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Fall 2023

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Wilder School *in Action*

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Letter from the dean's office



Dear Friends,

As we welcome autumn's kaleidoscope and crisp air, I am delighted to introduce the Fall 2023 edition of our magazine, mirroring the dynamic life of the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs. Within its pages, you'll find riveting stories that signify our spirit and achievements.

The Wilder School continues to demonstrate its commitment to academic excellence, steadfastly holding a place among the top 15% of public affairs programs in the U.S., as recognized by the U.S. News & World Report. This consistent achievement, now a signature of our school, has propelled us to top-tier rankings across five specialty areas.

In parallel, we celebrate the ascendancy of our Senior Associate Dean of Faculty and Academic Affairs, Dr. RaJade Berry-James, to the presidency of NASPAA, the world's leading accrediting body for public affairs programs. Her journey, indicative of the Wilder School's leadership caliber, echoes our global influence.

This edition's cover story features our Capitol Semester interns — a tangible testament to our commitment to experiential learning. The Capitol Semester is our immersive policymaking internship program with the state legislature, allowing our students to work alongside the commonwealth's representatives and engage directly with the legislative process.

Delving further, you'll find an engaging conversation with our namesake, Governor L. Douglas Wilder, who offers critical perspectives on the Commonwealth Poll — an unbiased, insightful reflection of the issues affecting Virginians,

conducted by the Wilder School since 2000.

With a generous gift, Wilder School alumna Sesha Joi Moon has established a scholarship to aid VCU students in perpetuity.

This year was punctuated by high-profile events that enriched our campus life. We had insightful engagements with Dame Karen Pierce DCMG, British ambassador to the U.S., and FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell, both offering profound perspectives. We also recount our experience hosting the esteemed 2023 Deans Summit and the 16th Excellence in Virginia Government Awards.

We honor our alumni, Najmah Thomas and Amy Atkinson; their transformative work in social change and community leadership is emblematic of our mission.

I invite you to celebrate our 2023 achievements as you traverse this edition. The Wilder School stands as a beacon of public service education, fostering a more equitable, just society, whether you're a potential student, an alum, or a public service professional.

The Wilder School is not just an institution; it is a powerhouse of change, an engine for innovation, and a launchpad for public servants. We stand dedicated to molding future leaders, cultivating pioneering thought, and driving meaningful change.

Thank you for your unwavering support and your indispensable role in our journey. Together, we carry our shared mission forward, dedicated to shaping a better future through public service. 🏡

Warm regards,

Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D.

Dean

L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs
Virginia Commonwealth University

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



@VCUWilderSchool

VCU L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs

Ranked **top 15%** of programs nationwide



No. 1 in Virginia

- Public Management and Leadership
- Social Policy
- Urban Policy



Visionary leadership

A Q&A with RaJade M. Berry-James, incoming President of NASPAA



This interview was condensed and edited for clarity by TIFFANY MURRAY-ROBERTSON

Dr. RaJade M. Berry-James, the senior associate dean of faculty and academic affairs at the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University and elected president for the 2023-24 term of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), brings over 30 years of dedication to public administration, with a focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and education. Her achievements include \$1,130,000 in research grants to support vulnerable populations, the creation of innovative graduate courses in social equity, and numerous awards for pedagogy and mentoring. A two-time chair of the NASPAA Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA), Dr. Berry-James's leadership accredited the first international programs and initiated COPRA's first diversity policy. Her unparalleled service exemplifies her commitment to advancing public administration worldwide.

Q Dr. Berry-James, congratulations on being elected as the incoming President of NASPAA by the organization's membership. What vision do you bring to NASPAA under your upcoming leadership?

A Thank you. My vision for NASPAA under my leadership is to bridge the gap between academic research and practical action for social change. It's about bringing to life the core values of NASPAA, such as diversity, inclusion, and social equity, by making them actionable.

Q How do you plan to engage the membership in achieving this vision?

A Engaging the membership requires open communication, active listening, and a willingness to take on broad new ideas and perspectives. It's about working with people who are on the ground, understanding their needs and challenges, and then creating a dialogue to address those needs.

Q What is the key characteristic that you feel will be most necessary for your success?

A I believe resilience is a key characteristic that will be most necessary for my success. There will undoubtedly be challenges ahead, but the capacity to recover quickly, adapt, and keep moving forward is crucial.

Q As a distinguished academic and public servant, how do you see the role of education in advancing equity and justice in society?

A Education is a powerful tool for advancing equity and justice. It provides a pathway for upward mobility, it enlightens individuals about their rights and responsibilities, and it fosters empathy and understanding among diverse groups. As educators, our role is to empower students with knowledge and skills that enable them to be drivers of social change.

Q As the incoming president of NASPAA, how do you plan to address the increasing demand for diversity, equity, and inclusion in public affairs education?

