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
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: 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, enlightens individuals about their rights and responsibilities, and 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 multilayered approach that includes policy changes, cultural shifts, and continuous education.

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.

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.

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 Volsker Alliance, a nonprofit 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 Volsker 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 Volsker 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 captures 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.

1. 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.

2. How are poll questions developed? How does the Wilder School research expertise prioritize and explore Virginians’ voices?
   A. The poll questions are developed by Rhoby 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.

3. 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?
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 glycemic 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, community involvement, and leadership, she’s using her platform to make oral health a permanent part of the larger discussion for health equity in all policy planning.

Meet our new faculty

Luisa Nazareno, Ph.D.

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 “groundlessness in real-world problems and proactive agenda on equity” and advocates for experiences extending beyond the classroom. In her free time, 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.

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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.

Charity Scott, Ph.D.

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.
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 stage for the future of 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 others,” 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.”

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. 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.

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—Sesha Joi Moon, Ph.D.

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 enacting 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 truly is 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 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. 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

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

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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.

TAKING THE CAPITOL STEPS TO CAREER SUCCESS

Students gain an inside perspective on legislation in action

BY RACHEL ZEEVE
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 about government, but I wanted to see it operating in the active sense — no classroom alone can replicate that level of learning," he said. 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.

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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.

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 work with our legislators in action, witness firsthand public engagement and explore career opportunities offered by state agencies and departments." 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.

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Across party lines, Evans noted a welcoming work environment. "Friendships and positive work relationships were the norm," he said. "This good-natured relationship was reflected in the ability of members to work collaboratively on bills and issues where large divisions of policy preferences 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." 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.

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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." 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.

Across party lines, Evans noted a welcoming work environment. "Friendships and positive work relationships were the norm," he said. "This good-natured relationship was reflected in the ability of members to work collaboratively on bills and issues where large divisions of policy preferences were present. I found a newfound appreciation for the level at which laws and policies have to be scrutinized across the aisle."

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"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.

- Dharma Minesh Amin, Ph.D. (P.P.A.'10, M.S./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.

- 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 leadership 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.

- Doctoral student Amidu Kalekah 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. Kalekah’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. (GHF'22, M.S./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 us — and our traveling team of British embassy diplomats — to engage with such a diverse range of young leaders and thinkers at VCU.”

As professor and first dean of VCU’s School of Community Services — which later became the Wilder School in 2013 — in 1974, 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 role. Henry shared that its current 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.”

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For Najmah Thomas, Ph.D., 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.”

— Najmah Thomas

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

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

BY RACHEL ZEEVE

For more information, please visit us at bit.ly/givewilder

Learn about ways you can give back while supporting tomorrow’s leaders. Contact Stevan Dozier, the Wilder School’s director of development, at doziers2@vcu.edu or (804) 828-6205.
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.