



VCU ASPIRE

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

ASPIRE Annual Report 2014-2015



TURN AWARENESS INTO ACTION



Director's Message



Lynn E. Pelco, Ph.D.

Associate Vice Provost for Community Engagement
Acting Director, ASPIRE

About ASPIRE

VCU ASPIRE is an innovative living-learning program that enrolls more than 200 undergraduate students each year. ASPIRE students promote community engagement through academic coursework and co-curricular experiences.

Mission

VCU ASPIRE enriches and deepens students' understanding of their capacity to create positive change in communities and addresses critical societal needs through long-term sustainable partnerships.

Living

All VCU ASPIRE students reside in the West Grace South Residence Hall for two years, complete nine credits of academic coursework, and contribute a minimum of 100 hours service.

Learn More

For more information or to apply, visit aspire.vcu.edu.

Engaging Learners. Making a Difference in our Communities.

This year marks ASPIRE's third year of operation. How time flies! In April, 50 undergraduate students successfully completed the program, and we are very proud of each and every one of them. Across their two years with ASPIRE, each of these amazing young adults provided a minimum of 100 hours of service to the community and developed a fundamental understanding of community engagement theories and practices that will serve them well as they continue to be actively engaged citizens after they leave VCU.

ASPIRE has developed deep and lasting partnerships with a wide variety of local, regional and global community organizations. Every week, ASPIRE students meet community-identified needs across five critical impact areas—Affordable Housing, Community Building, Education & Workforce Development, Environmental Sustainability, and Health & Wellness. As they progress through the two-year ASPIRE program, students can focus or divide their volunteer time across the social causes and community partners that inspire them. For example, exercise science major Kori Johnson volunteered weekly at the School for the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community (SPARC) to help SPARC prepare for its amazing LIVE ART show. Environmental studies major,

Josh Ring, used his ASPIRE volunteer hours to establish an ASPIRE donation garden and to assist with the Fairfield Middle School Youth-Run Farm Stand. These are just two typical examples of the kinds of impact our ASPIRE students are making in our communities. As you read this report, I hope you will feel as inspired as I am by the innovative ASPIRE initiatives currently underway. And I hope you will find a way to get involved with ASPIRE in 2015-2016!

It has been an honor for me to serve as interim ASPIRE director during 2014-2015. As interim director, I followed after ASPIRE's very first director, Dr. Mary Slade, who laid the groundwork on which the program stands today. And I am pleased to be passing the director's office on to Dr. Erin Brown, who began her new job on June 1. Only great things lie ahead for VCU ASPIRE!

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Acting Director, VCU ASPIRE

198
STUDENTS

were enrolled at the start of Fall 2014

50
STUDENTS

completed the two-year program in Spring 2015

42
MAJORS

represented in ASPIRE

COMMUNITY PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Peter Paul Development Center



VCU ASPIRE works hand in hand with community partners to address community-identified needs. Peter Paul Development Center, located in the heart of Richmond's East End, has been an ASPIRE partner since 2011.

Peter Paul's vision is to serve as a community change agent through education. Over the past year, ASPIRE students have been active participants at Peter Paul in a variety of ways, including serving as youth mentors in Peter Paul's after school program; working in concert with Peter Paul and Bon Secours on the Class-A-Roll nutrition program; raising awareness for and participating in community-building events with Peter Paul and Richmond Promise Neighborhood; and combining efforts with Peter Paul, St. Peters Episcopal Church, and FeedMore to meet the immediate need for food security through a twice-a-month food distribution program.

Additionally, several current and former ASPIRE students have served as interns for Peter Paul. Peter Paul is an important community asset working in one of Richmond's increasingly vibrant communities. The ASPIRE community cannot possibly express its appreciation for all that Peter Paul does for Richmond children and for the broader Richmond community.

ASPIRE is thankful for the multitude of opportunities that Peter Paul affords students to live, learn, engage and lead together to make VCU and the Richmond community the best it can be – something that can only be achieved by working together.

"As volunteers at our community food distribution, ASPIRE students put in major physical effort in taking food off the food truck, sorting and helping our neighbors put them in cars or carts. But it's their attitudes that are contagious; they bring hope to individuals who sometimes lose sight of that. As tutors to our students, the ASPIRE students inspire ours. Their encouragement and ability to serve as approachable role models to kids who are looking for young people they can look up to, brings us closer to our mission."

—Rosemary Jones, Director of Volunteer Services at Peter Paul Development Center

Community partners who are interested in collaborating with ASPIRE should contact Nannette Bailey, ASPIRE community partnerships coordinator, at nabailey@vcu.edu or (804) 827-2300.

