

Keeping Pace

The latest news from The Pace Center, VCU's Methodist Campus Ministry



Letter from the Associate Director

Dear Pace Supporter,

Pace's success is not measured solely by the number of students we welcome each semester. The greater measure of our success is the knowledge and empowerment students take with them when they leave. About $\frac{1}{3}$ of students at VCU are the first in their families to graduate from college. Because of this, many VCU students struggle to adjust to college life and to take advantage of available resources and opportunities to help them discover their calling.

As a graduate of VCU and a one-time lost student, I've come up against the hidden barriers to entry that first-generation college students experience. I personally had no idea what I needed from my college experience until I had already entered the job market. There was no plan in between college acceptance and graduation. So deep was my ignorance that when I entered school, I didn't understand that I had to determine a major to obtain a degree. College had always been my family's goal for me - I had to figure out on my own how to get to college graduation.

Many of our students are in this boat. They have a general idea of where to go, but might not have the tools to get there. While VCU prepares students academically, the Pace Center nurtures their gifts and dreams, asking them what they enjoy, what they are good at, and what gifts others have that can benefit the entire community. Pace teaches students to ask questions, meet people, and get involved. We encourage students to build community in their classes, their school communities, and their jobs after school.

At Pace, students learn how to pause, look within, find their gifts, and create community. Our true measure of success is in the power we help students find within themselves. In this issue of Keeping Pace, we will show you how Pace has impacted students socially (pg. 2), in their current roles while attending VCU (pg. 4), and in their post-graduate roles (pg. 6). We hope you enjoy learning about the incredible work Pace students are doing to build community at Pace and beyond!

Jean Linnell
Associate Director

Finding your Social Stride

By Ami Zhang, VCU Sophomore

VCU is a place where saying hello to strangers seems strange, where people tend to avoid eye contact with each other on the sidewalks, and default to their phones when they become bored. People don't seem to know how to interact with each other anymore. The Pace Center is one of the few places on campus where people are able to share face-to-face conversations without the distraction of a phone. When students walk through Pace's doors, they are surprised that students and staff remember their names and ask them about their day. Pace Fellow, Mary Wells, recalled the second time she came to Pace: "I remember going to Pace, and Russ [Pace's Student Engagement Coordinator] remembering my name, and that got me so excited!"

Mary considers herself to be an extroverted person but struggled to make deep connections during her first semester at VCU. Mary, a freshman in forensic science, was looking for ways to be more involved on campus and find new friends. She volunteered for Community Cafe, a \$1 culturally-themed lunch, and felt at home while working in the kitchen. "We made Chicken Noodle Soup.



Mary Wells (center) at Pace event, Strings & Things.

Helping to cook made me feel really at home because that's what I would have done with my family. That was the first bowl of food I had eaten that week because it had just been really hard for me to eat up until that point - just dealing with everything that was going on," said Mary. "Having people to talk to and sit with while I ate gave me the space to be able to help myself and eat."

Mary came back the next day for Walk-A-Dog - a weekly event where students can meet new people as they walk around the park. At Pace, she felt accepted and comfortable. Mary is now a leader of Walk-A-Dog, and even started Pots N' Pals, an event where students can come together to learn to cook. She considers Pace to be a place she can turn to when she feels alone.

Many students feel nervous and shy when they first come to Pace. But by becoming involved with Pace, they have become leaders that are confident in their communication skills. Jaqui Ruiz, a senior in psychology, noted how anxious she was when she first came to Pace. "Just talking to somebody - even if it's just a friend of a friend - would intimidate me so much and I would get so anxious, and panic and think like, what should I say next?" Jaqui pushed herself to attend Strings N' Things, a weekly fiber craft group, and found a supportive community within that space. From there, Jacqui became a leader of several Pace events such as Common Grounds - a weekly

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"Once the pandemic hit, I was so isolated and so used to keeping to myself. Getting out of that bubble was so hard".

- Jaqui, 2023 VCU graduate, Psychology

conversation over coffee - and Gamin' and Jammin' - a community game night. "I feel so much more confident now because I've practiced asking people questions so much at Pace," Jaqui said. "Conversation comes more naturally now."

Even students who were leaders before the pandemic felt isolated and became unsure of their abilities after being alone for so long. Katie Petring, a junior in forensic science, was the president of her speech and debate club in high school but lost her stride during the pandemic. "During covid, there was nothing to do at VCU, so I moved back home and was super depressed. There wasn't a lot to look forward to."

She started looking for ways to get involved through Pace and Eta Lambda Sigma, a professional fraternity. At Pace, students' welcoming attitudes and encouragement helped Katie thrive. She started taking more leadership roles both in Pace and in her classes. Katie is proud to say that she is no longer sitting in the background. Now, she's founding an American Sign Language Club at VCU and is working with Pace and the American Red Cross to establish a more robust volunteer program around Red Cross Blood Drives.

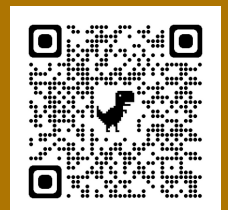
Many students struggle to find a sense of belonging on VCU's campus. There are thousands of students, hundreds of events and clubs, and finding one's fit can be frustrating. There is a sense of belonging that students have here at Pace, because we genuinely care about each other. Students who were initially shy and unsure become confident in their abilities, and Pace will continue to support them through their journey to become the leaders they hope to be.

