

Testimony Provided to the  
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor  
*“Innovation to Improve Equity: Exploring High-Quality Pathways to a College Degree”*

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Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, members of the committee....good morning to you all.

I am proud to be with you this morning on behalf of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, a nationally prominent urban public research university that serves more than 31,000 students from all 50 states and 101 nations around the world. We are a bridge to prosperity for—as of last month—more than 200,000 alumni living, working, innovating, creating, and healing in the U.S. around the world. VCU also includes a nationally premier academic health system and, added together, we are a vital economic engine with a more than \$6 billion impact on the Commonwealth of Virginia. That’s the largest of any university in the Commonwealth.

Chairman Scott and Congressman Cline certainly know well our enormous impact on the Commonwealth they serve.

I have spent nearly two decades in higher education strategic leadership in North Carolina, Texas, and now Virginia. I have spent that time ensuring that the colleges and universities in which the American public invests deliver on their promise to help students succeed in ways that transform their lives and enable them to pursue their American Dream.

I believe in American public higher education. I believe that it is a catalyst—maybe THE catalyst—to transform our society and the next generation of scholars and visionaries who will lead it. I believe this because I see it every day. And because I’ve lived it.

I am the first person in my family to graduate college. I am here with you this morning because the education I received from three outstanding public universities transformed my life and inspired me to ensure that every student has that same opportunity. Especially students from underrepresented and often disenfranchised communities, like students from first-generation, economically disadvantaged families and people of color.

As a scholar, I have studied how we empower people from these communities to succeed, and how universities can enable such achievement. That’s because I recognize that our nation is strongest and best when ALL of its people have the same chance to succeed, no matter where they’re starting from. Education is the greatest form of social justice.

And this is exactly what we focus on at VCU.

VCU is one of America’s top urban, public research universities. We are among a very few that have Carnegie classifications as both an R1: Highest Research Activity and a community-engaged university. Which is to say, we are focused simultaneously on building America’s future, serving America’s people, and positively impacting America’s communities.

We recognize that all of our students have great potential and capability, but they have not all had equal access to power or information with respect to how to succeed in college. We understand they do not all start from the same place. Unequal access to power and information

means that some students get lost in the academic enterprise and must figure it out for themselves, as best they can, as they pursue their goal of obtaining a college education. So at VCU, we have worked to transform our approaches to meet the needs of our diverse student population.

I will describe some of these changes in detail shortly. But first, I want to tell you about who we serve.

### **A Record of Student Success**

Our diverse student body looks like America: 43 percent of students are from minority populations, one-third of freshmen are first-generation college students, and 30 percent are low-income Pell-eligible. Our commitment to helping our students stay and succeed at VCU is evident in the fact that our Latinx, African-American, and Pell-eligible students graduate at nearly the same rate as their classmates from more privilege. This success puts us in rare company. By creating approaches to improve equity by meeting the students where they are, we believe we will completely eliminate this gap by the time our current first-year class graduates—something very few universities have done.

This follows a larger trend at VCU. For ALL of our students, both four- and six-year graduation rates have increased by more than fourteen percentage points since 2012. Even more importantly, 17 percent of our students move up two or more income quartiles after they graduate, among the highest of any university in the Mid-Atlantic. A student born into the bottom quartile of family incomes has a 27 percent chance of reaching the very top quartile after graduating from VCU.

VCU is a place where we embrace the idea that equality of opportunity is available to anyone, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved. VCU is the place where American dreams come true.

Achieving these outcomes is a result of several strategies and tools focused on meeting students where they are. These strategies can be grouped in three broad categories: guidance and support, student-faculty engagement, and college access and affordability.

### **Guidance and Support**

VCU utilizes an “intrusive advising model” that proactively guides students through a reflection of experiences, identifying purpose, and goal setting as they focus on their educational outcomes. We invested significant resources to provide a consistent student-advisor experience—no matter a student’s classification or major—and to lower the student-to-advisor ratio. This has allowed for early intervention when students are struggling academically. We have also developed technology that allows for well-timed advice and guidance to promote satisfactory and timely progress to degree completion.

We also recently implemented Major Maps (example attached), a uniquely designed tool that combines academic planning with strategic career planning. Working with their university guides—such as academic advisors, career advisors, faculty, and mentors—students create a plan that is individualized to them and that focuses on their end goal. They work backward to determine which experiences, connections, and skills will best position them to succeed as working professionals after they graduate.

### **Student-Faculty Engagement**

VCU has increased student-faculty engagement, redesigned the traditional approach to teaching some first-year courses, and increased focus on ensuring students' fit in their chosen academic program.

By challenging the traditional approach to teaching first-year courses, which are so important and can benefit from a new 21<sup>st</sup> century approach, VCU faculty pique their students' curiosities about the world through interdisciplinary, inquiry-based, community-engaged, and experiential learning—all while developing writing and critical thinking skills. This cohort-style learning model offers small class sizes with consistency in the students and the faculty member during the entire first year, fostering connectedness, creativity, and engagement. This matters, because we know that when students participate in high-impact learning courses, and when they have this network of support around them, they are more likely to stay enrolled and graduate.