STUDENT FELLOWS SPOTLIGHT



ASPIRE has selected five students to serve as ASPIRE Student Fellows for the 2015-2016 academic year. Fellows are former ASPIRE students who apply to remain with the program for a third year and live among ASPIRE students, providing leadership and mentorship.

The 2015-2016 Student Fellows are: Erin Cole, Accounting and Business major; Kori Johnson: Exercise Science major; Josh Ring: Environmental Studies major; Chris Vance: Chemistry major; and Margaret Von-Vorys Norton: Gender

Sexuality, and Women's Studies major. Fellows are responsible for leading projects with community partners, assisting with reflection opportunities for current students and serving as resources in the community. They'll also be partnered with ASPIRE Community Fellows for mentoring and networking opportunities.

Nerice Lochansky, ASPIRE assistant director, said Fellows become deeply engaged in critical thinking, strategic planning and peer-to-peer management

and accountability, while staying connected and involved with programs that speak to their passions and personal civic identity.

"We are extremely excited about the group of students who have accepted the ASPIRE Student Fellowship for the 2015-2016 academic year," Lochansky said. "They have proven to be extremely committed and passionate about community engagement, and to date they have together completed over 1,050 co-curricular hours with ASPIRE."

10,017 HOURS

completed in co-curricular activities

526 ACTIVITIES

offered through co-curricular programming

104 PARTNERS

in the community and on campus



FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Dr. Michael Rackett

Dr. Rackett serves as ASPIRE's full-time faculty member and teaches both first and second-year ASPIRE students. He has also joined ASPIRE student volunteers each week at Woodville Elementary School and has led ASPIRE students on service trips to Sneedville, Tennessee and Belize, Central America.

Rackett brings an historical lens to his community engagement work. He earned a Ph.D. from Duke University in Religion

(History of Early Christianity), an M.A. from VCU in English, an M.Div. from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and a B.A. from the College of William and Mary in Religion. Prior to joining VCU ASPIRE in 2013, Rackett taught research writing at VCU, as well as various religious studies courses at VCU, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Meredith College and Duke University. His historical research interests range from early Christianity to American slave

narratives to Richmond history.

"VCU ASPIRE gives students the opportunity to get to know faculty and staff members at a much deeper level than most other academic contexts," said Rackett. "The close interaction, cooperation and discussion that take place forge strong bonds, not only among students but between students and faculty."

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Service Trips to Rural Tennessee and Belize



ASPIRE staff and students travelled to Sneedville, TN twice during the 2014-2015 academic year, once over spring break in March, and once after classes ended in May. Partnering with the Jubilee Project, an organization that helps to tell the stories of people working towards positive change, students completed home repair and renovation projects for people living in one of the poorest counties in the United States.

"Being able to work in Appalachia provides our students with an opportunity to see rural challenges that are so different from what they might see on a daily basis in Richmond, but still in many ways parallel urban experiences," said Nerice Lochansky, ASPIRE assistant director. "These service trips tie directly back to our mission. Students who take advantage of these high impact practices are availed an opportunity to deepen their understanding of an important region of this country, gain valuable skills, work alongside members of the community and think through and reflect on social issues."

Following her trip to Sneedville, McKayla

Burnett, a first year ASPIRE student and junior social work major noted, "I have started to think about what area I want to work in as a social worker. I am now considering working in a smaller, more rural area because I want to be able to provide people with resources that they didn't have before."

In addition to the domestic trip offerings, ASPIRE completed its first annual trips to Belize. Eleven students and a Richmond community partner joined ASPIRE staff members on the two week service partnership near Belize City. The group worked at a camp run by the Belize Council for the Visually Impaired, helped paint a homeless men's shelter, and ran a week long summer camp for children in the Sand Hill community.

Ralph Stuckey, a staff member working with RRHA, was the Richmond community partner selected to attend. He was chosen for his familiarity with the program and its students. ASPIRE frequently collaborates with him on community engagement projects including leadership development and community networking initiatives. Stuckey believes

his experience abroad aligned well with RRHA's focus.

"RRHA's mission extends far beyond the bricks and mortar of the buildings we manage," Stuckey said. "The mission is the people. My services to the children and people of Belize are an extension of my services to the residents of RRHA properties. My experience in Belize helped me to become a better servant to RRHA residents."

A second trip to Belize occurred in July 2015.

Lochansky said the sense of community that ASPIRE students build amongst each other during these intensive shared experiences is truly special and an important part of being a member of a living learning program at VCU.

"Their reflections on the experience throughout the trip are insightful and illustrate the powerful learning an international service trip can provide."



3.16 GPA

average for ASPIRE students

