has been **Kimberly Bridges**, Ed.L.D., whose class taught Petway a valuable lesson. "Your voice matters. You are in the room and at the table for a reason," she said of the takeaway. "And that has resonated with me to the point that I started speaking up more at work — and in the last three years, I've gotten three promotions."

Early in the three-year program, Petway stood out "as an eager student who loved learning with and from both her instructor and her peers," Bridges said, noting that Petway has stayed in touch throughout her educational journey.

"One of her most recent texts came at the start of this last semester when she told me she was sitting in the library tearing up at the very idea that she was going to become a doctor of education leadership," Bridges said. "It had me teary-eyed too. It was so powerful, not only because she took the time to keep me informed about how she was doing but also because she always exuded such gratitude and grace and joy."



Photo: Hannah Jimerson

## Special education major connects life, school, work and a passion to serve others with disabilities

As **Chad Lowery** continues his undergraduate studies, he's finding his way in the working world — and proving a point.

"You need to really know a person as they are," he said, "instead of what they look like."

Lowery, who has cerebral palsy, is majoring in special education. He is also a legal assistant at a local law firm, BeneCounsel, specializing in disability rights and advocacy — a position secured through the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC).

"I have a passion for helping other individuals with disabilities," Lowery said. "I feel like people — or society, rather — doesn't expect individuals like myself to have the desire of having a job, going to school, having a career, having a family someday. And I think RRTC is a good resource to show society you can't judge a book by its cover."

Mallary McEvoy, an RRTC employment specialist, met regularly with Lowery to review

his strengths and interests, such as advocacy for disability rights, supported employment and special education. Lowery was among the applicants for a "job share" by Matt Bellinger, who founded BeneCounsel. "And from the start at BeneCounsel, Matt saw possibility instead of disability for Chad," McEvoy said.

Bellinger started BeneCounsel based on the barriers and difficulties of navigating benefits for his child. In 2022, with a growing caseload, he began searching for legal assistants - and decided to hire individuals with disabilities.

"I was thinking I could go the standard route and hire a paralegal. But then I started thinking, 'well, that's typically how you would do it, but is that really what I should do?'" Bellinger said. "Why don't I hire a person with a disability, because that's who I serve? The more I thought about that, the idea grew, so that's what we did."

## Alum Ashley Bland receives VCU '10 Under 10' award for contributions to Richmond Public Schools

In 2023, Ashley Bland (B.S.'13, M.Ed.'16, Cert.'23) was named one of VCU's top 10 graduates of the past decade. VCU Alumni's 10 Under 10 awards celebrate alumni who earned their first VCU degree within the past 10 years and who have enjoyed remarkable professional success, made important contributions to their community and/or loyally supported the university.

When Bland entered VCU as a first-generation college student, she didn't plan to become a teacher. She majored in biomedical engineering and physics to prepare for a STEM career.

As an undergraduate, Bland chaired a pre-college initiative of VCU's chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers. She worked to encourage local middle and high school students to pursue STEM fields.

When some of them decided to study engineering in college, she realized the impact she could have. A professor recognized Bland's avid interest in working with youths and suggested she consider our RTR Teacher Residency's master's program.

After graduating in 2016, she taught middle school math in **Richmond Public Schools** (RPS). In 2020, Bland became an instructional facilitator for the afterschool TechConnect, which teaches

middle-school students technology skills. Then COVID-19 broke out; Bland was tasked with helping create technology so students could learn virtually.

That work earned Bland honors as Richmond's Teacher of the Year in 2021 and Virginia Region I Teacher of the Year in 2022. Bland credits her sixth-grade math teacher for helping her excel. "I grew up in rural Virginia, and he was the first person to expose me to the idea of finding success beyond the smaller area where I grew up," she said. "I feel like I'm carrying the torch that he passed on."

Bland, one of the first School Leader Residents in RPS, completed her post-master's certificate in educational leadership, while working alongside a strong school leader. She is now a teacher and leader pathways specialist in RPS.



# AWARDS and Recognition

## Professors earn Ruch Award for Excellence in Teaching

During our graduation ceremonies, one of our faculty members is recognized with the Charles P. Ruch Award for Excellence in Teaching. The award honors a former VCU provost and dean of the School of Education and is based on student nominations.



At the Spring 2024 graduation, **T'Airra Belcher**, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Counseling and Special Education, received the Ruch award.

