



VCU

School of Public Health

Chair, Department of Epidemiology

Leadership Profile
2024



WittKieffer

Executive Summary

Virginia Commonwealth University seeks a visionary, entrepreneurial and growth-minded leader to serve as the next Chair of the Department of Epidemiology in the School of Public Health. Reporting directly to the dean, the Chair will develop, articulate and operationalize a compelling vision and strategy for the Department of Epidemiology's future and play an important role in informing the strategic growth and direction of the School of Public Health.

The **Department of Epidemiology** integrates research, education and public health service to better understand health and illness and improve community health. Faculty in the department collaborate with researchers throughout the school and across VCU to explore the intersections of behavior and physiology, to understand the social determinants of health, and, ultimately, to improve health outcomes. The department couples research and public health service with a strong focus on education and training, offering a MPH, PhD in Epidemiology, and dual-degree programs with VCU's schools of Medicine, Social Work and Pharmacy.

The **School of Public Health** will play an important role in addressing the public health workforce shortage in Virginia as it prepares the next generation of public health professionals, scholars and leaders. These efforts build on VCU's longstanding commitment to public health education, research and service. The university's Master of Public Health program, offered since 1996, was the first MPH program to earn CEPH accreditation in Virginia. In April 2023, VCU brought together the departments of Biostatistics, Epidemiology, and Health Behavior and Policy to establish a new, standalone School of Population Health with a mission to advance health and health equity in the Commonwealth of Virginia. In July 2024, the school was officially renamed the **VCU School of Public Health**, the latest step on its path to recognition as a CEPH-accredited school of public health.

Virginia Commonwealth University is a public R1 institution offering comprehensive undergraduate, master's, doctoral and professional programs and encompassing one of the largest academic health centers in the nation. Designated a Community Engaged Institution by the Carnegie Foundation, VCU's institutes and centers of excellence support the university's research mission and involve faculty from across the arts, public policy, biotechnology and health sciences.

VCU seeks a Chair who can steward the strategic growth of the Department of Epidemiology, drawing on prior experience in academic administration, a commitment to faculty and professional development, and an authentic commitment to diversity and inclusion.

The successful candidate will have a proven record of scholarship and extramural research funding. A doctoral degree in epidemiology or a related discipline is required along with qualifications for appointment as a tenured full professor in the Department of Epidemiology.

For information on how to apply or to submit nominations, please see "Procedure for Candidacy" on page 18.

*VCU's goal is to promote thriving communities for all people.
The School of Public Health will further that goal
through its mission to reduce—and one day eliminate—
longstanding socioeconomic and geographic health disparities
that have plagued Virginia for centuries.*

— **MICHAEL RAO**
PRESIDENT, VCU

*Graduates will be prepared to become agents of change
for their communities as we strive to develop a high-performing
public health workforce that will serve in state and local
agencies, NGOs, schools, employers and communities.*

— **VANESSA SHEPPARD**
INTERIM DEAN, SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

*Together with our public health partners, we will create
a workforce that will make Virginia a hub for developing,
evaluating and implementing high-impact programs
to reduce disparities in health that impact
millions of people across the country.*

— **MARLON LEVY**
INTERIM SVP FOR HEALTH SCIENCES, VCU
CEO, VCU HEALTH SYSTEM

Opportunities and Expectations for Leadership

The Chair of the Department of Epidemiology serves as a senior academic leader in the VCU School of Public Health, working in close partnership with the Dean and other school and university leaders to inform the strategic growth and direction of the school.

As the department's academic and administrative leader, the Chair is responsible for all education, faculty, research and service activities across Epidemiology. The Chair oversees the department's operations and budget, manages resources strategically and responsibly, and works with the Dean to encourage philanthropic engagement and support.

The next Chair will develop, articulate and operationalize a compelling vision and strategy for the Department of Epidemiology's future. Toward that end, the Chair will be expected to:

