

momentum

ON THE MOVE: **VCU School of Education** rises to No. 17 in the U.S. News & World Report's best public graduate school rankings

VCU establishes itself as national authority in Social Security disability policy

Entering the workforce can be a daunting proposition at even the best of times. It becomes exponentially harder, however, for those with a long-term disability.

While many people dealing with these types of impairments do qualify for Social Security disability benefits to help them make ends meet, the assistance they receive is rarely enough.

"The amount beneficiaries get from Social Security is often very small — it really puts them at or below the poverty level," said Dr. John Kregel, the associate director and director of research at the VCU School

of Education's Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC). "These are people who have medical needs as well: additional costs related to things like medicine or assistive technology. So it's really important that the ones who want to work are able to do so."

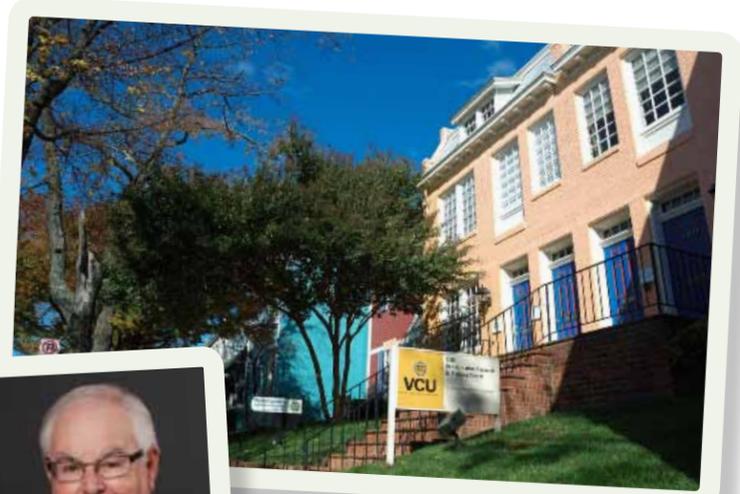
Unfortunately, returning to the workforce isn't always straightforward, even for those who are able to. Social Security disability regulations can be extremely complex and intimidating for those unfamiliar with their language.

Many beneficiaries, for instance, shy away from entering the workforce out

of fear of losing the income they already have. Under current regulations, individuals could lose their disability benefits if their earnings exceed a specific amount — a frightening prospect for those unsure if their health will allow them to maintain long-term employment.

Beneficiaries aren't the only ones who struggle with the Social Security system's complexities.

"There are a lot of policies and procedures, and interpretations to be made," Kregel said. "It's very hard for someone to learn the rules on their own, and if



in the country where people can become certified as a benefits counselor."

they are getting incorrect information, they can actually make the situation worse."

That's where VCU comes in. Thanks to the work of the RRTC, the university has quietly become a national leader on Social Security disability benefits issues.

"Our mission is to improve the economic self-sufficiency of those receiving disability benefits," Kregel said. "We believe individuals who are receiving benefits shouldn't be imposed upon and kept in poverty by the programs designed to assist them."

This summer, the U.S. Social Security Administration awarded VCU a five-year, \$26 million contract to fund the National Training and Data Center. Led by project director Susan O'Mara, the center provides initial training and certification, technical assistance and professional development for community work incentives coordinators — counselors who advise and educate beneficiaries on how employment will affect their public benefits.

"We provide the training for these benefit counselors to help them understand the ins and outs of Social Security and to be able to answer the technical questions that come in," Kregel said. "We're also the only place

In addition to awarding VCU the contract for the National Training and Data Center, Washington D.C. often looks to the

university for policy guidance as well. This summer, Kregel testified before the U.S. House of Representative's Committee on Ways and Means, chaired by former vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan, on the issue of Social Security disability benefits reforms.

"Congress has come to understand that it's very important that people who are on disability insurance who want to work should be allowed to work," Kregel said.

For Kregel that means, in addition to the individual support and education provided by the National Training and Data Center, examining the bigger picture as well.

"We could do a better job of evaluating the Social Security programs that are in place, and fund the ones that work," Kregel said. "We need to rely more heavily on evidence-based programs that have proven to be effective."