A We plan to leverage the collective power of our members to challenge and change systemic biases in public affairs education. We want to create an environment where every student feels valued and is given equal opportunities to succeed. This requires a multipronged approach that includes policy changes, cultural shifts, and continuous education.

Q You mentioned the significance of practical action for social change. Could you discuss a specific project or initiative you've been involved with that best represents this approach? How might you

apply lessons from that experience to initiatives at NASPAA?

A I believe in engaged scholarship through research, teaching, and service. Collaborating with community partners offers promising practices that solve the problems we all face. During my time as a research associate at the University of Akron Institute for Health and Social Policy in Ohio, I honed the art of community-engaged practice. Working closely with my research assistants, I collaborated with health and juvenile justice professionals to secure grants, initiate programs, and evaluate outcomes. Together with practitioners, we worked to strengthen the community and enhance the quality of life for its members. Our combined efforts focused on addressing social issues, fortifying public services, and creating a meaningful impact on society.

Q One of your key leadership characteristics you've mentioned is resilience. Could you share an instance from your past where you had to exhibit this trait? How did that experience shape your approach to leadership?

A My dissertation research centered on the implementation of affirmative action, specifically the vital role of affirmative action officers in higher education. The study examined factors affecting equitable outcomes, barriers hindering social change, and leadership

characteristics. These officers had to show courage, commitment, and consciousness to work effectively on college campuses. Their efforts in advancing equity were influenced by the campus climate and political determination to enhance diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.

In both campus and community work, my focus is on progressing people, policies, and practices toward cultural competence. I aim to move from a state of incompetence to cultural proficiency, concentrating on the attributes that promote cultural awareness and foster social equity. As a professor of public administration, I've created award-winning courses blending social equity, cultural competence, and program evaluation. Despite often being the only woman of color present, I am unwavering in my commitment to racial equity and the eradication of racism through my work and leadership.

Q As NASPAA seeks to expand its global reach, can you share your thoughts on the challenges and opportunities presented by such international collaborations? How does the potential to impact international policy frameworks align with your vision for NASPAA?

A As President, I'm eager to promote the ideal of public service globally. I'm honored to follow the lead of distinguished public sector giants whose impact strengthens NASPAA's ideals. Together with the NASPAA Executive Council and the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation, I will work to enhance our brand and engage with institutional members, both domestically and internationally. Our joint efforts are aimed at recruiting a diverse group of students for careers in state, local, and federal government service. As NASPAA engaged scholars, we're dedicated to addressing grand challenges in public administration. Through our scholarship and engaged practices, we strive to create practical knowledge to solve universal problems and implement breakthrough approaches with a meaningful global impact. [#NASPAA](#)

Catalyzing transformation

Insights from the 2023 Deans Summit on public service education

BY TIFFANY MURRAY-ROBERTSON

The 2023 Deans Summit, a seminal gathering of deans and directors from premier public service schools, was recently hosted by the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at VCU. Pioneered by the Volcker Alliance, a nonpartisan organization committed to advancing public service education, the summit promoted a robust exchange of transformative ideas and strategies.

A standout session from the summit was a thought-provoking discussion with L. Douglas Wilder, the first elected African American governor in the U.S. His perspective fueled critical dialogues on addressing structural racism, promoting inclusive leadership, and expanding access to public service degree programs for members of the military.

The attendees also delved into pressing issues like the impact of recent Supreme Court rulings on diversity and inclusion, fostering democratic values, and the challenges affecting higher education more generally. Participants explored Richmond's rich cultural landscape, featuring a private tour of the Virginia State Capitol and a dinner at the historic Old City Bar.

Dean Susan T. Gooden succinctly encapsulated the spirit of the event, stating, "Our partnership with the Volcker Alliance and collaboration with deans from across the country has ignited a groundbreaking conversation. This summit is a vital step toward reimagining public service education and strengthening the very fabric of government."

Sara Mogulescu, President of the Volcker Alliance, further added, "The insights gathered here will help steer future Deans Summits. Governor Wilder's groundbreaking career is a beacon for our efforts to cultivate the next generation of public service leaders."



Commonwealth Poll captures perceptions of Virginians

The Wilder School poll is a longstanding bellwether of representation on the issues most critical to the people of the commonwealth

BY DAVID SLIPHER


Understanding the issues of importance to voters is an essential part of any democracy. But these perceptions are often clouded by inaccurate reporting and speculation. The Wilder School illuminates authentic perceptions through a transparent and data-driven methodology. The poll was also cited as an official CNN 2020 Presidential Election Poll by CNN, representing the gold standard in public opinion research.

Policymakers in Virginia, Washington, D.C., and across the nation use the poll to identify sentiments across a range of perennial topics, including voting intentions, economic and workforce development, education, housing, public health, public safety, and racial equity. The poll, which is conducted through phone interviews, reports detailed demographics like geography, gender and ethnicities of respondents.