- **Enhance and inspire academic and research excellence**
Maintain the highest standards for excellence in education and research training activities in preparing the next generation of public health professionals and leaders.
- **Recruit, retain and mentor exceptional faculty and trainees**
Grow the department and help position the school for future success by recruiting and retaining outstanding, diverse faculty and trainees and investing in their mentorship and professional development.
- **Strengthen and grow the research enterprise**
Expand extramurally-funded research by building on translational and community-engaged public health research, leveraging opportunities for collaboration with VCU's Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center, and strengthening the internal research infrastructure necessary to enable success.
- **Invest in student engagement and success**
Ensure exceptional education and research experiences for students through excellence in pedagogy and a strong commitment to student support, engagement and success.
- **Advance institutional diversity, equity and inclusion**
Model and promote the essential roles of diversity, equity and inclusion in all activities and pursuits, including the department and school's relationships across VCU and with the communities it serves.
- **Enhance collaboration across the department, school and VCU**
Foster a culture of inclusivity, collaboration and support in the department and across the school and establish and maintain effective relationships with health science researchers across VCU.
- **Build strategic external relationships**
Develop relationships with key community partners and stakeholders, including collaborations with the Virginia Department of Health to build teaching, research and practice-based relationships.
- **Enhance VCU's impact and distinction through service and engagement**
Model an authentic commitment to the public and to service within the community. Advance epidemiology and public health through professional service and engagement, *e.g.*, through grant study sections, academic societies and/or service as a journal editor or on editorial boards.

Professional Qualifications and Personal Qualities

Virginia Commonwealth University seeks a visionary, entrepreneurial and growth-minded leader to serve as the next Chair of the Department of Epidemiology in the School of Public Health. The successful candidate will have a proven record of scholarship and extramural research funding. A doctoral degree in epidemiology or a related discipline is required along with qualifications for appointment as a tenured full professor in the School of Public Health's Department of Epidemiology.

In addition, the ideal candidate will possess the following qualities and qualifications:

- **Commitment to academic excellence**
- **Experience in academic administration**
Successful prior leadership experience as an academic administrator, including experience building or growing a department, division, center, institute or program. Record of recruiting and supporting the success of diverse faculty, staff and students, ideally in public health, the health professions or health-related academic programs.
- **Commitment to faculty and professional development**
Experience and success mentoring faculty, early stage investigators, trainees and/or graduate students and supporting their personal and professional development and success.
- **Demonstrable, authentic commitment to diversity and inclusion**
Evidence of engagement and leadership in advancing institutional diversity, equity and inclusion in prior roles and/or in an organization or unit where diversity and inclusion are central to its mission.
- **Managerial, operational and fiscal acumen**
Ability to build and manage highly effective teams. Sophisticated financial acumen and a record of successful budget, personnel and project management experience.
- **Collaboration and relationship management**
Ability to build consensus and community among constituents. Successful experience establishing and stewarding collaborative relationships across disciplines and units as well as with other internal and external partners, including community organizations, funding agencies and others.
- **Strong communication, listening and interpersonal skills**
Interpersonal and communication skills to cultivate a collaborative and productive work environment. Ability to listen to and learn from others. Capacity to connect with diverse internal and external constituencies and audiences.
- **Advocacy**
Willingness and capacity to promote the mission of the School of Public Health and VCU locally, regionally and beyond.



About the Department of Epidemiology

The Department of Epidemiology integrates research, education and public health service to better understand health and illness and improve community health. Faculty in the department collaborate with researchers throughout the school and across VCU to explore the intersections of behavior and physiology, to understand the social determinants of health, and, ultimately, to improve health outcomes.

Epidemiology faculty are engaged in diverse areas of research and scholarship, including **genetic epidemiology, traumatic brain injury, social epidemiology, public health nutrition, and sleep, circadian rhythm disturbance and cancer.**

The department offers a MPH degree and a doctoral training program, as well as dual-degree programs with the schools of Medicine, Social Work and Pharmacy. Experiential learning opportunities with partners such as the Virginia Department of Health enable students to make a direct, real-world impact on population health.



About the VCU School of Public Health

In April 2023, VCU brought together the departments of Biostatistics, Epidemiology, and Health Behavior and Policy, previously in the School of Medicine, to form a new School of Population Health. In July 2024, the school was renamed the VCU School of Public Health.

The vision for the school was born more than two decades earlier, long before COVID-19 shined a light on the stark disparities that exist across the United States. Today, the VCU School of Public Health is the only school of its kind in the Commonwealth of Virginia that:

- Is tied to an academic health system with a teaching hospital, children's hospital, NCI-designated cancer center, and Center for Clinical Translational Science
- Is part of a robust health sciences campus, with programs in medicine, nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, and health professions
- Offers a Master of Public Health program that includes a focus on cancer health equity science
- Is recognized as a minority serving institution.

Students can engage in community-centered research and be immersed in experiential learning with VCU's many public health partners, including the Virginia Department of Health.

