

The Enrollment Crisis and a Path Forward for the College

Prepared for Interim Dean Catherine Ingrassia

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In October 2022, Interim Dean Catherine Ingrassia charged the Enrollment and Retention Task Force with identifying patterns and challenges in enrollment and retention. Specifically, the task force would examine four things:

- DFW patterns (across discipline, course number, demographic, course modality, etc.)
- Persistence within modalities (both modality of delivery and the length of course [mini-semester v long semester])
- Enrollment patterns within major (correlated with the two items above)
- Pivot points in which we fail to retain students

Based upon this information, the task force would then make recommendations to address the enrollment and retention crisis facing the College. This report is the culmination of their work.

Task Force Members

Name	Title	Contract	Department
Chris Burdett	Assistant Professor	Term	Political Science
Sally Hunnicutt	Professor, Associate Dean for Faculty and Academic Affairs (Science and Mathematics)	Tenured	Chemistry
James Mays	Associate Professor	Tenured	Statistical Sciences and Operations Research
Ryan O'Hallahan	Advisor (History)	Staff	History
Debbie Polo	Assistant Professor, Director of Student Learning Outcomes (Chemistry)	Term	Chemistry
Krista Scott	Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs		
Scott Sherman	Associate Professor, Associate Director (Robertson)	Tenured	Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture
Sachi Shimomura	Associate Professor, Associate	Tenured	English

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Robert Wieman	Assistant Professor	Term	Mathematics

Executive Summary

Nationally, enrollment in two-year and four-year colleges and universities has decreased for several years and the decrease is expected to continue for at least five years. Although some flagship state institutions and elite private colleges and universities have maintained enrollment at 2018 levels, most have seen small to significant enrollment declines. VCU has seen enrollment decrease by 9% overall since 2018. The enrollment decline makes it difficult for VCU, and especially for the College of Humanities and Sciences, to fulfill its mission to educate students of diverse backgrounds, especially those from Virginia. In addition, the enrollment decrease has resulted in a significant decline in revenue and budgetary constraints.

General causes of the enrollment decline include:

- Declining U.S. birth rate from 2008 to 2018
- Increasing tuition and fees and growing student debt burden
- Increasing uncertainty about the value of higher education
- The COVID pandemic and subsequent online teaching
- Changing interests in modalities that institutions cannot meet

The task force obtained data specific to VCU and the College that reveals important trends and sentiments supplementing what we observe nationwide, particularly regarding our ability to retain students.

- VCU's advantages - e.g., urban setting, proximity to home, diverse student body - appear to be offset by the cost of attendance and concerns about the value of a degree, generally. And though we do not have clear data to this effect, VCU is in a highly competitive environment. The enrollment decisions of Virginia high school students and the retention of VCU/CHS students are impacted by admissions policies of other proximate 4-year institutions, some under similar financial pressures, yet with a perceived comparative advantage.
- Retention is not solely linked to student success. Overall, student success rates in fall 2021 and spring 2022 courses in the CHS (as signified by the number of students who get a D, F, or W) remain the same as they were before spring 2020. Although there is no change in aggregate, specific courses have decreased DFW rates while others have increased.
- The impact of increasing online modalities on retention may be a matter of taste rather than performance. Student success rates for online courses are roughly equivalent to those taught in person. However, students in online courses are far more likely to get an incomplete in a course.
- Better placement and improving student sense of belonging appear to improve student outcomes, in addition to targeting certain high enrollment, high demand courses. In some courses, students performed better when they took the prerequisite course(s) in person rather than online.

- Preliminary data suggests students who were not retained within the CHS left VCU for financial reasons, and others left the CHS but stayed at VCU, completing degrees in non-CHS units. These students often move to degree programs where the connection to graduate degrees and postgraduate careers is more obvious.
- Student sentiments reveal a desire for increased and meaningful contact with staff, administration, instructors, and other students, especially those within their majors.

Though the College must sustain its focus on increasing student success and improving student outcomes, meeting the ongoing enrollment and retention crisis will require innovation in other areas as well as scaling up what we already do well. Toward these ends, we recommend:

- Adopt a ‘team of teams’ approach to recruitment involving the College’s faculty, staff, and administrators at all levels. Specific measures include: recruitment champions for each department and school; a CHS recruitment advisory board; summer bridge and enrichment programs; student “Rambassador” program.
- Improve information/data collection and proliferation to increase awareness and support coordination. These measures must be regular and sustained. This includes working with IRDS to generate data on a semester or yearly basis that support our retention efforts.
- Invest in faculty and staff initiatives that address recruitment and retention, such as through grants and awards that support and incentivize innovation and scaling.
- Create structures that help students connect their academic and career interests with majors within the College. Specific measures include: connecting students to CHS majors in a sophomore-level, unit-based course; creating two-year course schedules for incoming students; requiring units to develop a Career Blueprint to supplement major maps, while encouraging coordination with the Career Center to this effect.

The crisis facing the College is serious, and nationwide indicators suggest that it will continue if not worsen. Acknowledging this reality does not mean we must passively submit. Instead, the College must assemble the creativity and energies of our talented faculty, staff, and administrators to become a leader in recruitment and retention.

