As a planning student at the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University, Ryan Rinn learned how to create a quality of life plan for Richmond’s Highland Park neighborhood. He didn’t do this by sitting in a classroom; he was part of an 11-member team that went into the community. Ultimately Rinn—a 2012 graduate of the Wilder School’s Master of Urban and Regional Planning program—earned that award-winning project into a profession, bringing his passion to revitalize Richmond as the executive director of Storefront for Community Design.

The nonprofit seeks to improve Richmond through planning and design, working to build community connections; expand youth programming and spur economic growth. Every day Rinn puts into practice what he learned at the Wilder School, making a positive difference in the community. That’s our mission at the Wilder School. We prepare tomorrow’s leaders through education, research and training that encourages public service. We’re a leading-edge school of public policy and government that emphasizes learning by doing.

Every year Wilder School students and faculty work with state agencies, local governments, nonprofits and community organizations across Virginia on dreams of research projects offering innovative solutions to today’s public policy issues. We’ve done that for decades. Recent examples include students in an emergency management graduate course rewiring emergency operations plans for small localities in Virginia, and public administration students developing a plan for state education and veterans agencies to help prepare veterans for employment.

We must dear of partnership. We believe that high-quality research, creative thinking and collaboration will ultimately produce the best public policies.

The legacy of Governor L. Douglas Wilder

We’re proud to be named for L. Douglas Wilder, the 66th governor of Virginia and the first elected African-American governor in the United States. This followed a distinguished legal career and historic public service in the Virginia State Senate and as lieutenant governor.

L. Douglas Wilder, the 66th governor of Virginia and a distinguished professor at the school that bears his name, speaks at the Wilder School’s spring graduation on May 13.

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After leaving the Executive Mansion in 1994, Governor Wilder was elected to come to VCU’s Department of Political Science and Public Administration, where he taught classes in government and public policy as a Distinguished Professor. He has continued in that role and is still lecturing at the school that was named for him in 2004.

Many of his students have gone on to successful careers in public policy, business and elected office.

In 2003, he led a successful campaign, with former U.S. Rep. Thomas J. Riley Jr., to change Richmond’s charter to allow an at-large elected mayor, and was then elected in 2004 the first at-large mayor to more than a half-century. The Wilder School embodies the values of state and local leadership and service championed by the governor.

Alumni network

You’ll find our approximately 10,000 alumni across the public, private and nonprofit sectors, from the halls of Congress—U.S. Rep. Rob Wittman of Virginia’s First District earned his doctorate in public policy and administration from the Wilder School—to the nation’s ninth largest transit system, where Keith E. Parker leads the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority. Parker, who holds a master’s in planning, is also a member of the VCU Board of Visitors. Our graduates work in law enforcement offices across the country, including as police chiefs and correctional facility directors, in the armed forces, in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and as FBI and Secret Service special agents. Likely every county and city in Virginia has Wilder School graduates serving the community, whether as sheriffs, planners or administrators. Alumni are also in the private sector as financial analysts and business owners.

The Wilder School has helped prepare leaders throughout state and local government, including state Sen. Rosalyn R. Dance of Petersburg, an alumna who holds a master’s in public administration, and Diana Trương, Virginia’s Secretary of Education, who earned her M.P.A. and Ph.D. here.

Hands-on learning

The Wilder School offers graduate and undergraduate degrees and certificates in public policy and administration, criminal justice, homeland security and emergency preparedness, urban and regional studies and planning, nonprofit management, geographic information systems, urban revitalization and gender violence intervention. Our programs blend classroom theory with hands-on practice and field-based courses, so students learn skills they’ll use on the job. Also, Wilder students interm with state and local government agencies, nonprofits and businesses—opportunities that prepare them to be successful in the workplace.

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Chernoh Wurie, Ph.D., instructor of criminal justice, and his students discuss public safety issues with Sgt. Michael and Regional Planning and Studies Program, gather before the 2016 From left, Wilder School Dean John Accordino, Ph.D.; Hyman Gulak; of Virginia and beyond, including the National Academy of Public Administration, the Young-Pogson Sheriff’s Office and the New York City Housing Association’s Office of Emergency Management. Taylor Lewis, a senior majoring in criminal justice, spent the summer working in the sexual assault unit of the Metropolitan Police Department of the District of Columbia. Lewis, an aspiring special agent for a federal investigative agency, spent her experience last year in Henrico County’s Summer Basic Jailer Academy, held in partnership with the Wilder School, positioned her for the competitive internship in Washington. The jailler academy legal criminal justice students earn college credit while becoming certified for the Fall. The Wilder School also draws top students from around the world. Sombo Chunda, an native of Zambia, brings a wealth of experience to her studies. Chunda came to the Wilder School as a M.P.A. student after a prestigious Mandela Washington Fellowship brought her to VCU last year. She was country director of Diakonia, a Swedish international nonprofit organization based in Zambia, and is now pursuing her doctorate with us.

Acclaimed faculty

Our faculty enjoy national and international reputations for their research, including housing and neighborhood development, cyber security, sexual assault, human trafficking, social equity in public and nonprofit organizations, immigration policy, alternative energy, entrepreneurship as anti-poverty strategy and workforce development policy.

Faculty bring professional expertise to the classroom, sharing knowledge they gained while serving as top government officials and business and community leaders. John Accordino, Ph.D., become dean of the Wilder School in March after more than 30 years as a professor of urban and regional planning. His expertise includes community revitalization and regional economic development.

You’ll find our faculty in top leadership of professional organizations. Susan T. Gooden, Ph.D., is immediate past president of the American Society for Public Administration, the nation’s largest professional association for public administration. Faculty volunteer on community and state boards, including the Virginia Board of Jurisprudence and Richmond Region Energy Alliance.

Center for Public Policy

We’re Virginia’s public policy experts. In addition to our academic programs, our Center for Public Policy—which includes the Center for Urban and Regional Analysis, The Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute, the Office of Public Policy Outreach, Performance Management Group and the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory—conducts research and provides education and training for state and local governments and nonprofit organizations.

Notable services include the Virginia Executive Institute, which provides advanced leadership training to state and local government employees, the Minority Political Leadership Institute and the HIGHER Ground Women’s Leadership Development Program.

We help lawmakers through our Translational Research Policy Services, where we translate the research of VCU faculty into background summaries for legislators. Our Legislative Briefing Services provide state lawmakers with concise overviews about pending bills.

Our Legislative Briefing Services also conduct executive summaries of state and local policies and programs, helping policymakers see if public policies are generating an acceptable return on investment for taxpayers.

Convening the community

We’re thought leaders, sharing insights with the community on important topics through public events. Last fall, we sponsored the Wilder School’s Symposium on “Race and American Society: 50 Years After the Kerner Commission Report,” and in March we hosted the Wilder School’s Teton Hall, “Public Policy, Populism and Donald Trump: Who Are ‘We the People?’”

The Wilder School will host a forum about issues facing Virginians in the upcoming election on Thursday, Oct. 20. Our annual Morton B. Gulak Lecture in Urban and Regional Planning will take place on Wednesday, Oct. 25, and will feature Torn L. Griffin, founder of Urban Planning and Design for the American City, based in New York City. Shaquil Thomas, member of the Indian Parliament and former undersecretary of the United Nations, will deliver the India lecture on Monday, Oct. 9.

The point of all this is to make our teaching, scholarship and outreach to the community—to make government work better, to make it more responsive to the needs of citizens and businesses, and to make it more efficient and innovative. We do this through leadership, service and partnerships. Let us know how we can partner with you to improve the community. Together we’ll make a difference.

— Contact presented by VCU Wilder School

Support the Wilder School!
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