To see video from Kregel's testimony to Congress, or to read the transcript, visit go.vcu.edu/soetestimony. To learn more about the National Training and Data Center's work, visit www.vcu-ntc.org.

Dear VCU School of Education alumni and friends,



As interim dean, I am extraordinarily proud of the VCU School of Education, a nationally ranked graduate school with renowned faculty and dedicated staff as well as accomplished alumni and students. This fall, as we enter our 51st year, we are working with talented students who are studying to become counselors, teachers, adult educators, reading specialists, school administrators, special educators and educational researchers. Through our five hallmarks — focus

on community-engaged projects, commitment to inclusion, dedication to enhancing faculty infrastructure, concentration on research and scholarship, and support of our creative and innovative centers — the VCU School of Education continues to be a leader in the region and the nation.

This academic year, our priorities are to strengthen and extend both people infrastructure, and research and scholarship. To that end, this fall we are launching eight searches for both department chairs and faculty, and, with the support of our Advancement Council, we have inaugurated a new Faculty Excellence Fund. The fund will support two faculty members a year with grants of up to \$5,000 apiece. We also welcomed a new senior director for development, Edward G. Kardos, who will lead our plans for enhanced revenue, student scholarships and programs. In new initiatives and old, the VCU School of Education continues to forge ahead.

At no time in our history has the interest in higher education and the demand for graduate degrees been stronger. The VCU School of Education offers cutting-edge, comprehensive and well-conceived courses, seminars, internships and externships. We also provide support to our students in job searches with a proven track record of success placing them in positions for which they are qualified.

We so appreciate your interest and support for our fast-moving, high-quality School of Education, and we will continue to keep you informed about our exciting work during this upcoming academic year.

Best,

Leila Christenbury

Leila Christenbury
Interim Dean and Commonwealth Professor



VCU School of Education

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Make it real.

Richmond Teacher Residency broadens impact thanks to new U.S. Department of Education grant



Residents help students with hands on project.

recruitment and preparation of 120 more teachers for the city's schools.

"In addition, we are undertaking some exciting new work with new community partners to build a sustainable pipeline and a local capacity to identify and support students interested in pursuing a teaching career in STEM fields at the K-12 and pre-baccalaureate levels."

RTR is partnering with the MathScience Innovation Center and the Mary and Frances Youth Center to offer summer programming to inspire and equip RPS middle and high school students with the skills, knowledge and dispositions needed for college and career success in STEM fields. Through a partnership with the Virginia Department of Education, RTR is establishing a Virginia Teachers for Tomorrow program in every RPS high school to encourage juniors and seniors, especially promising math and science students, to consider a teaching career.

In 2011, the VCU School of Education's Richmond Teacher Residency (RTR) program started with nine residents in four host schools. The residents were preparing to be math, science, social studies and English teachers for Richmond Public Schools (RPS). Since that first cohort, RTR has prepared 61 new RPS teachers, created a new special education track and grown; today RTR serves 24 Richmond schools.

While this growth alone is something to celebrate, RTR also received a five-year, \$7.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education in October 2014.

"This new funding will allow us to significantly broaden our impact in Richmond Public Schools," said Dr. Terry Dozier, director of RTR as well as the Center for Teacher Leadership, an affiliated School of Education center. "It will support the

The growth of RTR has created an exciting momentum across the state. This past spring, the Virginia General Assembly appropriated funds to expand the RTR model to the cities of Petersburg and Norfolk. Ensuring a sustainable pipeline of highly effective teachers for urban school systems is one way the School of Education is showing its commitment to improving our community, one classroom at a time. ■

School gardens combat food deserts in urban communities

Food deserts — communities devoid of grocery stores and supermarkets with fresh food — are affecting the health of many people in urban communities throughout the United States. As a means of addressing this problem in the Richmond area, the Community Food Collaborative (CFC) works with local schools to create school gardens and markets in an effort to provide the community fresh and affordable food.

"Students are trained in urban agriculture and organic growing practices as a viable career choice while also learning valuable customer service skills, merchandising and marketing," said Amanda Hall, CFC co-founder and a Ph.D. student in the VCU School of Education. "Students and community members are empowered and use their own voices to make positive, measurable changes in their immediate neighborhoods."