The Big Picture of a Big Problem

Declining enrollment nationwide

According to an October 2022 [report from the College Board](#), nationwide enrollment at postsecondary institutions has decreased by nearly 10% from 20.9 million in 2011 to 18.9 million in 2020.¹ The pandemic only exacerbated this downward trend, while forecasts suggest continued decline at mid-decade thanks to the anticipated 'enrollment cliff'. In the wake of a decade-long decline in birthrates, estimates indicate that the [college-age population in the U.S. will fall by 15%](#) between 2025 and 2029, and then remain stagnant until 2035. Moreover, recent studies of birth rates during the pandemic point toward [a second cliff](#) during the mid-2030s. Taking stock of public enrollment trends, Virginia matches the national average of -8% from fall 2010 to fall 2020.² Thirty-one states fared worse over this period, ranging from -9% (North Dakota, Maine) to -35% (Alaska).

Looking deeper into the numbers, trends vary among demographic groups. Hispanic students are the fastest growing demographic attending public four-year institutions. From fall 2010 to fall 2020, the relative share of Hispanic students increased from 11.1% to 18.8%.³ Meanwhile, the share of White students declined from 67% in fall 2010 to 55.7% in fall 2020. The share of Black students also declined, but to a far lesser degree, from 12.1% to 11.5%. The share of Asian students increased slightly, from 7.0% to 8.7%. Though it is worthwhile to probe the reasons for this variance, one can also see opportunities for outreach while also gaining a better sense of the impact of declining enrollment depending on the typical demographic composition of a university's student body.

Increasing uncertainty about the value of Higher Ed

A [survey](#) of 20,000 Americans by Strada Education Network in 2020-2021 reveals uncertainty about the value of higher education today. Though respondents acknowledge the importance of additional education to advancing one's career, achieving one's goals, and getting a stable job, answers of 'probably would' and 'definitely would' do not significantly outweigh corresponding answers of 'probably would not' and 'definitely would not'. For example, on the question of additional education being worth the cost, respondents answered 'definitely would not' more often than 'definitely would'. It is also striking that more respondents answered 'not sure' compared to any other option.

¹ Jennifer Ma and Matea Pender, *Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid 2022* (New York: The College Board), 25.

² *Trends*, pg. 27.

³ *Trends*, pg. 29.



<https://stradaeducation.org/research-edu 1>

The survey results highlight a critical challenge facing VCU and other universities: how to increase the confidence of potential applicants in the value of their degree. Responses suggest that applicants are not persuaded by value in an intertemporal sense, such that taking on a greater cost-burden now is worthwhile because of the medium-to-long term benefits. 54% believe that additional education would probably or definitely advance their career, yet only 35% believe additional education is worth the cost. For some, lowering the cost-burden is the clear solution.⁴ One might also move the needle by freezing tuition rates for the duration of their degree. For others – namely, those who are ‘not sure’ – the solution likely turns on how universities communicate and demonstrate the value of their degree such that the immediate costs borne by the student no longer disincentivize enrollment and matriculation.

This observation turns out to be quite important to universities with limited maneuverability vis-à-vis tuition and fees. Simply put: a strategy that minimizes tuition increases must also encourage students to embrace intertemporal smoothing. On the one hand, as mentioned, this should involve how we communicate and demonstrate value. What is our message, and how is it

⁴ There are reasons to wonder if a ‘tuition reset’ would be an effective solution in the long term. According to Jim Hundrieser, vice president of the consulting arm of the National Association of College and University Business Officers, universities typically experience a short-term bump, only to have to raise tuition down the line. Jon Marcus, [“As enrollment falls and skepticism grows, some colleges are cutting prices,”](#) *Washington Post*, December 2, 2022.

shared? Additionally, we need to take a comprehensive view of our audience. For instance, potential first-generation applicants may want to hear different things and may need to receive it in different ways compared to other applicants. Regardless, the recent enrollment decline in the College of Humanities and Sciences supports urgently revisiting the message while enhancing the brand by increasing the value of a degree. This involves both the quality of the education students receive as well as the jobs or additional education made possible by a VCU degree.

Tuition on the rise

The College Board report also observes a striking increase nationwide in tuition and fees among public four-year institutions over the past thirty years. Adjusting for inflation, the average published tuition and fee price has more than doubled from \$4,870 to \$10,940.⁵ This outpaces price increases at public two-year colleges and private nonprofit four-year institutions. Meanwhile, state and local funding has increased by 43% after adjusting for inflation.⁶ The differential between rising tuition and state and local funding suggests that four-year institutions have passed along operational costs to students at an increasing rate during this period.

Comparatively, Virginia is the eighth most expensive state for full-time, in-state students with average published tuition and fees of \$14,580 (2022).⁷ This actually amounts to a decrease of 5.03% over the last five years. In terms of state and local funding per public full-time equivalent (FTE) student, Virginia ranks 16th at \$7,290 (2020-21).⁸ Though this figure represents a 21% increase over the last ten years, the growth of state and local funding has not kept up with the rising cost of education in Virginia, which shifts the burden of covering rising operational costs onto tuition and fees. It also suggests that any attempt to lower tuition and fees will not be offset by state and local funding. Moreover, should state and local funding decrease, the pressure to adjust operational costs downward would be that much greater.

