

2
BRUSHSTROKES:
ART, LEGACY AND OPPORTUNITY

4
FALSE CONFESSIONS
AND THE COURTS

20
JOE CASEY PREPARES
FOR HIS NEXT CHAPTER

Wilder School *in Action*

Spring/Summer 2026

WHERE PLANNING MEETS COMPLEXITY

Planning at the intersection
of land, history and democracy



VCU L. Douglas Wilder School of
Government and Public Affairs



Wilder School in Action

TABLE OF CONTENTS

▲ Letter from the dean	1
▲ Brushstrokes: Art, legacy and opportunity.....	2
▲ Governor Wilder reflects on leadership, governance and public service in Virginia	6
▲ Leadership in service to a Gail Mani.	8
▲ Justice, education and public purpose.....	9
▲ False confessions and the courts	10
▲ Where planning meets complexity	12
▲ Alumni, Faculty and Student Achievements	16
▲ Faculty and alumni achievements	18
▲ Alumni changemakers : Joe Casey prepares for his next chapter	20
▲ Wilder students brief the FBI on foreign threats	21

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CONVERSATIONS WITH

GOVERNOR WILDER

Leadership and legacy: listen in

L. Douglas Wilder, Virginia's 66th governor and the nation's first elected African American governor, shares his experiences and reflections on current events and historic milestones.



bit.ly/wilderpod



Letter from the dean

Dear Friends,

At the Wilder School, leadership is more than a subject of study. It is shaped through preparation, tested through experience and ultimately used in service to others. In this edition of *Wilder School in Action*, you will see that commitment reflected across our work in public institutions, in scholarship that informs justice, in communities navigating change, and in the students and alumni preparing to serve with purpose.

A central theme throughout this issue is how institutions and communities respond to an increasingly complex world. Public leadership today requires more than expertise in a single discipline. It requires the ability to think across systems, understand competing pressures and guide institutions through moments of uncertainty with clarity and responsibility.

You will see this theme reflected in our cover feature on Urban and Regional Studies and Planning. Faculty and students examine the interconnected forces shaping modern communities, including housing, infrastructure, environmental change and equity. Their work reflects a defining reality of contemporary public service: Meaningful solutions require leaders who can understand complexity and help communities move forward with thoughtfulness and care.

This year, the Brushstrokes initiative also marks a meaningful moment for the Wilder School. Through his artistic work, Governor L. Douglas Wilder continues to demonstrate a life grounded in creativity, courage and public service. Brushstrokes is more than a celebration. It reflects a legacy of creating access through scholarship support and reminds us that leadership endures when it builds pathways for others.

You will also see the Wilder School's presence in the work of governing. Across Virginia's new administration, alumni and faculty are helping guide policy, strengthen institutions and support the responsibilities of executive leadership. Their contributions reflect a central mission of the school: preparing individuals not only to understand

government, but also to serve within it with thoughtfulness and responsibility.

Our faculty continue to advance scholarship that shapes public life. Research from the Wilder School is informing how courts evaluate false confessions and shaping national conversations on justice and equity. Across disciplines, our work reflects a shared commitment to applying evidence, insight and public responsibility to society's most pressing challenges.

Students remain central to this mission. In this issue, you will meet Alexander Campbell, a Truman Scholarship finalist whose commitment to justice, education and advocacy reflects the values we seek to cultivate. You will also see how experiential learning, including collaboration with the FBI, prepares students to translate knowledge into meaningful public impact. That spirit of growth continues well beyond graduation. We also highlight alumnus Joe Casey, whose decades of executive leadership in local government reflect the enduring value of disciplined preparation, lifelong learning and service to community.

Across generations, the Wilder School community shares a commitment to strengthening institutions, expanding opportunity and advancing the public good. While the work evolves with the needs of our communities, our purpose remains constant: to prepare thoughtful leaders, strengthen institutions, advance social equity and serve the public good in Virginia and beyond.

With gratitude,



Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D.

Dean

L. Douglas Wilder School of Government
and Public Affairs



Stay up-to-date with the Wilder School
at our news page: bit.ly/wilderschoolnews



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Brushstrokes

Art, legacy and opportunity

At 95, Governor Wilder's first public art exhibition celebrates leadership, legacy and the next generation of public servants.

BY TIFFANY MURRAY-ROBERTSON

On Jan. 17, Governor L. Douglas Wilder celebrated his 95th birthday. The following evening, more than 200 guests gathered at the Black History Museum & Cultural Center of Virginia. The standing-room-only audience included elected officials, members of the judiciary, university presidents, civic leaders and members of the Wilder family, underscoring Wilder's impact across public life.

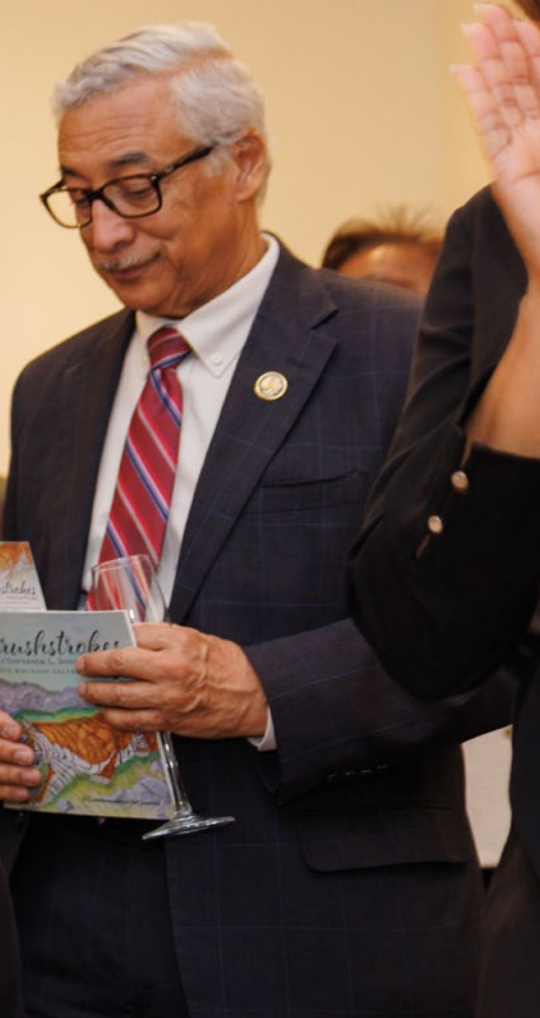
"Brushstrokes of Governor L. Douglas Wilder" marked his first public exhibition of paintings, most rendered in watercolor, along with several mixed-media works. For many in attendance, the exhibition revealed a different dimension of a leader most often defined by historic firsts, executive decisions and principled resolve.