Through grants and student and community volunteers, Hall and co-founder Toby Vernon were able to start CFC at Fairfield Middle School's community garden in Henrico three years ago. This market provides fresh food to the community and also accepts EBT/SNAP benefits. VCU students can also participate — the CFC collaborates with the School of Education, ASPIRE and the Division of Community Engagement.

In addition, during professional development sessions for in-service and pre-service teachers hosted in the VCU School of Education, Hall uses the community gardens project as an example of using critical service learning to address academic and community engagement needs.

"This project has allowed many students to find their voice, believe in something and work to make a difference," Hall said. "To hear them talk about their school, their community and themselves with pride and excitement is the best experience I could have. It makes what I learned in the School of Education real in the community." Thanks to her hard work in the community Hall recently earned a spot on this year's RVA Style Weekly Top 40 Under 40 list. ■



Amanda Hall and Fairfield Middle School students showcase this year's crop.

SOE student experiences education policy firsthand thanks to internship

When doctoral student Stefani Thachik started her studies at the VCU School of Education, she had no interest in politics or policy. Today she is an intern in the Virginia Secretary of Education's Office, learning every day how policy impacts the classroom.

Among her duties in the Secretary of Education's Office, Thachik serves as a liaison for the Standards of Learning Innovation Committee, which provides recommendations to the Virginia Board of Education and the General Assembly on Standards of Learning topics and assessments. Thachik also traveled around Virginia to help with Governor Terry McAuliffe's eight-stop listening tour, a series of public forums that allowed teachers, parents and students to voice their concerns about the state's education system.



Stefani Thachik in front of the Virginia Capitol.

"The School of Education's Ph.D. program uses assistantships and co-curricular activities to enrich students' education," said Dr. James McMillan, interim associate dean for academic affairs. "Stefani's assistantship in the Secretary of Education's Office has allowed her to apply her training in educational research and leadership to solve pressing educational problems of the Commonwealth. This is but one example of the type of community-engaged experience that integrates classroom learning with real-life policies and practice."

After graduating from VCU, Thachik hopes to become more involved with initiatives of the Cradle to Career program, which builds partnerships to support students through school, college, their career and even into retirement.

Between her hands-on experience, her Ph.D. coursework in educational leadership and her professors' mentoring, Thachik believes her experience at the VCU School of Education has given her a better sense of the entire education system and broadened her interests within the field. ■

Alumna supports practical experience for student teachers

Connecting a class curriculum with community needs is the bedrock of service learning, a fact no one knows better than VCU School of Education alumna Anna Lou Schaberg. After leading programs for gifted students at Richmond Public Schools for more than 20 years, Schaberg now helps support graduate student service-learning initiatives through the Bob and Anna Lou Schaberg Fund.

One such initiative, the VCU-Albert Hill Middle School Service-Learning Partnership, pairs School of Education practicum students with middle school teachers and students to conceptualize and execute projects around the school and in the community. This partnership, which began with a pilot program in spring 2014, was founded out of a desire among secondary education professors to provide a more meaningful practicum experience for pre-service teachers.

"I was intrigued by the opportunity for middle school students to develop their skills while working collaboratively to identify and solve problems," Schaberg said. "Life is full of difficulties, so I felt giving students the confidence that these problems can be tackled would be a real contribution to their development."

This fall, thanks to an enhanced commitment from the Schaberg Fund and the diligent work of Ph.D. students and professor Gabriel

Reich, the project will expand to Fairfield Middle School in eastern Henrico County and will include all the School of Education's middle school practicum students. The expansion means these programs will reach more than 100 middle school students in the Richmond city and Henrico County school systems over the course of the 2015-16 school year, with a further expansion to Lucille Brown Middle School planned for next spring.

"Anna Lou has a vision," said Meg Pienkowski, a School of Education Ph.D. student who is part of the pilot project at Albert Hill Middle School. "She is impacting a lot of lives with her generous gift — a gift that will have profound repercussions both in the classrooms at Albert Hill and beyond, as our pre-service teachers become teachers themselves."

For Schaberg, the partnership is equally beneficial. "It's wonderful to be in a position to help provide funding and encouragement," she said. "It is an unexpected gift."