Student aid on the rise

Overall, student aid has increased from \$100.2 billion in 2001-02 to \$174.4 billion in 2021-22. It is also worth noting that the latter figure is down from a high of \$230.0 billion in 2011-12.⁹ The College Board observes that, over the past twenty years, institutional grants have become the largest source of undergraduate student aid, increasing from 19% in 2001-02 to 35% in 2021-22. Over the last decade alone, institutional grants increased by 53%. By contrast, students now rely less on federal loans: 39% of total undergraduate student aid in 2001-02 compared to 25% in 2021-22. Other sources of student aid (e.g., Federal Education Tax Benefits, private and employer grants, state grants, Pell Grants) have seen their shares remain relatively stable.

The decline in federal loans masks an increase in the reliance on federal unsubsidized loans over the same period. In 2001-02, unsubsidized loans comprised 34% of total education

⁵ *Trends*, pg. 12.

⁶ *Trends*, pg. 20.

⁷ Florida public four-year institutions are currently the least expensive for full-time, in-state students (\$6,370); Vermont is the most expensive (\$17,650). *Trends*, pg. 15.

⁸ Oklahoma offers the least state and local funding per FTE student (\$5,350); Wyoming provides the most at \$24,100 (2020-21). *Trends*, pg. 21.

⁹ *Trends*, pg. 34.

borrowing.¹⁰ This compares to 40% in subsidized loans, and 14% in non-federal loans. By 2021-22, federal unsubsidized loans make up 46% of total education borrowing, while the share of subsidized loans has fallen to 16%. The share of nonfederal loans remains relatively stable at 13%. Though the federal government remains the chief source of lending, borrowers are now much more exposed to interest rate fluctuations. More importantly, their debt is much more costly as it accrues interest from the outset. The College Board also notes that an increasing share of undergraduate students do not draw upon federal loans of either type, up from 62% in 2011-12 to 75% in 2021-22.¹¹ This change can be explained by the greater reliance on institutional grants. It also further highlights the increasing importance of institutional support so students can attend despite rising tuition costs.

Current figures from 2Q FY2022 reveal that 21% of borrowers hold between \$20,000 and \$39,999 in federal loan debt. An additional 21% of borrowers hold between \$10,000 and \$19,999 in debt. Meanwhile, 33% of borrowers owed less than \$10,000 in debt. These figures must be cast against the backdrop of cumulative debt, however. According to the College Board, in 2020-21 the average cumulative debt per borrower for a bachelor's degree was \$29,100.¹² This represents a slight decrease from 2010-11 when average cumulative debt was \$29,000 (in 2021 dollars). We are able to observe a similar, slight decrease if we disaggregate debt accrued pursuing a bachelor's degree at a public four-year institution: \$27,400 in 2020-21 versus \$27,700 in 2010-11. Considering the increasing tuition rates over this same period, these figures similarly highlight the growing importance of institutional grants to dampening a student's debt burden.

More attractive options than a 4-year degree

There are more education options available today than ever. People have taken advantage of multiple avenues for learning outside of a college or university, and they perceive greater benefits in those options. A May 2022 [survey](#) by EDGE research and HCM Strategists for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation reveals that college-age youth are pursuing or intend to pursue different learning options.¹³ These include: online learning via YouTube, licensing, certificates, single-subject short courses, and trade/vocational schools. Two striking details stand out from the survey results. First, more respondents have either completed or are currently taking classes on YouTube (20% and 27%, respectively) than those who have completed or are currently attending a 4-year college or university (7% and 5%, respectively). Second, 48% of respondents expressed no interest in a 4-year college or university, compared to 40% who plan to attend a 4-year college or university. Admittedly, these results align with declining trends in enrollment and retention, but losses to these alternative educational outcomes need not be irrecoverable if 4-year colleges and universities identify what is working about these outcomes and diversify their offerings.

¹⁰ *Trends*, pg. 37.

¹¹ *Trends*, pg. 40.

¹² *Trends*, pg. 43.

¹³ *Exploring the Exodus from Higher Education*. EDGE research and HCM Strategists (May 2022), 6.

The Big Problem @ VCU

In recent years, the College of Humanities and Sciences' enrollment has fallen at an alarming rate. From AY2017 to AY2021, enrollment numbers declined by 19.5%. Though the most significant year-on-year change coincides with COVID-19 (-7.9% from AY2019 to AY2020), enrollment numbers were already dropping prior to the pandemic (-5.4% from AY2018 to AY2019). Meanwhile, the return to some degree of normalcy, including in-person instruction, has not reversed the downward trend (-7.4% from AY2020 to AY2021).

Retention is likewise a serious problem for the College. From spring 2018 through spring 2021, the average first year retention rate for first-time, full-time freshmen is 82.6%. However, between their first and second year, students start to leave the College. From spring 2018 through spring 2020 - the last year for which we have data on second year retention, the average retention rate falls to 72.7%. Fourth year retention is dramatically worse: 42.6% on average from spring 2018 through spring 2021. And though fourth year retention rates for first generation (avg. 37.9%), Pell eligible (avg. 37.3%), and underrepresented minorities (avg. 38.8%) are typically lower over this same period, the College especially struggles to retain Black/African American males (avg. 25.7%) and Hispanic/Latino males (avg. 31.6%). Historical data indicates that some students return to complete their degrees: sixth year graduation rates of first-time freshmen average 65.3% from spring 2018 through spring 2021. We can and should celebrate these students' perseverance, but we must address the roughly 35% of first-time students who did not matriculate. Additionally, we cannot ignore the time it takes to complete a degree outside of the intended four years. Stretching the time frame from four to six years likely increases the debt burden of a degree for these students, alongside introducing volatility in year-on-year enrollment numbers for the College and its units.