The collection reflects thoughtful composition. Across the

works, themes of movement, balance and interior life emerge. Light shifts. Color deepens. Forms suggest both forward motion and stillness. The paintings feel assured and deliberate, reflecting the same bold clarity that defined Wilder's public life.

For Wilder, painting began as something private. After enrolling in an eight-week watercolor course at Virginia Commonwealth University, he approached the medium not as a public endeavor, but as personal expression, something meant for reflection rather than exhibition. Watercolor requires intention. It does not easily allow revision. It asks the artist to see clearly before committing brush to paper.

"When I'm painting, what it means to me is that I'm putting onto paper that which I feel, that which I see," he reflected. "I see orchestration of color meaning orchestration of thought."



PHOTOS BY MACLIN MEDIA



That interplay between color and cognition mirrors the habits that shaped his public service. Throughout his career, Wilder emphasized preparation, clarity and principled judgment. On canvas, those instincts appear in another form, revealing a lifelong practice of observing landscape, history and self.

The exhibition featured 38 watercolor works, five of which were auctioned in support of “A National Ovation,” a scholarship initiative supporting students from Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Union University and Howard University who enroll in the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs for undergraduate or graduate study.

The scholarships serve as a bridge between Wilder’s alma maters, Virginia Union University and Howard University, and the Wilder School’s graduate programs. In doing so, they help relieve students’ financial burdens while cultivating a diverse pool of future leaders prepared to bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas and sustained commitment to public service.

During the celebration, National Ovation Scholarship recipients were recognized, offering living testimony to the exhibition’s purpose. Among them was Joseph Earl Levy III, who spoke on behalf of the recipients.

“As I continue my studies to go into law and politics, I carry a deep sense of responsibility to lead with purpose and honor a legacy that was given before me,” Levy said.

The exhibition strengthened the scholarship initiative’s long-term capacity to support future leaders.

“Art, to me, is the revealing of life; not just life itself, but its continuation in one form or another. It never ends,” Wilder said.

That sentiment resonates deeply. “Brushstrokes” is not simply a celebration of years. It is an affirmation of endurance, discipline and continued becoming.

In bringing together creativity and scholarship, reflection and opportunity, the Wilder School honored a visionary whose legacy continues to evolve, not only in institutions and policies, but also in students, in memory and now on canvas. [W](#)

A visual expression of
reflection, discipline and
a life shaped in service.



"Birth to Now"



"Handshake of Hope"



"Infinity"



"Paths of Purpose"

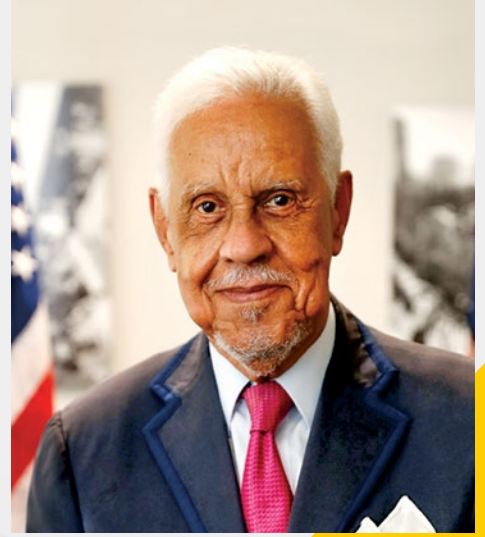


"Dance of Devotion"

Governor's voice

Governor L. Douglas Wilder reflects on leadership, governance and public service in Virginia.

BY PAM COX



Few figures have shaped Virginia's modern political history as profoundly as Governor L. Douglas Wilder. As the nation's first elected Black governor and a lifelong public servant, his leadership has helped define conversations about governance, accountability and the responsibilities of democratic institutions.

In the following conversation, Governor Wilder reflects on the significance of Virginia's election of its first woman governor, the early tone of the Spanberger administration, and how citizens should evaluate government performance. He also considers findings from the Wilder School Commonwealth Poll and what they reveal about Virginians' priorities.

Q How significant is Virginia's election of its first woman governor in the broader history of national politics?

A It is significant that Virginia continues to demonstrate that it is part of a new and evolving commonwealth, one that recognizes the contributions of all people. The election represents both progress and continuity: progress because it reflects a broader understanding of leadership and opportunity, and continuity because Virginia has long held an important place in the nation's political development.

From the earliest days of the Republic, Virginia has played a central role in shaping governance and public policy in the United States. I am pleased to see the commonwealth once again moving toward that level of leadership. When Virginia demonstrates that merit and ability matter most, it sends a signal across the commonwealth and the country.

Q What early signals has Governor Spanberger sent about working with legislative leadership across party lines? How would you characterize the tone of the first General Assembly session under the new administration?

A Governor Spanberger has made it clear that she is paying careful attention to the commonwealth's finances, how money is spent, and whether it is spent wisely. Fiscal stewardship is one of the most important responsibilities of any administration.

By emphasizing accountability in spending, she signals that she understands the importance of disciplined government. That approach creates an environment in which legislators from both parties can focus on results rather than rhetoric. When leaders demonstrate seriousness about the public trust, it encourages cooperation and a more productive legislative atmosphere. The tone thus far suggests an emphasis on careful management and practical governance.

Q What benchmarks should voters use to evaluate whether this administration is meeting expectations?

A Government does not always lend itself to simple benchmarks. Public policy is often complex, and results may not be immediately visible. What matters most are the goals set by the administration and the expectations of the people.

During a campaign, candidates present their priorities and make commitments about what they intend to accomplish. Those commitments provide the basis for public evaluation. Voters should look at what was promised, what actions were taken and what results were achieved. If there is a difference, the question is why. Responsible leadership requires not only setting goals but also explaining decisions and outcomes clearly.

Q The Wilder School Commonwealth Poll recently found that, for the first time, maintaining democracy and civility outranked concerns about inflation and immigration among Virginia voters. What does this shift suggest about the priorities of Virginians?

A That finding suggests that many Virginians are increasingly concerned about the tone and direction of public life. Civility and the preservation of democratic institutions are fundamental to a healthy society. When citizens place greater emphasis on those values, it reflects a desire for leadership that respects engagement, equity, inclusion and mutual respect.

