

CONGRATULATIONS CLASS OF 2025



VCU

School of Public Health

2025 Commencement

Friday, May 9, 2025, 1 - 3 p.m.

Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

Order of Exercise

Procession

Welcome.....Vanessa B. Sheppard, Ph.D.

Commencement Speaker.....Danny Avula, M.D., M.P.H.

Founding Dean Public Health Impact Award....Vanessa B. Sheppard, Ph.D.

Faculty Awards.....Roy Sabo, Ph.D.

Department Teacher of the Year

SOPH Teacher of the Year

SOPH Staff of the Year

Student Awards

Delta Omega Inductions.....Katherine Peterman, M.P.H.

Christopher “Kim” Buttery Award.....Katherine Peterman, M.P.H.

Saba W. Masho Award.....Tilahun Adera, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.A., B.Pharm

Recognition of Graduates.....Kellie Carlyle, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.

Closing Remarks.....Kellie Carlyle, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.

Recession



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 streaming and Terry Brown for photographing the event. We also acknowledge all the faculty and staff members who contributed to the graduation festivities.

Welcome from the Dean

I am honored to welcome you to our first commencement ceremony as the VCU School of Public Health. It has been an exciting year for our School. In July, we received approval to change our name to the School of Public Health and are making strong progress toward full accreditation. Earlier this year, we debuted at #34 in the Blue Ridge Institute for Medical Research rankings among public institutions. We've grown enrollment and expanded our programs to include an online MS in Clinical Research and Biostatistics and a new health policy concentration in the MPH program.

Today, we proudly celebrate our incredible graduates. They are the future of public health—innovators, advocates, and leaders who will shape a healthier world. I wish them continued success and fulfillment as they embark on the next chapter of their journey.

- Vanessa B. Sheppard, Ph.D.



Danny Avula, M.D., M.P.H. *Commencement Speaker*

Dr. Danny Avula is currently the Mayor of Richmond, Virginia. Before taking office, Avula served the Richmond and Henrico Health Districts for 12 years. There he championed efforts to address maternal and childhood health, access to reproductive care, community safety, and the root causes that shape health outcomes—especially poverty and race.

In January 2021, Governor Northam appointed Avula to lead Virginia's COVID-19 vaccination effort. He jump-started a struggling vaccine rollout and elevated the Commonwealth from 50th to one of the top 10 most-vaccinated states in the country. As Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Social Services, Avula implemented key changes to support families across Virginia and to create more sustainable pathways out of poverty.

Avula earned his medical degree from the VCU School of Medicine and serves on the board of the Medical College of Virginia Foundation. He is a pediatrician and works as a hospitalist at Chippenham Hospital.



Student Awards

**AcademyHealth Public
Voice Fellow**
Guleer Shahab

**Black History in the
Making Award**
Vimbai Dihwa

**Christine Mirzayan
Science and Technology
Policy Graduate
Fellowship with National
Academies of Sciences,
Engineering and Medicine**
Nixon Arauz

**Graduate School
Dissertation
Assistantship**
Edem Defor
Stacie Lefeavers
Julie Russo

**Graduate School Three
Minute Thesis Competition
Winner**
Guleer Shahab

**Kapulli-Izkalli Racial &
Justice Fund Award**
Nixon Arauz

Phi Kappa Phi Nominees
Maria Fatima Ali
Melanie Cruz
Emily Edwards
Deborah Karp-Leiss
Stacie Lefeavers
Jerry John Rawlings Mensah
Stephen Miller
Julie Russo
Guleer Shahab
Kelci Straka-Mai
Faizan Talib

Student Leadership

AcademyHealth
Valentina Vega - *President*
Sarah Marks - *Vice President*
Sonia Riaz - *Treasurer*

Public Health Student Association
Nicholas Griffin - *President*
Vivian Khuu - *Vice President*
Faizan Talib - *Secretary*
Emily Edwards - *Treasurer*
Rajah Daughtry - *Service Co-Chair*
Kelci Straka-Mai - *Service Co-Chair*
Deborah Karp-Leiss - *Professional
Development Chair*
Maria Eddleman - *Communications
Chair*





SHARE THE EXCITEMENT!

