

VCU State of Academic Affairs Address
Provost Fotis Sotiropoulos
February 28, 2022

Thank you all for joining me here today - at the ICA and online - for VCU's first State of Academic Affairs.

It has been my honor to serve as VCU's provost for a full six months - which is really hard to believe – since I've had the opportunity to meet many of you already, I've learned my way around both Richmond campuses and our Qatar campus, and I've explored the beautiful city of Richmond and spent many hours on my bike riding along the Virginia Capital Trail.

And - I assure you that with every day that passes by, the better I get to know this institution and this community, I feel more energized, more inspired and more embolden by the palpable energy, the passion and infectious enthusiasm at VCU -- what I have come to refer to as the "VCU magic".

Our faculty, staff and students feel this magic - and our community feels it also. And the reason is simple – at VCU every member of our community embraces and is driven by the core pillars of our academic mission – access and student success, inclusive excellence, community engagement and societal impact.

As President Rao said in his State of the University address earlier this month - VCU puts students and patients first and produces transformative innovation in education, research and healthcare.

Today, I would like to celebrate your successes - particularly those achieved in the shadow of a global pandemic - and I want you to join me in envisioning our very bright and transformative future.

As I mentioned in my video invitation to today's address, we aren't starting from scratch.

VCU's impact is already exceptional.

And never has that been more evident than in the past two years through which you have stood strong to our academic mission in the face of a global pandemic.

While the pandemic has presented critical challenges throughout higher education and affected the lives of all of you and your loved ones, VCU stood out among American institutions. I watched this from my previous institution.

And I saw it first hand when I became a candidate for provost. VCU comes together in the face of challenges - each individual, each department, each college and school, each administrative office, and each campus has come together during the pandemic.

And do not just take my word for all this.

Let us look at some quantitative metrics of what you have all achieved in the past 2 years

- Students success numbers have reached historical heights
 - Our 6-year (~68%) graduation rates for our first-time students entering all VCU campuses including Qatar have never been higher
 - Along with success, access is strong with almost a third (32%) of our incoming first-time students are Pell Eligible; 29% are First-Generation, and 67% are female.
- Our research productivity has never been higher
 - Our annual external sponsored research grew from \$310M in 2019 to \$363M today
 - The number of proposals you submitted reached historical heights and keeps growing - 196 more proposals requesting ~22% more sponsored dollars
 - VCU's position in the National Science Foundation survey - that ranks institutions based on research expenditures - climbed from being ranked #65 to #58 among public institutions. That is, we jumped 7 spots in just one year
- The diversity of our faculty has continued to steadily rise

So, in the midst of a devastating pandemic, how did you respond? You taught your hearts out helping our students graduate at the highest rate in VCU's history, you shifted your research productivity to high gear, and you did your best to ensure that the impact of VCU kept growing on all fronts!

And I am immensely proud of our superstar faculty, our talented and dedicated staff and our brilliant students who are behind these numbers and have worked so hard under extraordinarily difficult circumstances to achieve all this growth.

How fortunate we are to have outstanding faculty, like those who received awards at our fall convocation. Faculty who:

- Perform in a superior manner in teaching, scholarly activity and service;
- Are productive scholars and/or art makers who have been recognized nationally or internationally for their achievements;
- Inspire students with their teaching, using stimulating techniques, developing outstanding curriculum and teaching strategies and continue their teaching outside of the classroom;
- Contribute superior service to the university, their discipline and the wider community; and
- Achieve outstanding results in teaching, research, scholarship and service within the first five years of their tenure-track faculty career and at least three consecutive years of a term faculty career.

I am exceedingly proud of our talented and dedicated staff, like the winners of the Presidential Awards last year. Staff who:

- positively impact the university with significant contributions throughout their careers while exemplifying VCU's core values and ethical standards;
- accomplish exceptional achievements and leadership within their roles to the benefit of the university; and

- promote and exemplify VCU's values through excellent customer service and fostering excellence and a culture of caring among their colleagues.