It may also suggest that some previous leadership did not fully recognize how important those values are. Government cannot function effectively if people believe their voices are not heard or their concerns are not taken seriously.

Public officials must listen carefully to the concerns of Virginians and respond with seriousness, transparency and respect for differing views.

Money is often the measure by which government operates. Large sums can be spent unwisely without proper oversight. Waste has too often been tolerated by both parties. Identifying and correcting that waste is essential to maintaining public confidence and ensuring that government serves the people.



Leadership in service to the commonwealth

Alumni and faculty step into key roles across Virginia's new administration.

BY TIFFANY MURRAY-ROBERTSON

Leadership in government rarely emerges by accident. It is cultivated through preparation, tested through experience and sustained by a belief that public institutions matter. Across the commonwealth, that preparation is now visible in the daily work of governing, where Wilder School alumni are serving in roles that help government function, guide policy and support the responsibilities of executive leadership.



Sesha Joi Moon, Ph.D. (B.A. '05/H&S; M.S. '08; Cert. '09/GPA)

into the shaping of policy and the direction of state government.

Sesha Joi Moon, Ph.D. (B.A. '05/H&S; M.S. '08; Cert. '09/GPA), Virginia's chief diversity officer, leads statewide strategy to strengthen workforce practices and

advance inclusive excellence across state government. Her work centers on building institutions that reflect the communities they serve, reinforcing the relationship between representation, and public trust and effective governance. Moon's commitment to expanding opportunity extends beyond her public role. At the Wilder School, she established the Dr. Sesha Joi Moon Endowed Scholarship to support students committed to advancing marginalized communities and strengthening the next generation of public leadership.

Nicholas "Nick" Donohue (B.S. '06/GPA; B.A. '06/H&S), secretary of transportation, oversees long-range transportation policy, infrastructure investment and strategic mobility planning across the commonwealth.

He has decades of experience shaping multimodal systems, and his work has helped influence regional connectivity, economic opportunity and the infrastructure networks that support communities across Virginia. Transportation policy, often invisible when it works well, remains central to how government supports growth, mobility and daily life.

Nicky Zamostny (VEI), chief of staff to the attorney general of Virginia, plays a key role in guiding executive operations, policy coordination and strategic priorities



Nicholas "Nick" Donohue (B.S. '06/GPA; B.A. '06/H&S)

within the Office of the Attorney General. Her work supports the legal and administrative framework that underpins statewide governance, helping ensure alignment among policy direction, organizational leadership and the delivery of public responsibilities.

Wilder School leadership was present even before the administration formally began its work. **Dietra Trent, Ph.D. (MPA '95; PPA '07),** Wilder School alumna and former Virginia secretary of education, and **Curtis Brown (Cert. '09; M.A. '11),** Wilder School alumnus, faculty member and former head of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, served in leadership roles on Governor Abigail Spanberger's transition team. Their work helped shape early priorities, administrative direction and leadership strategy, drawing on their experience across education policy, emergency management and community resilience.

Taken together, these roles reflect more than individual achievement. They illustrate how leadership shaped through scholarship and practice becomes embedded in the everyday work of governing, from strengthening administrative foundations to guiding policy and supporting executive transition.

For decades, the Wilder School has prepared students not only to study government, but also to serve within it. The presence of its alumni and faculty across Virginia's new administration reflects that mission in practice and underscores the enduring importance of public leadership grounded in service to the commonwealth. [w](#)



Traci J. DeShazor (MPLI)

At the center of that effort is **Traci J. DeShazor (MPLI),** secretary of administration for the commonwealth of Virginia. She oversees the operational structure of state government, guiding the workforce, systems and administrative functions that enable public institutions to serve citizens effectively. Her career has included roles across municipal and state government, including deputy chief administrative officer for human services and chief equity officer for the city of Richmond, and later, deputy secretary of the commonwealth. A graduate of the Virginia Executive Institute and Minority Political Leadership Institute, DeShazor has built a career focused on strengthening institutions and reinforcing the systems that allow government to serve the public with consistency and accountability.

Leadership within the administration extends beyond operational management



Nicholas "Nick" Donohue (B.S. '06/GPA; B.A. '06/H&S)



Why we give: Dr. Bonnie Gail Mani

*Wilder School
pioneer gives back
to her alma mater.*

BY LAUREN FLOYD

“Talent may be equally distributed, but opportunities are not.”
For Bonnie G. Mani, Ph.D. (MPA '80, PPA '87), who often reflects on the uneven access to opportunity, that belief is more than a philosophy. It is the

foundation of her giving.

A Wilder School alumna and the first woman to earn a Ph.D. in Public Policy and Administration at Virginia Commonwealth University, Mani is channeling her life's work into expanding access for graduate students balancing ambition, scholarship and full-time careers.

A published author, trained pianist, political science professor, federal professional and advocate for women's career advancement, Mani reflects the spirit of institutional excellence. Her recent gift to the Wilder School establishes the **Dr. Bonnie G. Mani Awards in Public Administration**, merit-based scholarships that help full- and part-time graduate students cover the costs of data collection and analysis related to their dissertations.

Through this award, students receive critical financial support while balancing coursework, research and full-time

employment, a challenge Mani understands firsthand. While rising through the ranks at the Internal Revenue Service in the 1970s, she pursued a Master of Public Administration at the encouragement of then-Wilder professor and MPA program chair Dr. Leigh Grosenick. She later earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy and Administration, becoming the first woman in VCU history to complete the program.

Mani's path to public administration was not linear. Initially intending to pursue a Master of Music at VCU, she discovered that her passion for learning transcended disciplines. Analytical thinking, confidence and perseverance became transferable strengths that guided her academic and professional journey. As a federal employee working toward two graduate degrees, she came to understand how essential financial support can be in creating academic flexibility and opportunity.

Today, Mani sees an urgent need for well-prepared, ethically grounded public administrators at every level of government, a need she believes the Wilder School is uniquely positioned to meet.

For her, giving is both an investment in the future of public service and a commitment to expanding opportunities for women in public administration, particularly for those facing socioeconomic barriers.

“I'm concerned with opportunities for women in public administration,” she said.

“I would encourage prospective donors to support what matters most to them and direct their giving toward areas where they can make a meaningful difference.” 

“I would encourage prospective donors to support what matters most to them and direct their giving toward areas where they can make a meaningful difference.”

— Bonnie G. Mani, Ph.D. (MPA '80, PPA '87)





Justice, education and public purpose

Focused on justice, access and public policy, Wilder School student Alexander Campbell has emerged as a Truman Scholarship finalist.

