



2016-2017 Annual Report

ASPiRE

About ASPiRE

Academic Scholars Program in Real Environments (ASPiRE) enriches and deepens student's understanding of their capacity to create positive change in communities through coursework, co-curricular experiences and a vibrant residential environment.

Message from the Director



Erin Burke Brown, Ph.D.
Director, ASPIRE

In its fifth year of operation, VCU ASPIRE continues to be a program that connects students to their passions and sparks lifelong civic engagement. With students from nearly 40 different majors, the program has expanded service efforts this year to include working with seniors, incarcerated individuals and exceptional educational students.

Several students have been recognized for their academics and service this year, with two students receiving VCU's Business Services Scholarship and five students receiving the President's Service Award.

An additional seven students will be studying abroad in places such as Ghana and Tanzania to explore community engagement in international contexts. Several other students will be pursuing service post-graduation through Teach for America, City Year, the Richmond Teacher Residency Program and VCU's Medical School Guaranteed Admissions Program.

It is clear that VCU ASPIRE is challenging students to turn awareness into action not only during their time in the program, but for years to come.

BY THE NUMBERS

Total current number of ASPIRE students: **169**

Total number of hours: **11,230**

Total number of co-curricular events: **~1,000**

Total number of partners served: **120**

Anticipated student enrollment for 2017-18: **200**



ASPIRE NEWS HIGHLIGHTS

Since 2015, VCU ASPIRE has partnered with St. Mary's Woods retirement community as part of the Opening Minds through Art Initiative. Students work one-on-one with seniors with varying stages of dementia, completing artistic projects that culminate in a showcase attended by family, friends and community members. The partnership has allowed VCU ASPIRE students to form inspiring intergenerational relationships that have shaped how they view art, health and aging.

This past Spring, six VCU ASPIRE students presented at the annual William and Mary Active Citizens Conference in Williamsburg. Submitting proposals for the peer-reviewed undergraduate conference marked the first time that these students had formally presented to an audience. More than 150 students attended the three ASPIRE-led presentations on the topics of healthcare disparities, microaggressions and using social media for student activism.

During the DCE's 10-year anniversary celebration, Hands Up Ministries was celebrated as the Exemplary Partnership in Outreach. The award recognizes the nearly five-year partnership between Hands Up Ministries and VCU ASPIRE. The partnership has led to 252 students providing more than 1,600 hours of service supporting the building and maintenance of 10 homes in Richmond's Highland Park neighborhood.

In 2015, VCU ASPIRE began working with the Richmond City Justice Center (RCJC) through a series of book clubs and workshops that paired VCU students with residents of RCJC to discuss and learn about current events. This past Fall, that partnership was deepened when a section of the Foundations of Community Studies Course, CMST 300, became a part of VCU's Open Minds initiative. Eleven students in CMST 300 took classes at RCJC where they discussed community issues with residents that ranged from civil discourse and citizenship to mass incarceration, as discussed by Bryan Stevenson in this year's common book, Just Mercy.

ASPiRE Students Work on Election Initiatives



The first cohort of ASpiRE students partnered with the Mosby Tenant Council in 2012 to start a non-partisan Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) effort in Mosby. The number of Mosby residents already registered to vote may be partly due to the efforts started by the first ASpiRE class.

The idea for the GOTV effort came directly from the leaders of the Mosby Tenant Council. Patricia Williford, president of the Mosby Tenant Council, approached VCU ASpiRE about partnering with the residents to mobilize voter turnout.

"It is critical that the Mosby residents understand that their vote is the most important way for their voices to be heard," she said. "We are very grateful for the support of the ASpiRE students because we cannot turn things around by ourselves."

For the past five years, the students have worked in Mosby to help conduct voter registration drives, organize voter education events and help residents exercise their right to vote on Election Day. This year the students worked with the residents to plan a voter education luncheon in mid-October. Representative Robert C. "Bobby" Scott was the featured speaker.

As Election Day approached, both the students and the Mosby residents received surprises. The first sweet surprise came from a Ben & Jerry's franchise owner from the Charlottesville area. The owner showed up unannounced in Mosby to hand out ice cream to celebrate National Voter Registration Day. The residents were reminded to vote as they indulged in their free scoops of Empower Mint, a new ice cream flavor.

The second surprise came when a group of British Journalists sponsored by the U.S. State Department and the International Center for Journalists requested a meeting with VCU students the first Saturday in November at the ASpiRE building. The journalists were traveling around the U.S. to learn how the presidential and local elections looked through the eyes of college students.

The day before the election, ASpiRE student Wesley Huie walked door-to-door in Mosby passing out nearly 300 flyers to remind people to vote on Tuesday and to instruct them on where they could catch rides to the poll.



Photo credit: Jim Hale

WHAT ASPIRE PARTNERS SAY:

"SPARC is so grateful to be a community partner with VCU's ASpiRE program for the last four years. We had an amazing time working with the ASpiRE students in our inclusive performing arts program, LIVE ART. The ASpiRE students are some of the most willing and capable community partners that we have the privilege of working with, and we value the integrity and service they provide for our students and hope to continue and expand our partnership in the future."

- Courtney Vollmer, director of creative play, School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community



ASPIRE students participate in the annual Alternative Spring Break trip to Sneedville, Tenn. The students assisted with the Jubilee Project, making home improvements for a local family. Plumbing repairs allowed the family to have running water after years without it.