On April 3, 2024, the university announced that the school is officially on the path to recognition as a CEPH-accredited school of public health. The transition reflects the school and VCU's ongoing commitment to excellence in education, research and community outreach. Such recognition would build upon VCU's longstanding Master of Public Health program, which became the first CEPH-accredited MPH program in Virginia in 1996.

Mission and Vision

The School of Public Health's vision is well-being and longevity for all. As part of an urban public university and safety-net health system, the VCU School of Public Health is committed to improving health and well-being for all populations through education, discovery, knowledge dissemination, and co-learning from the communities it serves. To fulfill this mission, the school:

- Cultivates innovative thought leaders, creative scholars, informs communities and trains a diverse workforce equipped to serve Virginians, the nation and world.
- Leads research that is collaborative, rigorous, impactful and that promotes opportunities for all populations to have equitable health and well-being.
- Focuses on diverse populations with an emphasis on those who experience a disproportionate burden of illness or adverse outcomes to enhance opportunities for vibrant and healthy lives as a result of our education, research, practice, and service.

Departments and Programs

The School of Public Health comprises four foundational departments: Biostatistics, Epidemiology, Health Policy, and Social and Behavioral Sciences.

The school offers a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree with concentrations in Applied Public Health, Epidemiology or Cancer Health Equity Science.

Additional degree programs include the following:

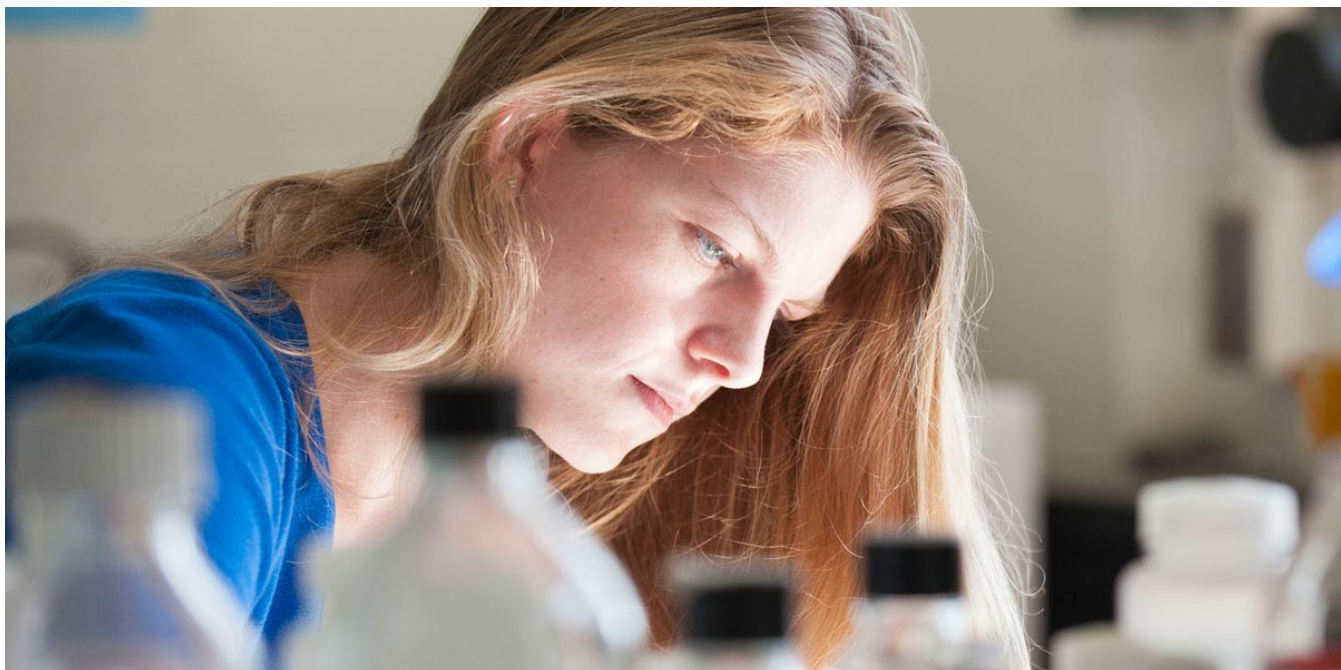
- PhD in Biostatistics
- PhD in Epidemiology
- PhD in Healthcare Policy and Research
- PhD in Social and Behavioral Sciences
- Master of Public Health
- Master of Science in Biostatistics
- Graduate Certificate in Genomics Data Science
- MD/PhD
- MSW/MPH
- PharmD/MPH