And finally, I am amazed by our brilliant students. Students like:

- MiJin Cho, a junior in the College of Humanities and Sciences and the Honors College, who is a Boren Scholarship recipient, is working to make her mark as a physician-scientist and is a co-founder of Storytelling and Healing, a student organization that explores stories of struggle, illness, and healing.
- Michael Portillo, a senior in the School of Business, who plans to serve in the US Foreign Service as an economic diplomat. He is a Thomas R. Pickering Foreign Affairs Fellow, has interned with the US Department of State, and received both Gilman and Boren Scholarships.
- Josly Pierre-Louis, a student in VCU's Clinical and Translational Science doctoral program in Cancer and Molecular Medicine, who recently became VCU's first recipient of the Ford Foundation's prestigious predoctoral fellowship. She is a co-founder of the VCU chapter of National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers.
- Anirban Mahanty, a senior in the College of Humanities and Sciences and the Honors College, who is a previous recipient of the prestigious NIH Undergraduate Scholarship and was recently selected as a 2021 Goldwater Scholar. He is the founder of the Medical Scientist Training Club and serves as chair for the SCHEV Student Advisory Council.
- Oscar Kemp, a junior in the School of Social Work, who recently received the Public Policy and International Affairs Junior Summer Institute Fellowship at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. He is president of the VCU Association of Black Social Workers and plans to serve communities across the globe as a Public Diplomat in the Foreign Service.

- Emily Ko and Amir Behdani, both second-year Pharm.D. students at the School of Pharmacy, who launched a nonprofit called Pharmacists for Digital Health to improve the availability of healthcare services for underrepresented populations. They were runners up at a national pharmacy innovation challenge for creating a process that allows patients to more easily share health updates with a medical practice by using a mobile phone. They have since co-founded a health technology startup and are developing the prototype product.

Please join me in recognizing these amazing faculty, staff and students.

I would like to introduce to you at this point two of our newest members of our VCU community who will be joining us later this year. Both hired after very competitive national searches:

- Professor Naomi Boyd, our new dean of the School of Business, who joins us from West Virginia University.
- Dr. Lyndon Cooper, our new dean of the School of Dentistry, who joins us from the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Welcome to VCU, Naomi and Lyndon. I look forward to working with you.

At VCU our faculty, our staff, our students and our alumni unite to form an inclusive and vibrant community of scholars and art makers. A fearless, empathetic and compassionate community that never shies away from taking on society's biggest challenges via cutting edge transdisciplinary research and creative works. Because this is what great research universities like VCU do. We take on research that matters for improving the lives of all humans on this planet.

Important research that:

- Transforms health care as we know it by preventing and reversing liver disease.
- Leads to the sustainable manufacturing at scale of affordable life-saving drugs for all humans on our planet.
- Takes on major threats to public health – like the regulation of tobacco products–by shaping, refining and predicting the effects of various regulatory scenarios.

- Implements and evaluates shared housing models for LGBTQ+ youth and pregnant and parenting youth experiencing homelessness in the Greater Richmond Region, which can be transferred across the state of Virginia.
- Develops science-based solutions for waterway restoration, management and ecosystem preservation under multiple anthropogenic stressors to inform public policy.
- Leverages virtual reality and interactive art works to treat patients on the Palliative Care Unit, integrating art, technology, philosophy and medicine!

Just to mention a few of the exciting research our faculty are engaging in.

We have so much more work to do on all these fronts and there is no time for complacency.

But as I contemplate all these achievements, I cannot help thinking that if you all can accomplish all of this during a pandemic - *are there any limits to what we are capable of as an institution?*

How far can we go if we continue building on our diversity to drive excellence but we also strengthen our commitment to academic excellence as a means to expand our diversity?

Our steadfast commitment to diversity unleashes the limitless potential of our students and faculty and drives transformative innovation and societal impact.

And the more our impact grows, the higher we rise in prestige as an institution, the easier it becomes to attract and retain excellent faculty and students from diverse backgrounds.

This is how we create a virtuous circle that will continue to lift us all up, making us reach higher for the benefit of our students, our faculty and our entire community.

VCU's story is one of adaptability, ingenuity, creativity and tenacity.

It is also aspirational.

Our vision is of a university where:

- Our educational enterprise focuses on access and student success.
- Our passion is to educate informed and compassionate citizens, critical thinkers, creative problem solvers and entrepreneurs – to equip our students with the life-long learning skills they will need to succeed in a rapidly changing world.
- Our research is transdisciplinary, solving grand societal problems that improve the lives of and helps lift up all humans.
- Our community is engaged, ensuring economic development and prosperity for all.
- Our culture is inclusive and caring and with a laser-sharp focus on excellence in everything we do.
- Our aspirations and ambition know no limits!

Our students, our faculty, our staff, our community deserve nothing less!

A few weeks ago, President Rao, Vice President for Research and Innovation Sriram Rao and yours truly had the chance to meet with the new director of the National Science Foundation.