What's going on

In accordance with our charge, the task force sought to identify significant trends and better understand the reasons behind them. We employed a two-track strategy. First, we collected and analyzed historical and current data involving enrollment and retention in the College. Second, we gained direct insight into motives and sentiments among CHS students. The results from each track are described below.

Historical and current data

Regarding historical and current data, the task force requested several reports from IRDS. The following are the most significant findings. In addition, IRDS is going to take on a larger analysis that will be ongoing to support the CHS' efforts to monitor retention and the various factors that could contribute to improved or decreased retention.

1. The fall 2016 entering student cohort into the CHS. First-time freshmen students in the CHS totalled 2600 in 2016. Of these students, 22% (N=567) were undeclared. Another 15% (N=381) selected *advising tracks* that are not majors at VCU or within the CHS. Four years later, 28% (N=450) of students from the VCU graduates from this cohort *graduated from a school or college outside of the CHS*. Nearly a quarter of these 450

students graduated from the School of Business. From the original 2600 students in the CHS first-time freshmen cohort, 993 did not graduate in these four years; 20% of this non-graduating group had moved to majors outside the CHS. We suggest extending this analysis to earlier cohorts as well as including transfer students. **This analysis suggests that the CHS serves as an entry point for VCU students. It also suggests that the CHS should implement programs that better connect students to CHS majors and to post-graduate careers as well as implement more interdisciplinary programs.**

2. Student grades in courses based on modality. In spring 2022, there was **no difference** between the percent of students earning an A, B, or C in face to face courses versus any option that includes online (79% for both groups, N=21720 face to face, N=36484 online). More students taking some type of online modality got a grade labeled "other", which includes "incomplete" (6%, or N=2931 of grades in online modality courses got a grade of "other vs. 0.27% for face to face). This result suggests that students in courses with partial to fully online modalities are significantly more likely to fall behind and be unable to complete a course with a grade. **We suggest that instructors teaching using online modalities get appropriate training to address this concern, and that the CHS and VCU invest in appropriate support for online courses if such courses are a priority.** In addition, the next item indicates that, although overall the rate of ABCs in face to face and online courses is indistinguishable, that is not the case for individual courses.
3. We requested an analysis of grades in pre-requisite courses, by modality, and how that related to the following course. In agreement with #2, one course sequence (STAT 210 to PSYC 214) showed no modality effect. However, a large modality effect was observed for CHEM 302 (Organic Chemistry II) based on the modality of CHEM 301 (Organic Chemistry I). [Note: CHEM 302 is a high DFW course.] Of the 91 students who took CHEM 301 face to face, 35% earned a D, F or W in CHEM 302. Of the 166 students who took the course CHEM 301 online, 72% earned a D, F or W in CHEM 302.¹⁴ **We suggest that a broader analysis of course sequences be carried out in order to identify key bottleneck courses. It is also worthwhile for the dean's office to lead an examination of departmental and disciplinary cultures/expectations that might propagate high DFW rates in their courses.**
4. The CHS advising group reviewed returning students who had not registered for fall 2022 classes by July 27, 2022. Although some of these students may have ultimately registered for classes, this snapshot does provide some insight into why students are not retained. A third of the non-returning students (331/993) had an accounting balance hold on their transcript, suggesting that they had a financial barrier to returning. Just 5% reported that they were transferring out of VCU. The advising group also reported the courses in which the non-returning students had earned a D, F or W. The top ten

¹⁴ Although the number of transfer students in CHEM 302 was small, N=10, fully 80% of those students did not complete CHEM 302 with a grade of C or higher.

courses on this list were UNIV200, HUMS202, STAT210, UNIV112, PSYC101, MATH151, BIOL101, RELS108, CHEM102, and PHYS201.

Student Survey Results Summary

During late October and early November 2022, the Strategic Planning and Enrollment task forces jointly conducted a survey of CHS students. The survey's objective was to gain greater insight into the "student experience" through a blend of 16 open-ended, multiple response, multiple choice, and Likert Scale questions.¹⁵ 137 students responded. The questions fall into three baskets: motives for attending VCU, perceptions of VCU, and factors behind academic success. Though the sample size is small, one can nevertheless create a snapshot of student sentiment and inform responses to the College's enrollment and retention crisis.

1. Motives for attending VCU

- The linkages to/reputation of medical programs was the single factor mentioned most often among reasons behind enrolling at VCU. However, it is also clear that VCU's location (e.g., proximity to home) and 'atmosphere' – including the urban setting and diversity of the student body – are the most important, non-academic factors influencing student enrollment at VCU.
- Respondents were given the opportunity to share reasons for staying at VCU if they had ever considered leaving. Sunk costs, favorable tuition, and proximity to home were the most common reasons for staying at VCU.