We have also been very intentional in providing students with impactful and engaging experiences with their faculty mentors. This includes deliberately promoting engagement between students and faculty through high-impact learning experiences. We have an initiative called VCU REAL—REAL is an acronym that means “relevant, experiential, and applied learning.” Through REAL, students engage in meaningful hands-on work that allows the application of knowledge from the classroom into action and service. These experiences are both directly relevant to their personal interests and address social, scientific, and economic challenges that our society faces.

The REAL initiative is now VCU's promise to our students. This promise is one of the most valuable experiences students have at VCU, as we know that students who participate in these types of high-impact learning courses are more likely to persist and graduate on time than their peers who do not. To ensure access to opportunity is equally distributed, all VCU students are required to have a REAL experience that allows them to apply their classroom learning in a real-life setting to better prepare them for their careers. And we know first-hand that those who would employ our students value their critical reasoning abilities applied outside of a classroom or laboratory setting, which the REAL initiative affords.

There's a reason we call this REAL, other than convenient nomenclature. At VCU, our motto is Make it Real. That means we prepare students for the real world, to do important things, to solve real problems. We are not an ivory tower; we are gritty and scrappy and real. Our students are, too. There is no such thing as an average VCU student.

As we think about educating the next generation of Americans, it is critical that colleges and universities move beyond the simple academic checklists that many of us remember from our days as students years ago. We need to provide pathways to career and professional success that blend success in the classroom with other important experiences.

Indeed, our definition of student success extends beyond graduation, so we are also preparing our students for the world of work. That is why Major Maps include a developmental scheme for assisting students to work through major choice and change, career choice, and university preparation beyond the classroom. They help students prepare for their careers, which is why we have moved our Career Services Office under the auspices of the Student Success Office, and why we are connecting the Major Maps to student experiences and skill development such as undergraduate research, service learning, practica, internships, and networking.

It is our responsibility—and our privilege—to serve our students with the same intensity and passion that they bring to us.

### **College Access and Affordability**

Our commitment to student success is further apparent by ensuring that students can access VCU through many doors, including by transferring to us from community colleges across Virginia and the nation. That's why we partner with every community college in our state—whether by guaranteed admissions agreements, articulation agreements, co-enrollment options, and even reverse transfer credit agreements. We also have grant-funded programs supported by federal and non-profit agencies that allow us to hire transfer coordinators who support students throughout their journey to completion.

And I mentioned Major Maps earlier...we also have Transfer Maps with several community college partners that provide students seamless access into 22 high-need degree programs at VCU. We are working to expand these Transfer Maps beyond our current community college partners to cover every community college in the state. We expect that these partnerships and initiatives will make it easier to earn a VCU degree with less wasted time and less debt.

This is one of the many ways VCU is committed to access and affordability. Because none of the great things we do matter if they are inaccessible or unaffordable for ALL the students we serve. We were very pleased to join our fellow public universities across Virginia in not raising tuition this year, and we are grateful for the partnership of our state's General Assembly in making that possible. I hope we can continue to operate with the kind of partnership and leadership that focuses on the needs of the people we serve.

VCU has also made affordability an institutional priority. That's why VCU has invested more than \$35 million in institutional funds over the last 8 years to build up our need-based aid. This past academic year, we awarded almost \$80 million in institutional-based scholarships and grants to our students, a 45 percent increase over where we were in 2011.

In parallel, in 2013, VCU began awarding completion grants—essentially, “micro grants”—to help students cover small outstanding balances and/or unmet need that, though small in the scheme of things, are tremendous obstacles for too many of our students and would have otherwise prevented them from completing their last year at VCU on time.

Not coincidentally, in that same time frame, we have seen our 6-year graduation rate jump by 8 percent—with even larger gains for students of color (+9%) and recipients of the Federal Pell Grant (+13%).

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I want to emphasize that a more equitable student experience is happening at VCU because so many of my colleagues have made it their professional and personal commitment to make it happen. This is the result of a very deliberate strategy, and it has taken every one of us.

When we educate students, we prepare them to achieve their American Dream. And that’s particularly true for many of the students we serve who come from backgrounds where higher education outcomes have not been modeled for them. So when they succeed, it’s a tremendous advantage for them, their families, their communities, and America.

I am grateful to work every day in this kind of environment. And I’m so proud of our record, which is the tremendous success of our students.

Thank you for giving me a few minutes to speak with you about it this morning. I would now be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

*Attachment: example of VCU Biology Major Map*



2018-2019

# Biology College of Humanities and Sciences

Concentration(s): No concentration

Visit [majormaps.vcu.edu](http://majormaps.vcu.edu) for the online version with links.