Polls released this year reveal that the most important issue to survey respondents in the commonwealth is inflation and rising costs of living. A slight plurality (48%) of Virginians said they would prefer that Virginia's \$1 billion budget surplus be used for projects such as building or repairing schools, compared with 43% who would prefer that the surplus be used for tax relief for Virginians.

Education has taken the front seat, with rising questions challenging the quality and value of schooling. More than 4 in 10 Virginians believe school-aged students in their community are falling behind in school. Additionally, 55% of those polled do not think that the value of education by the colleges and universities in Virginia is worth the cost. African Americans, Democrats and those with a bachelor's degree or higher had the strongest support for higher education.


Lauded for its prevalence, historical accuracy and strong reputation amongst media, the Commonwealth Poll is an institution that demonstrates the research expertise at the Wilder School.

 **55%**
disagree that higher education is worth the cost

 **4 in 10**
believe school-aged students in their community are still falling behind

 **49%**
see crime as a serious issue

 **72%**
see affordable housing as a serious issue

 **59%**
have felt impacts of climate change

Governor's voice

Exploring the Commonwealth Poll



66th Governor of Virginia L. Douglas Wilder shares his perspective on the Wilder School Commonwealth Poll, a longtime bellwether and trusted source for public opinion in Virginia.



“ When we look at what is and imagine the consequences for the future, we pose our questions to fit that mold. Perennial concerns like education, healthcare, housing, and crime will always be top of mind for the people. Our poll questions help elucidate to what degree citizens are affected. **”**

Q The Wilder School has conducted the Commonwealth Poll since 2000. What qualities set the Commonwealth Poll ahead of other polls?

A What we bring to the people with the Commonwealth Poll is studious, as well as in-depth, relative to the real issues affecting the people of Virginia. The poll is clearly nonpartisan and reflective of the real issues affecting the people of Virginia. It has its place of recognition because of its accuracy, especially in voting perception.

Q How are poll questions developed? How does the Wilder School research expertise prioritize and explore Virginians' voices?

A The poll questions are developed by Robyn McDougle, Associate Dean of Research and Outreach, and her team, through experience and

connections with representatives of both parties. When we look at what is and imagine the consequences for the future, we pose our questions to fit that mold. Perennial concerns like education, healthcare, housing, and crime will always be top of mind for the people. Our poll questions help elucidate to what degree citizens are affected.

Q As Governor of Virginia, you were instrumental in investing in education across the commonwealth. In recent polls, we've seen strong opinions reflecting decline in the value of a college degree. What needs to happen to reverse these perspectives?

A There are strong opinions questioning the value of a college degree. The question is the cost of that college degree and the enormous amounts of money and sacrifices

that people have to pay to some of the universities. But money alone is not the answer to education. It's the proper dispensation of money. Unfortunately, that isn't always a priority in higher education.

Q How does the Commonwealth Poll help benefit students at the Wilder School and across VCU?

A The poll gives them a guideline and a guidepost to compare their feelings with others. Moreover, it likewise gives them an opportunity to improve upon their thinking and to offer criticisms where necessary, including the poll itself. So, the guidelines for students should always be inquisitive. The question is, if these things are as they are, how do our students bring about change? 🇺🇸

Getting to the root of oral health

Sarah Raskin facilitates oral health access for underserved patients and dental workforce equity for underrepresented professionals



BY DAVID SLIPHER

When the subject of preventative healthcare is broached, oral health is often regarded as a distinct and separate issue. However, for Sarah E. Raskin, Ph.D., M.P.H., associate professor at the Wilder School, this is not the case. Raskin sees a deep and intimate connection between oral health and overall well-being. Bridging the gap between these two aspects of health is her passion, and she has dedicated herself to finding solutions to disparities in oral care. Through her work, she's making a significant impact in areas such as dental safety nets, workforce diversification, community-based research and rural oral health. "Oral health has a reciprocal relationship with overall health. For example, pregnant people who have periodontal (gum) disease are more likely to deliver preterm or low birth weight babies," said Raskin. "Having



gum disease also substantially increases the risk of poor glycaemic control and end-stage renal disease among people with diabetes." Much of Raskin's research critiques the status quo and historical deficiencies in oral healthcare, especially systemic factors that wind up excluding racial and ethnic minorities, and economically

disadvantaged individuals from obtaining care and from pursuing opportunities in the dental professions. To understand these inequities, she's taking a holistic view of oral health systems and incorporating her training in cultural anthropology into her approach. One constant has emerged — many of the same factors that exclude underserved patients from dental care also prohibit professional achievement among potential dental workforce members. "Using mixed social science methods such as patient and provider surveys, interviews with oral health policy advocates, and ethnographic

