



INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

2021-2023



VCU College of Health
Professions



Inclusivity is everywhere at VCU.

I am so proud to share the inaugural inclusive excellence biennial report for the VCU College of Health Professions, where we strive to be the most inclusive place to study and work for all members of our learning community.

I write this message to you on the heels of receiving the news that we have been designated as an INSIGHT Into Diversity Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) award recipient for 2023. This news comes after years of hard work that has created a foundation for inclusive excellence that our College will work to build upon in the years to come.

In this report, you will learn a bit about our diversity and inclusion initiatives and some of their impressive outcomes. From doubling the number of students from historically underrepresented backgrounds in some of our programs to the implementation of affinity groups and inclusive practices for hiring, we have made important strides in the past two years.

More importantly, you will learn about the rich diversity of our people – the individuals who make the College, and VCU, the amazing and celebrated institution that it is.

From veterans to people committed to rural healthcare, to people with diverse religious perspectives, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people of all colors, racial identities, and ethnic backgrounds, we aim to celebrate difference in all of its forms at CHP, because we know that this improves the process and outcomes of learning and expands the possibility of new directions for research.

I am grateful to our interim dean, Dr. Paula Song, my predecessor, Dr. Angela Duncan, our former dean, Dr. Susan Parish, and all members of our learning community who have contributed to advancing inclusion and belonging. Your investment of time, energy, resources, passion and hard work has made the measurable progress documented in this report possible.

I look forward to your continued contributions as we take these efforts to the next level in our enduring VCU pursuit of “diversity driving excellence.”

Stephan Davis, DNP, MHSA, CDE, FACHE, FNAP, FAAN
Associate Dean, Inclusive Excellence and Belonging
College of Health Professions & School of Nursing

Executive Director, Inclusive Leadership Education
Assistant Professor of Health Administration
Department of Health Administration



2023 recipient, Association of University Programs in Health Administration (AUPHA) Teaching Excellence Award for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging and Social Justice

To many great strides — and work still to come.



It is my privilege to serve as interim dean of an institution where promoting a culture of inclusion and belonging stems from our core value of individual dignity. Since its early foundations, the College has maintained a strong commitment to embracing the diverse backgrounds, identities and experiences of every individual.

Our major contribution to Virginia and the nation is training healthcare professionals, leaders and scholars, who are effectively learning to serve individuals and communities reflecting the rich diversity of the Commonwealth of Virginia and beyond.

As a College, we have made great strides along our inclusive excellence journey, and we continue to focus on learning more about ourselves and one another, to become more effective, compassionate leaders and healthcare providers.

I proudly invite you to take a close look at this report, which highlights a number of significant achievements in recent years. From providing safe spaces to have sensitive conversations, holding educational events on clinically relevant topics to address health disparities and hosting guest speakers who have shared evidence-based practices to foster inclusion, the College has emerged as a national leader for inclusive andragogy in the health professions.

I sincerely thank every member of our vibrant learning community and our dedicated alumni for their efforts in promoting opportunities that foster growth and an inclusive learning environment for all.

Paula H. Song, Ph.D.
Interim Dean, College of Health Professions
Richard M. Bracken Chair and Professor of Health Administration

On the cover: College leaders, members of the DEI committee, as well as facilities and information technology staff pose for a photo after the announcement that the College received the 2023 INSIGHT into Diversity Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Health Professions Award. The College is the first academic unit on the VCU Health Sciences campus to receive this honor.



Inclusivity and belonging. It's something we live by.



The College of Health Professions (CHP) prioritizes the core value of individual dignity and strives to promote a culture of diversity, inclusivity and equity in a supportive learning and work environment. We are committed to creating a community that embraces and honors student, staff and faculty members' diverse backgrounds, identities and lived experiences including race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic class, religion, creed, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, age and disability.

Every CHP student deserves an exceptional education that includes learning to effectively serve individuals and communities that reflect the rich diversity of the Commonwealth of Virginia. CHP faculty and staff are responsible for creating an educational and research environment that is welcoming and inclusive of all students. Faculty and staff use instructional approaches that foster intellectual contributions while encouraging critical thinking and freedom of expression. Our faculty has the expertise to lead efforts in ensuring patients, consumers, community members, families and communities receive high-touch, respectful and humanizing support within the context of evolving healthcare technology.

We commit to this statement because it is consistent with the values of our College and of Virginia Commonwealth University as represented in our strategic plan. A climate of inclusion and diversity aligns with an overwhelming body of evidence-based healthcare and decades of health and workplace research. **Finally, a culture of inclusivity and diversity is imperative if we want to meet our College's responsibility to train effective healthcare professionals.**

To promote diversity, equity and inclusion, the College of Health Professions will:

- Create** communication and marketing materials that speak to all;
- Foster** best practices in holistic hiring and admissions processes;
- Facilitate** awareness and understanding of people from different backgrounds;
- Promote** a representative community of leaders, faculty, staff and students;
- Develop** a dedicated and effective leadership team that emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusivity;
- Foster** international and domestic multicultural experiences, collaborations, and partnerships.

Advancing inclusive excellence and belonging.



Since 2018, total College student enrollment grew 35%, while students identifying as people of color is up **83%**, in part due to intentional efforts to diversify the student body. Of the **1,273 students** enrolled in the Fall 2023 semester, **540 (42%)** are from underrepresented populations.

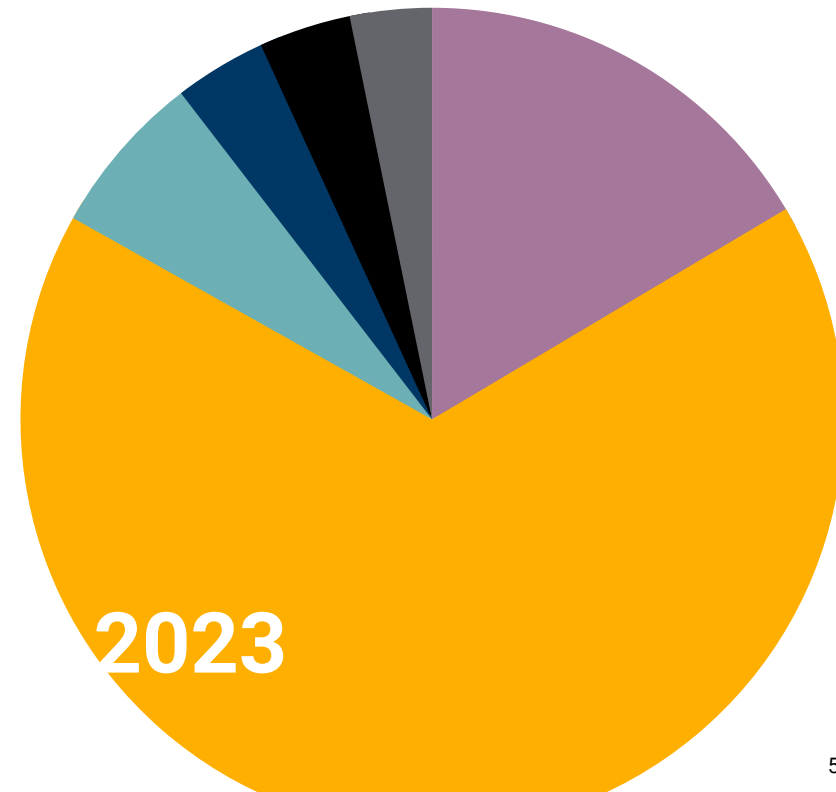
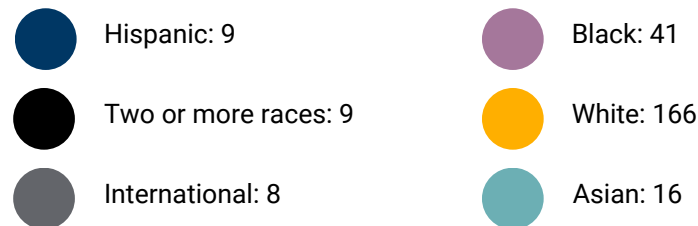


Students of color

“Not only has the College worked to increase our total enrollment, but we have worked diligently to achieve our mission to help diversify the healthcare workforce so that the healthcare leaders we produce reflect the populations we serve.”