Director Panchanathan shared his new vision for NSF, a vision focused on the “**missing millions**” — all those brilliant creative minds from under-represented backgrounds and socio-economically disadvantaged communities who are capable of succeeding in science and technology but do not have access to pathways that lead into those careers.

Closing the gap between the demographics of the research community and the demographics of the whole nation, is not just the right thing to do but it is a critical prerequisite for the US to remain globally competitive and the world leader in scientific and technological innovation.

At VCU we are already working hard to close that gap through projects like ADVANCE-VCU - an NSF funded program focused on increasing the number of diverse faculty – and especially female faculty - in STEM fields.

But, there are many more millions, beyond STEM, that are missing from the global creative enterprise and entrepreneurial ecosystem. According to a very recent report published by the

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, there could be tens of millions of more successful businesses around the globe today if we can find ways to unleash the creative potential of all and especially those from underrepresented and socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

And the entrepreneurs of the future will not only come from STEM disciplines. To the contrary, finding the missing millions of entrepreneurs and innovators will require engaging young minds trained in the arts, the humanities, social sciences, medicine and more. In other words, it will require adopting a transdisciplinary educational mindset that will help ignite in our students a life-long passion for transformative innovation and engage them in creative problem solving for the benefit of society.

And what institution is better positioned than VCU to emerge as the National model for what the universities of the future that will close this gap and find these missing millions should look like.

- Because diversity, equity and inclusion is in our DNA.
- And because transformative innovation is in our DNA.

This is, after all, the university that is committed to its core to providing all students with REAL transformative educational experiences.

- The university that is already at the forefront of inventing the future of higher education through mind-blowing innovative initiatives like the Da Vinci Center for Innovation, iCubed, and many others.
- The university that is the home of this spectacular Institute for Contemporary Arts, and of course the home of a world-class School of the Arts across two campuses, in Richmond and in Doha.
- The university that is leading the way every day by showing how the arts can be the catalyst for our disciplinary strengths in engineering, business, medicine, education, the humanities, social sciences, and so many more, to fuse together driving transdisciplinary innovation in research, teaching and community engagement.

But to fully realize our potential we need to constantly work to ensure that not only our students graduate on time but that they are also equipped with meaningful degrees and life-long learning skills that will enable them to be the creative thinkers, researchers and entrepreneurs of the future.

We live in a world that is constantly changing, a world in which knowledge is doubling every few hours. A world that is increasingly being defined by exponentially growing technologies, big data and artificial intelligence. In which the human experience as we know is being constantly re-defined by technology infusing every human endeavor. A world that is facing daunting challenges due to the growing global income inequality, rampant health disparities, and racial and climate injustice.

In that context we need to prepare for what the Future of Work will be like as Artificial Intelligence and automation cause a big chunk of human jobs to disappear in the next few decades and create many new jobs. We need to urgently engage in conversations about how to prepare our students to be productive and successful in this new emerging world.

We can be the institution that leads the way by imagining and putting in place educational paradigms that prepare humans to work and creatively co-exist with technology by cultivating higher-order human cognitive abilities, which are less likely to be surpassed by intelligent machines.

Our vision is that of a new kind of humanities/arts/social sciences-trained student who is sufficiently proficient in the basics of computational thinking but also has been given the chance to cultivate higher-level cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, the ability to design and work with complex interconnected systems, entrepreneurship, compassion, and cross-cultural understanding. All skills that machines will not be able to acquire and that a re-imagined humanities, arts and social sciences education can cultivate.

And preparing our students to compete and succeed in this future of work is also critical for closing the widening income inequality gap. It is about financial justice and providing opportunities for social mobility. It is about what President Rao has been so succinctly and eloquently articulating: Meeting our students where they are!

It is within this context of rapid change and daunting societal challenges that we are in the process of recalibrating our Quest 2025 Strategic Plan. Because our world has changed, so must our strategic priorities in the post pandemic world.

This is an exciting time for disruptive innovation and change.

I have challenged our General Education committee and our entire community to re-imagine what the VCU GenEd needs to look like to prepare our students for the future of work.

A General Education that, in addition to the fundamental course work that forms the bedrock of a VCU education, is flexible and agile enough to incorporate foundational literacies in racial justice, computational thinking, and entrepreneurship. To continue adapting to meet our students where they are in a rapidly changing world.

I am really proud of the work so many of you have done at all levels that will allow us to introduce the new course on Racial Literacy as a required GenEd course for ALL VCU students in Fall 2023.