Sponsored by the Office of the Provost

	EXPLORE	EXPERIENCE	EXCEL		
	<p><b>MAXIMIZE COURSE AND DEGREE PLANNING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Schedule an appointment</b> with your academic advisor each semester to discuss tutoring, course electives, and degree progression.</li> <li>• Explore the major through your introductory biology and chemistry courses.</li> <li>• Attend all supplemental instruction sessions.</li> <li>• Attend Ready, Set, Go – Sophomore Transition Experience.</li> </ul>	<p><b>GET CONNECTED WITH YOUR COMMUNITY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Register to <b>vote in Virginia and explore Richmond</b>, including its <b>museums, parks, festivals, and cultural events</b></li> <li>• Apply to live in the <b>ASPIRE, Globe, INNOVATE, or LEAD Living &amp; Learning Programs</b></li> <li>• Get involved with VCU Student Government or one of over <b>450 clubs and organizations</b> on campus.</li> </ul>	<p><b>BUILD CULTURAL COMPETENCE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn about your study abroad options by visiting a <b>study abroad fair</b> and attending a <b>First Advising Session</b> in the Global Education Office.</li> <li>• Review the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs (<b>OMSA</b>) website for programs, events, and resources.</li> <li>• Join a living-learning program such as <b>VCU Globe</b></li> </ul>	<p><b>GET REAL EXPERIENCE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore <b>"What Can I Do With This Major"</b> to learn about employers/ job titles in your field of study.</li> <li>• Complete your <b>Handshake</b> profile and opt-in to industry email lists to learn about opportunities.</li> <li>• Complete a <b>"Gap Analysis"</b> Strategic Plan with your academic or career advisor.</li> </ul>	<p><b>PREPARING FOR LIFE AFTER COLLEGE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend a <b>Pre-Professional Health Interest Workshop</b>, offered by University Academic Advising, if you are considering a professional health program (medicine, dentistry, etc.)</li> <li>• Explore <b>Career Pathways on VCU Career Services'</b> website.</li> <li>• Practice independent living skills (such as money management, self-care, time management, and personal responsibility).</li> </ul>
YEAR 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Schedule an appointment</b> with your advisor and explore minors, certificates, and skills-based value added courses and your plan to complete the Biology core and collateral coursework.</li> <li>• Talk to your professors about research interests, picking future classes in your major, and strategies for success in your degree program.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take <b>service-learning classes</b> or volunteer to address a <b>social issue (ConnectVA &amp; HandsOnRVA)</b>.</li> <li>• Join a student organization such as National Science Teachers Association, Women in Science, STEM at VCU, Black Women in STEM, or a pre-professional health track club.</li> <li>• Explore peer leadership opportunities or apply for <b>I-LEAD Connect, Alternative Spring Break</b>, and other leadership and service events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create and complete a science related community-engaged research project.</li> <li>• Attend civic meetings, such as <b>school board, neighborhood associations, city council, or state legislative sessions</b></li> <li>• Attend at least two or three public talks or other events advertised by the department.</li> <li>• Attend a program through the <b>Wellness Resource Center</b>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider <b>jobs in the nonprofit sector</b>.</li> <li>• Consider applying for a year-long service opportunity after graduation through programs like <b>VCU AmeriCorps, Literacy Lab, Peace Corps, Fulbright Student Scholars, Teach for America and City Year</b></li> <li>• Attend professional conferences that offer student rates or scholarships. Enhance your networking skills and practice your "elevator speech" when presenting yourself.</li> </ul>	
YEAR 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See your advisor each semester to discuss degree progression and plans for elective coursework.</li> <li>• Discuss the options for fulfilling your biology senior capstone and begin to plan accordingly as many students use research, internship, service-learning or study abroad to fulfill this requirement.</li> <li>• Work with a professor as a preceptor or through a directed and/or independent study.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With careful planning, a study abroad semester works well during junior or senior year.</li> <li>• Consider becoming a <b>diversity ambassador</b> with the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs.</li> <li>• Apply for a Fulbright or other post-graduate international fellowship program through <b>VCU's National Scholarship Office</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read scholarly articles about diversity in STEM.</li> <li>• Reflect on your own cultural competency, and be prepared to answer interview questions that outline how you have worked with diverse populations.</li> <li>• Schedule a mock interview with <b>VCU Career Services</b></li> <li>• Attend Office of Multicultural Student Affairs   Love Diversity Week.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop tangible skills in internships that you can demonstrate to employers.</li> <li>• Meet with a career adviser to discuss your career direction and create an action plan.</li> <li>• Go to a conference for a professional association, club or other organization.</li> </ul>	
YEAR 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Schedule an appointment</b> with your academic advisor a semester before your anticipated graduation to ensure all graduation requirements will be met.</li> <li>• Take biology courses that will help you build your skill set and <b>resume</b> including internship, directed and/or independent study, labs, preceptorship and service-learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain practical experience related to your career goal through internships, externships and skill building.</li> <li>• Take on a leadership role in a student organization or club or go deeper in your service opportunities.</li> <li>• Join a professional association such as the American Institute of Biological Sciences or the American Association for the Advancement of Science</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete necessary exams, applications, or self-marketing activities for next steps beyond graduation.</li> <li>• Research prospective employers and create a job or graduate school search strategy at least 8 months before graduation.</li> <li>• Have your <b>personal statement</b> or cover letter reviewed, and do a mock interview at <b>VCU Career Services</b>.</li> </ul>		
YEAR 4					