



2026 GRADUATION PROGRAM



VCU

School of Public Health

CLASS OF 2026

MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Arooj Abidi, M.D.

Concentration: Cancer Control and Prevention Science

Capstone: "Identifying Geographic Bright Spots in Colorectal Cancer Outcomes"

President, Public Health Student Association

American Society of Hematology (ASH) Abstract Achievement Award

Amy Bonds

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Spatial Analysis and Risk Assessment of PFAS Exposure Across Virginia"

Sydney Collier

Concentration: Applied Public Health

Capstone: "Effects of a Community Science-Based Volunteer Training Program on Greening Education Outcomes"

Zakira Debraux

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Environmental Metal Exposure and Blood Pressure Among U.S. Children: An NHANES 2017–2018 Analysis"

Jocelyn Espinoza

Concentration: Applied Public Health

Capstone: "Assessing Feasibility and Acceptability of the Estilos de Vida Saludable Initiative"

Service Chair, Public Health Student Association

Ambassador, ASPPH This is Public Health!

Feature: M.P.H. student's hands-on experience unleashes public health potential

MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Gretchen Groff

Concentration: Applied Public Health

Capstone: " Greenspace Exposure and Health: A Systematic Search and Narrative Review"

Lauren Kern

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Understanding the Latent Tuberculosis Infection (LTBI) Care Cascade in U.S. Public Health Department Settings: Factors Associated with Losses Across Stages of Care"

Rose McMullen

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "The Effectiveness of Second Grade Learn to Swim Programs in Virginia"

Myra Nasir, M.D.

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Diagnostic Accuracy and Clinical Impact of One Versus Two Sets of Blood Cultures in Hospitalized Patients"

Janet Nguyen

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Socioeconomic Disparities in the Co-Occurrence of Depression and Drug Use Disorders"

Akeem Ogunkoya

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Does Bystander Knowledge of Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and Automated External Defibrillator (AED) Use Vary by Age?"

Tess Patterson

Concentration: Applied Public Health

Capstone: "Neighbor Insights: Building a Sustainable Food Pantry Experience Evaluation Model"

MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Sara Talley

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Factors Influencing Parental Intent to Vaccinate Children Against Non-Mandated Vaccines: Influenza, COVID-19, and HPV"

Seneca Ung

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Food Insecurity and Type II Diabetes: Evaluating the Role of Urban-Rural Residence in BRFSS 2022"

Emma Wagner

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Investigating Climate Change as a Driver for Black-Legged Tick Hotspot Dynamics in Virginia"

Samantha Walmsley

Concentration: Epidemiology

Capstone: "Patient- and Admission-Level Variance Decomposition for Time to Post-Discharge Dialysis Onset in Hospitalized Chronic Kidney Disease Patients"

Austin White

Concentration: Applied Public Health

Capstone: "Applying a One Health Framework to Lyme Disease in Virginia: Developing Community-Facing Prevention and Communication Tools"

MASTER OF BIostatISTICS

Miranda Brown

Leean Jo

Sushma Vuppala, Pharm.D.

Concentration: Clinical Research

CERTIFICATE OF GENOMICS DATA SCIENCE

Anthony Stillman, M.S.

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Biostatistics

Rasha Alsaadawi, M.S.

Advisor: Nitai Mukhopadhyay, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "Testing for Conformity with Parametric Distributions Using Level Sets: A Topological Data Analysis Approach"

Dustin Bastaich, M.S.

Advisor: Bassam Dahman, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "Propensity Score Matching Accounting for Longitudinal Trends Before Baseline with Group-Based Trajectory Modeling"

Khoa Huynh

Advisor: Jinze Liu, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "A Novel Statistical Learning Framework to Uncover Clinically Significant Spatial Ecotypes with Single Cell Spatial Multiomics Data"

Ren Rasnick, M.S.

Advisor: Leroy Thacker, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "An Adaptive Method for Covariate Balancing in Block Randomized Clinical Trials"

Scott Silvey, M.S.

Advisor: Jinze Liu, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "Empirical Sample Size Determination for Machine Learning Algorithms in Biomedical Research"

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Epidemiology

Esse Foka Nzaha, M.P.H.

Advisor: Chrisa Arcan, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.B.A., R.D.

Dissertation: "Dietary Acculturation, Dietary Inflammatory Potential, and Metabolic Syndrome Among Immigrants in the United States: A Mixed-Methods Approach Using NHANES and Qualitative Data"

Awardee, Carter G. Woodson Award for Academic Excellence

Awardee, VCU Graduate Student Dissertation Assistantship

Feature: Class of 2026: Esse Foka Nzaha digs into the immigrant diet paradox

Jonathan Wells, M.H.S.