Alena C. Hampton, Ph.D., LCP
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Student Success

As of Fall 2023, there were **247 employees** at the College. Of the total, 33.6% identify as a person of color.



The College's DEI Committee



Beth Williamson Ayers, MS
Director of Outreach and
Professional Affairs



Brenda Brown
Office Administrator



Malorie Burkett, MS
Director of Communications and
Marketing



Stephan Davis, DNP, MHSA
Associate Dean, Inclusive Excellence
and Belonging



Michael Forder, MEd
Director of E-Learning &
Continuing Education Coordinator



Chelsea Gary, MPA
Director of Recruitment and Student
Programs



Jenni Mathews
Evaluation Coordinator



Beverly George-Gay, DNP, MS, MSN
Associate Professor
Director of Distance Education



Audrey E. Kane, Ph.D., OTR/L
Assistant Professor and Director of
Admissions



Jessica Koroma, BS, RT(R)(VI)
Instructor



Michael Lacy, Ph.D., MLS
Assistant Professor



Gail Stubbs
Financial Specialist

Ph.D. in Health Related Sciences

Promoting equitable healthcare for all

The Ph.D. in Health Related Sciences trains the next generation of researchers and health science leaders on how to address healthcare disparities, incorporates social justice instruction into the curriculum and highlights healthcare cases from across different populations. The Ph.D. program has trained students of different races, ethnicities, gender identities, ages, sexual orientations and abilities for more than 20 years. All applicants write about how they will contribute to DEI in their own healthcare careers.



In 2022-2023, the Ph.D. program awarded eight full and partial scholarships to underrepresented students.



The average student in the Ph.D. program is 42 years old.

At VCU — and in higher ed — DEI is ‘a lifetime assignment’



In Fall 2019, under the leadership of former Dean Susan L. Parish, Ph.D., a focus was put on DEI initiatives at the College. The directive intensified in the wake of COVID’s unmasking of health disparities and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery.

“Things were smoldering, and then there was a fire,” says Angela Duncan, Ph.D., MS, M.Div. In 2021, Duncan was named associate dean of DEI in a shared position between the College and School of Nursing. Duncan, now retired, already held the role with the College for a year prior.

“I was already in place to begin to address these issues, especially because that time revealed to some, and intensified to others, the ongoing issues around race and trauma. It was very painful. We needed people who could bring people together, start that healing process and offer sacred spaces to have conversations about what folks were feeling. We also began to offer DEI training and hear from people on what they really desired for the College. Other schools and colleges at VCU came together weekly to talk about what was working, and what wasn’t. One of the things I said was, ‘We all have a part to play in this. It’s on all of us.’”

“The challenge is, when the fires were burning, people were all on board, then over time you saw some start to pull back and focus on other things. VCU must continue to put the resources forward to do this work. Dr. King talks about how ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’ DEI is not an issue to be resolved in a couple months and then we’re on to something else. **This is a lifetime assignment.** And this work is very wearying. You have national diversity officers in higher education leaving in droves. They’re burned out. We need to make sure they have the resources they need, and give them respite. Even though I’m retired now, I’m still in the community. Doing the work. **For me, diversity is not an afterthought — it is my life. It’s in my blood. It’s in my DNA. And it’s not going away.**”

Pursuing research that matters

Julia Chevan, Ph.D. '06 used a 2020 grant to create a summer program to help high school students from marginalized groups prepare for a health profession career.

Kelli Gary, Ph.D. '08 secured a federal grant for her project, “Developing a Cultural Family Intervention after Brain Injury for African Americans,” plus another grant to improve literacy among low-income youth in Petersburg, Va.



Health Administration

Removing barriers, advancing the profession

Glance at Health Administration class photos over the past decade, and you will immediately see a dramatic shift: As the years go on, faces become more diverse — especially in recent cohorts. Such change was intentional and strategic, the result of a vision to educate healthcare leaders who look like and share life experiences with the patient populations they will ultimately serve. Since 2020, inclusivity and belonging have been a central tenet of the department’s mission to educate the next generation of healthcare administrators.



MHA Class of 2025

Certificate programs expand access and equity

Healthcare organizations today are responsible for both care quality and health status of their communities. They must pay closer attention to the diverse needs of their populations and find ways to make care more equitable for all.

The department introduced three certificate programs, with two directly tied to DEI: **Health Equity** and **Ageing Studies**. Health Equity positions students to influence policy, taking courses such as intersectionality and unconscious bias. They meet lobbyists and advocates with special interests who show them how to look at policy objectively and successfully advocate in their communities. The Ageing Studies certificate is co-sponsored by the Department of Gerontology and helps students with an interest in working with older adults.

Karis Cha, MHA '24, recalls how Kevin Harris, Ph.D., senior associate dean for DEI in the VCU School of Medicine, gave a talk to Health Administration students that discussed how diversity is not just about race and ethnicity.

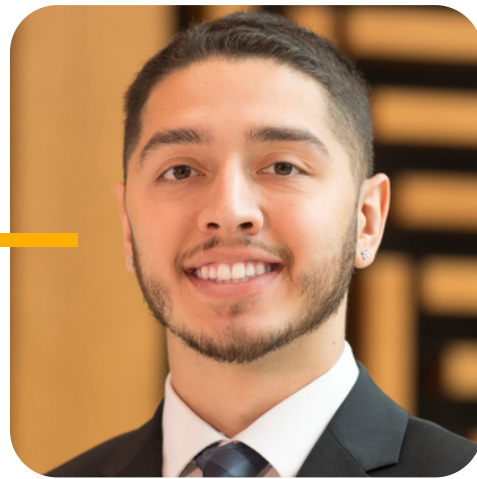
“It’s also about your lived experiences, your perspectives, your beliefs,” Cha says. “That was really helpful to hear. I’ve really seen that lived out in our Health Administration program.” Cha says DEI helps build the relationships that are so important in the healthcare field.

“The best way to build relationships is by building trust, and I think trust is built when people see you care about them,” she says. “You don’t care for people by just stereotyping or not taking the time to really get to know them.”

A dedication to inclusivity also helps foster equitable care for patients of all backgrounds, Cha says.

“One of the foundational tenets of DEI is that all people are equal, and all people have the same value, the same worth,” she says. “I think that’s fundamental to providing the best patient care.”





Making change through diverse experiences

Victor Melo, MHA '24 and **Augusto Gonzalez, MHA '25** took part in the National Association of Latino Healthcare Executives' La Mesa Emerging Leaders Program. The yearlong leadership development initiative offers a space for networking, knowledge sharing and discussions with diverse speakers.

