



# Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs

## Leadership Profile

June 2025



*WittKieffer*

## Executive Summary

Reporting to the president, the Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs (Provost) serves as the university's chief academic officer with oversight of the core university functions, including academic affairs, faculty affairs, student affairs, strategic enrollment management, and student success. The provost is the second-ranking executive officer at VCU and serves as the president's partner in the articulation and execution of a compelling vision that builds on a history of excellence and access in higher education.

The provost partners closely with the president, the senior vice president for Finance and Administration and CFO, the senior vice president for Health Sciences and CEO of the VCU Health System, and other executive officers of the university in formulating the goals, priorities, and policies of the institution. They will work with deans and all campus leadership to design and implement the programs, organizational structure, and resource distribution for the institution. Direct reports to the provost include 12 campus deans, the vice president for Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success, the vice president for Student Affairs, the senior vice provost for Academic Affairs, the senior vice provost for Faculty Affairs, the senior vice provost for Academic Administration and Operations, the vice provost for Global Initiatives, the vice provost for Innovation and Strategic Design, the associate vice provost for Institutional Research and Decision Support, the vice provost for Community Engagement, and the executive assistant to the provost.

Located in the capital city of Richmond, Virginia, VCU was founded in 1838 as the medical department of Hampden-Sydney College; became the Medical College of Virginia just shy of two decades later; and merged with the Richmond Professional Institute in 1968 to create its current identity as a top 50 National Science Foundation public research university and health system. VCU provides unparalleled access for its students while producing ground-breaking research across all its disciplines. With a record \$506 million in sponsored research funding in FY2024, VCU is a member of and oversees national research consortia while also providing an exceptional undergraduate experience with a commitment to access. VCU has a total enrollment of more than 28,000 students and is currently experiencing annual growth. It employs more than 26,000 faculty and staff across its college campus and health system.

The most successful candidates will have the skills and experiences that enable them to provide innovative and collaborative leadership to advance an engaged and rising university whose core mission is to serve, along with its academic health sciences center, as one national urban public research institution committed to the success and well-being of its students, patients, faculty, staff and community. The ideal candidate will be a highly accomplished academic leader, hold an earned terminal degree, and bring a distinguished academic record that merits appointment as a tenured full professor at VCU. In addition, the individual must have significant administrative experience appropriate to the size and complexity of VCU. Preferably, candidates will have an understanding of the health sciences in a large academic medical center.

To submit a nomination or express personal interest in this position, please see the Procedure for Candidacy at the end of this document.

## Opportunities and Expectations for Leadership

### Serve as a voice for the university

As the second-ranking official and chief academic officer of VCU, the provost will represent the president in his absence and, in doing so, represent a united vision for VCU. The provost will engage the campus community in a clear and thoughtful manner that empowers faculty, staff, and students to fulfill the core mission of student success and to achieve the strategic goals that position VCU as the premier urban public research university. The office will have oversight for the collection and analysis of academic and institutional data and must always deliver an evidence-based message to all constituents in advancing institutional priorities. The provost should be someone who is respected and followed by all of VCU's academic programs, schools, and colleges under the VCU Board of Visitors and the president.

The provost will stay abreast of issues relating to the Commonwealth of Virginia and higher education as they impact the institution and disseminate that information as appropriate. In addition, the provost will be present and engage in crisis and in reputation management, addressing institutional challenges and clearly communicating those challenges and resolutions to both the campus community and external constituents.

The provost will continue to foster the upward trajectory of VCU as a national public research university and will work with the faculty and other leaders to lift the university's academic quality, needed research, and student success, along with the success of faculty and staff. The provost will be expected to lead VCU in fulfilling the principles and best practices expected of an education, research, and innovation leader.

### Promote a culture of shared governance

The provost must have a commitment to shared governance and be a consistent and vocal advocate for faculty, tapping into its great potential to advance research, creative endeavors, teaching, mentoring, and service. This person will work to promote a culture of transparency and collaboration across all constituencies by building consensus and trust in policy decisions that will advance institutional priorities. A civil and respectful leader, the provost will offer decisive management after seeking input and valuing contributions from the campus community and will communicate a clear sense of direction, then advocate for and empower community members to advance priorities and the larger vision and goals of VCU.

### Foster an academic community that supports all

VCU takes pride in its access mission, which is designed to provide an outstanding and transformational education through blind admission to the university. The institution has evolved to reflect the large, urban center it calls home and the increasing complexity of the world. With a focus on excellence and opportunity, the provost will lead efforts to attract and retain students, faculty, and staff and will cultivate a supportive environment that enables and promotes all student success and full engagement in the academic enterprise. The provost must have also demonstrated executing thoughtful strategies to recruit, retain, and develop faculty and staff at VCU with a focus on our academic and research mission.