observations of service delivery, we can go beyond strict biological understandings of oral disease and cognitive understandings of career paths," she said. "These underlying forces shape inequities such as societal expectations of what a dentist should look like and how a community member should tolerate being excluded from care." Community partnerships are key to Raskin's work, and as a VCU School of Dentistry faculty affiliate and member of the iCubed Initiative Oral Health Core,

she's using her expertise to influence best practices to incorporate outreach as a prime component for transforming dental service delivery. She's partnering respectively at the local, state, and national levels with CrossOver Healthcare Ministry, Virginia Health Catalyst, and CareQuest Institute for Oral Health. Together with these groups, she has worked to reduce missed appointments among dental safety net patients, expand community-based services through dental practice law changes, and document and

address how discrimination within dental offices affects patient outcomes. Her data-driven research, which she makes publicly accessible by publishing in an open-access format as much as possible, represents a sea-change for reframing the conversation around oral health. Through her recognized expertise, connections, and influence on oral health advocates, educators, and scholars, her mission is to make oral health a permanent part of the larger discussion for health equity in all policy planning. 

Meet our new faculty

Luisa Nazareno Aguiar and Charity Scott

We are proud to announce the newest members of the Wilder School faculty and welcome their expertise and impacts.



Luisa Nazareno, Ph.D., joins as assistant professor after completing her doctoral studies at the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University. Her interests are labor markets, social protection, and development, focusing on Latin America and the

United States. She specializes in impacts associated with work deregulation and emerging technologies on workers, families, and places, and preparing to mitigate adverse changes in communities. Nazareno is instructing the Seminar in Urban Policy (PPAD 750), Public Policy Economics (PPAD 716), and Survey of Data Analysis Techniques in Public Policy (PPAD 722).

She selected the Wilder School for its "groundedness in real-world problems and proactive agenda on equity" and advocates for experiences extending beyond the classroom. In her free time, Nazareno loves to cook and eat good food, working in the kitchen with her husband. "I love to gather people around the table," she shared. "The kitchen is definitely the busiest room in our house."

Charity Scott, Ph.D., is an assistant professor. She comes to the Wilder School after earning her doctorate at The Ohio State University's John Glenn College of Public Affairs. Her research interests are education policy and management, built from her experiences as a K-12 teacher in an



urban setting as well as previous work with community organizations advocating to improve education outcomes. Scott is passionate about socially equitable and just community-inclusive research, and understanding the institutional environments in which schools operate. "(I am) interested in how these changes to the educational landscape have shaped experiences and outcomes, especially those of long-disadvantaged students, and their self-determination of families and communities," she said. Scott instructs Survey of Applied Research Methods in Public Policy (PPAD 721).

She looks forward to working with Nakeina Douglas-Glenn and the Research Institute for Social Equity (RISE) and aiding doctoral students of color through teaching and mentorship as they seek solutions to shape their communities for the better. "It is important to engage in a discourse with my students to pull from their individual knowledge and experiences to help inform how we do, could, or should approach public administration phenomena." In her free time, Scott paints and kayaks, and she looks forward to exploring the Richmond region.

BY THE NUMBERS



As of 2022, of all practicing U.S. dentists, **only 5.9% are Hispanic** and **3.8% are Black**, compared to 19.1% and 13.6%, respectively, of the U.S. population.

Source: American Dental Association and U.S. Census Bureau



Nationally, people who identify as experiencing discrimination or indigent treatment in a dental setting are **two to four times more likely to:**

- describe their oral health as poor/fair,
- not to have had dental care in two years,
- are not planning a future visit for preventive/routine oral care, as in the dental setting.

Source: Sarah Raskin research under publication review



Only 33% of dentists nationwide treat Medicaid-insured dental

patients. Dentists who treat **Medicaid-insured patients are more likely to be Black, Hispanic, or Asian** and more often practice in rural areas, majority nonwhite zip codes or high-poverty zip codes.

Source: Nasseh K, Fosse C, Vujicic M. Medical Care Research and Review.



Why I give to the Wilder School: Sesha Joi Moon, Ph.D., establishes landmark endowed scholarship to unlock the potential of the next generation of leaders

BY RACHEL ZEEVE

Sesha Joi Moon, Ph.D. (B.A.'05; M.S.'08; Cert'09), is building a lasting legacy in Richmond and beyond through her tireless commitment to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion. Inspired by her family's past, she's expanding critical learning opportunities for future generations through the new Dr. Sesha Joi Moon Endowed Scholarship.

This scholarship offers vital financial support to undergraduate and graduate students with demonstrated need from both the Wilder School and the College of Humanities & Sciences Department of African American Studies. Recipients are dedicated to contributing to the advancement of marginalized students.

Reflecting on the past and looking to the future

A recent trip to Georgia helped set the incredible gift in motion. "We stopped in multiple places where my mom's side of the family is from," said Moon. "When we arrived there, our family home was still there over a hundred years later.