"We talked about our upbringings, challenges, barriers we've faced and our different experiences," says Melo (above, left). "It certainly feels like we empower each other. We want to make change and bring that change through our diverse experiences." Gonzalez, of Argentinian descent, appreciated the shared values and support within the cohort.

"What really opened my eyes was being with people from all walks of life, within the healthcare community specifically, and having similar experiences with other current and aspiring leaders who understand the unique barriers faced by Latino healthcare professionals," says Gonzalez. "This has been career-changing for me."



In 2023, as part of its Inclusive Leadership Education initiative, the department partnered with the National Association of Health Services Executives, the professional society for Black healthcare leaders, to deliver a four-part webinar series during Black History Month. The series featured accomplished Black healthcare leaders and diverse generational perspectives. Two panelists included VCU alums: **Michael Elliott, PharmD, MSHA, FACHE**, the inaugural COO at VCU Health, and **Chelsea Perry, MHA '17**, co-founder of Appcelerator and MBA candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business.

The Health Services Organization and Research (HSOR) Ph.D. Program's 2023 cohort is the most diverse in its history.

Front : Naana Adjei, AJ Smith, Ngan Bui
Back: Ashwah Abdulrahim, Noah McLemore



Maya Perkins, MHA '25 received the We Believe in You Award from the National Association of Health Services Executives (NAHSE), a scholarship given to a future healthcare management leader. Perkins, elected her class DEI director, also earned a 2023 Black History in the Making Award. That award, established at VCU in 1983 by English professor emerita Daryl Dance, Ph.D., recognizes outstanding Black students at the university.



Occupational Therapy

A historic foundation for future leaders

Understanding the Department of Occupational Therapy's role in serving a diverse community begins with each new student cohort taking the Richmond History Walk. This eight-stop tour, designed by the department, winds students through the city's complex past. They visit the nearby White House of the Confederacy and The Valentine museum, with stops that show the history of the Medical College of Virginia.



That includes St. Philip Hospital, which served as the segregated hospital until 1962, along with the site of an East Marshall Street well, where human remains mainly of African descent were discarded in the 1800s without due respect by medical staff.

"The tour provides a historical foundation for understanding DEI and belonging in our community and profession, social determinants of health and how we provide therapy," says **Carole Ivey, Ph.D., OTR/L, FAOTA**, the department chair. "These concepts are infused across our curriculum, service, and research."

Research: Faculty studies turn toward inclusivity

> **Stacey Reynolds, Ph.D., OTR/L, FAOTA** was a co-author of 2022's "Impact of Acute Self-Care Indicators and Social Factors on Medicare Inpatient Readmission Risk" in the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*.

> **Jodi Winship, Ph.D., OTR/L**, an OT with the Virginia Center on Aging, was lead author of "Covid in context: The lived experience of Richmond's low-income older adults" in *Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine*. In the same publication, she co-authored "Socioeconomic Effects on Psychosocial Factors Among Low-Income Older Adults" and served as co-author in a qualitative study published in the *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*, "Stakeholder perspectives on the implementation of smart speakers for aging in place in low-income senior housing."

> **Robert Fix, Ph.D.** co-authored "Creating interprofessional readiness to advance age-friendly U.S. healthcare," published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

See the research

@ occu.chp.vcu.edu/research



Above: VCU's OT Academy draws prospective students from underrepresented populations. The summer "camp" promotes knowledge and understanding of the profession while preparing students to apply to a graduate OT program. Through presentations, discussions and hands-on opportunities, students gain the skills required to become a competitive applicant and successful student.

Audrey Kane, Ph.D., OTR/L (top right) was one of 11 OTs on an American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) task group that made changes to the centralized application service used by most OT programs. The changes expanded options for applicants to report sex, gender and disability status, and revised the essay prompt.

Service: Clinical rotations with DEI emphasis

All students complete a fieldwork clinical rotation with a focus on psychosocial needs, serving nonprofits catering to diverse and marginalized populations in the community. This includes treating unhoused individuals, people with autism, low-income older adults, those with mental illness and adolescents with emotional or behavioral needs.

Curriculum: Capstone projects highlight inclusivity needs across community

The Occupational Therapy Doctorate (OTD) program culminates with a 14-week capstone experience, of which over a quarter of the projects every year are on inclusivity topics. A sampling:

Continuing DEI in the Classroom: Preparing Students to Work with Marginalized Populations (Teresa Artis '23)

Creating an Online Learning Course to Teach How to Provide Inclusive Occupational Therapy for Transgender and Gender Independent Clients (Maggie McNabb '22)

Modified Lifestyle Redesign Program for Community Dwelling Older Adults (Cassandra Raymo '23)

See OT's capstones

@ rampages.us/vcuotposterfair



"I've been part of a lot of DEI initiatives here, which have further increased my skills as an occupational therapist," says **Julian Battle**, an OT student. "As an OT, you work with all types of people of all different races, backgrounds and beliefs, and having an understanding of their experiences is a strength. Advocating for DEI at the College level is a skill we bring into the real world."

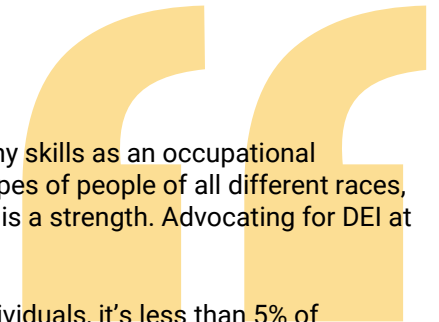
"OT demographics are primarily white and women. For Black and Latinx individuals, it's less than 5% of occupational therapists. But our diversity numbers are steadily increasing at VCU. We have a pretty diverse cohort of students, and then looking at later cohorts, with my younger classmates, diversity is increasing even more. We're seeing more men, more individuals of color," he says. "VCU OT has worked to increase not only diversity in the program but in the OT profession in general."

Intention equals Inclusion

VCU's OTD program has greatly built diversity in Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic and Native American students between the classes of 2019 and 2026. As a percentage of total students enrolled in the program:

2019: 19%

2026: 35%



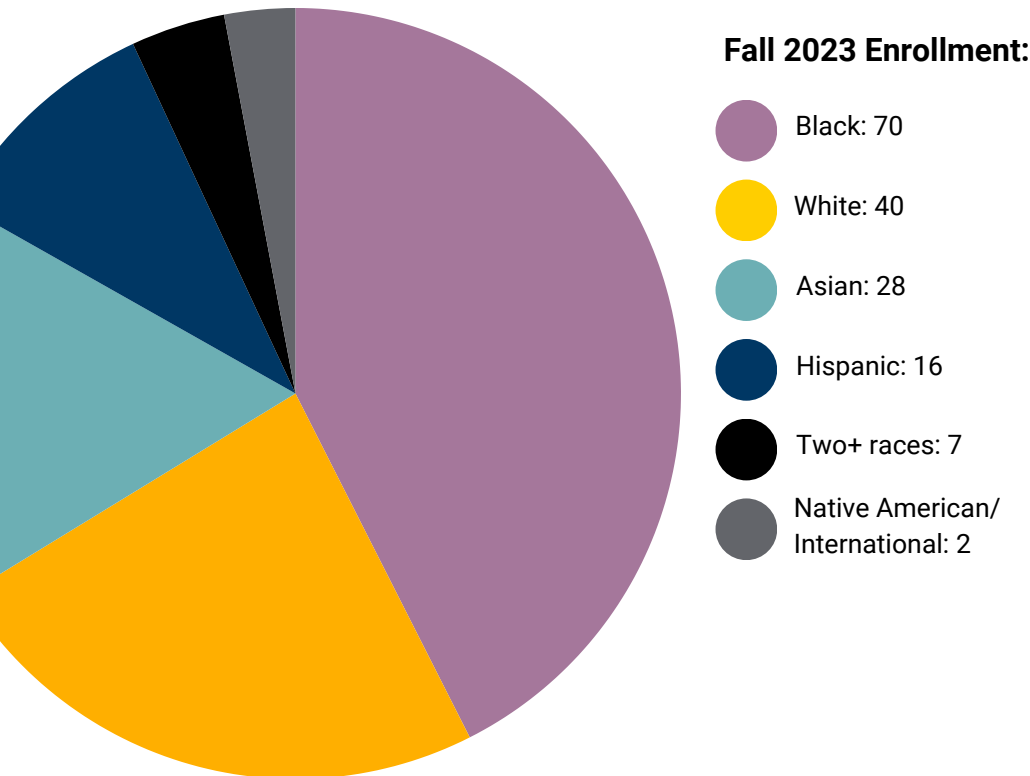
B.S. in Health Services

Committed to Listening in Learning

The Bachelor of Science in Health Services program works to foster a safe learning space where every student can engage in critical conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion. Advisors undergo continual training on equitable access to care, cultural competence, microaggression prevention and other ways to support inclusiveness.

Lowering Barriers to Healthcare Careers

The program collaborates with various student health sciences organizations, including VCU P.R.I.M.E. (Pre-Health and Related Interests Mentoring Experiences) to help underrepresented students find and follow their path to a healthcare career. We welcome students of all backgrounds and make education accessible wherever they choose to learn – whether on campus or in our online program that allows students to juggle classes and support their families.



The parents of **Sarah Chwairy '23** emigrated to the U.S. from Beirut, Lebanon in order to provide better educational opportunities for her and her siblings. "I owe my success to them," Chwairy said in a May 2023 VCU News story. "They both made numerous sacrifices in the best interest of their children." Chwairy, who grew up in Burke, Va., is pursuing a career in healthcare management.



Physical Therapy

Educating PT providers who reflect Virginia and the U.S.

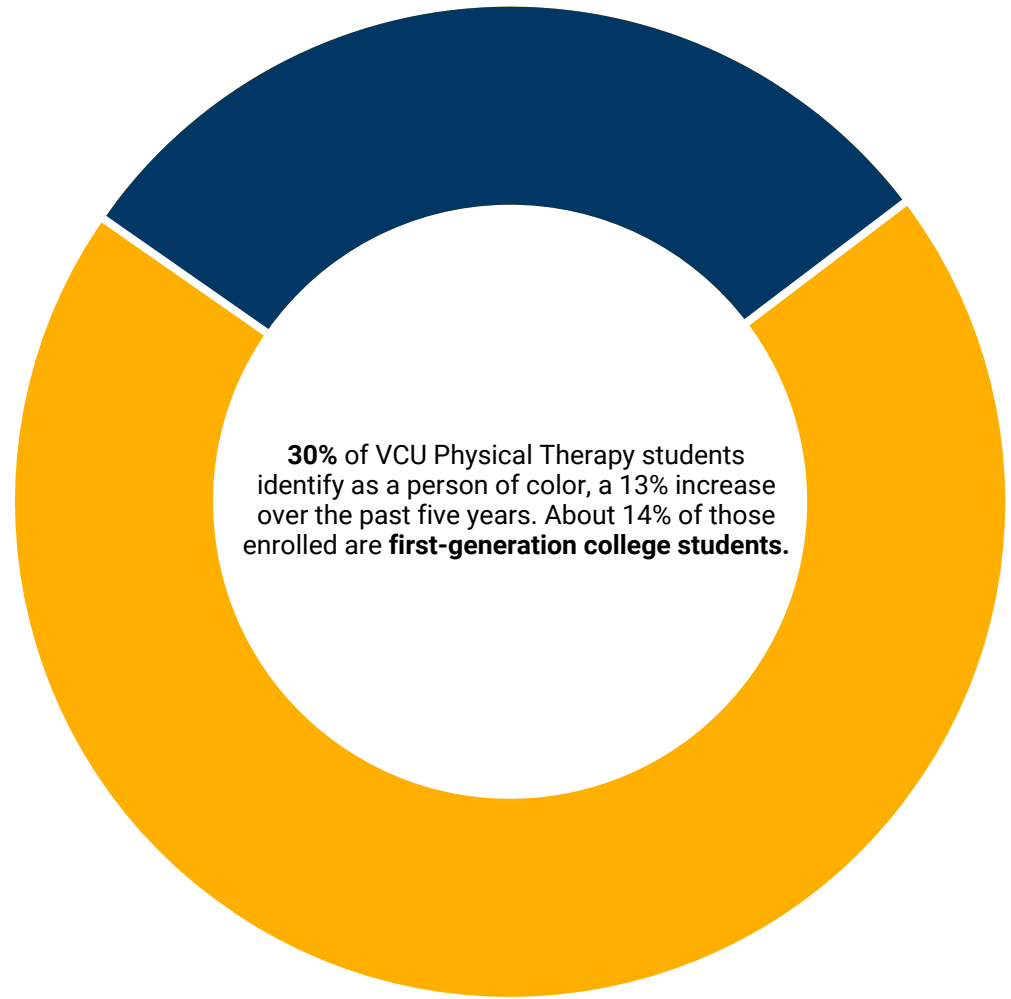
The Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) program seeks to bring into the profession students who mirror the diversity of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Through its efforts, the PT program continues to serve the Richmond region and nation by impacting the health of our communities through excellence in education and leadership.

A key way the department supports those efforts is by increasing access to healthcare careers for underrepresented students who take part in summer enrichment and exploration programs offered in partnership with VCU Diversity P.A.T.H.S. (Promoting Access To Health Sciences). More than 50 undergrads have explored careers in PT thanks to these programs. Of those participants, **83% went on to enroll in VCU's DPT program.**

In addition, our student-led DEI committee provides a robust array of events throughout the year to promote education and understanding of various cultural groups.

Expanding Community Care

Student volunteers run the pro bono CARES clinic, providing PT services to uninsured and underserved patients in the Richmond community. The clinic is an example of the service learning at the heart of the program's efforts to support equitable access to care.



Jonathan Mack, PT, DPT, was introduced to the field of physical therapy through the VCU Summer Academic Enrichment Program. He graduated in 2023 and is a sports physical therapy resident, volunteering at the pro bono CARES clinic (see above). "DEI has to be an intentional effort because it's such an important thing due to the fact that as healthcare providers, you're seeing patients from all walks of life," says Mack, the 2023 class president and recipient of the American Physical Therapy Association Minority Scholarship Award. "You're seeing people come to you in a vulnerable state, whether it's an injury or whatever they're dealing with, and you're going to have to take the time to learn about them."

Mack has noticed growing diversity among his VCU cohort, too. "It's cool to have those unique experiences and people from all backgrounds," he says.