Belcher's research interests include culturally competent counseling and supervision practices, LBGT-affirmative counseling, and multicultural considerations on development. The students commended Belcher for a willingness to accept feedback and adapt as part of a growth mindset, as well as for providing a safe space for students to be wrong or to converse in less than perfectly worded terms as they engage with concepts of multicultural counseling and explore bias while still in the classroom environment.

At the December 2023 graduation, **David Saavedra**, Ph.D., assistant professor, Department of Foundations of Education, received the Ruch award.

Saavedra uses an ethnographic lens to study how cross-cultural educational relationships are formed, maintained, broken and repaired and the importance of such relationships in the learning process. He aims to understand how teachers and students from different cultural backgrounds form relationships with one another, how these relationships function in schools to either aid or hinder learning, and the various ways in which an ethic of care can be applied and understood by those in culturally diverse settings.



Students credited Saavedra for using real-life examples of different pedagogical approaches and impacts, as well as providing diverse lessons that opened their eyes to overlooked histories.

## Interim dean honored with pair of national recognitions



**Kathleen Rudasill**, Ph.D., our interim dean, received two prestigious national awards this year. Rudasill was elected to Fellow status in the American Psychological Association and received the Jan Kristal Memorial Award for exceptional contributions to temperament theory and its application for improving children's welfare.

# Excellence – and commitment – celebrated at VCU Faculty Convocation

During the 41st annual VCU Faculty Convocation highlighting seven educators and researchers for excellence in fall 2023, VCU President Michael Rao, Ph.D., emphasized how faculty blend education and empathy to serve students in lasting ways.

He cited the words of **Emiola Oyefuga**, who received the Outstanding Adjunct Faculty Award: “Any student can learn. One just has to find the best way to teach.”

“That’s care. That’s empathy,” Rao said. “And really, it’s a commitment to others, which when we treat students the way we treat them, we are multiplying our ability to positively impact the lives



of so many other people whose lives they will touch.”

Oyefuga’s research focuses on leveraging social capital to improve educational outcomes for students. Her current work, in collaboration with researchers from the School of Education, examines educator sexual misconduct in schools nationwide. The program aims to train teachers and school employees about signs of sexual abuse and reporting it.

Oyefuga said everyone needs to be involved in the education of children, which includes creating safe spaces for learning.

Photo: Tom Kojesich, Enterprise Marketing and Communications

## Book co-authored by VCU education professor tops 2023 titles in Cambridge University Press series

A common practice in schools once put students with limited English skills into separate classrooms with specialist teachers. But as methods have evolved, more teachers spend more time with multilingual learners, and a book co-authored by our own **Luciana de Oliveira**, Ph.D., has made an impression.

“Teaching Young Multilingual Learners” was the top title published among 374 books in its Cambridge Elements series in 2023, receiving 35,567 downloads and views.

De Oliveira is a professor of teaching and learning, as well as our school’s associate dean for academic affairs and graduate studies. She co-authored the book with a University of Maryland colleague and former student, Loren Jones, Ph.D.

The book captures research on language teaching practices designed for young multilingual learners in primary school settings within English-speaking environments. By preparing general education teachers to work with those learners across content areas, the book meets a crucial need as many states see increasing numbers of multilingual students.

“Teaching multilingual learners has moved away from providing language support in specialized classes to these students being included in a general education classroom for a lot of their time in schools,” de Oliveira said. “This means that all teachers, not only ESOL specialists and bilingual teachers, need to be prepared with the skills and knowledge to work with this population of students.”

De Oliveira, who is certified to teach English and Portuguese, is a past president of TESOL International Association.

## Professor who advanced marriage equality among honorees for service to the LGBTQIA+ community

**Carol Schall**, Ph.D., associate professor and co-director of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center's Autism Center for Education, was among the 2024 recipients of the **Burnside**



**Watstein Awards**. The program recognizes individuals who enrich the VCU community and make a significant difference in the lives of LGBTQIA+ faculty, staff and students.

Schall and her wife were plaintiffs in Bostic v. Rainey, which advanced marriage equality in Virginia. "Because of Carol Schall and the other plaintiffs in this lawsuit, since 2014, LGBTQIA VCU faculty and staff have been able to add their partners and their children to VCU health insurance plans. It is difficult to convey what a big deal this is," her nomination read.

Schall said it felt strange to win an award for living her life authentically, but she felt grateful that she and her wife were able to use their story to promote inclusion in Virginia. While they were married in California, their marriage was not recognized in Virginia, which led to multiple instances of discrimination.

"We won that court case, but more importantly, we won the hearts and minds of fair-minded Virginians who said, 'Yeah, you get to be who you are and love who you are,'" Schall said.