And I have already charged our GenEd committee to identify the flexibilities and imagine the curricular structures that will allow us to incorporate new foundational literacies in Computing and Entrepreneurship for ALL VCU students by Fall 2025.

But our work will not end with introducing new GenEd courses. Racial, cultural, computational and entrepreneurship literacies need to be weaved in the fabric of the VCU curriculum across all disciplines and degree programs.

Our vision for the future of higher education is one that places less emphasis in the classroom and more emphasis on experiential transdisciplinary learning.

And by that I do not mean that we walk away from our core educational mission to provide our students with the fundamental knowledge they need. Rather, we must leverage technology and high-quality online learning modalities to continue doing much of what we have been doing in the past, but in new ways in order to create the flexibility and opportunity to innovate in the future.

For example, providing our students with the opportunity to acquire stackable credentials and certificates.

Re-shaping the campus in person experience of the future to focus more on experiential, project-based, transdisciplinary learning rather than being the traditional sequence of lecture-based in person classes. In other words, to focus more on outcomes rather than a set of requirements.

To build the Hybrid University of the Future!

And speaking of the university of the future, students who have been part of our DaVinci center have been saying that the DaVinci Center and our Shift Retail Lab, led by Garrett Westlake, look more and more like the classrooms of the future. Because the VCU DaVinci educational model is centered on cross-disciplinary collaboration, innovation, experiential learning and entrepreneurship. And it creates amazing opportunities for our students to innovate.

Students like Devin Singh, 2021 graduate with a BS in Psychology from our College of Humanities and Sciences, who applied the skills she acquired at DaVinci to develop mobile app interface designs for Buy From a Black Woman, a national non-profit. Her designs won Best in Show in a national advertising competition, and Devin shared this experience as a 2021 speaker for an Adobe Creative Campus international conference.

These are exactly the kinds of transformative experiences we want all of our students to have. So, I challenge you all to take this one huge step further– to go beyond the current REAL requirement. To scale the DaVinci model up, weaving cross-disciplinary collaboration, innovation, experiential learning and entrepreneurship throughout our entire educational enterprise, and leveraging it to transform VCU into the university of the future.

This is a critical building block for us to realize President Rao's REAL vision. We have already made major progress as an institution as over 50% of our undergraduate degree programs require a transformative experience that takes us to the next level.

But there are significant gaps in the diversity and socio-economic background of students who are able to participate so we have much more work to do.

I am challenging us all to collectively commit that by Academic Year 2027-28 we will realize President Rao's vision that 100% of VCU students will graduate after having participated in at least one transformative educational experience.

A transformative REAL experience may include:

- Work based experiences like internships, clinical and field placements, Co-Ops, etc.
- Problem based learning like transdisciplinary, multi-year vertically integrated projects for all our students aligned with VCU's strategic research thrusts and/or are relevant to industry and community stakeholders.
- Undergraduate engagement with faculty sponsored research projects.

I also challenge us all to renew and expand our commitment to graduate education.

- To scale up by leveraging online and hybrid modalities to dramatically grow the number of our master's students. To develop new market-relevant degrees and graduate certificates that serve the needs of all learners, traditional and non-traditional, and the re-skilling and re-tolling needs of our alumni throughout their careers.
- To aggressively grow our efforts to attract, mentor and graduate in time high caliber PhD students

As an R1 institution, research aimed at both producing fundamental knowledge and also solving society's greatest challenges is in our DNA. And while we continue to support traditional discipline-centric research efforts, we also need to advance a transdisciplinary research paradigm that breaks silos and focuses on building networks of knowledge and discovery.

We need to adopt a human-centered design thinking approach in our research if we strive to not only do research for the sake of producing cutting edge scholarship but also do research that solves problems and helps lift all humans up.

There are unprecedented opportunities for bringing together engineers, clinicians, health scientists, humanists, artists, ecologists, climate researchers, social scientists, political scientists, business researchers, and more to develop societally relevant impactful research agendas. And this is exactly what the recently launched One VCU Research Strategic Priorities Plan and associated seed funding opportunities seek to do.

We just need to adopt a different way of thinking and step out of our traditional comfort zones: This is truly a remarkable time to be at VCU. We each have a unique opportunity to reshape the future of higher education and position VCU at the leading edge of transformative innovation.

And I am committed as your provost to work with President Rao, Senior Vice President Kellermann, other senior academic leaders, our deans and all of you to execute this bold vision for our academic and research enterprises.