Nurse Anesthesia

Removing barriers, advancing patient safety

VCU Nurse Anesthesia takes a holistic approach to candidate selection for the nation's top-ranked nurse anesthesia academic program – eliminating the GRE as a requirement, considering non-academic attributes in applicants and switching to virtual interviews. The selections committee considers academic and professional nursing accomplishments, diverse lived experiences, and individual attributes – and the outcome has been the most diverse cohorts of soon-to-be CRNAs in the school's history.

A national leader in eliminating the GRE

The lack of diverse anesthesia professionals may contribute to health disparities, racial biases in pain management and inadequate pain management services in communities of color. That's the basis of a report from VCU faculty who co-authored a study highlighting the results of eliminating the GRE in nurse anesthesia applications, published in early 2023 in *Nursing Outlook*. The department removed the GRE from admissions requirements in 2021 and in the first cycle following saw a 40% increase in the overall number of applications to the DNAP program – its largest cohort to date.

Of the 59,000 CRNAs in the U.S., less than 12% identify as Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or Native American.

“The GRE is a barrier for applicants who don't even consider any program that requires that test. But removing that test is only part of an effective strategy to broaden diversity in our profession. At VCU, we're augmenting this recent shift in our admissions practices with greater outreach to meet these prospective students where they are.”

– **Nickie Damico, Ph.D., CRNA**, Herbert T. Watson Endowed Professor and co-author, “Addressing Structural and Systemic Barriers in Nurse Anesthesia Programs: Recommendations to eliminate the GRE and adopt holistic admissions”

See the full report @ nrna.chp.vcu.edu



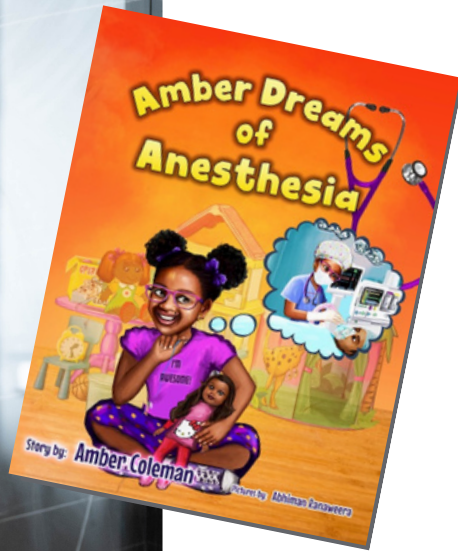
Neil Sagrado does not define his life from the rough breakup he had in 2020, but it's a life-altering event that took him away from life in Houston. That's where he grew up, as a first-generation Filipino-American raised in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

“I have since then become more spiritual in a Buddhist sense,” says Sagrado. Then an ICU nurse, he began travel nursing with a dream to become a certified registered nurse anesthetist (CRNA). He applied to VCU.

“During the interview, I was very proud that I was not only Filipino, but also gay. I really appreciated VCU accepting who I was, because it's who I am as a person,” he says. “I remember also telling them: ‘I am going to become a CRNA someday, and will never give up trying and applying.’”

But VCU did accept him, “and I was so happy.” Now in his second year, Sagrado co-chairs the department's DEI committee and heads its wellness committee.

“I can be open about who I am here. I can be myself,” he says. “This is kind of a take on anesthesia, but you come to learn that the pain from a breakup or any obstreperous life experience is where true growth comes from. I want to become more than just a CRNA at the bedside, and truly become a leader. I want to inspire people of color and LGBTQ status that they can become CRNAs – or whatever their heart desires.”



Amber Coleman, CRNA '18 self-published a children's book, *Amber Dreams of Anesthesia*. She says that while the book is aimed at all kids, she hopes it resonates with those in communities of color, which are underrepresented in healthcare jobs. "Representation matters, and I do have a responsibility as a woman of color to help those who look like me blaze a trail in the field," she says.

Nurse Anesthesia's DEI committee

The student-run, faculty-advised DEI committee was originally established as a task force in 2021. Its purpose: Enhance diversity, equity and inclusion within the program and foster a culture of belonging and empowerment through education and outreach within the College's diverse populations. CRNA alumni and preceptors offer mentoring to students, and the committee ensures student voices are heard when addressing cultural issues within the department. In recent years, the committee has met with middle, high school and college-age students to showcase the profession – and its need for diverse providers.

In 2022, the committee brought more than 200 critical care nurses of color with interest in the profession to Richmond for the **Diversity CRNA** information session and airway simulation workshop. The mission of the Diversity in Nurse Anesthesia Mentorship Program is to inform, empower and mentor underserved diverse populations with information to prepare them for a successful career as a CRNA.



11%

VCU Nurse Anesthesia posted an 11% gain in overall applicants for 2023 compared to 2022. The department attributes the increase in large part to the Diversity CRNA event, as applications from Black students rose to 18% – nearly seven percentage points – year-over-year.

Gerontology & the Virginia Center on Aging

Advocacy for All Ages and Abilities

VCU Gerontology has focused on rapidly expanding degree programs as people become interested in representing elder populations and promoting optimal aging for individuals and communities. Faculty research seeks to better understand and fight ageism, ableism and abuse in later life that many older people and those with disabilities experience.

Supporting Elders of all Backgrounds

The Creative Interprofessional Readiness for Complex & Aging Adults program focuses on social determinants of health, cultural sensitivity, equity, rural health issues and elder abuse. This development program for faculty and clinicians explores how ageism, sexism, racism and ableism affect a person's care.

Along with the Virginia Center on Aging, VCU Gerontology is creating the first Virginia site for Alter, a national initiative that addresses the lack of resources dedicated to dementia in Black and faith-based communities.



Gerontology professor and College Associate Dean for Research **Faika Zanjani, Ph.D.** is the principal investigator at the Richmond Brain Health Initiative, which seeks to improve Alzheimer's and dementia education and resources available to older adults in Richmond and surrounding areas. She is also associate director of academic programs and research training at VCU's Institute for Inclusion, Inquiry and Innovation (iCubed), which strategically invests in academic and research programs that employ transdisciplinary approaches to solve challenging and persistent problems in urban communities.

Fostering inclusion

Gerontology's Age and Ability Inclusion Toolkit raises awareness of ageism and ableism of people in senior living communities and seeks to create a sense of belonging for them as well as their families and caregivers.