She noted, though, that the fight for equality is still ongoing.

"Courage is not fearless — instead, courage is seeing your fears, recognizing your powerlessness in the face of those who hate you, but living your life anyway," Schall said. "And so if I can leave you with one thing: Be you, live your life, and to hell with everybody who hates you."

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## Retired professor's career recognized for support of students with disabilities

**Colleen Thoma**, Ph.D., who retired after the 2023-24 academic year as professor of special education in the Department of Counseling and Special Education, received the Presidential Award of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD). Thoma remains co-editor of AAIDD's *Inclusion* journal.

Her research interests focus on supporting the transition from school to adult life for students with disabilities, particularly students with intellectual disability. She has addressed this area in multiple ways, including by identifying how to apply a universal design

for learning processes to meet academic and transition goals.



"I'm honored to receive this recognition of my service to the organization, particularly my role as co-editor of *Inclusion* and the impact of my work on the field," said Thoma, a 25-year member of AAIDD. The AAIDD is a professional organization that promotes research, policies, practices and human rights for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In 2019, Thoma earned the organization's Research Award, which recognizes investigations that have contributed significantly to knowledge in the field.

# Professor taps into Oxford resources to advance work in STEM education

**John Fife**, Ph.D., associate professor in the department of foundations and director of our Center for Innovation in STEM Education, spent a week in June at the University of Oxford's Harris Manchester College Summer Research Institute (SRI).



The SRI fellowship supports faculty whose scholarship can benefit from unique resources at the University of Oxford, including access to some of its 100 libraries.

Fife leads a mission to reach “the missing millions” by creating interdisciplinary research, outreach and training opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills of youth and teachers

to enhance the STEM workforce. Supported by three National Science Foundation grants, Fife’s work focuses on building a Central Virginia STEM learning ecosystem and measuring its ability to enhance teacher training and, consequently, the STEM workforce.

During his time abroad, Fife partnered with an Oxford educator to analyze similarities and differences between British and U.S. use of AI and other new technologies in STEM teacher recruitment and retention.

“Together - with a cohort of diverse scholars, educators and researchers, as well as with support from VCU’s Office of the Vice President of Research and Innovation and the Global Education Office - we are elevating the global impact of our shared work,” he said.

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## Professors named in VCU’s first class of faculty scholars honored for ‘exceptional accomplishments’



Two of our faculty members were among VCU’s inaugural class of National/International Recognition Award (NIRA) scholars, announced in 2023. This new annual award honors faculty members for national or international recognition for exceptional accomplishments.

Our school’s NIRA honorees are **Kevin Sutherland**, Ph.D., and **Yaoying Xu**, Ph.D., both from the Department of Counseling and Special Education.

“Many of our faculty go far beyond every year with scholarship, research, artistic creation that distinguish them nationally and internationally. The NIRA seeks to recognize their excellence, placing a spotlight on their achievements which inspires and motivates us in what we do for our students and our entire community.”

**Fotis Sotiropoulos**, Ph.D., VCU provost and senior vice president for academic affairs

# STAFF Recognition

## Bittner earns staff spotlight as new employee



**Jamie Bittner**, data analytics specialist and research coordinator, received the Benchmark Award for New Employees in recognition of her significant contributions to advancing data-informed decision-making for the School of Education. In her dual role with the Office of Data Analytics and Office of Research and Faculty, Jamie manages a wide range of database and survey initiatives. Her commitment to data integrity, teamwork, and creative problem solving underscores her dedication to the school's expanding research and impact goals.

The award is part of the annual VCU Staff Senate Awards for Excellence ceremony. Among other initiatives, the Staff Senate advocates for professional development for employees.

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## Alcaine wins two national awards



**Jose G. Alcaine**, Ph.D., director of research services at the VCU School of Education, received two prestigious honors from the Society of Research Administration International (SRAI): the Excellence Award and the title of "Distinguished Faculty." These awards recognize his significant contributions to research administration, including his work in leading workshops, organizing conferences, and supporting faculty in securing grants and funding opportunities.

