



# VCU

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Community Engagement | Service-Learning

## **Service-Learning** Annual Report 2014-2015

ENGAGING LEARNERS. MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN OUR COMMUNITIES.



## Director's Message



**Erin Burke Brown, Ph.D.**

Associate Director, VCU Service-Learning Office  
Incoming ASPIRE Director

### About Service-Learning

Service-Learning is a high-impact educational practice that engages students in organized service activities and guided reflection.

The service activities benefit the community and enhance the academic curriculum of the participating students.

### Vision

To become a leader in the development of mindful and engaged citizens who contribute to a more just and humane world.

### Mission

To deepen our understanding of civic responsibility and enhance our capacity to act as locally responsive and globally aware citizens.

### Learn More

For more information, visit [servicelearning.vcu.edu](http://servicelearning.vcu.edu).

### Engaging Learners. Making a Difference in our Communities.

During the 2014-2015 year, the Service-Learning Office had continued support from the provost's office, departments, and individual faculty members. There were 92 faculty and approximately 3,469 students engaged in service-learning. Funding from the Division of Community Engagement enabled the Service-Learning Office to provide various forms of funding for faculty members to support their teaching and scholarship. A new funding initiative, the Service-Learning Partnership Award, was developed to assist new and veteran service-learning instructors strengthen and deepen their work in the community. Two partnership awards, each focusing on Virginia's history, connected students with local museums to assist with exhibits to educate individuals about the life of former slave Winnie Beal and the History of Richmond in 50 Objects.

With funding from the Division of Community Engagement, VCU joined Imagining America (IA), [imaginingamerica.org](http://imaginingamerica.org) in 2014. Imagining America is a dynamic and visionary national nonprofit consortium that brings together scholars, artists, designers, and community activists working toward the democratic transformation of higher education and civic life; fostering and advancing publicly engaged scholarship that draws on arts, humanities, and design; and catalyzing changes in campus practices, structures, and policies that enables artists and scholars to thrive and contribute to community action and revitalization. Many of the innovative partnerships featured in the IA

collaboration are initiatives that involve a service-learning component such as Open Minds, Middle of Broad (MoB), and CreateAthon.

In 2015, VCU once again received recognition as a Carnegie community-engaged campus. With this classification, VCU joins the ranks of only 361 universities nationwide that show a high-level commitment to community engagement that is intentional, reflective, and mutually-beneficial. Illustrating the impact of long-term service-learning partnerships was one of many factors contributing to VCU's selection for this honor.

This report highlights a few of the many projects and initiatives undertaken by service-learning faculty and students at VCU. As service-learning numbers grow, so too does our commitment to deepening and strengthening the partnerships VCU has within the community.

For more information about service-learning, contact Lynn Pelco at [lepelco@vcu.edu](mailto:lepelco@vcu.edu) or (804) 827-8215.

Erin Burke Brown, Ph.D.  
Associate Director, VCU Service-Learning Office  
Incoming ASPIRE Director

**3,469**  
**STUDENTS**

were enrolled in service-learning  
courses (approximately)

**92**  
**INSTRUCTORS**

taught designated service-learning courses

**117**  
distinct **courses** and  
**233**

**sections** provided  
students with diverse selection  
of service-learning courses



## FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Melanie Buffington

The National Art Education Association has named Virginia Commonwealth University's Melanie Buffington, Ph.D., the 2015 National Higher Education Teacher of the Year.

Buffington, assistant professor and graduate programs coordinator in the VCU School of the Arts' Department of Art Education, has current research interests that include museum education, emerging technologies, culturally responsive pedagogy, contemporary art, service-learning and pre-service teacher preparation. She has been a faculty member for eight years with the Art Education Department in the School of the Arts. She earned a B.S. degree at The Pennsylvania State University, and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from The Ohio State

University. She also has taught middle school art and interned in numerous museums.

"Melanie Buffington is one the country's rising stars in the field of art education," said Joe Seipel, dean of the VCU School of the Arts. "What a great honor she is receiving. We are so proud to have her here at VCU."

Buffington teaches several service-learning classes each year in Art Education. During her Service-Learning Faculty Fellowship, she has piloted innovative reflection techniques, presented at the VCU Service-Learning Institute, and served as a local expert within the VCU School of the Arts on the

use of service-learning pedagogy in the arts.

"My students have so many benefits from their service-learning experience, particularly the ways it helps them to put ideas from class and readings into practice," Buffington said. "Through their year-long mentoring experience at Carver Elementary School, they get to see the development of a child, they learn some of the realities of public school schedules, they experience the joys of lessons that are successful and experience the challenges from unsuccessful lessons. Many of the VCU students comment about how their experiences with their mentees are so powerful and help them to see children as unique individuals with different strengths and talents."

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

William and Mary Active Citizens Conference



Five Service-Learning Teaching Assistants (SLTAs) presented at William and Mary's annual Active Citizen's Conference in the Spring.

SLTAs are undergraduate or graduate students who have excelled in previous service-learning courses and are nominated by instructors to assist with the facilitation of a service-learning classes.