Adapted from a story originally published by VCU News and written by Joan Tupponce.



For Alexander Campbell, public service is rooted in lived experience. A criminal justice student at the Wilder School with a double major in political science, Campbell has shaped his academic and civic work around expanding access and advancing justice through policy and advocacy. That commitment recently earned him national recognition when he was named a finalist for the Truman Scholarship, one of the nation's most distinguished honors for students pursuing careers in public service.

The Truman Scholarship recognizes leadership, academic achievement and sustained dedication to improving communities. For Campbell, the recognition reflects years of advocacy and a belief that public systems function best when they are responsive, inclusive and accountable.

His interest in justice and access is both academic and deeply personal.

"I am a student with a disability. I had accommodations at school, but they weren't always followed," he said, describing an experience that helped shape his commitment to educational

equity and legislative engagement.

At the Wilder School, Campbell's studies in criminal justice focus on systems of law, equity and public accountability. His work in political science complements that foundation, deepening his interest in governance and policy reform. Rather than separating academic study from civic engagement, Campbell approaches both as mutually reinforcing. His research and leadership focus on how inequities in education and the legal system create long-term challenges, emphasizing early access and policy solutions that address root causes.

Legislative advocacy has been central to that work. Through policy engagement and public dialogue, Campbell has elevated issues related to education, disability access and fairness, bringing research and lived experience into conversations that shape public decision-making. His approach reflects a belief that effective policy must be grounded in evidence and informed by the voices of those directly affected.

Being named a Truman finalist places Campbell among a select group of students nationwide preparing for

leadership in public service. Finalists are recognized for demonstrated leadership, sustained civic engagement and a clear commitment to addressing complex social challenges. For Campbell, the distinction represents not an endpoint, but a continuation of his work in public service.

Education remains central to his vision of service. He views learning as both a personal pathway and a public tool, one that can open doors, inform policy and strengthen communities. His experiences continue to reinforce the importance of persistence, collaboration and thoughtful engagement with complex challenges.

At the Wilder School, Campbell has connected academic study with real-world advocacy, applying what he has learned to efforts that advance equity and opportunity. Looking ahead, he hopes to continue working at the intersection of justice, education and public policy, contributing to reforms that expand access and strengthen the systems that serve communities. His trajectory reflects a clear sense of purpose and a sustained commitment to public service. 



*When science
informs justice:*

False confessions and the courts

Research by Wilder School
professor Hayley Cleary is
helping courts better
understand false confessions
and reshaping how adolescent
interrogations are viewed in
postconviction cases.

BY LAUREN FLOYD

False confessions remain one of the leading drivers of wrongful convictions in the United States, particularly among adolescents. Research by Hayley Cleary, Ph.D., professor of criminal justice, is helping courts better understand how and why they occur.

In August 2025, a North Carolina Superior Court judge cited Cleary's work on adolescent development and juvenile interrogations when vacating the convictions of the "Winston-Salem Five," five young men charged as teenagers in connection with the 2002 murder of Nathaniel Jones, the grandfather of NBA star Chris Paul. The ruling marked one of the rare instances in which a judge accepted scientific research on false confessions as newly discovered evidence, one of the few legal pathways available to defendants seeking to prove their innocence after being convicted. The decision reaches beyond a single case and may signal a rare shift in legal precedent, a change courts have historically been reluctant to make.

Fighting false confessions with science

Cleary's research applies developmental psychology to police

interrogations and examines how adolescents and young adults interact with legal systems. Attorneys across the country contact her during postconviction litigation, asking her to review case materials and provide scientific context.

"Trial attorneys will find me and say, 'I'm defending this young person, and I believe their confession given to police was not true,'" Cleary said. "They'll ask, 'Could you review the discovery? Could you watch this video? Can you help me understand why these kinds of things might happen more frequently?'"

As an expert witness, Cleary does not determine whether a confession is factually false. Instead, she helps judges and juries understand the science behind false confessions. Her work examines why people confess to crimes they did not commit, and who is most vulnerable and under what conditions.

More than a century of psychological research shows that adolescents are particularly susceptible during police interrogations. Individuals between the ages of 10 and 25 are still developing cognitively and emotionally and are less likely to fully grasp the long-term consequences of their decisions.

Advances in developmental neuroscience further demonstrate how stress affects decision-making.

“Stress really interferes with young people’s ability to make good decisions, to weigh costs and benefits, and to resist pressure,” Cleary said. “The ability to navigate emotionally charged situations continues to develop past the age of legal majority.”

Interrogation tactics and risk factors

Many law enforcement interrogations begin with a guilt-presumptive mindset, a belief that a suspect is guilty. This approach can foster confirmation bias and increase the likelihood that officers will use tactics associated with a higher risk of false confessions, particularly among juveniles.

Practices linked to elevated risk include minimization, extended custody and isolation, presentation of false evidence, bluffing about evidence, and fabrication of police or laboratory reports. These techniques can distort perceptions of risk and consequence, especially when individuals are confronted with information that contradicts what they believe to be true.

Certain personal characteristics also heighten vulnerability to coercion, including developmental immaturity, neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD or autism spectrum disorder, mental illness, suggestibility and prior trauma.

Upholding due process

False confessions that result in wrongful convictions impose lasting harm on defendants and their families, undermine trust in law enforcement and carry significant financial costs.

“We know that incarceration is exorbitantly expensive,” Cleary said. “It costs taxpayer dollars to incarcerate people who did not commit a crime, and if they are later exonerated, compensation often comes from taxpayers as well.”

Cleary advocates for investigative interview strategies that move away from guilt-presumptive approaches and instead emphasize critical thinking and openness. She also argues that juveniles should

consult with an attorney before waiving their Miranda rights.

“We have constitutional protections against self-incrimination, but many people, especially young people, do not fully understand their Miranda rights,” she said. “Even when they do, the social pressure to waive them remains extremely strong.”

Adult waiver rates exceed 80%, while rates among juveniles approach 90%.

Research and responsibility

Cleary’s work is grounded in a commitment to fairness for young people navigating the legal system. She credits the Wilder School for supporting rigorous, policy-relevant research that informs both scholarship and practice.

“The research I conduct as a professor at the Wilder School establishes my credibility as a scientist and forms the basis of the science I share in the courtroom,” Cleary said.

While research can inform judicial decision-making, Cleary emphasizes that responsibility for justice ultimately rests with the legal system. As of late 2025, three members of the Winston-Salem Five have been released, while two remain in custody pending appeal before the Supreme Court of North Carolina. [W](#)

“**We have constitutional protections against self-incrimination, but many people, especially young people, do not fully understand their Miranda rights.**”

— Hayley Cleary, Ph.D.