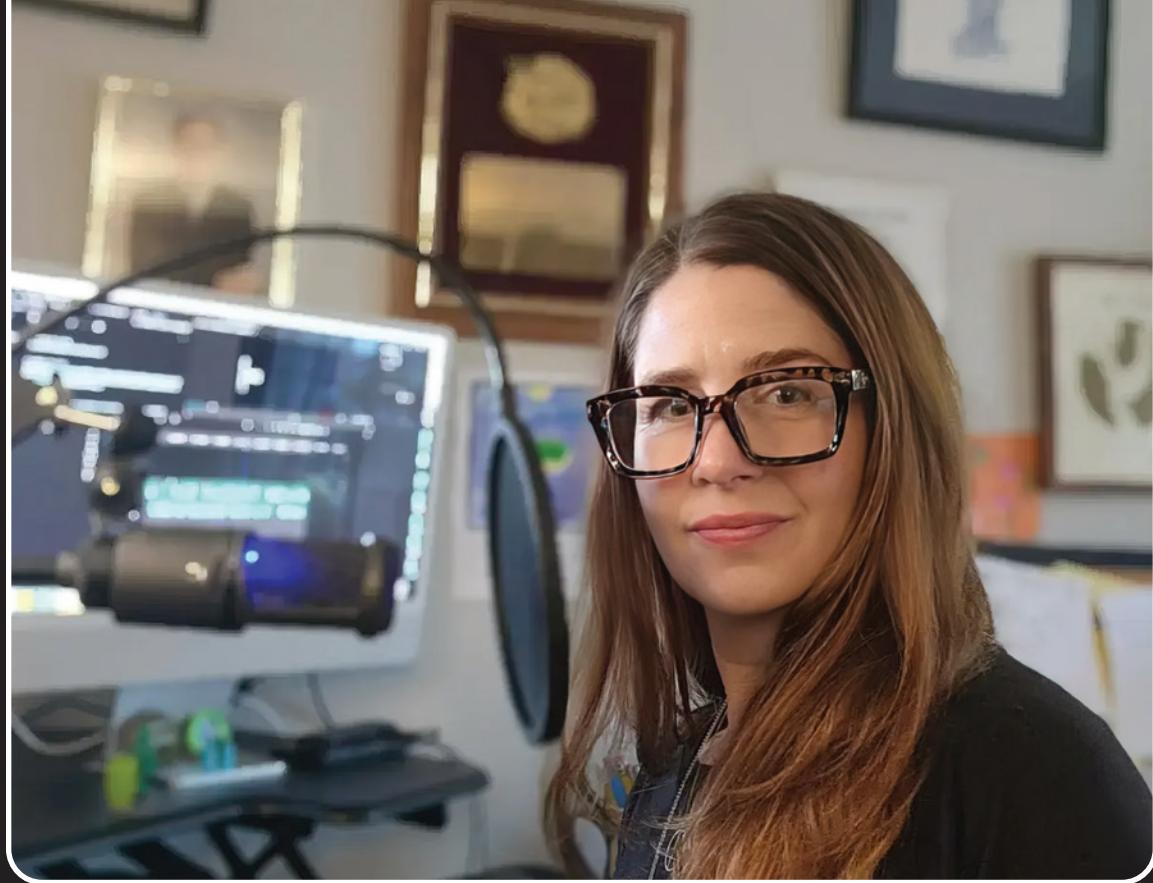


Photo: Contributed by Erin Croyle

## Through Odyssey podcast, Erin Croyle builds community for those who navigate disabilities

When **Erin Croyle**'s son was diagnosed with Down syndrome in 2010, she found herself entering an unfamiliar world. "It's like learning an entire new language," she said. "Depending on what state you live in, the systems are different, there are supports that are different. It's confusing."

Croyle knew she needed help navigating her new reality. In her search for a community and a support system, she found her new life's work as an advocate.

For nearly a decade, Croyle has served as a communications specialist with the Center for Family Involvement at our Partnership for People with Disabilities. The grant-funded center is staffed entirely by people who have a disability or a loved one with a disability, and it provides emotional and informational support for people and families living with a disability.

In 2023, Croyle launched The Odyssey, a podcast featuring stories and experiences highlighting issues that families and caregivers of people with disabilities face. Monthly episodes cover everything from the occasionally isolating experience of being a parent to the realities of learning how to support a loved one.

*"There are so many conversations to be had and so many voices out there that need to be heard."*

**Erin Croyle**

In one episode, Croyle goes over the minutiae of applying for Medicaid waivers; in another, she discusses practical ideas for self-care. Podcast guests share a range of lived experiences, with a shared goal of educating and identifying with their community.

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Brian McNeill, Sian Wilkerson, Allen Jones, Thomas Kojcsich and Kevin Morely from VCU Enterprise Marketing and Communications for their contributions of some of the content and photography in this year's annual report. We are also grateful for the photography provided by Erin Croyle, Hannah Jimerson, Jud Froelich, LA Ricks and Lucian Friel.

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