2. Perceptions of VCU

- 59% of respondents selected major/classes and Richmond's status as a "great city" as, respectively, their favorite part about being a VCU student. Meanwhile, nearly 33% selected the opportunity to work and/or live at home. It is also clear from the responses that the quality of advising and faculty enhance the student experience. Diversity, community, and friendships were the most expressed factors among the open-ended responses.
- Most respondents believe that students have a favorable perception of VCU. On a Likert scale anchored by "very negative" (1) and "very positive" (5), 42.4% selected 4 and 10.6% selected 5. 35.6% selected 3, presumably indicating that, in their view, student perception is neither negative nor positive. Among the open-ended responses, it is interesting to note student frustrations over institutional bloating juxtaposed to cost, such that the school appears to neglect or even exploit students. One can also observe multiple responses that lament a lack of school spirit. Otherwise, we again see concerns about the quality of instruction and course/degree flexibility, alongside favorable comments about community and location.
- Four themes stand out among the answers to an open-ended question asking for additional insight into student experiences at VCU. First, student experiences with campus services impacts their sense of value, opportunity, and safety. These

¹⁵ All multiple response questions included an open-ended "Other" option.

experiences include dietary options at campus dining, parking, and transportation. And though these concerns and complaints are not widely shared among respondents, they remind us of the multiple dimensions of student life. Second, community is important to how our respondents feel about VCU. When they feel connected, their responses tend to be positive. However, the community is not monolithic. Two responses to this question resonate with frustration over feeling disconnected as a non-traditional student. Third, students want to feel understood and valued by their faculty and by the university, generally. Some of the responses questioned the commitment of faculty to their students. One respondent noted how faculty comments – such as berating a class for poor performance – might suggest that they are not invested in student success. Of note, one response lamented the evident lack of appreciation for student hardships outside of class as well as an unwillingness to respond to requests for accommodations due to illness. Fourth, the quality of communication and advising is uneven. Some of the respondents were clearly frustrated by a lack of timely information and advice.

3. Factors behind academic success

- Answers to an open-ended question about obstacles in courses that hinder performance converged on time as the principal factor. This cuts across two dimensions. On the one hand, respondents indicated that they have “limited time to complete the required work outside of class”. On the other, they expressed frustration with class scheduling and availability of resources (e.g., Writing Center, tutoring, faculty office hours) at inconvenient times.
- Respondents linked academic success with courses that ‘enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills’ (68.7%) and being able to enroll in both in-person and online courses (63.4%). They also believe success is enhanced when faculty take time to get to know students (41.2%), when students are encouraged to be creative (37.4%), and when students can work in groups (30.5%).
- Respondents were asked to weigh in on modalities, scheduling, and timing of classes respective to academic success. A plurality of responses (40%) chose “mostly in-person classes” as the optimal modality.¹⁶ Meanwhile, 69.4% of respondents believe conventional 16-week semester courses best contributes to their academic success.¹⁷ Lastly, most respondents believe TR 75-minute classes (59%) and MWF 50-minute classes (57.5%) are best for their schedule and learning

¹⁶ This was followed by “a mix of in-person and online classes” (32.6%), and “hybrid classes that have some classes meeting online and some in person” (14.8%). Based on the wording of the question and the available answers, students do want some online offerings even if in-person classes remain the primary option. The student focus group revealed similar preferences for a schedule with both online and in-person offerings. This especially helps students who need to work and need a predictable schedule.

¹⁷ Most of the open-ended answers to this question acknowledged that they either lacked experience with options other than a conventional 16-week semester or they simply had no preference. This suggests that the evident dominance of the 16-week semester among student preferences may be a function of familiarity. Respondents might not know if mini-mesters or J-term courses are a better fit simply because they have not tried them. The question then turns on whether certain students would benefit from a different course length – either in terms of performance or work/school balance; how the College/university could identify these students; and then, how to incentivize making the attempt.

style. As for timing, the preference for afternoon classes was only slightly higher than morning classes (61.2% compared to 59%). Only 18.7% selected evening classes.¹⁸

- When asked about factors that impact their success as a student but are not related to their courses, respondents overwhelmingly selected “mental/physical health challenges” (76.8%) and “financial barriers” (60.8%). Juxtaposed to the remaining options – “Low academic self-esteem” (45.6%), “Lack of other resources (non-financial)” (31.2%), and “Transportation issues” (20.8%) – we gain a picture of students who are encumbered by visible (i.e., financial) and invisible (i.e., mental, emotional) challenges.
- The survey also asked for ideas and suggestions for changes at VCU that would positively impact their education. The answers to this open-ended question are varied, which makes it difficult to systematically analyze student sentiment. That being said, there were a number of thoughtful suggestions among the 80 responses. These include: increase clarity about course requirements and expectations; ensure that assigned work/readings is ‘purposeful’, quality over quantity; devote more resources to renovating existing spaces, including residence halls; increase scheduling flexibility; hold more ‘fun events’; enable students to select majors later through flexible crediting; vary academic pathways for different kinds of students (e.g., transfers, continuing/non-traditional students); increase faculty representation; streamline communications; increase career advising resources; and, improve attention to local Richmond community/awareness of VCU’s impact.

Student Focus Group Summary

The Strategic Plan and Enrollment & Retention task forces jointly hosted a student focus group on November 15th, 2022. The aim of the focus group was twofold. The task forces sought to (a) supplement data from the broader student survey and (b) float ideas and strategies under discussion in each task force. Ten CHS students sat for the entire session. The host asked the participants eight questions, providing the opportunity for open responses in an otherwise unstructured format.