WHERE PLANNING MEETS COMPLEXITY

**URBAN AND
REGIONAL
STUDIES AND
PLANNING AT
THE L. DOUGLAS
WILDER SCHOOL
OF GOVERNMENT
AND PUBLIC
AFFAIRS**



From housing instability in Richmond to land stewardship on ancestral tribal grounds, the program prepares students to navigate complex forces shaping communities across contexts.

BY TIFFANY MURRAY-ROBERTSON

Benjamin F. Teresa, Ph.D., associate professor and program chair, directs the RVA Eviction Lab, where research on housing instability informs planning practice and policy in Richmond and beyond.

► Land, sovereignty and planning

On land returned to the Patowomeck Tribe after generations of displacement, a graduate student stands at the edge of a forest weighing decisions that are anything but technical.

Some of the trees carry cultural meaning, including those used to craft ceremonial eel baskets, a practice once nearly lost and now being reclaimed. The land must serve multiple futures at once: preservation of sacred space, ecological stewardship, public access and tribal sovereignty.

In early 2025, the Patowomeck Indian Tribe of Virginia acquired 870 acres of ancestral land along the Rappahannock River in Stafford, Spotsylvania and Caroline counties. The acquisition marked a significant moment of land restoration for a community whose relationship to this landscape stretches back generations.

Ren Usher, an enrolled member of the Patowomeck Tribe and a master's student in Urban and Regional Planning at the Wilder School, is helping develop a land-use framework that honors those realities simultaneously. The work requires historical research, community consultation, spatial analysis and the careful translation of cultural values into planning decisions that will shape the land for generations. ►

PHOTOS BY LOGAN WHITTON



“I’m part of the tribe, and sustaining community — not just buildings, but the people who have always been here — is what matters,” Usher said. “Planning is about honoring that, making culture visible while protecting what must remain sacred.”

This is what planning looks like now: layered, historical and deeply human.

Usher’s work is unfolding on a specific landscape, but the questions it raises about governance, legitimacy, history and responsibility sit at the core of how planning is taught across the Wilder School.

Systems and legitimacy

If planning today requires navigating layered systems, the intellectual foundation of the Urban and Regional Studies and Planning program rests on understanding how those systems function and how people experience them.

For Benjamin Teresa, Ph.D., associate professor of Urban and Regional Planning, chair of the program and director of the RVA Eviction Lab, the future of planning lies in understanding cities as political, economic and deeply human environments. Housing,

transportation, infrastructure and economic development do not operate independently; decisions in one domain reverberate across others, shaping patterns of opportunity, displacement and belonging. URSP Students earn national recognition from the American Planning Association

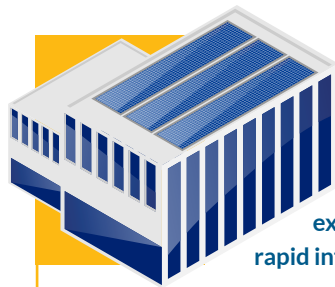
The Wilder School’s Urban and Regional Studies and Planning program continues to expand its national presence through student leadership and professional engagement. In 2026, the Urban Studies Student Association (USSA) and the Urban and Regional



Ren Usher, a student in the Wilder School's Urban and Regional Studies and Planning program, speaks with Brad Hatch, Ph.D., chief judge on the Patowomeck Tribal Council and a traditional knowledge keeper, at the tribe's ancestral land preserve.

Planning Student Association (URPSA) were formally recognized by the American Planning Association as an approved Planning Student Organization, making VCU the only university in Virginia with this designation.

The recognition connects Wilder students to a national network of planners and provides access to professional development, competitions and leadership opportunities. Through research, practice and national engagement, URSP students are building the skills and networks needed to help communities navigate complex planning



Data centers, emissions and uneven exposure

As Northern Virginia's data center footprint expands, research from the Wilder School highlights how rapid infrastructure growth can create environmental and governance consequences.

Urban and Regional Studies and Planning faculty members Damian Pitt, Ph.D., and Ivan Suen, Ph.D., examined emissions from diesel backup generators used during routine testing and power disruptions at data centers. Their analysis found that, in some locations, generator emissions approach levels comparable to those from major power plants, raising concerns about air quality, public health and long-term energy planning.

Using spatial modeling, the researchers mapped how emissions are distributed across surrounding communities. The study revealed uneven environmental exposure, with higher-emission areas overlapping with socially vulnerable populations. The findings underscore how infrastructure decisions, often framed as technical or economic, carry social and spatial implications.

The findings raise questions about regulatory frameworks, siting decisions and environmental accountability, reinforcing the need to evaluate growth not only through economic metrics, but also through equity and public health outcomes.

History, memory and the practice of listening

Meghan Gough, Ph.D., an associate professor of Urban and Regional Planning, examines how past planning decisions continue to shape present-day communities and future development trajectories.

Her research explores the relationship among place, memory and policy, asking how historical patterns of exclusion and displacement remain embedded in contemporary land-use decisions. In Richmond and beyond, redevelopment unfolds atop histories that continue to shape trust in public institutions.

Gough recently secured a contract with the *University of Pennsylvania Press* for an edited volume, "Place, History, and Planning," which advances the integration of historical scholarship into planning practice. The volume argues that effective planning requires not only technical expertise, but also an understanding of how communities have been shaped and reshaped over time.

Her work also emphasizes listening as a core professional skill. Community engagement is not procedural but interpretive. Understanding how residents experience place and policy is essential to building trust and designing equitable interventions.

For planners and policymakers alike, the lesson is clear: Sound policy depends on historical awareness and meaningful public participation. The program's curriculum reflects that principle, preparing students to connect research, community knowledge and governance in shaping future policy.



Meghan Gough, Ph.D.

challenges. Planning, he argues, is inseparable from legitimacy and public trust.

“Zoning may look technical, but when land-use decisions are on the table, people show up, because those rules determine what shape a neighborhood takes and who belongs,” he said.

“What looks technical at first is actually about democracy.”

Planning, he added, “is about legitimacy, how decisions are received, who benefits and who does not, and whether communities trust the process.”

He describes the present as a period of intersecting transitions, including demographic change, environmental pressure, shifting institutional trust, evolving economic structures and the enduring influence of planning history, all unfolding simultaneously and shaping how communities grow.