#VCUSOPH2025



Master of Public Health

Applied Public Health Concentration

Marley Byorick

"Assessing Community-Based Prevention Program Infrastructure for Disordered Eating Behaviors in Children and Adolescents," advised by Emily Zimmerman, Ph.D., M.S., M.P.H.

Melanie Cruz

"A Program Evaluation: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities in The Health Practitioners Monitoring Program," advised by Chrisa Arcan, Ph.D., M.H.S., M.B.A., R.D.

Rajah Daughtry

"Healing with HHEART," advised by Maria Thomson, Ph.D., M.Sc.

Nicholas Griffin

"Case-Control Study of Dietary Factors and Advanced Glycation End Products Among Screening Colonoscopy Patients," advised by Juan Lu, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Kayla Hodges

"Exploring Social Work Integration: A Process Evaluation of Family Lifeline's Early Childhood Program," advised by Derek Chapman, Ph.D.

Vivian Khuu

"School Personnel and Educator Misconduct: Examining Attitudes, Norms, and Reporting Intentions," advised by Kellie Carlyle, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.

Mandy Odom

"Evaluating the DO YOU Curriculum Implemented with System-Involved Teenage Girls at Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Center," advised by Kellie Carlyle, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.

Erin Wilson

"Innovative Programs that Promote Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Among Middle School Girls," advised by Chrisa Arcan, Ph.D., M.H.S., M.B.A., R.D.

Cancer Health Equity Science Concentration

Emily Edwards

"Utilizing the NCI Cancer Atlas: Differences in Cancer Incidence and Mortality in Virginia by Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC)," advised by Sun Jung Kim, Ph.D., M.S., M.A.

Faizan Talib

"The Impact of Health Lifestyle Interventions on the Quality of Life in Cancer Patients," advised by Alexander Lucas, Ph.D., M.S.

Epidemiology Concentration

Maria Fatima Ali

"Examine the Association Between Smoking and Periodontitis Among Adults with Hypertension: An Adjusted Analysis Using NHANES Data (2011–2014)," advised by Dina Garcia, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.

Maria Eddleman

"Exploring the Impact of ADHD on the Relationship Between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Cannabis Use Disorder," advised by Sonya Hung, Ph.D.

Deborah Karp-Leiss

"The Association of Patient Sex with the Comorbidity of ADHD and Eating Disorder Symptoms in Children Aged 9-10 years old," advised Chrisa Arcan, Ph.D., M.H.S., M.B.A., R.D.

Jerry John Rawlings Mensah

"Improving Prostate Cancer Screening: A Machine Learning Approach," advised by Emmanuel Taylor, Ph.D., M.Sc.

Kelci Straka-Mai

"Examining Substance Use Resistance Factors by Substance Use History," advised by Elizabeth Prom-Wormley, Ph.D., M.P.H.

MS in Biostatistics

Leean Jo

Advised by Yongyun Shin, Ph.D.

Clinical Research and Biostatistics Concentration

Stephen Miller, D.O.

Advised by Le Kang, Ph.D.



Doctor of Philosophy

Biostatistics

Edem Defor

"Demystifying Competing Risks in Kidney Transplantation: Scalable Regression, Cluster Informativeness Assessment, and AI-powered Prediction, with Software," advised by Dipankar Bandyopadhyay, Ph.D.

Healthcare Policy and Research

Sarah Collins, M.PH., R.D.

"A Multilevel, Mixed Methods Examination of Food Insecurity, Housing Instability, and Cardiovascular Health," advised by Anika Hines, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Vimbai Dihwa, M.B.A.

"Health Equity in Times of Crisis: The Impact of Economic and Public Health Shocks on Access to Care Among Women in Zimbabwe and the US," advised by Peter Cunningham, Ph.D.

Delton Harris, M.S.W., L.C.S.W.

"The Influences of Gender Identity and Healthcare Experience Delivery on HIV Screening," advised by April Kimmel, Ph.D.

Guleer Shabab, M.P.H.

"Improving Cancer Surveillance: Diversifying Cancer Registries to Include the SWANA Community," advised by Andrew Barnes, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Social and Behavioral Sciences

Nixon Arauz, M.A.