Some people might think it looks like a shack, but I felt like I was looking at a mansion. It was not only still standing a hundred years later, but it was on Jaudon Street, which is our family name."

The trip illuminated new insights about her family history. "I was asking how my great-grandfather got to Richmond, and they were saying he would bring family members out of Georgia to go to Virginia State University or Virginia Union University. I thought, 'Wow, I couldn't have had VCU without VSU and VUU.'"

As she reflected on her family's roots, a growing desire to give back came to fruition. "When I had over \$200,000 in student debt forgiven after a decade of public service, I felt that it is my responsibility that I pay that forward," said Moon. "That's why me and my family were very intentional about creating scholarships at VCU, VUU, and VSU — to honor the legacy of my family while also honoring the legacy of the next generation. It's this intersection of past and present, and trying to help whoever needs it next."

Building on the legacy

Moon serves as chief diversity officer at the U.S. House of Representatives and as executive director of The JXN Project, an initiative launched by Moon and her sister, Enjoli J. Moon. Together, they are seeking to understand the role of the Jackson Ward neighborhood of Richmond in shaping the Black American experience.

The Wilder School helped Moon along her professional journey. "It is a space that is named after someone who helped to advance Black American history, so to be able to say that you are a graduate of that school is already a badge of honor in itself," she said. "Moreover, my time

at the Wilder School was a period when I could see people that looked like me. Seeing Dean Gooden's well-deserved career accomplishments was very important to me. The Wilder School has gone on to support other women that look like me in notable positions within the school. It has also emerged on a national stage as a highly respected institution that truly prepared me for government."

As the youngest Black, queer woman to establish an endowment in the Wilder School as well as the creator of the second endowment in the Department of African American Studies in VCU's College of Humanities and Sciences, Moon is setting a crucial precedent in higher education.

"I hope that this scholarship inspires other funds," she said. "Knowing that I am one of the only Black women at VCU with a fund named after them, I hope that this inspires others to not only give, but also for VCU to act — to find an effective and accessible way to activate marginalized alumni. Hopefully, this inspired a broader conversation."

"When I think about the future of this fund, I think about how everything in Richmond is named after somebody. I never really understood the concept of legacy until recently. For me, it's knowing that we are holding space for Black women, Black, queer women and marginalized communities. We will live on when we are no longer here." 🏠



Make a gift to support the Dr. Sesha Joi Moon Endowed Scholarship Fund

Alumni changemaker: Amy Atkinson serves the commonwealth's youth and families

BY RACHEL ZEEVE

Amy Atkinson's (M.P.A. '00) career in public service began with embracing open doors that led her to unexpected professional opportunities. Today, as the executive director of the Virginia Commission on Youth, she has served in state government for nearly three decades and remains committed to opening doors for others.

The Virginia Commission on Youth is a legislative commission of the Virginia General Assembly established to offer guidance and research surrounding critical youth policy issues from education and health to juvenile justice and beyond. With Atkinson at the helm, her staff provides key insights that inform initiatives to help young people thrive.

A University of Mary Washington graduate, Atkinson earned her bachelor's degree in economics. She began her career with the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice as a legislative liaison. "When I started in public service, I knew that it would be beneficial to me and my employer [for me] to be more well rounded in public administration, and that's how I ended up at the Wilder School," she said.

She started taking classes at the Wilder School while working full time. "I loved the math-related requirements, particularly the statistics class," she reflected. "I also enjoyed taking classes that did not originally seem to align with my interests. Classes centered on skills like research and human resource management were very beneficial to my career."

Her journey led her to the Virginia Department of Medical Assistance Services, where she became the director of legislative affairs and communications. Next, she joined the Virginia Commission on Youth, where she has served for the past 20 years.

"What I like most about working for the Commission is that it is truly a bipartisan effort to address issues related to children and families," said Atkinson. "The most rewarding aspect of my career is seeing how folks from both sides of the aisle — and from the House and Senate — can work



“

My advice to young people that are getting started is to not be afraid to go through a door that you might not have anticipated. I never would have thought in a million years that I would have pursued public service — but those were the doors that opened for me.

”

— Amy Atkinson

together. I've been blessed with wonderful delegates and senators who serve on the Commission, and I have three extraordinary citizen members appointed by the governor as well."

Atkinson is especially proud of the progress the Commission has made in addressing awareness and concern in issues of youth mental health. Through the development of an online resource known as "Evidence-based Practices for Children and Adolescents with Mental Health Treatment Needs," the Commission

is empowering families with knowledge.