Understanding those intersections shapes how students are trained. Planning requires the ability to connect neighborhood change to regional

governance, institutional decision-making and long-term public outcomes.

Richmond provides a distinctive vantage point. The region reflects many of the pressures facing major metropolitan areas, including housing instability, spatial inequality, infrastructure demands and contested growth, but at a scale that allows faculty and students to engage directly and consistently across the city and surrounding counties. Here, theory and practice meet continuously.

That perspective is embedded throughout the curriculum, shaping how students learn to analyze land use, evaluate infrastructure, engage communities and navigate ethical public decision-making.

Infrastructure and memory

Across the program, faculty examine how layered transitions are reshaping communities. Environmental change, demographic shifts and evolving governance structures increasingly intersect, requiring planners to

understand systems in motion rather than isolated problems.

Damian Pitt, Ph.D., associate professor of Urban and Regional Planning and director of policy and community engagement at the VCU Institute for Sustainable Energy and Environment, studies how infrastructure and energy decisions are reshaping communities and governance. His research on the rapid expansion of data centers across Virginia highlights the tension between economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Data centers generate revenue and jobs, but they also place growing pressure on land, water and energy systems, raising questions about long-term planning and community impact. Similarly, the expansion of utility-scale solar presents opportunities alongside trade-offs. Cleaner energy brings climate benefits, yet land-use decisions affect agricultural preservation, rural character and local governance.

These are not simply technical questions. They are institutional decisions that will shape how regions grow for decades to come.

Pitt’s work moves between research and governance. He has served as a gubernatorial appointee to the Virginia Solar Energy Development and Energy Storage Authority, contributed to the Richmond 300 Master Plan Advisory Commission and served on the board of the Virginia chapter of the American Planning Association. Through these roles, his research informs policy and policy informs practice, reinforcing the program’s integration of scholarship, governance and regional planning.

If infrastructure reveals how systems function, Sarah Raskin, Ph.D., assistant chair and associate professor of Urban and Regional Planning, focuses on how those systems are experienced. She is trained in public health, and her research examines how the composition and distribution of service providers, resource availability and institutional trust shape community well-being, particularly in rural and divested areas.

“We are increasingly seeing

From capstone to practice

For many MURP graduates, the transition from classroom to career is immediate. Capstone research often becomes the foundation for professional work in public agencies, planning organizations and community development.

Latoya Gray-Sparks, a graduate of the program, completed her capstone on the preservation of historically Black neighborhoods in Richmond. Today, she works with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, where her work continues to center on community history, preservation and equitable development.

Tarnika Edmunds followed a similarly applied path. As a student, she conducted research examining displacement in Richmond’s Black communities, interviewing residents and documenting neighborhood change. She now serves in the Office of the Mayor for the city of Richmond, where planning, policy and community engagement intersect in practice.

Together, their trajectories reflect the program’s emphasis on applied learning, community-centered planning and preparation for public decision-making.



Latoya Gray-Sparks



Tarnika Edmunds



URSP Students earn national recognition from the American Planning Association

The Wilder School's Urban and Regional Studies and Planning program continues to expand its national presence through student leadership and professional engagement. In 2026, the Urban Studies Student Association (USSA) and the Urban and Regional Planning Student Association (URPSA) were formally recognized by the American Planning Association as an approved Planning Student Organization, making VCU the only university in Virginia with this designation.

The recognition connects Wilder students to a national network of planners and provides access to professional development, competitions and leadership opportunities. Through research, practice and national engagement, URSP students are building the skills and networks needed to help communities navigate complex planning challenges.

demographic change driven by aging, and it touches everything: housing, transportation, environment and community,” Raskin said.

Technical solutions alone, she emphasizes, are insufficient. Planning begins with listening and understanding how policies are encountered in everyday life and how communities interpret change.

Historical perspective further deepens that approach. Meghan Gough, Ph.D., associate professor of Urban and Regional Planning, examines how past planning decisions continue to shape contemporary landscapes, not as distant history, but as active forces embedded in present-day policy and community experience.

Land-use decisions and redevelopment unfold atop histories of exclusion, displacement and contested belonging. In Richmond and beyond, those histories remain visible in the built environment, in neighborhoods shaped by redlining, in civic spaces marked by public debate and in redevelopment efforts that carry both promise and tension.

Students are trained to approach planning with historical awareness, asking not only what should happen next,

but also what has already happened and who has been shaped by those decisions.

Learning to thrive

For students, these ideas become tangible through applied learning at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Undergraduate students engage in community-based projects, collaborative planning exercises and student-led initiatives that emphasize participation, creativity and civic engagement. Many take leadership roles in student organizations, organizing events and projects that reflect their growing confidence in shaping the built environment around them.

At the graduate level, every master's student completes a capstone project for an external client, addressing real challenges across housing, infrastructure, environmental planning and community development. These projects often become the bridge between academic training and professional practice.

Recent alumni illustrate how that preparation translates into practice. Latoya Gray-Sparks (B.A. '04/H&S; MURP '23/GPA) conducted her capstone on preserving historically Black neighborhoods in Richmond and now

serves with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. Tarnika Edmunds (MPA '25), a former Wilder Fellow alumna, now serves in the Office of the Mayor for the city of Richmond, where planning and community engagement intersect in daily governance.

What distinguishes the program is not only the range of issues it engages, but also the framework within which those issues are taught. Planning is understood as inseparable from governance. Students learn how decisions move through public institutions, how policy shapes implementation and how community voices influence outcomes.

As cities and regions confront housing instability, environmental transition, infrastructure demands and evolving governance, the ability to think across systems and to listen within them becomes essential.

On land shaped by displacement and return, Usher began to see planning not as a way to simplify complexity, but as a way to work within it.

“Traditional ecological knowledge teaches that everything is connected: land, water, people and memory,” Usher said. “Planning isn’t about control. It’s about stewardship and learning how to live within those connections.” 

Alumni, Faculty and Student Achievements

From cabinet appointments to nationally recognized research and student achievement, the Wilder School community continues to lead in service to the commonwealth and beyond.



LeQuan Hylton, Ph.D.

FACULTY

Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D., Dean

Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D., received national recognition for her leadership in public service. She was named a Virginia Tech Distinguished Alumna of the Year and selected as the 2026 recipient of the Charles V. Willie Advocate Award by Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

RaJade "Jade" M. Berry-James, Ph.D., Senior Associate Dean

RaJade M. Berry-James, Ph.D., received the 2026 Outstanding Contribution to Graduate Education in the Southern Region Award from the Conference of Southern Graduate Schools. Since joining the Wilder School in 2022, she has strengthened graduate enrollment, expanded faculty mentoring systems and secured major funding to support graduate assistants and researchers. Her work reflects national leadership in advancing equity and excellence in graduate education.