"Aqui Entre Nos Study": An Exploratory Study of Racial Disparities in HPV Vaccine Uptake Among Black Hispanic/Latino (H/L) Men: Insights into Vaccine Behaviors, Vaccine Information-Seeking Behaviors, Communication Preferences, and Tailored Messaging," advised by Dina Garcia, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.

Jacqueline Knight Wilt, M.P.H.

"Exploring Emerging Adults' Consideration of Future Cancer Risk Reduction: Opportunity for Shifting Prevention Paradigms?," advised by Maria Thomson, Ph.D., M.Sc.

Stacie Lefeavers, M.PH., R.N.

"A Higher Education Response to Exploitation on Campus," advised by Kellie Carlyle, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.

Julie Russo, M.PH.

"Men's Perceptions of Autonomous Reproductive Choices," advised by Kellie Carlyle, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.



Farewell

After more than two decades of dedicated service to Virginia Commonwealth University, Leroy Thacker, Ph.D., is retiring from the Department of Biostatistics. A respected educator, prolific researcher, and valued collaborator, Dr. Thacker has made an enduring impact across the fields of public health, medicine, and the health sciences through his expertise in biostatistical methods and commitment to interdisciplinary research.

Dr. Thacker earned his B.S. in Mathematics from Randolph-Macon College before completing both his M.S. in Mathematical Sciences/Statistics and Ph.D. in Biostatistics at VCU. He joined the Department of Biostatistics as an Assistant Professor in 2007 and was promoted to Associate Professor in 2014.

Over the course of his 18-year tenure, Dr. Thacker brought rigor, insight, and generosity to countless collaborations. His statistical leadership has informed research on liver disease and hepatic encephalopathy, maternal mental health, pediatric and adolescent health, and beyond. With over 15,000 citations, an h-index of 62, and more than 400 peer-reviewed publications, his work has shaped scientific discourse and helped translate research findings into improved clinical practice and health outcomes.

In the classroom, Dr. Thacker's passion for teaching and mentoring was equally impactful. Since 2007, he has taught more than 17 graduate-level courses and was honored with the Department of Biostatistics Outstanding Teaching Award in 2010. His approachable style, sharp wit, and dedication to student success have left a lasting impression on generations of biostatisticians and health science professionals.

As Dr. Thacker retires, we celebrate his remarkable legacy and extend our deepest gratitude for his many years of dedicated service. We will miss his jokes around the department but take comfort in knowing that Dr. Thacker will continue "living the dream," as he embarks on this new chapter.

Leroy Thacker, Ph.D.
Associate Professor



In Memoriam

David Wheeler, Ph.D.
Professor



David Wheeler, Ph.D., served in the Department of Biostatistics for 13 years, beginning as an assistant professor in 2011 and rising to the rank of full professor in 2023. He was also a member of the Cancer Prevention and Control research program at VCU Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center. Wheeler passed away in June 2024 after a lengthy and courageous battle with brain cancer. A prolific researcher, his pioneering contributions in statistical methods have advanced spatial epidemiology and cancer research.

Dr. Wheeler was internationally known for his research, focusing on spatial, environmental, and cancer epidemiology, emphasizing the analysis of environmental exposures, mixture analysis, and spatial patterns in disease risk. He served as the Principal Investigator on 12 grants from agencies such as the National Cancer Institute and the American Cancer Society. His many contributions include more than 100 peer-reviewed publications and over 7,500 citations. Dr. Wheeler also served on the editorial board of the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* since 2019 and was a reviewer for numerous peer-reviewed journals and grant review panels.

During his tenure at VCU, Dr. Wheeler taught courses in Spatial Data Analysis, Statistical Computing, and Applied Data Analysis. His exceptional teaching was recognized in 2019 when he received the Best Elective Course award in the Masters in Public Health Program from the Department of Epidemiology. Dr. Wheeler mentored seven Ph.D. students on topics related to spatial models for environmental and chemical exposures and causal modeling and served as a dissertation committee member for an additional 13 students.

VCU School of Public Health

The VCU School of Public Health offers graduate degrees in biostatistics, epidemiology, healthcare policy and research, public health, and social and behavioral sciences. Students have the opportunity to engage in a real-world public health education and work with faculty on research that improves the lives of all Virginians.