"My advice to young people that are getting started is to not be afraid to go through a door that you might not have anticipated," she said. "I never would have thought in a million years that I would have pursued public service — but those were the doors that opened for me. So continue your education, continue working hard, and always keep your options open." 🏠

2023 Capitol Semester interns Edvard Evans, Sofhia Pineda Garay, and Laila Barnes gained specialized experience working alongside delegates of the Virginia House of Representatives and the Virginia Senate. Photo: David Slipher

TAKING THE CAPITOL STEPS TO CAREER SUCCESS

Students gain an inside perspective on legislation in action

BY RACHEL ZEEVE

PHOTO: DAVID SLIPHER

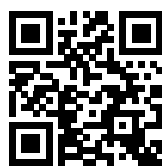
What's the best way for undergraduates to gain experience in public service? With Virginia's Capitol right down the street from the VCU

Monroe Park campus, this collaborative, hands-on legislative interning develops students' critical skills for career success.

The Wilder School Virginia Capitol Semester program represents a unique opportunity for undergraduate students to gain direct experience in the policy process. Each spring, the internship combines classroom experience with hands-on public service work in the office of a Virginia State Legislature House delegate or senator during the General Assembly.

Practical classroom experience forms the bedrock for the career experiences students gain throughout the semester. Coursework examines state policy issues and legislative process. Concurrently, guest speakers share a detailed look behind the scenes of state government.

View Laila's profile



LAILA BARNES, criminal justice and political science

"I aspire to get accepted into law school and become a successful lawyer. The Capitol Semester program helped prepare me to reach these goals, because the program gives you real responsibility in Virginia's legislature."

After a pivot from international relations to political science, undergraduate Edvard Evans applied to the program to see legislation in action. "I've learned at great length about government, but I wanted to see it operating in the active sense — no classroom alone can replicate that level of learning," he said.

Students also heard from a number of guest speakers who illuminated new perspectives in the policy world. Laila Barnes' favorite was Governor L. Douglas Wilder, 66th Governor of Virginia and the school's namesake.

"When he came and spoke to our class, he had rich knowledge and wisdom regarding the state of Virginia," she said. "He made a comment about Virginia being a 'people's state,' not a red or blue state. He showed us how he went out

and spoke to the people regardless of the background that they come from."

Sofhia Pineda Garay found the perspectives of Michael Maul, director of the Virginia Department of Planning and Budget, especially helpful. "I really enjoyed knowing that the state of Virginia is endowed to invest most of its budget on K-12 education and Medicaid holders to ensure healthcare accessibility for all," she said.

Contributing to the world of policymaking

Barnes spent the semester as an intern with the Office of Minority Leader Delegate Don Scott. There, she played an integral role in supporting daily activities — tracking bills and committee activity while organizing calendars and meeting notes. She

also assisted with editing newsletters, researching bills, attending constituent meetings, and following legislation.

With aspirations to become a lawyer, Barnes felt welcomed by the staffers and work environment as she honed her skills. "I felt comfortable while learning new tasks and developing myself as a student and future professional," said Barnes. "I would recommend applying for this program because it allows you to make future connections with legislators and community members."

Pineda Garay put her advocacy skills to work in the Office of Senator Mamie Locke, responding to constituent concerns through in-person and virtual meetings with other legislators, advocacy groups, state agency employees and department lobbyists, all while tracking key bills in both the House and Senate.

EDVARD EVANS, political science

"In light of increasingly divisive conversations surrounding social and economic issues and what seems to be a growing distrust of our government, the Capitol Semester brought me a lot of comfort and hope in seeing how many things really are open for the public to look at."



View Edvard's profile

"I enjoyed attending committee meetings and watching our legislators debate public policy reform to better public services in our communities and localities," she said.

Working in the Office of Senator George Barker, Evans was responsible for organizing bills and talking points for committee meetings as well as constituent correspondence. Evans quickly learned that with some practice, government can be more accessible than it appears.

"From the outside, it's easy to view government bodies as being complicated machines," he said. "However, throughout my time in the program, I realized how transparent the government can be if you know what you are looking for. It is easy to contact representatives, and many questions can be answered by simply reaching out and asking."

For his final project, Evans worked alongside classmate C.J. Walz to design a bill focused on underage sex trafficking in Virginia. "For our bill, we looked at Peterson and McClellan's Senate Bill 664 of the 2022 session and Delaney's House Bill 2131 of the 2023 session for modification," he said. "We combined the two and altered the language to create something we thought would better protect the children of the commonwealth while creating a more agreeable bill for a divided House."

Connections and career opportunities

Over the years, many Capitol Semester participants have gone on to receive extended internships and permanent staff roles. Working shoulder to shoulder with a range of legislative professionals also aids students in connecting to a wide range of government, industry and other public sector relationships.

For Pineda Garay, networking was invaluable to her success in the program. "The best and most rewarding part of this experience was the opportunity to network with agency representatives and nonprofit organizations in the Richmond area," said Pineda Garay. "This internship is a great chance to watch our legislators in action, witness firsthand public engagement and explore career opportunities offered by state agencies and departments."