The students' presentation, "Universities of Privilege and Communities of Need: Building Trust through Collaboration," explored how universities and communities can clash over issues related to power and privilege. With less than an hour, the SLTAs had to quickly define the concept of privilege and provide participants with an opportunity to discuss their thoughts and reflect on privilege at their universities and in their own lives. One of the presenters, Ariana Taylor, believes that they "managed to make privilege easier to understand for even the most unaware individual."

The SLTAs began their presentation with an interactive example of privilege, providing each attendee with a piece of paper with the instructions to write their name on it and throw it in a garbage can in the front of the room. The attendees that were able to 'make the basket' had privilege. For students sitting closer to the trash can it was easier to do this than students sitting in the back or those who had their views blocked by others. This activity allowed participants to understand that privilege is not necessarily something that one can control, but is something that impacts everyone.

The SLTAs used VCU as a case study of university-community partnerships. They discussed the controversy surrounding the "We built this city" t-shirt and discussed how unintentional actions can have unexpected repercussions in the community. The SLTAs cited open communication and reflection as methods for engaging in meaningful and thoughtful partnership with the community, asserting that participating in service-

learning courses as both students and as SLTAs helped them understand how to work positively in the community.

According to Symone Simmons, working on the presentation and attending the conference "taught [her] how to speak to other people about racism and privilege in a constructive way." Similarly, Alexis Mathis "realized that [she] had to put [her]self in the position to be uncomfortable sometimes to understand where someone is coming from with a different perspective."

Regina Hamilton summed up the entire conference experience citing the highlight "being able to experience all the different views."

SLTAs have proven an invaluable resource for service-learning instructors in the classroom and community. To learn more about the SLTA program or nominate a student, visit [servicelearning.vcu.edu](http://servicelearning.vcu.edu).

43

Service-Learning teaching assistants

supported service-learning courses

130

More than community partnerships were strengthened and sustained through service-learning courses

7 service-learning projects

12 community partners

were supported through Service-Learning Office funding avenues.

## COURSE SPOTLIGHT

### Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Program



This past spring the Undergraduate Teaching Assistant Program (UTA) housed within University College was designated as a service-learning course. Since 2008, the program has been an integral part of the Department of Focused Inquiry (FI) providing UNIV 111, 112, and 200 classrooms with much-needed additional support that promotes a learner-centered model of education.

Typically, FI faculty who participate in the program are paired with up to six UTAs, former UNIV students who excelled in their UNIV courses. Between 150-200 undergraduates participate in the program assisting 30 faculty members each year.

In the past, service-learning was largely defined by students completing direct service to external university partners. As that definition has evolved to encompass more nuanced approaches to community engagement it also includes

indirect service along with on-campus partnerships. The UTA program serves a critical role within the VCU community. It provides undergraduate peer mentors to students taking UNIV courses. These mentors promote student learning and assist students with making connections across their learning.

Professors Thad Fortney and Peter Henry have been at the forefront of the UTA program for several years. The decision to transition the UTA program to service-learning was largely spurred by the national dialogue in higher education surrounding student retention.

Nationally retention has been lower for first generation and underrepresented minority students, populations that are large at VCU. As service-learning courses, the UTA Program brings to the University College and VCU another strategy to support the retention of all students. The transition meant providing UTAs with

more explicit resources on experiential learning and its impact on college students. This additional component allowed UTAs to be more intentional about their role in the classroom and has enhanced the already strong program.

Professors Fortney and Henry hope that the UTA program can continue to grow and serve as a model for other institutions looking for ways to improve student success and upperclassmen engagement.

To find out more about the UTA Program, contact Peter Henry at [p Henry@vcu.edu](mailto:p Henry@vcu.edu) or Thad Fortney at [twfortney@vcu.edu](mailto:twfortney@vcu.edu).

## PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

### "Made in Church Hill" Exhibit Features Service-Learning Art



An exhibition created by VCU service-learning students that features historic Richmond neighborhood Church Hill was on view at the Valentine Jan. 22 to June 28, 2015 in the Stettinius Community Galleries. "Made in Church Hill" expresses the community's transformation, from the perspective of the people who live and work there.

Aided by a 2014 Community Engagement Grant, Traci Garland, adjunct professor of art history and gallery coordinator at the VCU Anderson Gallery and Michael Lease, adjunct professor of photography and head of exhibitions and design at the

VCU Anderson Gallery, offered the service-learning course "Social Practice in the Museum" during the fall 2014 semester.

The course allowed VCU undergraduate and graduate students to work with high school students from Church Hill Academy, students from the University of Richmond and staff of the Valentine.

Portraits in the exhibition were taken in homes, churches or other places of significance to the subjects. The exhibition also includes a multi-channel sound piece by artist Vaughn W. Garland, sound poems written and performed by academy students

and audio clips from field recordings taken in Church Hill.

Community Engagement grants of up to \$20,000 are awarded annually to projects that advance community-engaged scholarship and address community-identified needs. These projects often include a service-learning component that allows students to participate in faculty-led initiatives. The service-learning office also provides funding for projects, faculty travel, and partnership development. For more information, visit [community.vcu.edu](http://community.vcu.edu).

**72,160**  
service hours

were provided by  
service-learning students.



**\$9,400**

granted to seven project awards

**\$11,502**

granted in travel grants