- To think strategically to advance cluster hires of tenure/tenure-track faculty in areas aligned with our strategic research thrusts
- To optimize our investments in start-up packages and infrastructure;
- To develop mentoring opportunities for all our faculty, especially our junior faculty;
- To proactively reward and work hard to retain top researchers, scholars, and art makers, and but also outstanding teaching faculty;
- To continue expanding the diversity of our faculty, staff and student bodies;
- To set and keep the excellence bar rigid and high in our promotion and tenure processes;
- To support research for all across the entire institution through seed grants, like the recently announced programs from the Office of the Vice President for Research and Innovation and the provost office to support excellent scholarship and creative works in the humanities, arts, and social sciences;
- To create faculty collaboration spaces where creative collisions and serendipitous interactions can take place leading to VCU magic;
- To constantly reaffirm our institutional commitment to shared governance;

- And last but not least to create a culture of care for the success of our students that proactively provides resources and supports relationships that foster learning, development, belonging and connectedness. Engaging our students to directly work with VCU administration to advance our bold vision for the future.

It is important to remember though, that achieving our vision of access and excellence is not just up to President Rao, Senior Vice President Kellermann, Vice President for Research and Innovation Sriram Rao, me or a handful of administrators.

It also requires a collective commitment by each and every one of you to strive to do your absolute best in whatever ways you contribute to our institution.

Whether you are a tenured or tenured-track faculty expected to excel in both research and teaching, or a primarily teaching faculty, or a staff member supporting the success of our students, the success of our faculty or our engagement with our community and our alumni.

It requires aiming high, looking outward, and constantly measuring our achievements against aspirational peers.

Doing so, however, will help lift us all up, will increase our institutional prestige, and solidify VCU's position as one of the nation's greatest research universities. In other words, it will help us achieve national and international prominence.

And we do have a rich legacy of excellence to build on.

As President Rao announced last week, VCU has just joined the University Innovation Alliance, a consortium of national public universities dedicated to increasing the number and diversity of college graduates in the United States. An alliance that includes universities like Arizona State University, The Ohio State University, Michigan State, Purdue and others!

VCU is the proud home of so many highly ranked programs in US News and World Reports.

Our overall ranking as an institution, however, in USNews rankings has remained essentially flat in the last 5 years, presently ranked at #172. And the two highest factors that contribute to US News university rankings are: Peer perception and 6-year graduation rates

We are an institution, however, that takes pride in how many we include and not about how exclusive we are in giving opportunities to students. And this will NEVER change!

As a result, we do have an uphill battle because many ranking algorithms tend to favor institutions that distinguish themselves by how many they exclude.

That means we need to keep working harder than others to expand the success and social mobility of our students – but we do this anyway – not because of whatever rankings happen to be the flavor of the day but because our core commitment to equitable access and inclusion is in our institutional DNA!

I am challenging all of us, therefore, to work even harder to achieve President Rao's bold goal of 78% 6-year graduation rate with no equity gaps and 90% retention rate. Achieving this goal will not only benefit our students but will also help lift VCU's position in national rankings!

But access and academic excellence need not be mutually exclusive. And the excellence of our academic and research enterprises needs to be quantified with data and benchmarking against aspirational peers. Peers who when we compare ourselves with could make us all initially feel a bit uncomfortable.

For that my office has been investing in acquiring the tools that will enable our deans, our chairs, all of you to start benchmarking our achievements against aspirational peers in order to inform with data the development of effective strategies for solidifying excellence across our institution.

Great universities do not just happen. They are being built by excellent faculty, brilliant students and dedicated staff, by setting aspirational strategic goals, by aiming high, by striving to do better, always trying to reach higher.

Our time is now to make VCU the national model for the university of the future.

- A university that not only provides access but is also relentless and deliberate in pursuing inclusive excellence in everything we do;
- A university that breaks silos and advances transdisciplinary educational paradigms meeting our students where they are in a world that is rapidly changing;
- A university that leads the Nation in educating as many of those missing millions of informed citizens, researchers, creative problem solvers, and compassionate entrepreneurs;
- An outstanding research university that measures its impact by the numbers of human lives we are saving, improving, lifting up through our cutting-edge transdisciplinary research;
- And finally, a university that becomes the driver of prosperity and social mobility for all in our community

As my parting thought, let us always keep in mind this quote attributed widely to Michelangelo:

The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark.

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