Advisors: James Burch, Ph.D. and Elizabeth Prom-Wormley, Ph.D, M.P.H.

Dissertation: "Detailing the Genetic and Environmental Factors Shared Between Major Depressive Disorder and Its Comorbidity with Alcohol Use Disorder."

Awardee, 2025 Dr. Saba W. Masho Endowed Scholarship

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Social and Behavioral Sciences

Fariha Tariq, M.P.H., M.B.B.S.

Advisor: Jessica LaRose, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "An In-Depth Examination of Psychological Distress among Black and White Breast Cancer Survivors."

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Health Policy

Danielle Montoya, M.P.H.

Advisor: Peter Cunningham, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "Place, Culture, and Care: A Socioecological Examination of Type 2 Diabetes Among Hispanics in the U.S."

Doctoral Scholar, Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)

Susan E Kennedy Scholarship Nominee

IMSD Affiliated Scholar

Feature: [Class of 2025: Dani Montoya embraces public health and perseverance](#)

Shillpa Naavaal, M.S., M.P.H.

Advisor: Peter Cunningham, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "Impact of Virginia Medicaid Adult Comprehensive Dental Benefit on Dental Care Utilization and Provider Participation"

Guleer Shahab, M.P.H.

Advisor: Andrew Barnes, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "Improving Cancer Surveillance: Diversifying Cancer Registries to Include the SWANA Community"

AcademyHealth Public Voice Fellow 2022

Winner, 2023 Graduate School Three Minute Thesis Competition

Gati Wambura, M.P.H.

Advisor: Askar Chukmaitov, Ph.D.

Dissertation: "Examining Maternal and Neonatal Health Outcomes Under Health Care Delivery and Payment Reforms: Evidence from Accountable Care Organizations in the United States and Free Maternal Services in Kenya"

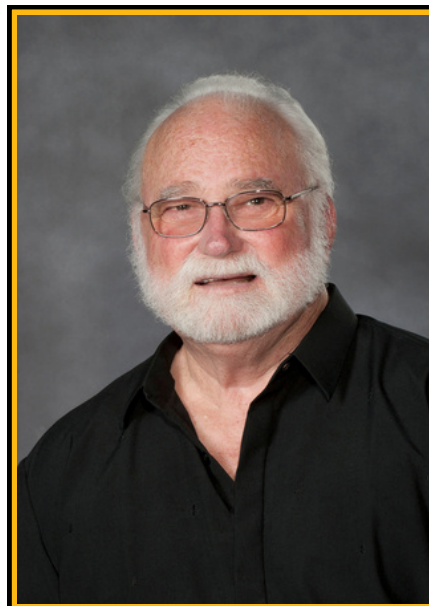
Awardee, 2025 Health Policy Student of the Year

Inductee, Delta Omega Honor Society in Public Health

Distinguished Fellow of Public Health Award

Karl E. Peace, Ph.D.

Dr. Karl E. Peace is the inaugural recipient of the **Distinguished Fellow of Public Health Award**, an honor recognizing his extraordinary career achievement and sustained excellence in the field.



A VCU alumnus and world-renowned biostatistician, Dr. Peace's journey from his roots as the child of Georgia sharecroppers to a global leader in public health serves as a profound inspiration to the academic community and beyond. His scientific contributions include publishing 15 books and over 150 articles, with his foundational work in biopharmaceutical statistics serving as the global benchmark for drug development and the approval of life-changing treatments for the prevention of NSAID induced gastric ulceration, reduction of CHD risk, Alzheimer's disease and hypertension. Beyond his research, Dr. Peace has left a transformational mark through his mentorship and philanthropy, founding the Biopharmaceutical Applied Statistical Symposium (BASS) and establishing endowments at VCU that support faculty as well as students. Through his pioneering efforts in health equity and his tireless commitment to the success of others, Dr. Peace embodies the highest standards of the profession and the mission of the VCU School of Public Health.

Read more about Dr. Peace's life and contributions in this story published by MCV Foundation.



In Memoriam

Akpene Tetteh, M.S.

*Healthcare Policy and
Research Ph.D. candidate*

A native of Ghana and a truly exceptional student, Akpene Tetteh, M.S., was on track to complete her Ph.D. this summer, in an unprecedented three years, but passed away unexpectedly in February 2026.

Akpene was working on her dissertation at the time of her passing. It aimed to improve health outcomes among diabetic adults in the United States by targeting barriers to treatment and prevention along the diabetes continuum of care. Her research examined opportunities to improve screening rates for diabetic retinopathy, especially among high-risk groups, and aimed to improve health outcomes among diabetic adults in the United States by targeting barriers to treatment and prevention along the diabetes continuum of care. But what really stood out for those who worked with her every day was her commitment to her work.