Get the Toolkit: ageismtoolkit.vcu.edu

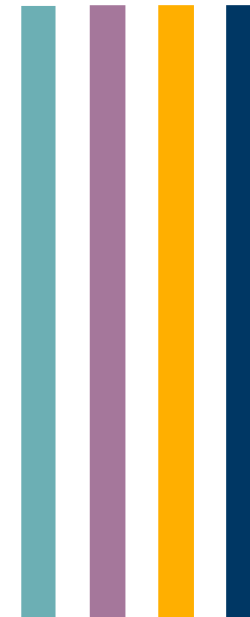


VCU

Virginia Center on Aging

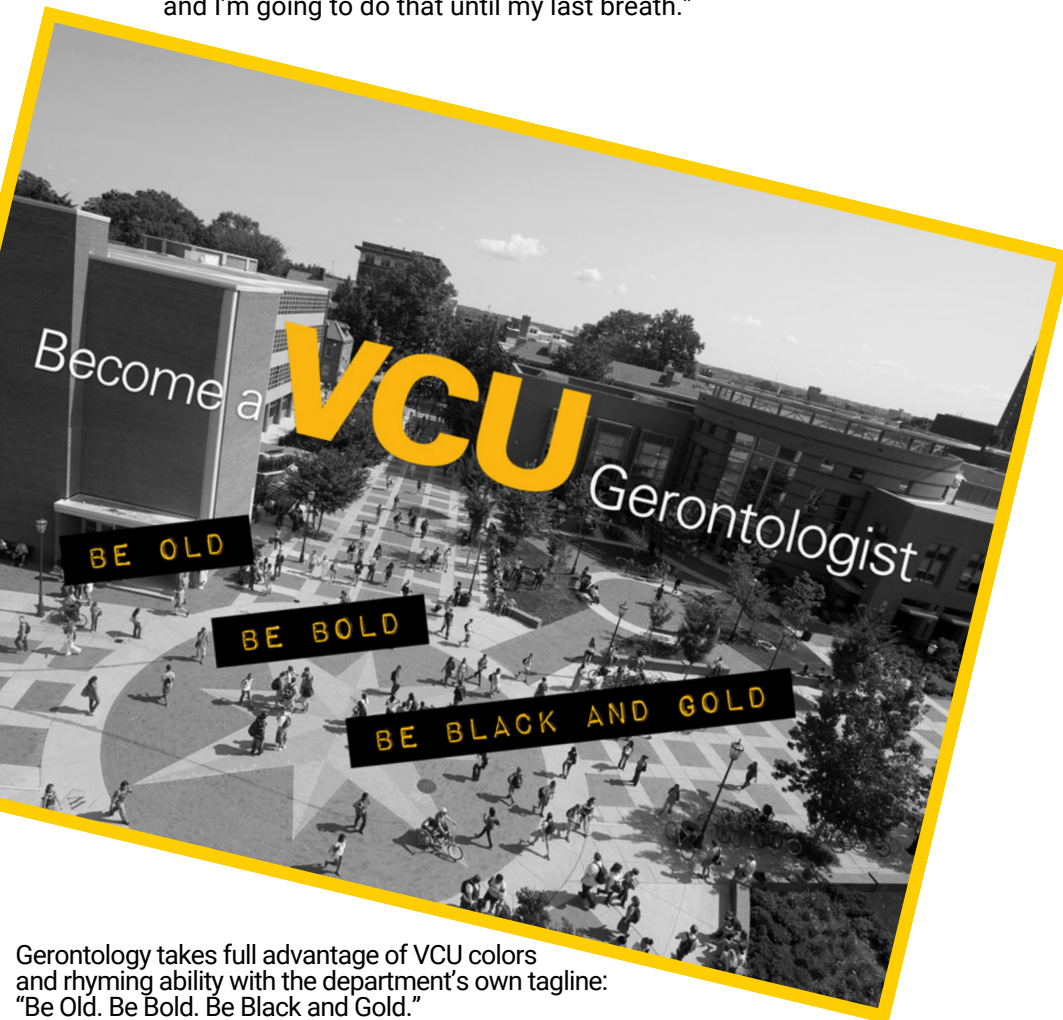
College of Health Professions

The Virginia Center on Aging (VCoA) is a statewide agency created by the Virginia General Assembly in 1978. It is housed at VCU Gerontology. VCoA protects and improves the quality of life of older Virginians, so that they might remain interdependent and contributing members to life in the Commonwealth. Partnerships with others have made its initiatives possible.



For one Gerontology student, learning is a lifelong endeavor

A former Army captain with 36 years of federal service, **Debi Taylor** stayed retired from the U.S. State Department for all of three months. “I got bored out of my mind. I’m a lifelong learner. I love education, I don’t care what it is – whether it’s knitting or learning how to make stained glass. But I could never define ‘retirement’ – no one could, and neither could I. So I finally decided retirement is just a change in career, and for me, that new career had to have purpose and meaning. So I started volunteering with AARP Virginia, working on aging issues and legislation. I worked with the Commonwealth Council on Aging on legislative issues, too. But I started asking more and more questions about aging, and I was asking more questions than I was receiving answers,” she says. Taylor enrolled at VCU for the Fall 2023 semester. “I needed to understand aging, because I’m here – I’m 72. I want to make sure that I personally understand what it means to age, and not just let it happen to me. I plan to graduate within three years, and I’m keeping my options open on what I do with my degree. It might be working on legislation, it might be working with dementia patients, it might be working in nursing homes. I recognize there are more years behind me than are in front of me. But I still get to decide the purpose and meaning of my life, and I’m going to do that until my last breath.”




VCU Gerontology’s Inclusive Excellence Accolades

The department along with chair **Tracey Gendron, Ph.D.**, were honored with the American Society on Aging’s Ageism & Culture Award for Success in Diminishing Ageism in March 2023.

Jen Pryor, MS, the department’s graduate program director, was named one of “The Top Women Leaders of Virginia for 2023” by the website Women We Admire.

Annie Rhodes, Ph.D., director of the Virginia Memory Project, was named to the “Top 40 Under 40” by *Style Weekly*.

Gerontology runs three research labs. See them in action and find some of the groundbreaking gerontology research on the department website.

 gerontology.chp.vcu.edu/about-us/research-labs



Gerontology takes full advantage of VCU colors and rhyming ability with the department’s own tagline: “Be Old. Be Bold. Be Black and Gold.”

Patient Counseling

Educating and training persons of all cultures, faith traditions and value systems

The education and training of students from diverse backgrounds is at the core of Patient Counseling's mission. Through the offering of theory and clinical practicum courses, students are prepared to offer spiritual care to persons of all cultures, faith traditions and value systems. Faculty and staff diversity is representative of the student population in the academic setting and the patients, family members and care team in the clinical environment.

Inclusive excellence in admissions and beyond

Moments focused on diversity, equity and inclusion are a key part of the student education process, as well as staff and faculty meetings. The admissions committee, made up of people from diverse backgrounds, engages a holistic approach to reviewing admissions materials and interviewing prospective students. The department strives to foster an environment that embraces and engages with people from all cultures, values systems and spiritual and religious faith traditions.

Diverse experiences

Through the department's unique mix of academic and clinical faculty and the diverse patient population at the clinical placement site of VCU Health, students have the opportunity to expand their skills of comprehensive and compassionate spiritual care. DEI and belonging experiences include October's Spiritual Care Week activities (which includes the Good Grief Conference), along with community service and self-care.



As the first woman and person of color to serve as the department's Rev. Robert B. Lantz Chair, **Rev. Marilyn J.D. Barnes, MS, MA, MPH, BCC** is an ordained Itinerant Elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Her area of research includes spirituality, religiosity and meaning-making in healthcare. She is pictured with John W. Kinney, Ph.D., a theology professor and director of Virginia Union University's Center for African American Pentecostalism and Leadership Development. Dr. Kinney lectured at VCU in April 2022 on "The Intersection between Community and Clinical Settings of Care."



Creating a hospitable space

At VCU's Clinical Pastoral Education program, **Beba Tata-Mbeng, MS, MDiv, MPH, BCC** pursued a curriculum rooted in understanding religious beliefs around the globe. "I came in there with my own faith and theology," says Tata-Mbeng, a Roman Catholic chaplain and manager of spiritual care for the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Fla. "I was exposed to that study of world religions. By understanding people's different experiences, perspectives and beliefs, I'm able to maybe understand what they are going through from their perspective. I want my patients to be my teachers." Having a highly diverse group of fellow students in her VCU master's degree program also helped foster greater understanding, she says.