Department of Biostatistics

Robert A. Perera, Ph.D. - *Interim Chair*
Dipankar Bandyopadhyay, Ph.D.
Brian Bush, M.S.
Shanshan Chen, Ph.D.
Priyam Das, Ph.D.
Xiaoyan Deng, M.S.
Mikhail Dozmorov, Ph.D.
Mahmud Hasan, Ph.D.
Le Kang, Ph.D.
Jinze Liu, Ph.D.
Nitai Mukhopadhyay, Ph.D.
Niloofer Ramezani, Ph.D.
Cynthia Sabo, M.S.
Roy Sabo, Ph.D.
Yongyun Shin, Ph.D.
Ekaterina Smirnova, Ph.D.
Leroy Thacker, Ph.D.
Katarzyna Tyc, Ph.D.
Nolan Wages, Ph.D.

Department of Epidemiology

Roy Sabo, Ph.D. - *Interim Chair*
Livingstone Aduse-Poku, Ph.D.
Chrisa Arcan, Ph.D., M.H.S., M.B.A., R.D.
Diane Bishop, M.P.H.
James Burch, Ph.D.
Derek Chapman, Ph.D.
Juan Lu, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H.
Elizabeth Prom-Wormley, Ph.D., M.P.H.
River Pugsley, Ph.D., M.P.H.
Lauren Snellings, M.P.H.
Anne Zehner, M.P.H.
Emily Zimmerman, Ph.D., M.S., M.P.H.

Department of Health Policy

Peter Cunningham, Ph.D. - *Interim Chair*
Andrew Barnes, Ph.D.
Erin Britton, Ph.D., M.P.H.
Askar Chukmaitov, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.A.
Bassam Dahman, Ph.D.
Anika Hines, Ph.D., M.P.H.
April Kimmel, Ph.D.
Emiola Oyefuga, Ph.D.
Morgan Snell, Ph.D.
Emmanuel Taylor, Dr.P.H., M.Sc.
Lauryn Walker, Ph.D., M.P.H., R.N.

Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences

Jessica G. LaRose, Ph.D. - *Interim Chair*
Richard Brown, Ph.D.
Kellie Carlyle, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.
Sharyn Dougherty, Ph.D., M.P.H.
Dina Garcia, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.
Sonya Hung, Ph.D.
Sun Jung (Sunny) Kim, Ph.D., M.S., M.A.
Autumn Lanoye, Ph.D., L.C.P.
Alexander Lucas, Ph.D., M.S.
Maghboeba Mosavel, Ph.D., M.A.
Bianca Owens, Ph.D.
Vanessa B. Sheppard, Ph.D.
Maria Thomson, Ph.D., M.Sc.
Katherine Y. Tossas, Ph.D., M.S.
Marcie Wright, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Departmental Staff

Muna Ali, B.A.
Jenifer Beausoliel, B.A.
Kate Huck, M.Ed.
Sabrina Janesick, M.A.
Nerice Lochansky Luu, M.A.
Jillian Moore, B.A.
Drew Necci

Dean's Office Administration and Staff

Vanessa B. Sheppard, Ph.D.
Founding Interim Dean

Kellie Carlyle, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed.
Interim Associate Dean for Academic Affairs

Roy Sabo, Ph.D.
Interim Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs

Marcie Wright, Ph.D., M.P.H.
Director of Impact, Opportunity, and Engagement

Carrie Boyd, M.H.S.
Director for Finance and Administration

Maggie Christ, M.A.
Communications Strategist

Jessica Coates, B.S.
Fiscal Technician

Laura Keller, M.A.
Director of Development

Tanya Madden, B.S.
Senior Research Administrator

Bia Neece, B.A.
Fiscal Technician

Brooke Nissim-Sabat, M.S., M.P.H., R.D.N.
Assessment and Accreditation Administrator

Katherine Peterman, M.P.H.
M.P.H. Education Administrator

Kati Scharles, C.R.A.
Director for Research Administration

Kelly Sullivan, M.Acc.
Financial Administrator

Asia Venable, B.A., A.A.
Executive Assistant to the Dean





VCU

School of Public Health

Vision

Health, well-being, and longevity for all

Mission

The VCU School of Public Health is committed to improving health and well-being for all populations through education, discovery, dissemination and co-learning with the communities we serve.