Across party lines, Evans noted a welcoming work environment. "Friendships and positive work relationships were the norm," he said. "This good-natured



View Sofhia's profile

SOFHIA PINEDA GARAY, criminal justice and political science

"I really enjoyed knowing that the state of Virginia is (investing in) K-12 education and Medicaid holders to ensure healthcare accessibility for all. I also enjoyed hearing about the vast majority of career backgrounds of employees in this department."

relationship was reflected in the ability of members to work collaboratively on bills and issues where large divisions of policy preference were present. I found a newfound appreciation for the level at which laws and policies have to be scrutinized across the aisle."

A launchpad for the future

In the fast-paced legislative environment, managing responsibilities and prioritizing projects gives students the opportunity to problem-solve independently. Whether they continue their education or pursue their burgeoning careers, students emerge with the ability to adapt their skills to any paths their futures hold.

Now, Evans is motivated by a passion for the policy world. "The Capitol Semester program created my career goals," he reflected. "I had a loose idea that I wanted to work in a local or state-level government position but had no concrete plan for what I wanted to do. Through the Capitol Semester program, I now know that I want to assist a legislative representative by working in their office as a legislative aide or as chief of staff one day."

"Whenever I have a goal, I speak it into existence," said Barnes. "I will

graduate with high honors and build many connections along the way through more internships and career opportunities. I aspire to get accepted into law school and become a successful lawyer. The Capitol Semester program helped prepare me to reach these goals, because the program gives you real responsibility in Virginia's legislature."

The semester served as a springboard for Pineda Garay as she looks to the future. "My career plans had always been to prepare for the LSAT and enter a Virginia law school," she said.

She's considering graduate school across subject areas including public policy, public administration, and education administration. The Wilder School and University of Richmond dual-degree program offering a master of public administration, and juris doctor is also on her radar.

"The biggest takeaway is that there are a vast number of career opportunities in the state of Virginia through state agencies and departments regarding public policy and the state's budget," she said. "This opportunity has allowed me to be more open-minded to explore different careers outside of my field." 🙌

Accomplishments and achievements

The Wilder School produces outstanding scholarship, service and leadership — locally and nationally

▲ **Dhara Minesh Amin, Ph.D. (P.P.A.'10, M.S.'14/CJ),** and **Darrion R. Holloway, Esq., ('13 B.S./CJ),** are the recipients of the VCU 10 Under 10 Awards, which recognize the distinctive achievements made by alumni who earned their first VCU degree within the past 10 years. Amin works as a managing consultant in the State and Local Government division of consulting group Guidehouse. She combines her public service experience with private sector tools to help governments be more effective. Holloway works in personal injury litigation and serves with two other VCU graduates on the board of the 3E Program for Social Justice and Change.



leadership of putting the needs of people first. She explored the ever-broadening scope of emergency planning and response, and how multiplying factors compound response — especially the disparities that impact underserved communities, which are less likely to recover without more access to resources. During the visit, FEMA representatives conducted a recruitment fair aimed at filling 1,500 positions across multiple career sectors and professions.

▲ Homeland security and emergency preparedness students welcomed a visit from the Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator **Deanne Criswell** for a fireside chat and presentation on increasing equitable access to disaster relief. Criswell, who is the first woman to lead FEMA, shared lessons learned from disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, that have shaped her



▲ Doctoral student **Amidu Kalokah** was a recipient of the 2023 Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) Summer Program Scholarship in Quantitative Methods. The program, held at the University of Michigan, offers in-person and online classes and is designed to fulfill the researchers' training needs.



Kalokoh's current research explores the intersections of criminal justice, homeland security, and emergency management. He is focused on improving law enforcement engagement with school safety and security arrangements,

disaster and emergency management, mitigating money laundering, fighting financing terrorism, and democratic governance. His research interests developed through his experiences growing up amid a civil war and post-war conditions in Sierra Leone.

▲ Wilder School criminal justice faculty instructor and triple VCU alumnus **Brad Lehmann, Ph.D. (EDU'22, M.S.'11/CJ, B.S.'05/CJ),** received the 2023 Oxford University Summer Research Institute. While at Oxford, Lehmann expanded his research on the historical foundations of justice and society through access to the Bodleian Law Library, which hosts a unique collection of criminal justice and legal materials not readily available in the United States.

▲ The Wilder School was honored to receive **Dame Karen Pierce DCMG,** British Ambassador to the United States, during a stateside diplomatic visit. She met with Gov. Wilder and VCU leadership and hosted a presentation entitled "Democracy and



Diplomacy: Cultivating Our Future" to provide Wilder School students with an in-depth look at the intricate collaboration and partnership between the United States and the United Kingdom.

"It was fantastic to meet Governor Wilder and to witness his vision in action; the breadth and ambition of the Wilder School is extremely impressive," Amb. Pierce said. "It was a privilege for me — and our traveling team of British embassy diplomats — to engage with such a diverse range of young leaders and thinkers at VCU."