Tata-Mbeng, originally from Cameroon, supports people of all faiths through illness, injury and end-of-life care, including those who are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Christian. A Native American patient might want sage burned at their bedside, while a Catholic patient might request the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. For patients without religious beliefs, Tata-Mbeng talks with them about their values and experiences. "Creating that hospitable space is very important to supporting people from all cultural backgrounds where they can be truly and fully themselves to express their concerns, their triumphs and their sufferings."



Medical Laboratory Sciences

Unlocking healthcare answers for all patients

As “healthcare detectives,” Medical Laboratory Sciences professionals perform tests needed for doctors to treat people of all backgrounds. Therefore, the department admits a diverse group of students to meet the healthcare needs of their diverse group of patients.

In recent years, the department has worked to create a more inclusive admissions process while making strides in hiring and retaining diverse faculty who foster a culture of inclusion and helping students feel more connected to their instructors.



Welcoming all voices in the lab

Assistant Professor **Michael Lacy, Ph.D., MLS (ACSP) CM**, helps train the next generation of clinical lab professionals in the VCU Department of Medical Laboratory Sciences, a program that he notes is fortunate to have such a diverse group of students. “Diversity, equity and inclusion are incredibly important to the clinical lab,” says Lacy, a member of the LGBTQ community who is originally from rural Rustburg, Va. While studying the body’s immune system, students learn how different types of antigens are expressed in patients of different backgrounds, Lacy says. Those kinds of insights can offer lab professionals important clues on how to treat patients for various diseases and conditions. Students also learn how clinical testing of patients who identify as transgender may be affected by health factors that aren’t seen in the cisgender population, he says.

“Although our students may not have direct patient contact, the information they provide to the healthcare team is integral to patient diagnoses and treatment plans,” says Lacy, a member of the College’s DEI committee. “By having a more diverse group of students and clinical lab professionals, we can ensure all voices that could have an impact on patient care are heard.”

After having first Black instructor in her education at VCU, ‘it hit home for me’

When **Maiya Picott, BS, MS**, was recruited to VCU from a predominantly white institution to consider a career in laboratory sciences, she’d been considering another program and career path altogether. But a pitch to her from now-department chair Melissa Jamerson, Ph.D., MLS(ASCP), sealed the deal. “From the second I met Dr. Jamerson, she was super invested in my journey, and I could feel the genuineness of my interactions with her,” Picott told the American Society for Clinical Pathology. “I felt like there was nowhere else I would want to go to school because I was so welcomed and invited.” Another defining moment for Picott: Having a Black instructor – the first she’d had in her entire academic career. “When I saw this instructor who has a Ph.D. and was doing research, it really hit home for me. I wanted to pursue my Ph.D. and teach and be that role model that I was able to have,” she says. “I didn’t realize how important it was for me until then because I had never had it.” Today, Picott is an instructor in the department – and on track to complete her doctorate.



Radiation Sciences

Celebrating diversity by affirming values

The department's commitment to diversity is guided by a document the faculty created in 2021: "Manifesting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the VCU Department of Radiation Sciences." It articulates support and respect for people of all backgrounds as they work to remove structural barriers to opportunities and resources. The piece is published on the department website, on social media and is available in student handbooks. Department members are educated to be social justice advocates who challenge long-held opinions and assumptions in order to take action to change them.

40%

of students enrolled for Spring 2023 are from underrepresented communities.

Graduates have remarked how the program's dedication to diversity led to greater understanding and a welcoming learning environment.

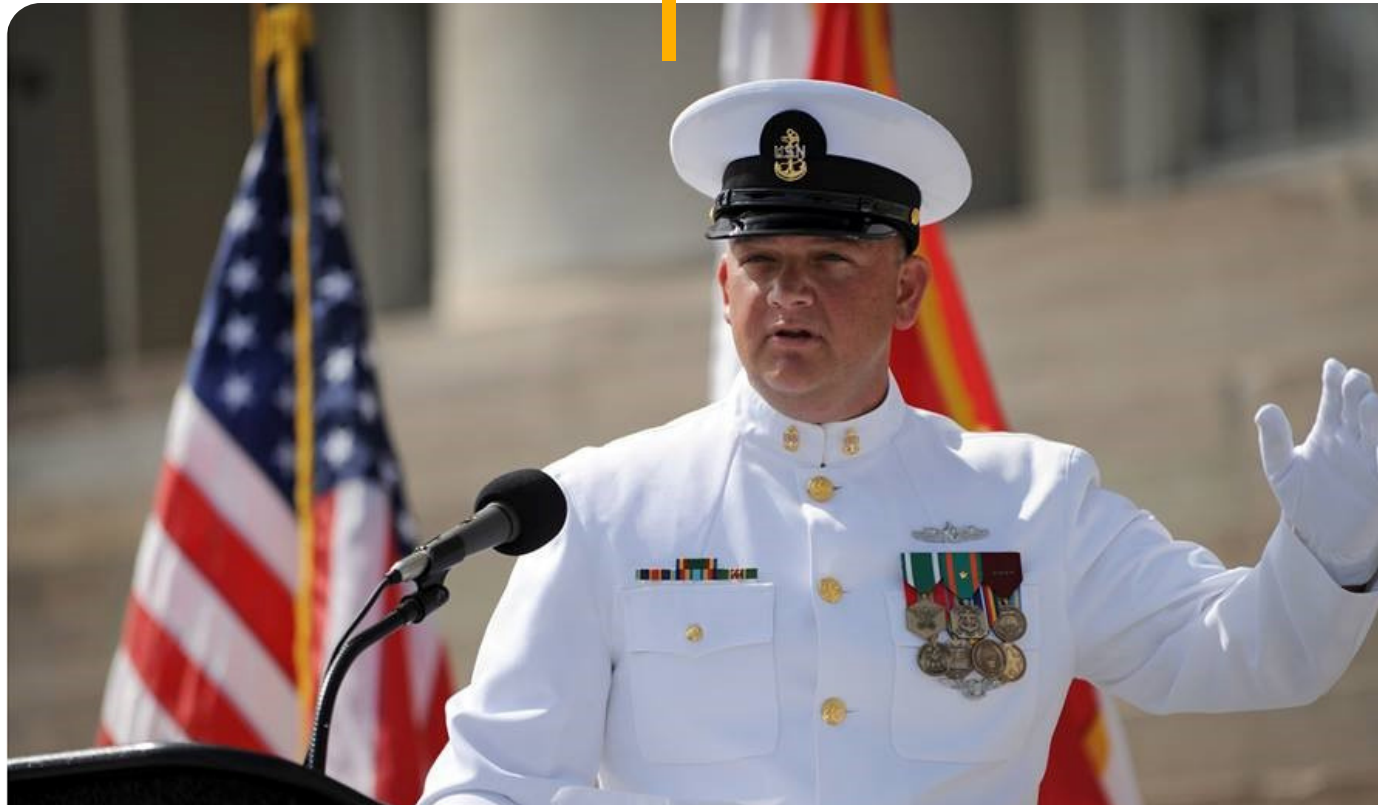
Putting principles into practice

Every faculty member has participated in diversity and inclusivity training. Two department faculty serve as college Recruitment Inclusive Champions, an Office of the Provost program established in 2014 to strengthen faculty and staff recruitment efforts by building cohorts of knowledgeable champions from across the university.