Research

Through rigorous research, the School of Public Health disseminates solutions to prevent disease and promote better health for all populations. Areas of research include:

- Chronic disease prevention and management
- Health policy research and evaluation
- Health disparities and health equity
- Oral health
- Cancer prevention and control
- Cancer care delivery
- Clinical trial design
- Genetic epidemiology
- Traumatic brain injury
- Social epidemiology
- Public health nutrition
- Sleep and circadian rhythm disturbance

In FY2023, faculty produced 321 publications, and the school was awarded 177 research grants and contracts totalling \$8.39 million in funded research. Current graduate students receive funding from NIH F30 Awards, NIJ Graduate Research Fellowships, and the NCI Geographic Management of Cancer Health Disparities Program (GMap).



Leadership



Vanessa B. Sheppard **Interim Founding Dean**

Vanessa Sheppard, PhD, was appointed the school's interim founding dean in April 2023. She also serves as associate director of community outreach engagement and health disparities research at VCU's Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Dr. Sheppard was previously associate vice president for population and public health strategic initiatives in VCU's Office of the Senior Vice President for Health Sciences. She has also held the Theresa A. Thomas Memorial Chair in Cancer Prevention and Control and served as chair of the Department of Health Behavior and Policy in the School of Medicine.

Prior to joining VCU, Dr. Sheppard was an associate professor in the Department of Oncology's breast cancer program at Georgetown University.

A leading expert in cancer health disparities and community-based research, Dr. Sheppard has dedicated her career to understanding and addressing the complex social, cultural and environmental factors that contribute to cancer disparities among diverse populations.

In 2022, the American Cancer Society recognized Dr. Sheppard as Researcher of the Year, noting the ways in which her innovative work has helped to identify effective strategies for promoting cancer prevention, screening and treatment in underserved communities.

Dr. Sheppard received a bachelor's degree in public administration and political science from James Madison University, a master's degree in sociology and urban affairs from Norfolk State University, and a PhD in epidemiology health services research from Eastern Virginia Medical School. She completed a fellowship in health services research at the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Health and Health Sciences Ecosystem at VCU

VCU offers exceptional undergraduate, graduate and professional programs across six nationally ranked health sciences schools or colleges committed to educational programs directed toward providing graduates capable of meeting the commonwealth's health care needs. Programs are dedicated to maintaining and updating the competency of health professionals in addition to preparing graduates to enter health professions. The educational programs are supported by an institutional commitment to effective teaching and VCU's 865-bed teaching hospital. We are committed to providing the very best in education, research and practice for the expansion of science and health care for Virginians and our growing global community.

VCU's renowned medical center, the region's only Level 1 trauma center, provides state-of-the-art care in more than 200 specialty areas. The academic medical center is home to one of only two NCI-designated Comprehensive Cancer Centers in Virginia and the region's only full-service children's hospital, as well as a community health center, dedicated research teams, facilities and valued partners in every field.

Colleges and Schools

- [College of Health Professions](#)
- [School of Dentistry](#)
- [School of Medicine](#)
- [School of Nursing](#)
- [School of Pharmacy](#)
- [School of Public Health](#)





VCU Center on Society and Health

A universitywide academic research center, the [Center on Society and Health](#) studies the health implications of social factors such as education, income, neighborhood and community environmental conditions and public policy. The center's work spans all geographic levels, from international comparisons between the U.S. and other countries to in-depth studies of the health of cities, communities and neighbors.

Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center

In 2023, the [National Cancer Institute](#) designated VCU's [Massey Cancer Center](#) a Comprehensive Cancer Center. One of only two comprehensive cancer centers in Virginia, Massey promises those living in its catchment area even greater access to life-saving cancer screenings and clinical trials offering leading-edge treatments, more resources for critical education about cancer risk and prevention, and care informed by the center's pre-eminent physician-scientists.

C. Kenneth and Dianne Wright Center for Clinical and Translational Research

The first federally funded clinical and translational research center in Virginia, the [Wright Center for Clinical and Translational Research](#) fosters research collaborations across the state and accelerates the translation of scientific discoveries to patient care. It provides the Commonwealth with infrastructure and resources that promote interdisciplinary human health research.

Office of Health Equity

The [Office of Health Equity](#) is a hub for health equity initiatives at VCU and VCU Health, connecting talent and expertise across the university and health system with that of community organizations to develop and build partnerships focused on addressing health inequities and disparities. The office works to infuse health equity principles into [education and training](#), [research](#), and [patient services](#) to remove barriers that create health inequities, including those related to geography, education, and social and financial resources.