To learn more about giving to the School of Education, visit: www.soe.vcu.edu/giving. ■

VISTA camp leaves lasting mark on the community

Picture this scenario: it is summertime and, because of water shortages, all swimming pools are shut down. Presented with that problem at the VCU School of Education's VISTA Summer Science Camp, local students learned how to gather, analyze and discuss science-based solutions. At the end of the camp, whose theme this year centered around climate change, students present their research and solutions to parents and community experts.

"The camp exposes the kids to an authentic learning experience, and they get really excited about science because they are doing hands-on work," said Jacqueline McDonnough, the program's director and a faculty member in the School of Education's Department of Teaching and Learning.

The four-week camp, which takes place in the School of Education's Oliver Hall, is funded through a U.S. Department of Education grant awarded to George Mason University, the VCU School of Education and William & Mary. Elementary school teachers and students from 80 high-needs areas have participated in the camp since its creation.



VISTA Summer Science Camp students learning about water pollution.

Before the students arrive, teachers are trained on problem-based learning techniques — as McDonnough puts it, they have to "learn the science before they deliver the science."

"As I go through the weeks of training, I see the impact it has on the teachers," McDonnough said. "They get a sense that they could do the things we are doing in camp in their own classrooms. They

see how designing instruction has an impact in terms of the students' excitement about the assignment."

This summer was the fifth and final year that VISTA camp was funded. Even years after attending VISTA camp, McDonnough hears stories from teachers of how students are still excited about science. ■

The camp exposes the kids to an authentic learning experience, and they get really excited about science because they are doing hands-on work.



Yet again, we are one of **America's Best Graduate Schools!** U.S. News & World Report ranks the VCU School of Education as the **17th-best public graduate program** in the country (up from 20th last year) and the **27th-best overall school of education** (up from 30th last year).

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Scholarship celebrating the past helps RTR resident create bright future

A scholarship a half century in the making, the School of Education's 50th anniversary award is already paying dividends for one student in VCU's Richmond Teacher Residency (RTR) program.

Luke Evancoe, a former Marine currently pursuing a Master of Teaching degree in biology education, was selected as the inaugural recipient of the newly founded 50th Anniversary Urban Education Scholarship. After nearly five years in the U.S. Marine Corps, where he rose to the rank of sergeant, Evancoe moved to Richmond to pursue a bachelor's degree in biology from VCU.

As a squad leader, I showed the younger men how to do their jobs as a Marine — teaching intangible things like discipline and attention to detail. It may be different skills than what you'd teach in biology class, but the essence is the same.

While finishing his undergraduate work, Evancoe volunteered at John Marshall High School and Richmond Community High School, doing full classroom work as well as closely mentoring a pair of assigned students — experiences Evancoe says helped steer him toward a career in education.

Likewise, Evancoe also credits his time in the military with teaching him about leadership.

"As a squad leader, I showed the younger men how to do their jobs as a Marine — teaching intangible things like discipline and attention to detail," Evancoe said. "It may be different skills than what you'd teach in biology class, but the essence is the same."

Now, Evancoe finds himself back in the role of mentee, thanks to the unique format of RTR. The program pairs a resident with an experienced Richmond Public Schools teacher, with whom the resident meets and teaches alongside four to five days a week.

Founded as part of the School of Education's anniversary celebrations last academic year, the 50th Anniversary Urban Education Scholarship supports promising students pursuing careers that improve educational opportunities in high-need environments.

For Evancoe, the scholarship is about more than just financial assistance — it also represents a sense of community.



Luke Evancoe at the 2015 SOE Scholarship and Awards ceremony.

"The monetary aspect is very helpful, and I'm very grateful for the donors who provide the much-needed financial support — we all know how high student loans can get," he said. "But beyond that, receiving the scholarship really made me feel appreciated. There was a nice ceremony when I was presented with the award, and it felt like the whole School of Education came out to attend. It was a really great start to my M.T. program — I really felt at home."

To learn more about how you can help support students through an endowed scholarship gift, visit www.soe.vcu.edu/giving.

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--- MOMENTUM FALL 2015 ---

Editor: Diana Burkett, APR, dburkett@vcu.edu

Co-editor: Tom Myrick, myrickt@vcu.edu

Art Director: Holly Delano, B.F.A. '88, DELANO Creative

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