Working with colleagues, patients of all backgrounds

Growing up in the small town of Continental, Ohio, **Travis Prowant, MSHS, RRA, RT, FASRT** had an all-white high school graduating class and an upbringing that offered little interaction with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. But that changed after he became a hospital corpsman in the U.S. Navy. "There were guys in my company from Korea. We had guys from Cameroon, from Nigeria, from Puerto Rico, from every state in the nation. You learn quick how to get along with folks and have fruitful discussions about the way you were raised," he says. "I welcomed that."

After a 20-year career in the Navy, he pursued his bachelor's degree in Radiation Sciences at VCU. He's now a radiologist assistant at VCU Health working with a diverse group of colleagues and treating patients of all backgrounds. For patients who don't speak English, Prowant uses an iPad-like device where an interpreter can remotely help him communicate with the person he's treating. "Every part of humanity comes into the radiology department. You have to be prepared and trained to talk to someone from different ethnicities, or religions, or whatever background they're from."



Travis Prowant, VCU '12, at his retirement ceremony from the U.S. Navy in 2008

Rehabilitation Counseling

United in pursuing diversity

Rehabilitation Counseling is dedicated to recruiting and keeping faculty and students from diverse backgrounds. The department offers scholarships to people from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, and the faculty team includes **Alena Hampton, Ph.D.**, who received a VCU Presidential Award for Community Multicultural Enrichment in 2023 for her work in support of the university's commitment to inclusion and belonging.

Inclusive excellence through self-reflection

Rehabilitation Counseling has undertaken a diversity in curriculum self-evaluation to examine a host of issues, such as whether class materials and teaching spaces are accessible to all learners, if course textbooks have been authored by people from underrepresented groups and whether an inclusive teaching statement is included in the class syllabus.

Supporting and teaching disabled people

Not only does this rehabilitation and mental health support program train professionals to launch a career working with the disabled, but a large number of Rehabilitation Counseling students also live with disabilities themselves.

'I credit VCU with how I approached the work.'

Aisha Rousseau, Ph.D., CRC '13 remains the only Black graduate from the Ph.D. Program in Health Related Sciences with an emphasis in Rehabilitation Counseling leadership. As Denver's former chief equity officer who today heads up special projects in the city, she took her VCU learnings in data analysis to inform and improve the Mile High City's DEI initiatives. "I identify as a quantitative researcher. While I believe lived experiences are important, I don't believe lived experiences and qualitative data are all we should defer to, so I'm constantly asking for the numbers. What the numbers showed us, as a city, was that agencies were saying they were doing equity work, but their staff, as a whole, had not yet received training or established formative processes to identify outcomes. It's critical to understand what the data is telling us. Once we reviewed the data, we set a goal to train all employees on the importance of equity, diversity and inclusion work, what we mean as an organization to pursue racial equity, and then implemented racial equity action plans for each agency to chart plans and identify outcomes. Now, the politics of making change happen? That's a different challenge that we as a city, and a nation, still have to address. But I credit my educational background from VCU with how I approached the work."

41%

of students in the Spring 2023 class were from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, up from 37% from Fall 2022.



Recognitions



Alena Hampton, Ph.D., associate dean for academic affairs and student success and associate professor in the Department of Rehabilitation Counseling, received the 2023 VCU Presidential Award for Community Multicultural Enrichment (PACME). The ceremony was created to recognize members of the university and health system communities who have contributed to advocating equity, building community, establishing cross-cultural initiatives, nurturing acceptance and promoting civility throughout the university. Hampton is pictured with former dean **Susan Parish, Ph.D.**, who championed inclusive excellence initiatives at the College.

Adrienne Lawrence, an award-winning educator, author and vice president of Jennifer Brown Consulting, delivered a Voices for Change lecture at the College during Black History Month in 2023. She's pictured here with Stephan Davis, associate dean of inclusive excellence and belonging, who engaged Lawrence through her firm to facilitate focus groups with the Department of Health Administration as part of its Inclusive Leadership Education initiative. Selected findings from the focus groups were presented by Davis and interim dean Paula Song at the Association of University Programs in Health Administration Annual Meeting.



In her 2022 book, *Ageism Unmasked: Exploring Age Bias and How to End It*, **Tracey Gendron, Ph.D.**, VCU Gerontology chair and director of the Virginia Center on Aging, challenges why “everything we know about aging is wrong,” and why the concept of generations divides us more than it serves to bring us together. Gendron has dedicated her career to changing the landscape and developing an age-inclusive climate that facilitates growth and engagement in elderhood. Her goal is to raise awareness of elderhood as the solution to the deeply embedded ageism pervasive within all cultures, settings and individuals.





Grateful to be part of CHP's ongoing Inclusivity journey

As social justice protests and COVID-19 swept the nation in 2020, the College of Health Professions created a new committee to facilitate conversations about the issues gripping the country. That panel evolved into the College's DEI committee, and Brenda Brown has been supporting its work ever since.

Brown, a general administration supervisor with the Patient Counseling program, schedules committee gatherings, takes notes and tracks the College's inclusivity and belonging efforts. "We started talking about whether our DEI initiatives were presented in our syllabi. We started talking about pedagogy, and the types of things we're communicating in our coursework that may be exclusive and not inclusive," she explains. "I'm excited we have this platform. I'm grateful to be a part of it."

Since the start of the College's holistic admissions process a few years ago, Brown says she's seen greater racial and cultural diversity when she walks the hallways. She says it's crucial to train people of color to be a part of the healthcare system because that helps patients from underrepresented groups feel seen, heard and develop trust with their healthcare providers. Although strides have been made to support inclusive excellence, Brown says more work needs to be done. DEI doesn't have a finish line, she notes: "I see DEI as ever-evolving and transformative at the same time."



In April 2022, award-winning journalist for MSNBC and NBC News Richard Lui visited the College and shared a message of advocating for equality and inclusivity in every career field. He also signed copies of his book, *Enough About Me*, which documents his time as a caregiver for his late father, Stephen.

Over the last two years, the College has hosted both VCU **Safe Zone** training for leadership and **Green Zone** training for faculty and staff. Safe Zone increases awareness of LGBTQIA+ communities and identities and deepens understanding of sex, gender and sexuality. Training also considers other intersecting identities (race, ethnicity, religious/spiritual orientation) and recognizes the unique concerns and challenges of the community. Green Zone training helps participants understand the military student and staff experience and equips them to support veterans and their families as they transition to academic life.



Support inclusive excellence and belonging at the VCU College of Health Professions.

Your support helps us continue equipping future healthcare practitioners and leaders with the skills they need to build stronger, healthier communities: chp.vcu.edu/giving

“The differences in our lived experiences, identities, abilities, talents, and beliefs enrich the process and outcomes of learning and expand the possibilities of new directions for research. We must create an environment that supports all members of our learning communities’ thriving so that they can ultimately reach their full potential and contribute to the advancement of our collective aspiration to improve health for all people.”

Stephan Davis, DNP, MHSA, CDE, FACHE, FNAP, FAAN
Associate Dean, Inclusive Excellence and Belonging



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