### Support and grow funded research

Enhancing the university's reach, impact, and productivity in research, scholarship, innovative and creative activity, and outreach across the disciplines, with a particular focus on expanding VCU's funded research portfolio, will be an important area of focus for the next provost. Over the past six years, sponsored research funding has increased by 86%. The provost will continue to lead this trajectory as VCU establishes itself as the premier urban public research university in the country. This principled and disciplined leader will bring a holistic view of the research funding landscape and present a research program strategy that positions VCU for success



in the identification of funding opportunities and the receipt of awards. The provost will be an important partner to the vice president of research and innovation and the deans to promote the VCU research agenda.

### Optimize resources

The provost is expected to wisely and creatively allocate resources to achieve the academic mission of the university while also helping to develop additional resources to further the mission. In addition to strategically managing the academic budget for the institution, they will actively engage with the senior vice president for Finance and Administration and CFO in university-wide budget discussions and decisions, and participate fully in fundraising and donor relations. They will work to create an environment where innovation and excellence are priorities in resource allocation. In addition, the provost will drive discussions surrounding financial barriers that impact student access and persistence and work to ensure resources are available to support students in overcoming these barriers.



### Inspire the deans and academic leadership

The provost will serve as a cooperative and supportive partner and leader for the university's deans in further integrating their efforts and encouraging synergies and partnerships across disciplines and colleges — while also allowing each academic unit appropriate autonomy to create compelling opportunities and define success at the highest standards expected of research universities. The provost will clearly outline the integrated role the deans play in advancing the institutional agenda and define clear goals surrounding enrollments, fundraising, and curriculum that will contribute to the larger university's success. A strong leader, the provost will expect and hold high standards for research activity in all academic units, supporting and hiring faculty who are conscientiously fulfilling all aspects of our research-university mission. They will be comfortable with leveraging data to make informed decisions that will drive student success. They will ensure alignment between the academic units and the university by providing consultative and transparent leadership and mentoring to the deans on educational, organizational, resource management, fundraising, and leadership agendas. In partnership with the deans, the provost will ensure that the learning and research infrastructure is in place to support the academic initiatives and priorities of VCU.

### Focus on students

The provost must bring a student-centric approach to their work and ensure all decisions are made with consideration given to student engagement, success, and persistence. Addressing the unique barriers to student retention and graduation will be essential in increasing overall student outcomes. They will ensure students have opportunities for learning, participation, and leadership both in and out of the classroom. They must model civility, professionalism, and respect when addressing campus issues and crises. The provost must proceed directly, communicate clearly, and work with partners to guide conversations and seek resolution in balancing campus safety and the First Amendment. Integrating innovation and creativity, including new technologies, to strengthen learning opportunities and outcomes will be important as VCU expands delivery options. The provost must provide direction and leadership support for the Division of Student Affairs and the Division of Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success, which are tasked with supporting the academic mission of the university.

## Professional Qualifications and Personal Qualities

The ideal candidate will be a highly accomplished academic leader, hold an earned terminal degree, and bring a distinguished academic record that merits appointment as a tenured full professor at VCU. In addition, the individual must have significant administrative experience appropriate to the size and complexity of VCU.

The ideal candidate should possess extensive experience in providing successful academic leadership within institutions that would prepare them for this key position in a university of VCU's complex mission, size, and scale, preferably including an understanding of the health sciences in a large academic medical center.

Additionally, the next provost will possess many of these skills and attributes needed to be an effective provost at VCU:

### **Knowledge of the research/teaching environment in an urban public research university will require:**

- The ability to work closely and collaboratively with the president, senior administration, deans, faculty, staff, students, community partners, donors, and the Board of Visitors;
- Experience in working collaboratively with faculty, staff, and students in an environment of shared governance;
- Exceptional budgetary and financial management skills, including awareness of the near-term interdependencies and long-term implications of financial decisions in a large, complex organization;
- The ability to guide and assist deans and department chairs in managing and structuring their organizational resources to function effectively, including in the selective hiring of tenure/tenure track faculty;
- Advanced skills in managing grievances, complaints, and crises;
- Experience managing staff and administrative budgets; and
- A commitment to accountability through clear and relevant metrics.

### **Experience in higher education and a vision for the future of urban public research universities will require a deep commitment to and demonstrated experience in the following:**

- Excellence in faculty and staff hiring, retention, and development, including the successful, selective hiring of tenure and tenure-track faculty positions and promotions to those who will advance the research mission of the university;
- Increasing research, creativity, and innovation in all disciplines;
- Creating admissions programs that are grounded in access and educational excellence;
- Improving graduation rates;
- Increasing internship opportunities and workforce training for all students;
- Furthering access and opportunity for all individuals across the organization and an understanding of how to advance these priorities;
- Leveraging the research, innovation, and creativity created by the university to serve the larger community, state, nation, and world; and

- Experience in partnering with alumni around engagement and philanthropy.