Sarah Jane Brubaker, Ph.D., Professor of Criminal Justice

Sarah Jane Brubaker, Ph.D., serves as president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (2025–2026). In this role, she is leading the organization's 76th Annual Meeting in New York City and selected the conference theme, "Resisting Colonization of Lifeworlds."

Nakeina E. Douglas-Glenn, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director of RISE

Nakeina E. Douglas-Glenn, Ph.D., was named the 2026 recipient of the Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Exemplary Practices Award by the American Society for Public Administration. Through the Research Institute for Social Equity, she advances data-driven accountability frameworks that strengthen public policy, governance and institutional equity.

ALUMNI

Traci J. DeShazor, Secretary of Administration, Commonwealth of Virginia

Appointed secretary of administration for the commonwealth of Virginia, DeShazor now leads statewide administrative operations. Her appointment reflects a distinguished career in public leadership across municipal and state government.

Nick Donohue, Secretary of Transportation, Commonwealth of Virginia

Appointed secretary of transportation for the commonwealth of Virginia, Donohue plays a central role in guiding the state's long-range mobility and infrastructure priorities. His leadership reflects decades of experience shaping transportation policy and regional connectivity.

Sesha Joi Moon, Ph.D., Chief Diversity Officer, Commonwealth of Virginia

Moon was appointed chief diversity officer for the commonwealth of Virginia, reflecting a distinguished career advancing equity, representation and public leadership.

LeQuan Hylton, Ph.D., Dale District Supervisor

LeQuan Hylton, Ph.D. (Ph.D. '16), was elected Dale district supervisor on the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors, succeeding the late James M. Holland, whom he credits as a mentor. A combat veteran and member of the U.S. Army Reserve, Hylton previously served on the Chesterfield County Planning Commission and is co-founder of Hylton & Company, a North Chesterfield-based real estate and property management firm.



RaJade "Jade" M. Berry-James, Ph.D.

**Elsie L. Harper-Anderson, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor**

Elsie L. Harper-Anderson, Ph.D., received the 2025 Marcia M. Feld Leadership Award from the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning Faculty Women's Interest Group, recognizing outstanding leadership within the planning academy and sustained contributions to mentorship, scholarship and professional service.

**Hayley M. D. Cleary, Ph.D.,
Associate Professor**

Hayley M. D. Cleary, Ph.D., co-authored an article in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* advancing empirical understanding of false confessions in homicide investigations and informing interrogation policy and practice.

Sarah Raskin, Ph.D., Associate Professor

Sarah Raskin, Ph.D., led a national study published in *Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology* analyzing how discrimination and resilience influence dental care access and outcomes, offering new insight for advancing equity in health policy and practice.

**Jay S. Albanese, Ph.D., Professor of
Criminal Justice**

Jay S. Albanese, Ph.D., was featured in *The New York Times* analyzing organized burglaries targeting professional athletes and the role of transnational crime networks. He also contributed research and investigative insight to the Vice TV documentary series *(Re)solved*.

Heather Millar, Ph.D., and Elsie L. Harper-Anderson, Ph.D.

Wilder School alumna Heather Millar, Ph.D., and associate professor Elsie L. Harper-Anderson, Ph.D., published research in the *American Journal of Distance Education* examining how employer perceptions of online degrees shifted following the COVID-19 pandemic, signaling broader changes in workforce expectations and the evolving role of higher education.

**Chernoh M. Wurie, Ph.D.,
Assistant Professor**

Chernoh M. Wurie, Ph.D., received an appreciation award from the VCU Police Department in recognition of his contributions to student engagement and community partnership.

STUDENTS

Alex Campbell, Truman Scholarship Finalist

Alex Campbell was named a finalist for the 2026 Truman Scholarship, one of the nation's most prestigious honors for students pursuing careers in public service. A third-year Honors College student majoring in criminal justice and political science, Campbell has advanced advocacy for students with disabilities and neurodiverse learners.

Mariam Al-Khafaji, APSA Diversity Fellow

Mariam Al-Khafaji was selected as a 2026–2027 Diversity Fellowship Program Fellow by the American Political Science Association. She is a Master of Public

Administration student at VCU, and her research examines comparative politics in the Middle East, including electoral participation and regime shifts.

**Isaac Kwabena Yeboah,
ASPA Founders' Fellow**

Isaac Kwabena Yeboah was named a 2026 Founders' Fellow by the American Society for Public Administration, a national program recognizing emerging leaders in public service. A doctoral student in public policy and administration, he also received the Best Paper Award at the Conference on Minority Public Administrators (COMPA) in Durham, North Carolina, this spring. His research focuses on public policy, leadership and financial governance in developing contexts.

Aemro Worku Ayalew, Doctoral Student

Aemro Worku Ayalew authored commentary published by the London School of Economics and Political Science blog *Africa at LSE* examining the human rights and governance consequences of internet shutdowns during armed conflict. His work argues that digital access should be treated as essential infrastructure during crises. His broader research focuses on poverty and environmental challenges in Ethiopia, particularly the intersections of agriculture, entrepreneurship and evidence-based sustainable development.



Mariam Al-Khafaji



Joe Casey prepares for his next chapter

After more than three decades in local government, including a decade as Chesterfield County Administrator, Joe Casey prepares for his next chapter following a career defined by public service, leadership and lifelong learning.

BY PAULA OTTO

In 1982, like many high school seniors, Joe Casey (MPA '95, PPA '13) was deciding where to go to college. A drawing compass from geography class helped narrow his options.

"Starting from my hometown in New Jersey, I drew a circle out 300 miles," Casey said. "I thought that distance was far enough away to gain some independence, but close enough to get back home if I needed to."

The circle led him south to the University of Richmond, where he majored in accounting. Though he initially planned to return to the New York area after graduation, an offer from KPMG's Richmond office altered the trajectory of his career.

"I still remember the recruiter telling me, 'If you were to leave Richmond today, you may never come back, but if you stay

for a year, you may never leave.'"

The recruiter was right.

What began as a role with KPMG, where his work included assignments across multiple sectors, including mergers and acquisitions, gradually evolved into something more meaningful. An assignment auditing Hanover County introduced Casey to the inner workings of local government and the people behind the numbers.