When asked about strengths and weaknesses about their majors, the participants universally praised advisors. They often knew their advisors by name and spoke glowingly about the support and advice they have received. Unfortunately, they did not speak the same way about faculty. The students described feeling disconnected from their faculty, which is not the experience they hope for, especially in their majors. This aligns with sentiments evident across answers to many of the questions. The participants expressed a longing for connection to their programs and the university.

Participants identified student-to-student relationships as vital to their sense of belonging, and they noted that building these relationships could be difficult. One student argued that VCU,

¹⁸ Responses to an open-ended question about scheduling and academic success express frustration over scheduling conflicts created by clusters of courses – especially required courses – held at the same time. Simply put: our students want more options on different days and at different times. This view was echoed in the student focus group, which specifically pointed to a preponderance of classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

including upper administration – President Rao was described as distant – should play a greater role in fostering school spirit and bringing students together for fun activities like sporting events, social gatherings, and concerts. Two students pointed to student and professional organizations as means toward these ends, though they acknowledged it could be (a) difficult to learn about these organizations and (b) they might actually foster insularity because some groups are not designed for widespread membership. Another student lamented what she perceived to be a lack of togetherness among other Black students, despite the diversity of VCU’s student body. Students seem content to go about their classes and then disperse into the Richmond area rather than make the campus a hub of activity.

Spaces also matter to building relationships and their sense of belonging. Students do not feel valued when their buildings need repair, especially when effort is put into new buildings that are not designed for their use. Additionally, certain spaces lend to connections because they are a place to gather and they house resources that help students succeed, such as the library. Regarding VCU’s relationship with Richmond, spatial concerns came up with respect to the way that VCU’s buildings have transformed nearby neighborhoods – both for good and for bad. Another participant expressed a desire to see stronger connections with Richmond through, for example, applied research that would truly benefit the local community.

The focus group also discussed resources that contribute to their academic success. In one respect, the participants felt the university could have done more to help them prepare both before and after they arrived on campus. They shared desires for mandatory modules or courses that would familiarize students with rules and resources, and they criticized first year advising for not doing enough to bridge their early courses with majors.¹⁹ Aside from these concerns, the participants acknowledged that they do not use campus resources. Instead, they primarily turn to their classmates. Not surprisingly, there was a great deal of energy and enthusiasm in the room when participants discussed the idea of students helping students to succeed, such as through mentorships or ambassadorships. They agreed that students are terrific resources for other students, particularly for navigating the hidden curriculum and building the longed-for sense of community.

The most poignant remarks to emerge from the conclusion of the focus group discussion focused on legacy. One participant wants to feel proud and connected to VCU after graduation. Another similarly shared that they want to improve VCU so that other current and future students would feel proud of the university. The group then agreed with the sentiment that they want to leave VCU better than when they arrived.

¹⁹ None of the participants had UNIV 101 during their first year.

Recommendations & Strategies

The College must meet the enrollment crisis head on through an array of strategies that tap into the talents and creativity of our staff, faculty, and administrators. Though the dean's office is in a position to lead these efforts, a comprehensive approach should also encourage and incentivize units and individuals to innovate and then scale up their successes. The task force proposes the following strategies with this in mind. These strategies likewise aim at a sustainable recovery from the recent decline in enrollment as well as insulation from the forthcoming enrollment cliff.

Recruitment strategies

The College must continue to work closely with partners in the Provost's Office to recruit students while also organically developing its branding and messaging that involves its faculty, staff and students in communicating its brand and message. Moreover, the College should draw upon the passions, experiences, stories, interests, and expertise of our faculty, staff and students to *start and strengthen connections* with potential students. Excellence in recruitment is a team effort that benefits everyone, especially students who have yet to set foot on campus. The following strategies will help the College achieve this excellence.

- The College's units should play a greater role in recruitment by connecting with prospective students, building excitement around their programs and majors, and communicating what students will be able to do with their degrees. To spearhead these efforts, units should designate a **Recruitment Champion** who has a passion for growing the major and garnering interest among potential students. The Recruitment Champion will lead in the development of a unit's 'connect strategy' and collaborate with faculty and staff in its implementation. This collaboration should include working in tandem with recruiting professionals in the Office of Strategic Enrollment Management to ensure consistent messaging and proper levels of outreach and follow-up. Recruitment Champions should be faculty members rather than advisors because advisors already play an important role in recruitment and retention. Units should also account for the service contribution of Recruitment Champions in annual evaluations and promotion/tenure applications.
- Great ideas and innovations need to be celebrated and shared. The dean's office should take the lead in creating mechanisms to pass these great ideas and innovations outward and upward. Recent examples include the GROWTH Awards and the Re-engagement Grants. Additionally, the dean's office should create a **Recruitment Advisory Board** composed of each unit's Recruitment Champion. This board will work with the College's recruitment officer to share, develop, and update effective recruitment practices and facilitate information-sharing. In this way, recruitment innovations and successes can be scalable.
- Units should also develop a **Student RAMbassador Program** to participate in and inform recruitment efforts. A Student RAMbassador Program can serve a number of purposes vital to recruitment and retention because of the intersection of perspectives and experiences related to student and academic life. Units should identify and welcome

ambassadors who are active in their majors and student life, and who want to help the unit build connections with potential and current students. Units should then enable the ambassadors to tell their stories as part of the unit's general recruitment efforts, such as through in-person outreach events and online-accessible videos and podcasts. Units should also invite feedback from RAMbassadors about recruitment and retention efforts. RAMbassadors should not merely represent a unit; they should form a collaborative community and partner in growing the program and the College.