About Virginia Commonwealth University

Located in the heart of Richmond, the capital of Virginia since 1779, Virginia Commonwealth University serves an integral role in the economic health of the city and the state, educating the current and future workforce, reaching out to the community, advancing research and enhancing patient care.

VCU was founded in 1838 as the medical department of Hampden-Sydney College, becoming the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) in 1854. In 1968, the General Assembly merged MCV with the Richmond Professional Institute, founded in 1917, to create Virginia Commonwealth University.

Today, VCU offers comprehensive undergraduate, master's, doctoral and professional programs and encompasses one of the largest academic health centers in the nation. With \$464 million in externally funded research awards in FY2023, VCU is one of only 69 public R1 doctoral universities in the country to be designated by the Carnegie Foundation as "Community Engaged" with "Highest Research Activity." VCU's centers and institutes of excellence support the University's research mission and involve faculty from multiple disciplines in the arts, public policy, biotechnology and health care discoveries.

VCU enrolls more than 28,500 students in more than 200 degree and certificate programs in the arts, sciences and humanities. The university has nearly 2,500 full-time instructional faculty who are nationally and internationally recognized for excellence in the arts, business, education, engineering, humanities, life sciences, social work and health care professions. With more than 25,000 employees, VCU and VCU Health generate \$6.3 billion in economic impact on the Richmond region.

Mission

Virginia Commonwealth University and its academic health sciences center serve as one national urban public research institution dedicated to the success and well-being of its students, patients, faculty, staff and community through:

- Real-world learning that furthers civic engagement, inquiry, discovery and innovation
- Research that expands the boundaries of new knowledge and creative expression and promotes translational applications to improve the quality of human life
- Interdisciplinary collaborations and community partnerships that advance innovation, enhance cultural and economic vitality, and solve society's most complex challenges
- Health sciences that preserve and restore health for all people, seek the cause and cure of diseases through groundbreaking research and educate those who serve humanity
- Deeply ingrained core values of diversity, inclusion and equity that provide a safe, trusting and supportive environment to explore, create, learn and serve.

Values

The following core values characterize VCU and all its pursuits:

- **Accountability.** Commit to the efficient and transparent stewardship of our resources to achieve institutional excellence
- **Achievement.** Pursue excellence in learning, research and scholarly pursuits; service; and patient care
- **Collaboration.** Foster respect, collegiality and cooperation to advance learning, entrepreneurship and inquiry
- **Freedom.** Strive for intellectual truth with responsibility and civility, respecting the dignity of all individuals
- **Innovation.** Cultivate discovery, creativity, originality, inventiveness and talent
- **Service.** Engage in the application of learning and discovery to improve the human condition and support the public good at home and abroad
- **Diversity and inclusion.** Ensure a climate of mutual trust and respect where individuals of different cultural backgrounds, identities, abilities and life experiences are embraced, engaged and empowered to drive excellence and success.
- **Integrity.** Adhere to the highest standards of honesty, respect, and professional and scholarly ethics.

Quest 2028 Strategic Plan

VCU's strategic plan, [Quest 2028: One VCU Together We Transform](#), sets the projected course for VCU through 2028, aligning goals between VCU and VCU Health. It represents an intentional refocusing of the institution's work serving the needs of Virginia, incorporating lessons learned during the global pandemic.

University Goals

- Diversity driving excellence
- Student success
- Research and innovation
- Thriving communities

VCU Health Goals

- Workforce wellness
- Patient-centered care
- Innovative research and education.
- Advance health equity



Leadership



Michael Rao President

Michael Rao, PhD, became president of Virginia Commonwealth University and chair of VCU Health System Authority in 2009. He is the first Asian-American to lead VCU and the fifth person to serve as president since the university's creation in 1968.

Rao has overseen one of the largest expansions of VCU's footprint through the construction or renovation of approximately 9 million square feet of living-learning environments, academic meeting spaces and state-of-the-art clinical and laboratory facilities. With guidance from the master facility plan, ONE VCU, the university's mission and physical environments will better align to support student success and patient experience while also focusing on safety, mobility and collaboration across programs. The VCU Engineering Research Building, the Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU Children's Pavilion, VCU Health's Adult Outpatient Pavilion and the state-of-the-art STEM building with expanded lab space and support for innovative teaching methods.