"While I was auditing primarily numbers, there were still a lot of words," Casey said. "You had to understand the grants, the programs and the services — and the people delivering them. I came to see that servant leadership exists at every level. It's not just department heads. The front-line employees working to make someone's life better are servant leaders, too."

When Hanover County's assistant director of finance position opened, Casey applied — and was hired. Over the next 13 years, he rose through the ranks, deepening his commitment to public service.

While serving in Hanover, Casey enrolled at the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, earning a Master of Public Administration in 1995 with an emphasis in public finance. He credits the late Dr. Blue Wooldridge as one of his most influential professors.

"He was tough," Casey recalled. "But that experience stretched my brain."

Soon after earning his MPA, Casey was invited to teach graduate courses in public finance and nonprofit financial management. Inspired by his students — particularly doctoral students — he returned to the classroom himself, entering the Wilder School's Ph.D. program in his early forties while balancing executive leadership responsibilities and raising a family.

Why pursue a doctorate mid-career?

"It's like asking an athlete why they try to run further than they did the day before," Casey said. "Your mind and heart are meant to keep moving forward. There's an energy that comes from pushing yourself. And for me, it's easier to sit in a classroom than run a marathon," he added with a laugh.

His dissertation examined the impact of collective bargaining on law enforcement agencies nationwide, blending his expertise in finance with his leadership experience in local government.

"My Ph.D. program gave me greater maturity in how I approached problems and analysis," Casey said. "It changed how I thought."

That perspective shaped more than a decade of leadership in Chesterfield County, Virginia's fourth-largest county and fifth-largest locality. During his tenure, the county attracted more than \$12 billion in capital investment and more than 10,000 new jobs, including major projects involving LEGO, Google and Commonwealth Fusion Systems' first-of-its-kind grid-scale nuclear fusion

Calling all Wilder Fellows: Help us celebrate 20 years

The Wilder Fellows program marks its 20th anniversary in 2026, reflecting two decades of investment in Wilder School graduate students and applied public leadership. Since its founding, the program has supported more than 200 students and generated more than \$6.2 million in tuition assistance, connecting Wilder Fellows with host employers across the public, private and nonprofit sectors.

We will gather for a 20th Anniversary Celebration on Oct. 16, 2026, at the Richmond Marriott. Please scan the QR

code to share your update and stay connected.

Twenty years in, the work continues, and you remain an essential part of our story.



power facility. He also prioritized infrastructure improvements, including road enhancements, a new water treatment plant and expanded public safety and school facilities.

For Casey, economic development was never simply about numbers. It was about strengthening communities and ensuring long-term resilience.

His advice to current graduate and doctoral students reflects that same practical orientation.

“Take every opportunity to intern or shadow in public service and nonprofit organizations,” he said. “You’ll discover what inspires you — and sometimes what doesn’t. Both are valuable.”

As he prepares to conclude his public service career this summer, Casey looks forward to spending more time with his wife, Suzanne, their three sons and his mother. Yet stepping away from government does not mean stepping away from growth.

“Who knows,” he said. “You might see me back at the front of a classroom at the Wilder School.”

For a leader shaped by lifelong learning, the next chapter is less about slowing down and more about continuing to move forward — in service, in scholarship and in community. 



From classroom to consequence: Wilder students brief the FBI on foreign threats

BY LAUREN FLOYD

In the classroom, students learn theory. In the real world, they learn consequences.

Last fall, nine undergraduate students from the Wilder School stood before intelligence analysts and federal agents at the FBI’s Richmond field office and delivered a briefing on foreign threats to the commonwealth. For most undergraduates, addressing that kind of audience comes later in their career. For these students, it came before graduation.

Students mentored by Wilder School faculty members Larry Prokop and Maureen Moslow-Benway analyzed how foreign adversaries could target Virginia’s education and financial sectors. Drawing exclusively on open-source intelligence, the students examined vulnerabilities across universities, community colleges and trade schools, assessing how hostile actors might approach personnel, exploit funding streams or influence institutional systems.

The assignment was not theoretical. Agents asked questions. They tested assumptions. They pushed for clarity.

“I would put them up against any of the intelligence analysts I worked with in the bureau because of the research and the critical thinking they put into this,” said Prokop, a former FBI analyst.

Moslow-Benway agreed. “They were so good. Every single one of them was on their A-game.”

The experience placed students inside the professional environment they hope to enter. They briefed the full leadership team of the Richmond

field office, from the special agent in charge to division heads overseeing criminal, white-collar and counterintelligence operations.

Exposure at that level carries weight. It also builds confidence.

“For many of them, this is an opportunity of a lifetime,” Prokop said. “They’re not observing from the sidelines. They’re engaging real-world problems alongside practitioners.”

Richmond’s concentration of federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies offers unique opportunities for students in homeland security and emergency preparedness (HSEP) and criminal justice. Internships often lead to permanent positions and, in some cases, high-level security clearances.

“Every intern who worked with me at the FBI Richmond office was offered a job at the end and was given a top secret clearance,” Prokop noted. “They were working with real-world threats.”

As global cyber threats evolve and artificial intelligence reshapes risk landscapes, the demand for skilled HSEP professionals continues to grow.

“We want students to be part of something bigger than themselves,” Moslow-Benway said. “There is a real need for professionals who can think critically about emerging threats and protect our communities.”

The classroom remains foundational. But when students stand before federal agents and defend their analysis, the distance between theory and practice narrows. In that space, students begin to see themselves not just as learners, but also as practitioners. 



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CONGRATS TO OUR 18TH EXCELLENCE IN VIRGINIA GOVERNMENT AWARDS RECIPIENTS.

These Virginians were celebrated
on April 15 for their exceptional
contributions to public service.



Top row, from left: Wally Smith, M.D., Kathy Glazer, Tamarah Holmes
and Robert Holsworth, master of ceremonies.
Bottom row, from left: Judith Holland, Dean Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D.,
Governor L. Douglas Wilder and Barbara Carter.

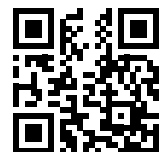
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Lifetime Achievement Award (Posthumous)
Community Enhancement Award
Grace E. Harris Leadership Award
Hill-Robinson Expansion of Freedom Award
Public-Private Partnership Award

Unsung Hero Award
Governor's Medallion

James M. "Jim" Holland
Dr. Wally R. Smith
Dr. Tamarah Holmes (Ph.D. '13)
U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine
Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, Kathy
Glazer (MPA '08), Executive Director
Barbara Carter
U.S. Sen. Mark Warner

Watch honoree
video profiles



bit.ly/evga2026