“Akpene will be well remembered by the faculty and collaborators who worked alongside her for her dedication to research, her commitment to improving diabetes care among underserved communities, and the perseverance with which she pursued her goals,” said her advisor, Bassam Dahman, Ph.D., a professor of health policy.

[Read more about Akpene here.](#)

Farewell

A Legacy of Science and Service

**James B. Burch,
Ph.D., M.S.**

*Professor, Department
of Epidemiology*



As we celebrate the Class of 2026, we honor the distinguished retirement of James B. Burch, Ph.D. A professor of Epidemiology and a vital investigator at the Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center, Dr. Burch concludes a career defined by profound scientific inquiry, international leadership, and an unwavering commitment to the human side of public health.

Most notably, Dr. Burch led the HERO Study, a landmark clinical trial that pioneered heart rate variability biofeedback as a revolutionary tool for the autonomic recovery of veterans. His work was a masterclass in applied epidemiology, proving that rigorous data could be transformed into a source of profound healing and resilience for those who have served.

This high-impact leadership at VCU was built upon a foundation of extraordinary service that spanned decades. Dr. Burch's career serves as a map of modern public health history, from managing high-stakes environmental safety for the U.S. Army in Europe and risk assessments at the Rocky Flats nuclear facility, to shape national policy as a member of the Science Advisory Board for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. An internationally recognized scholar with more than 100 scientific works and scholarly publications, he spent his life decoding the invisible biological rhythms that intersect with environment and stress to define human wellness.

Beyond the federal grants and scientific breakthroughs, Dr. Burch's most enduring contribution is the success of the scientists he championed. A recipient of the student-voted "Two Thumbs Up" award, he is revered for a "generosity of spirit" that transcended the laboratory. Whether directing student-led water initiatives in the rural villages of Ecuador or guiding doctoral candidates through complex epigenetics, he remained a mentor who viewed his students as his greatest legacy.

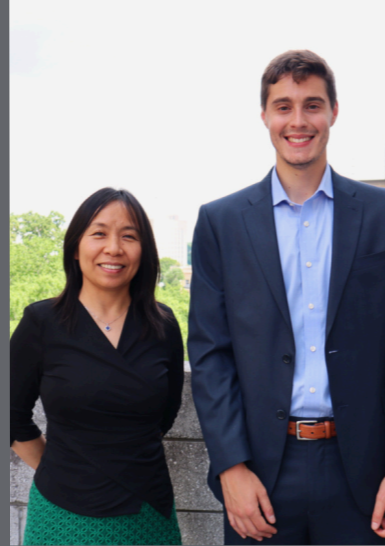
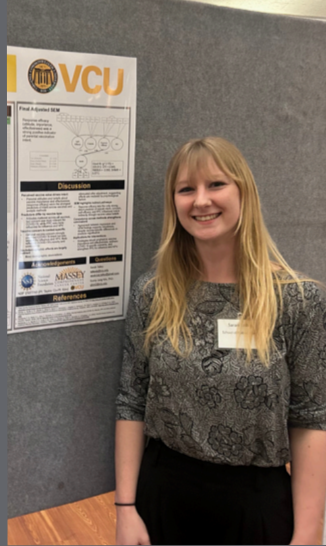
We extend our deepest gratitude to Dr. James Burch for his brilliance, his kindness, and his unwavering dedication to the VCU community. His impact remains a permanent part of this institution and the many lives he has touched.



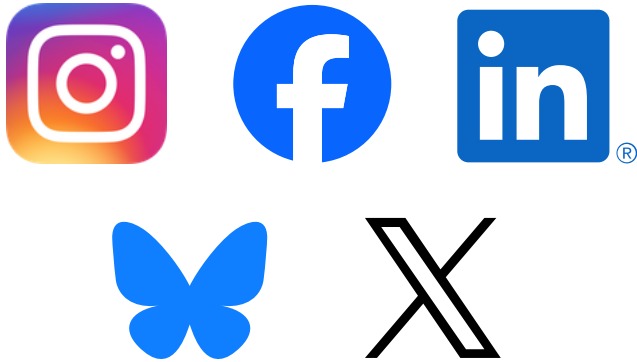
CLASS OF 2026







CONNECT WITH US!



Tag your photos
#VCUPublicHealth



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Katherine Peterman, Brooke Nissim-Sabat, Kellie Carlyle, and Maggie Christ for their dedication to honoring our students and planning this momentous event. We appreciate Brian Bush for his assistance with video streaming and Terry Brown for photographing the event. We also acknowledge all the faculty and staff members who contributed to the graduation festivities as well as the family and friends who support and celebrate these graduates.



VCU School of Public Health