Recalibration of VCU strategic plan

VCU’s strategic plan, Quest 2025: Together We Transform, was launched in 2018 with ambitious goals based on assumptions about the durability of federal and state funding; the predictability of demographic and enrollment trends; the public’s perception of the immediate and long-term value of higher education; and employment and market demands, to name a few. But concurrent global and national crises and shifting landscapes in higher education and the employment sector have rendered tenuous many of the assumptions informing the plan’s implementation strategies. We have already proven our ability to adapt and thrive within these rapidly evolving environments. This level of institutional dynamicism or hybridity is a necessary condition for transformative innovation in learning, research and care. Therefore, VCU will soon engage university and community stakeholders in a recalibration process for the Quest 2025 strategic plan. There will be broad participation in this process to ensure shared governance is key to the implementation of our strategic plan. More information will be sent to the university community in the coming weeks.

School of Public Health

A proposal for establishing the VCU School of Public Health is under development by the Senior VP for Health Sciences and the Office of the Provost. As key considerations and their implications are outlined, Faculty Senate will be engaged for their input in advance of any formal proposal being presented through the shared governance approval process. We are keeping the Faculty Senate president aware of developments so that we can engage you in the near future.

Provost’s Lecture Series

The Office of the Provost and the ICA at VCU are partnering to launch a new Provost’s Lecture Series to provide a forum for presentations and discussion highlighting the expertise and scholarship of both VCU and global thought leaders and their impact on the issues of the day.

The series will kick-off on Dec. 1, 2021 with Provost Fotis Sotiropoulos and Dominic Willsdon, executive director of the ICA at VCU. Sotiropoulos’ 15-minute (TED Talk-style) presentation will be followed by a moderated discussion on the importance of transdisciplinary research for social impact, what social impact can mean across different disciplines, and the importance of making research accessible to the public to encourage well-informed public debate. In spring 2022, three additional programs are planned with VCU faculty who have been nominated by their deans. A planning committee will be formed in spring 2022 to develop themes for future series; processes for identifying and selecting speakers aligned with the theme; and, ultimately, making recommendations for the 2022-23 schedule.

The Dec. 1 lecture will be held at the ICA auditorium at 6 p.m. The program will be live streamed and recorded. The announcement and invitation to the VCU community will be sent the week of Nov. 1.

Online Strategy Task Force

A new Online Strategy Task Force, with faculty, staff and administration membership, will hold its first meeting next week. The Online Strategy Task Force will be charged with developing strategy recommendations that will ensure that VCU offers high quality online courses and programs; improves both student and faculty experiences with online courses; increases and accelerates the development of marketable online credentials; and expands online education to support teaching, learning and innovation in undergraduate and graduate courses. The work of the taskforce will be guided by a steering committee led by Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, vice president for strategy, enrollment management
and student success. The task force will submit recommendations by March 2022. Additional information will be sent to the VCU community in early November.

Policies in the works

- **Syllabus policy**
  
  While the Office of the Provost provides guidance for course syllabus statements, we recognize that without a policy requiring every course to have a syllabus, the contents of this essential document can be inconsistent from course to course (and, at times, nonexistent). Ensuring every course has an appropriately informative and comprehensive syllabus reaffirms our collective commitment to student success.

  To that end, we are convening a work group to help develop a new course syllabus policy. This group will be charged with creating a draft policy that clearly defines: the requirement that every course has an appropriately informative and comprehensive syllabus; the key topics/content sections that should be included in every syllabus; a timeline for when the syllabus must be made available for students; the requirement for ADA compliance; and the mode(s) by which a syllabus should be made available to students.

  Invitations will be extended to faculty by November 1. Additional information regarding work group membership and timeline will be available soon.

- **Academic Analytics (including policy)**
  
  At the Faculty Senate meeting held on Oct. 5, concerns were raised about the potential use of Academic Analytics (AA) by the university. Last week, I met with Faculty Senate President Valerie Robnolt and Recording Secretary Everett Carpenter to learn more about the concerns and provide additional clarity about what AA is and how VCU might use it. Highlights of that conversation are below.