In addition to the Student RAMbassador Program, units should build **alumni networks**, strengthen ties with alumni networks that already exist, or even create an Alumni RAMbassador Program that will keep alumni involved in recruitment efforts. Research suggests that prospective students are increasingly uncertain about the value of a university degree. One strategy to address concerns about value is to shine a bright light on career paths typically associated with the College's various units. Alumni voices will make conversations about career options less abstract, and units should explore a variety of ways to share these voices and stories with prospective students, from panels to videos to networking events. These alumni-related initiatives should be brought into the recruitment repertoire.

- Unit-level recruitment initiatives should include **bridge programs** with local and regional high schools and community colleges. These could be formal or informal programs that establish a sustained relationship (or pipeline) between an academic program in the College and these other institutions. Recruitment Champions (or other faculty or staff within a unit) could organize and maintain these mutually beneficial relationships with faculty, staff, or administrators at these institutions, especially those in close proximity to VCU. Research shows that students are more likely to attend colleges and universities close to their homes. Bridge programs will help the College and its units cultivate a geographic comparative advantage while better competing with other higher ed institutions in the Commonwealth and regionally. Bridge programs can also be tailored to focus on growing demographics and even students who simply need to see themselves as capable of higher education. Toward this end, bridge programs should not focus solely on skill development; bridge programs can be a vessel for the stories of faculty, staff and students with whom potential students can identify. We can also start to build the self-confidence of prospective students so that they see that they belong at VCU.

In a similar vein, units should incentivize faculty to develop **summer enrichment programs** for prospective students. A week-long program, for example, would provide prospective students with direct exposure to our campus, our community, our faculty, and our teaching. It would give the College and its units the opportunity to foster interests, build connections, and help prospective students envision themselves thriving here.

- **Increased access to information** will enhance the effectiveness of unit-led recruitment efforts. In particular, units need increased access and use of recruitment lists from Strategic Enrollment Management (for example, the recruitment database or software

platform for tracking outreach and responses). Recruitment Champions could partner individually and collectively with SEM recruiters. Meanwhile SEM recruiters could impart the University's best practices, including outreach protocols to respective students.

Retention strategies

The student survey conducted in conjunction with this report revealed that a number of students who contemplated leaving VCU ultimately stayed because they felt connected to the university. We need to listen to this sentiment. If building connections is a guiding light of our recruitment strategy, retention must involve sustaining these connections. Retention begins with recruitment.

Students also need support to progress through their degree path. Support involves resources, so our plan involves: (a) assessing whether the resources we currently provide are what students want and need; (b) delivering high quality resources based on what we learn of student wants and needs (which includes faculty and administrative buy-in); (c) continuously proliferating information about our resources in a variety of modes; (d) encouraging/incentivizing students to take advantage of these resources, especially before we reach a crisis point in a student's academic career.

- Our focus group discussion and broader student survey reveal a clear interest in *students helping students*, such as through formal and informal mentoring. These relationships helped students better navigate through and adapt to college life, which benefits student success and retention. To ensure that students are aware of available mentorship opportunities, the dean's office will compile, publish, and actively update a list of and links to **mentorship programs** for students in the College (e.g., You First, P.R.I.M.E.). Additionally, the College should launch its own in-house mentorship program to complement existing initiatives and ensure that all students can access a formal mentorship program. For example, the College could launch and maintain programs for first-year, nontraditional, and transfer students, where mentors help students find social support and confidence, encourage them to get involved, encourage help-seeking behavior, and guide students toward resources available on campus.²⁰ The dean's office should take the lead in identifying and training mentors, and then assigning student mentors to mentees.

Student RAMbassadors can also sustain connections developed during recruitment through informal peer-to-peer mentorship. They can share their knowledge of majors, courses, successful study habits, university resources, and aspects of the hidden curriculum that students - especially first generation and students from marginalized groups - might struggle with. Units should help facilitate interaction between students and student ambassadors through, for example, panels or town-hall events, or on-demand media.

²⁰ Such a program could be modeled after the pilot program with the Mentor Collective from Spring 2020 to Spring 2021, which matched 271 student mentors with 1,291 mentees and resulted in 3,441 logged conversations and almost 17,000 peer to peer text messages.

- The College will increase efforts to **make information easily accessible** to students, especially regarding available resources designed to help them succeed. The College should likewise utilize platforms for on-demand delivery that are widely used by students (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Youtube). Utilizing a ‘team of teams’ approach, units can contribute their expertise to content development and active assessment of responsiveness to information campaigns.
- Information campaigns should also facilitate direct contact with the people who deliver student support/success resources. This aligns with the general emphasis on connection-building as a means to retain students. With this in mind, the College will hold **in-person resource fairs** during the academic year where students can learn, ask questions, and interact with representatives from, for example, the library, the Writing Center, mentorship programs, Career Services, Financial Aid, and Student Health Services. The College will aim to make the fairs a fun experience and develop incentives for participation.
- The College should approach SEMSS with a proposal to return to the practice of **setting first-semester/year course schedules** for incoming students. There are two immediate advantages to this practice. On the one hand, the College can pace students during their first year so as to limit burnout. On the other, the College and its units could more easily create learning communities among cohorts of students with common courses. Learning communities closely align with the broader objectives of building and sustaining connections while helping to improve self confidence and a sense of belonging through shared experiences.