Rao serves as chair of the Virginia Bio+Tech Partnership Authority and is a member of the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, for whom he serves as its representative for the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities. Rao also is a senior executive advisory committee member with the Northern Virginia Technology Council. He served as chair of the Council of Presidents and is immediate past chair for the American Council on Education.

Rao's career in higher education began in California in 1992, when he became president of Mission College. At the time, he was the youngest college president in the nation. He went on to serve as chancellor of Montana State University-Northern and president of Central Michigan University.

A tenured professor in the VCU College of Health Professions, Rao holds a bachelor's degree from the University of South Florida and a PhD from the University of Florida.

Colleges and Schools

With more than 100 graduate and professional degree programs, more than 20 of which are ranked in the top 50 by *U.S. News & World Report*, VCU is the destination for artists, engineers, doctors, designers and anyone else who wants to reimagine the human experience and tackle the problems of tomorrow.

From world-renowned arts and advertising programs to its top-ranked hospital and health science schools, VCU is prototyping the future through unexpected collaborations. Students at VCU are encouraged to try new things, look for the solutions no one else has considered, and take their ideas to new heights.

- [College of Health Professions](#)
- [College of Humanities and Sciences](#)
- [School of the Arts](#)
- [School of Business](#)
- [School of Dentistry](#)
- [School of Education](#)
- [L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs](#)
- [Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture](#)
- [School of Medicine](#)
- [School of Nursing](#)
- [School of Pharmacy](#)
- [School of Public Health](#)
- [School of Social Work](#)
- [School of World Studies](#)
- [VCU Life Sciences](#)
- [da Vinci Center for Innovation](#)
- [Office of Research and Innovation](#)
- [Graduate School](#)
- [Honors College](#)
- [University College](#)





Richmond, Virginia

VCU is at the center of a vibrant community of 1.2 million people that is a top destination for creative thinkers and entrepreneurs, foodies and artists, and nonprofit and government leaders. The university generates nearly \$9.5 billion in economic activity in Virginia annually. With the highest concentration of Fortune 500 companies of any urban area in Virginia, Richmond is a great place to work.

Richmond has been described as a culinary powerhouse by Food & Wine, ranked No. 9 among U.S. cities for the highest hiring rates and open jobs by LinkedIn, and voted one of the best cities in the nation for creatives by Thrillist.

From campus, it's a 5-minute bike ride to the river and a 2-hour drive to Washington, D.C., the mountains, or the beach.

Richmond is the fifth most populous city in Virginia. From the ballet to NASCAR, the Historic Richmond Region promises something for everyone.

Richmond boasts a flourishing cultural community enhanced by first-class museums such as the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Science Museum of Virginia, Children's Museum, Edgar Allen Poe Museum, Valentine Museum, and the American Civil War Museum at Historic Tredegar.

The city is also home to the Richmond Symphony, Richmond Ballet, Concert Ballet of Virginia, and Virginia Opera Association.

Outdoors enthusiasts will enjoy the James and Appomattox Rivers, which provide for swimming, fishing, water skiing, boating and canoeing, among other activities in more than 10,700 acres of park land that flank the James River.

[Learn more about Richmond and Central Virginia.](#)

Procedure for Candidacy

All applications, nominations and inquiries are invited. Applications should include, as separate documents, (1) a CV; (2) a letter of interest addressing the themes in this profile; and (3) a Statement of Contributions to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (see below).

WittKieffer is assisting Virginia Commonwealth University in this search. Candidates will be considered until an appointment is made. Application materials should be submitted using WittKieffer's [candidate portal](#).

Nominations and inquiries can be directed to:

Philip Tang and Sarah Seavey
VCUEpiChair@wittkieffer.com

Statement of Contributions to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

This statement, typically 150 to 300 words, is an articulation of career aspirations and contributions toward promoting diversity, equity and inclusion. Applicants can share how their lived experiences and past, present, and future academic and professional activities have or will contribute to VCU's mission of promoting equity and inclusion. Examples include working with others to further the goals of equity and inclusion; leading in any capacity that tangibly promotes an environment where diversity is welcomed, fostered, and celebrated; creative activity, research and scholarship that promotes equity and parity; teaching and mentoring students; and/or engaging with faculty and/or staff from traditionally underrepresented groups to create a positive and successful organizational experience.

Virginia Commonwealth University is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution providing access to education and employment without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex, political affiliation, veteran status, genetic information, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or disability.