**Personal skills and values that result in effective leadership at VCU will require:**

- Unwavering personal integrity and accountability;
- A sense of responsibility and urgency to complete tasks that advance the institution;
- A collaborative approach to working with staff, faculty, students, and fellow senior administrators that treats everyone as a respected partner;
- A strong set of communication skills that lead to effective interactions both inside and outside the university;
- A dedication to being part of the VCU and Richmond communities;
- A deep commitment to the importance of VCU to the state of Virginia and the importance of the urban public research university to the nation and the larger world; and
- A commitment to and appreciation of transparency, open communication, integrity, and trust-building.







## Virginia Commonwealth University: An Uncommon University

VCU is a place unlike any other. It represents distinctive excellence as evidenced through stories of a university and health system challenging preconceived notions and breaking through the sea of sameness prevalent in higher education and health care.

VCU is classified as a Carnegie Research I University and is designated a top 50 public research university by the National Science Foundation. U.S. News & World Report includes VCU in the top 20% of its list of “best global universities” and ranks many of the university’s schools and programs in the top 50 in the U.S., including fine arts, education, engineering, health sciences, and social work. Located in downtown Richmond, VCU enrolls nearly 29,000 students in more than 200 degree and certificate programs in the arts, sciences, and humanities, including many transdisciplinary programs and opportunities. The university maintains robust units of student affairs, as well as student enrollment management and student success, to support students and enhance their VCU experience. The VCU Health brand represents the health sciences schools of VCU, the VCU Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center, and the VCU Health System, which comprises VCU Medical Center (the only university and research-based medical center in the region), Community Memorial Hospital, Tappahannock Hospital, Children’s Hospital of Richmond at VCU, and MCV Physicians.

Today, VCU plays an integral role in the economic health of the city of Richmond, the region, and Commonwealth by providing the highest quality education for the current and future workforce, advancing research across a broad range of academic disciplines and enhancing the translation of research to serve the needs of the commonwealth and nation. Roughly 66% of VCU’s 229,000-plus alumni live in Virginia. The university and health system

combined contribute more than \$10 billion annually to the state's economy and therefore play a significant role in regional development and community planning.

## Strategic Plan

The university is guided by its strategic plan. VCU is a rare place of excellence with qualified access. The strategic plan charts the course in the coming years for VCU's rise as a pre-eminent urban, public research university committed to equitable access to social, economic, and health success. The plan addresses significant issues faced by all institutions of higher education, as well as those specific to VCU. The issues include:

- Growing cynicism that public higher education serves the public good and may not be worth the expense to individuals
- The significant challenge of the rising cost of education and providing affordable access and support for timely degree completion, regardless of students' particular demographic or group
- Increased competition in public higher education for students, faculty, government and philanthropic support, and national prominence
- Dependence on urban universities to lead in solving vexing societal issues, including health and economic vitality
- A recognition that resourcing the plan's strategic priorities will require an integrated, pan-university approach and will call for hard choices around resource allocation

## Academics

Offering more than 200 degree and certificate programs, VCU is a premier urban, public research university with a genuine commitment to the success of all students, combined with focused community service and an emphasis on challenging traditional learning models with innovative thinking that delivers results. One of 69 public universities to receive both a "Very High Research Activity" status and a "Community Engaged" designation from the Carnegie Foundation, VCU also boasts 10 programs in the U.S. News & World Report's top 10, as well as the No. 2 hospital in Virginia.

VCU is ranked among the top 50 U.S. public research universities by the National Science Foundation. Likewise, the university's emphasis on discovery and innovation creates an entrepreneurial spirit on campus. This mindset contributed to VCU being awarded more than \$500 million in sponsored research funding and 29 patents in the past year alone. VCU has a rich history in research and continues to be home to pioneers in discovery, the advancements of the arts and humanities, and world-renowned scientists who translate research to address real-world problems.

In addition to its contributions to the city of Richmond, VCU's Qatar campus offers undergraduate and graduate-level degrees, helping to advance the social, economic, and environmental development of that region. VCU's character, however, extends far beyond just the numbers. The unique backgrounds of the faculty, staff, and students create a vibrant, supportive atmosphere both in and out of the classroom.

## Colleges and Schools

- [College of Engineering](#)
- [College of Health Professions](#)
- [College of Humanities and Sciences](#)



- [Richard T. Robertson School of Communications](#)
- [School of World Studies](#)
- [School of Life Sciences and Sustainability](#) (effective 7-1-25)
  - (combines [VCU Life Sciences](#) and [Department of Biology](#))
- [School of the Arts](#)
  - VCUQ
- [School of Business](#)
- [School of Dentistry](#)
- [School of Education](#)
- [Honors College](#)
- [L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs](#)
- [School of Medicine](#)
- [School of Nursing](#)
- [School of Pharmacy](#)
- [School of Public Health](#)
- [School of Social Work](#)
- [VCU Graduate School](#)
- [Academy for Interdisciplinary Innovation at University College](#)



## Accreditation

VCU is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) to award baccalaureate, master's, doctoral, and first-professional degrees. The most recent decennial reaffirmation of accreditation was awarded in December 2024 with no formal recommendations for follow up. The university is committed to continuous improvement of its programs and services to ensure the quality and accessibility of its offerings. Accreditation and academic compliance are essential features of this process.