Brentwood, Washington, D.C.," a project prepared for the District of Columbia Office of Planning. She and 11 of her peers competed by pitching their solution to a real-world planning, public policy, or management problem before a panel of expert judges. The event was held in partnership with Virginia Housing at the Richmond offices of PlanRVA.



Susan Gooden receives prestigious Rutledge Award

Internationally renowned scholar **Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D., Dean and Professor of the Wilder School,** was honored with the prestigious 2023 Philip J. Rutledge Social Equity Award. Bestowed by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), this award underscores Gooden's commitment of over 20 years to advancing social equity.

The Rutledge Award emphasizes Gooden's enduring dedication to promoting social equity, a commitment planted during her tenure at Virginia Tech, where she established the Race and Social Policy Research Center. At the VCU Wilder School, in addition to being on the public administration faculty, she created the nationally recognized Wilder Fellows program and served as executive director of the Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute before ultimately becoming the school's dean.

Gooden has also served as president at both the American Society for Public Administration and the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration, and as editor and author of five books, including "Race and Social Equity: A Nervous Area of Government," recipient of the Herbert Simon Best Book Award from the American Political Science Association.

Laurin Henry celebrates a century, plus two years to grow on

As professor and first dean of VCU's School of Community Services — which later became the Wilder School in 2013 — in 1978, **Laurin Henry, Ph.D.,** has built a living legacy on education for good governance.

In the spring, leaders from the Wilder School and the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) proudly met with Henry to reflect on his renowned career. During the visit, Henry, who served as president of NASPAA, described NASPAA's rise. Henry shared that its fellows program "put NASPAA on the map in the university world." Today, NASPAA is the leading global accreditor of

graduate degree programs in public administration, public policy, public affairs, and related spheres.

As Henry looks to the future, he views young people as agents of change in the public sector. "Public service is a great activity with its own intrinsic rewards, and there are enough varied forms of public service — you can be a scientific type, an engineering type, or a managerial type," he said. "If you go to the right kind of school, you will also get a grasp of what the world is about in terms of society and politics ... It's to grasp the fundamentals of society, the nature of politics, and the nature of democracy."



Urban and regional planning graduate student **Nadya Syazsa** (at far right) took home the Plan Off! 2023 grand prize for her presentation "Designing an Eco-Resilient Community in



Najmah Thomas, Ph.D., merges history, equity and policy

BY RACHEL ZEEVE

“History can shine a light on inequity, and then, once we have that information, we can then use it to craft programs that are more equitable and create the kind of world that we want to leave to the next generation.”

— Najmah Thomas

For Najmah Thomas, Ph.D. (P.P.A.'11), the intersection of history, equity, and policy has always been at the forefront of her career in public service, policy program evaluation, and academia. With over two decades of experience in government and beyond, Thomas is forging a path for future generations of practitioners.

Thomas' academic journey began at Richard Bland Community College, and she attended The College of William & Mary. There, a switch from a business major to public policy sparked her path to the University of Phoenix for a master's in education and finally to the Wilder School and the Ph.D. program in Public Administration.

Today, Thomas has a range of experience as a practitioner in local or regional governments, private foundations, and state government.

“When I was working in my last public administration position with the Virginia Community College System and the Governor's Office of Workforce Development, we researched the very thing that my Wilder School dissertation

was on — out-of-school youth and connectivity to employee programs,” she said. “Having been an at-risk youth myself and having been a displaced worker, I had a unique experience. All of the programs under the Workforce Investment Board that I've managed I had actually gone through as a participant. Then, all of the programs that I evaluated as an academic, I'd actually managed as a professional.”

Thomas' passion stems from her background with the programs she evaluates today. “Part of the work that I'm doing now is determining whether these programs do what they're supposed to do and finding out if they are implemented with the ‘four E's’: equity, efficiency, effectiveness, and economy,” she said.

As an associate professor at University of South Carolina Beaufort, Thomas leads research and courses in leadership development, public service program evaluation, African American studies, and more to prepare students to bring a social equity lens to policy issues.

“There is something so encouraging about how this next generation

considers their work,” said Thomas. “It's a ‘glocal’ approach — there's not only a really keen understanding about global connectivity but also a really strong commitment to making things happen right where they are.”

Thomas' advice for students is to use the past to inform policy today. “Use history as a guidepost, not as a beating stick — embrace it as one of the finest tools we have to help us understand how policy came to be.”

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Congratulations to the 2023-2024 Wilder Fellows

These talented graduate students are gaining career experience working for our partner organizations. They'll conduct research and develop recommendations, culminating with a presentation of their projects in the spring.

Learn more about each Wilder Fellow and watch a video profile on each of our award winners on the Wilder School YouTube channel.