Though incoming students should retain the ability to opt out, it is important to frame the program as beneficial and student-centered. Students will be better connected with courses and potential majors that fit their interests and areas of exploration.

- Meanwhile, the College should continue to encourage curricular innovation and development with an eye toward student retention. This could include **a new, required course or module centered on the CHS experience** for incoming students (a new ancillary requirement, as mentioned above). This option could be curricular or non-curricular; for credit or for 0 credits. Meanwhile, content could include: attendance expectations and regulations; study habits and resources; how to read and use a syllabus; how to use the academic calendar; and how to read and use the bulletin. This course would effectively provide students with basic, universal tools to navigate through their academic career.
- Additionally, the College and its units should create **certifications, badges**, etc., for student achievements and milestones, especially early in a student’s academic career. Providing such recognition with a useful and tangible acknowledgement of their work early in their academic career will go far in enhancing their feeling of accomplishment and encourage them to persist in their program at VCU. These could be linked to GenEd courses and some courses that would follow these (increases interest in GenEd

areas, but also allows the benefit of taking a follow-up course that does not count for GenEd).

- The dean's office should partner with the IRDS team to collect data regularly that pertains to student retention.²¹ We should be able to:
 - Identify so-called bottleneck courses as well as critical course sequences that may enhance or inhibit student retention
 - Find patterns in retention for majors
 - Track student enrollment patterns within the CHS and within VCU
 - Track student enrollment patterns (and subsequent academic performance) of students who enter the College from other units at VCU
 - Identify markers for at-risk students or markers for courses or programs that signify an increased risk for students' leaving VCU
 - Forecast student enrollment to help units plan course schedules to maximize student retention while adjusting to student population levels of the 2020s versus the 2010s
- Following the model of the Department of Psychology, each department and school should develop a **College-to-Career (C2C) Blueprint**. Departments and schools that have strong internships currently are an obvious place to begin, but these Blueprints should be created within each major.

Additional Considerations

The task force identified additional considerations that arose during the writing of this report that merit further exploration. These involve actors in other parts of the university and potentially sensitive areas that require the authority and diplomatic skills of the dean.

Admissions

Does our admissions application process, including the application process for financial aid, create barriers for our target application pool? A [recent Forbes education blog](#) identifies a number of possible obstacles that arise from the application process alone, as well as possible improvements. These improvements include:

- Getting rid of optional or recommended requirements because of the uncertainty and stress they create for applicants and their families.

²¹ Following a meeting with Associate Dean Sally Hunnicutt in January 2023, IRDS agreed to take on a larger analysis that will be ongoing to support the CHS' efforts to monitor retention and the various factors that could contribute to improved or decreased retention. This is an important step toward strengthening collaboration between the College and university resources.

- Setting deadlines that benefit the applicant rather than the institution, such as timelines for early admission/early decision.
- Increasing transparency of the decision-making process and requirements.
- Clearly communicating costs of attendance, from tuition to room and board to materials and fees.

As our task force did not look into admissions processes, it is worth having a conversation with stakeholders – including students – about VCU’s application process.

Financial aid and curriculum

Given the percentage of students who leave VCU after their first year, there is reason to wonder if financial aid rules could align with curricular options so as to incentivize students to return while they are still aid-eligible. It may be worth thinking about strategizing in terms of types of aid (e.g., student loans with a 6-month grace period) to offer easy ways for students to return just in time to defer loans or otherwise manage their finances with their education. It is a problem that financial aid policies and educational route timings are entirely divorced. We should investigate better ways and curricular paths to balance a need to, for example, take time off to work and complete their degree.

Faculty buy-in

Faculty participation is essential, but it is not always forthcoming viz. programs designed to enhance student success, like early alert. This does not bode well for measures outlined in this report that arguably require greater faculty involvement. The dean’s office may need to develop effective measures to ensure faculty participation and accountability, even going as far as to mandate participation.

Big data and analytics

Off-the-record conversations with advisors suggest that VCU’s current tools - namely, Navigate - could be enhanced if not redesigned entirely. It is useful for reporting and generating snapshots, but it is not dynamic, nor is it really designed to help decision-making with individualized and nuanced suggestions. [Predictive analytics and choice architecture](#) may be the future of improving student success, but this is beyond our current capabilities. The dean’s office should further study its benefits and engage with university stakeholders about possible design and implementation.

Conclusion

This report results from months of candid, informed discussion and careful research. Among the conclusions we reached, one in particular stands out: enrollment decline is the status quo, and we cannot pretend otherwise and sit idly by. Crisis, however, need not induce panic, though it should inspire urgency. We must therefore put our collective minds and energy to the task at hand without delay. Our recommendations are but an opening salvo in what we hope will become a barrage. Let us shore up the future of the College to the benefit of the students and communities we serve.