  **About Academic Analytics:**

  AA is a tool used to strengthen and build areas of excellence. The tool compiles nationwide discipline-specific information for benchmarking purposes. It provides access to data and powerful analytics and visualization tools to sort through that data. It is not a contractor for hire to evaluate faculty, and it is not involved nor has any say in how we use its data. Under no circumstances is it to be used in promotion and/or tenure decisions or annual review process. AA is also not intended to be used solely by upper administration but also by deans and department chairs engaging in strategic planning to set and achieve goals at all levels.

  The leadership of the Faculty Senate is scheduled to meet with our academic deans and AA representatives before a final decision is made to use AA at VCU.

  **Academic Analytics Policy for VCU:**

  The provost’s office is in the process of drafting a policy that will govern the use of AA. The policy will explicitly articulate the information above and will be shared with the senate by Nov. 15 for feedback and input before it is finalized.

  **Why facts-based, benchmarking is important:**
Achieving national prominence is a major goal of our Quest 2025 strategic plan. Developing a strategy for VCU to achieve this goal starts with us benchmarking and monitoring how well we are doing against peer and aspirational institutions. A facts-based approach to benchmarking is intended to lift us all up -- to make us strive to do better, to reach higher, to achieve more for the benefit of our students, our faculty and our community.

We are already benchmarking our performance against other institutions with regard to enrollments, student success, retention rates, graduation rates, Pell recipients, URM student and faculty percentages etc. But as an R1 Institution, we require excellence both in teaching and research/scholarship/art-making. For that we also need analytics tools to benchmark how well we are doing relative to peer and aspirational institutions with regard to research and scholarship. This is a critical prerequisite for identifying strengths and weaknesses and developing effective strategies for improving how we mentor our faculty to career success, how we build effective research teams to pursue large-scale initiatives, and how to better serve our students and our community.

Finally, President Rao has charged me with the task of continuing and accelerating VCU’s steep growth trajectory. Our board is also very clear about the need for benchmarking our performance across everything we do.

Updates

Leadership searches

- Dean, School of Dentistry. Four finalists visited VCU throughout October. The last was on Friday, Oct. 22. Details are online.

- Dean, School of Business. The search committee held preliminary interviews late in September. Dates are not yet available for visits for finalists. Details are online.

Senior Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs position

After more than three years in the Office of the Provost, Dr. Gypsy Denzine expressed her desire to return to the faculty and what she loves most - teaching. She is a tenured professor in the Department of Educational Leadership in the School of Education.

Dr. Denzine has been a tireless advocate for faculty since joining the Office of the Provost in 2018. She has been a leader in strengthening the university’s promotion and tenure process; raising the profile and recognition of term faculty; and streamlining faculty recruitment, retention and development through the Office of Faculty Recruitment and Retention and the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence. Her approach to collaborative work across the university is evidenced in her support of the University Ombudsperson and her efforts throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as co-chair of the Academic Continuity Committee and the Faculty and Staff HR, Employee Health Team.

Of course, her departure leaves a significant void in the Office of the Provost. Additional information will soon be forthcoming regarding hiring a new senior vice provost.

Events
“A Call to Action: Ensuring the Success of VCU Black and Latino Males” - Oct. 27

Please join the Division of Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success on Oct. 27, 1-2:30 p.m., for a virtual conversation with our guests, who are faculty scholars on this subject: Shaun R. Harper, Ph.D., executive director of the University of Southern California Race and Equity Center, and Victor B. Sáenz, Ph.D., leader of Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success). Drs. Harper and Sáenz will address strategies for attracting, engaging, retaining, and graduating Black and Latino males. Register online.

P&T Recognition: Special Faculty Club - Nov. 1

Please join us for a special Faculty Club event on Nov. 1, where Dr. Art Kellermann and I will recognize our colleagues who have received promotion and/or tenure over the last two academic years. The event will begin at 4 p.m. at the ICA at VCU. RSVP here.

Election Day - Nov. 2

University closed

Homecoming (Nov. 13) and Fall commencement (Dec. 11)

The university has announced two opportunities to recognize the accomplishments of the VCU classes of May 2020, December 2020 and May 2021 in-person this fall.

- Our most recent alumni, and their families, are invited to an on-campus VCU Homecoming celebration on Sat., Nov. 13. More information is available on the VCU Homecoming webpage.

- On Saturday, Dec. 11, we will honor the achievements of our graduates in-person at the VCU Siegel Center, as part of the university's existing Fall 2021 Commencement exercises, with a formal commencement celebration at 10 a.m. More information is on the Fall Commencement webpage.