## Leadership

Michael Rao, Ph.D., became the fifth president of Virginia Commonwealth University in 2009 and has continued to cement VCU's place among the nation's premier urban, public research universities. Under VCU's strategic plan, Rao has piloted strategic efforts focused on academic quality, student success, and research that foster regional economic development and improve lives.

As president, Rao leads a prominent national public urban research university with an accompanying leading university medical center that is the largest employer in the Richmond area — with more than 26,000 employees. VCU Health is one of the nation's most comprehensive research-based health centers, which is ranked among the best hospitals in the country and was named the No. 1 hospital in the Richmond region by U.S. News & World Report. VCU's community impact, both economic and cultural, continues to grow and is evident in many ways,

including the university's renowned athletics program, the landmark Institute for Contemporary Art, the Medicines for All Institute, and the upcoming CoStar Center for Arts and Innovation.

Under Rao's leadership, VCU's place among national research universities continues to rise, with more than 20 graduate and first-professional programs ranked among the top 50 in the nation by U.S. News & World Report, including the nation's No. 1 sculpture program. He also oversaw one of the largest-ever expansions of VCU's master site plan, including the James W. and Frances G. McGlothlin Medical Education Center, the Academic Learning Commons, an expansion of the James Branch Cabell Library, the STEM Building and the in-patient Children's Tower at the Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU.

Rao has served as a strong, collaborative leader in higher education administration for more than 30 years, beginning in California in 1994, when he became president of Mission College and was, for a time, 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.

Rao holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of South Florida and a Ph.D. in higher education from the University of Florida. He and his wife, Monica, a watercolorist and graphic designer, have two sons.

## Finances

Historically, VCU has been a strong partner to and economic anchor for Richmond and its surrounding communities. Combined, VCU and the VCU Health System are the largest employer in the Richmond metropolitan area. VCU, its health system, and other related entities have cash and investments of approximately \$2.8 billion and an endowment balance of \$2.9 billion as of June 30, 2024.

VCU's sponsored research has also grown steadily in recent years and continues its upward trajectory. In 2024, sponsored research surpassed the half-billion-dollar mark. Based on the NSF HERD 2023 survey, VCU ranks among the top 15 percent of all U.S. research universities. The university's operating budget for FY2025 is \$1.66 billion.







## Richmond, Virginia

Richmond is a spirited and culturally alive city that feeds the energy on campus and provides unlimited opportunities for students. Richmond became the Commonwealth of Virginia's capital in 1779. The Richmond region is a vibrant, diverse, and growing community of more than 1.3 million people and is the ideal combination of small-town feel with intimate neighborhoods and local businesses and big-city offerings that include myriad theaters, galleries, music events, festivals, sports attractions, and more.

The city borders the James River, which offers more than 550 acres of parks, making it the perfect place for outdoor recreation. Richmond's location in the middle of the state allows for day or weekend trips to the beach, the mountains, or Washington, D.C. CNN Travel named it the top town to visit in 2024, and the Wall Street Journal recently ranked it No. 11 of U.S. cities with the hottest job markets. The metropolitan area is also home to eight Fortune 500 companies, a broad base of financial companies, hospitals and media firms, high-tech manufacturing companies, as well as state and local government agencies. The city is home to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, VCU's Institute for Contemporary Art, and additional cultural institutions that add deep enrichment opportunities.

In 2024, CNN named Richmond the No. 1 city to visit in America.

For more information on the city of Richmond, please visit:

[www.grpva.com/living-here](http://www.grpva.com/living-here)

[www.visitrichmondva.com](http://www.visitrichmondva.com)





## Procedure for Candidacy

All applications, nominations, and inquiries are invited. Applications should include, as separate documents, a CV or resume and a letter of interest addressing the themes in this profile.

WittKieffer is assisting Virginia Commonwealth University in this search. For fullest consideration, candidate materials should be received by July 31, 2025

Application materials should be submitted using WittKieffer's [candidate portal](#).

Nominations and inquiries can be directed to:

Zachary A. Smith, Ph.D., Sandra Chu, and Julia Bradley

[VCUProvost@wittkieffer.com](mailto:VCUProvost@wittkieffer.com)

*The material presented in this position specification should be relied on for informational purposes only. This material has been copied, compiled, or quoted in part from VCU documents and personal interviews and is believed to be reliable. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and factual situations govern.*

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