Duke Award & Cohort Update

This spring, Pace was selected to receive a Traditioned Innovation Award from Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School. These awards recognize initiatives that engage in experiments to transform communities by living out the convictions of an ancient faith in the current, challenging circumstances of our time. As part of our continuing relationship with Duke Divinity School, Pace was also invited to participate in Duke's Foundations of Christian Leadership Program. The program brings together emerging leaders from a variety of faith-based organizations to explore concepts of traditioned innovation, transformative leadership, and form a learning community rooted in Christian practices.

Emerging leaders from all over the US gathered at the Pace Center. Rev. Katie Gooch shared Pace's unique story of innovation and growth with Christian Leaders from churches, seminaries, and faith-based nonprofits. Rev. Kelley Connelly of the Pace Center and Second Presbyterian Church (USA) in Richmond attended the program as an emerging faith leader. "It was a healthy space to discern and reflect with other people who work to help communities thrive." Kelley reflected, "The participants all really liked Pace as an example because Pace is living into what the program teaches - holy listening and practical ministry concepts." Not only did Kelley gain a lot from the experience, she thinks other participants did too. One leader, Dr. Chris Burton (Director of the Leadership Institute at Union Presbyterian Seminary), noted how impressive it was that students took the initiative to host the meal, set the table, and arrange the furniture instead of staff. "Pace allows students to lead and express their gifts," said Kelley. "It was a great example of ABCD that program participants really latched onto."

Read more about Pace's Traditioned Innovation Award by scanning the QR code or visiting our website: www.thepacecenter.com/press.



Experimenting with ABCD at VCU

College is a time for experimentation and unparalleled discovery. Not only are students learning content that applies to their major, but they are also connecting the dots between their childhood and their budding adult lives. They are determining their passions and gifts. Students who have participated in Pace's Fellowship program are eager to apply the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) training they learned to their other interests.

-- CLIMATE CAFÉ --

Rising junior, Selma-Ait Bella is a research assistant to Professor Jesse Goldstein and participated in Pace's Fellowship program during her freshman year. "My professor had heard about this concept called the 'Climate Café' and was wondering how we could do it here at VCU." The "Climate Café" is a concept introduced by the Climate Psychology Alliance in which people come together to discuss their emotions regarding the climate crisis.

"We wanted to create a space where people weren't intellectualizing something as enormous as the climate crisis - which is something that students are asked to do in our classes all the time," said Selma. "It can be difficult to process how it's actually making us *feel* when we're just throwing facts around."

Selma worked with Professor Goldstein to plan the first event. Ten students gathered in Pace's Sanctuary and were each given the chance to pick up an object - a seashell, a gourd, a piece of nutmeg, a statue of a cow - and reflect on what that object made them



Selma Ait-Bella facilitated an event which helped students process their emotions around the climate crisis.

think of or feel in relation to climate change. The objects were a helpful way to begin to connect the room to the students' emotional landscapes.

Several students reflected on how they viewed the world as a child and how that vision - as well as their understanding of the world and the tangible character of the world - is changing. One student spoke of growing up in rural southwestern Virginia. She recalled family discussions about a natural gas pipeline that was being built through her backyard. "My childhood was all about nature, but that pipeline existed in my childhood too."

"The focus on conversation and the idea that everybody who walks into the space has something to share - their own stories and experiences - is what made this event a good fit for Pace," said Selma. Pace's resources allow students to experiment with community building in their chosen context. "If we can give students the resources they need to build community - the space and the program funds," said Rev. Katie Gooch, Director of the Pace Center, "then they are able to stop worrying about funding and start inviting people in."

"Projects like this help create shared spaces of intimacy and vulnerability that are crucial - in my opinion - to building community and a sense of shared responsibility - for the world and

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“I had to remind myself that people are humans. They’re not just text messages on a screen. Obviously, that was there, but you just don’t put it together during COVID when everything is just kind of blah.”

-Katie, VCU junior, Forensic Science

for each other.” said Professor Goldstien. “I was overall incredibly impressed with their maturity and self-awareness - but not surprised. I know they have it in them and just need spaces like this to express that side of themselves.”

-- STUDYING IN COMMUNITY --

Many VCU students are still experiencing feelings of isolation exacerbated by the pandemic. Events where they are able to see other students share and be vulnerable can be gateways to finding the community that many of them long for. Student Ami Zhang, another graduate of Pace’s Fellowship program, noticed a lack of community in one of her online classes:

“During fall semester, I really struggled with an online class I was in. It was completely remote and I didn’t really have any support from the teacher or the other students,” said Ami, a rising Junior majoring in graphic design. “I started to wonder: what if other students felt isolated from the teachers and students? I wanted to find a way to bring students together to help each other study and excel in school.”

Combining ABCD practices and research tools Ami learned about in her classes, Ami started surveying students about their study habits. “I analyzed the data and figured out what the top issues were for studying,” said Ami. “Then, I created a focus group. I gathered some people together and we just talked about studying issues.” Ami’s focus group decided to create a social study event based around the concept of the Pomodoro Technique - they would study for 25 mins and then take a 5 min social break. “The break helps you refresh your mind before jumping back into studying. It helps you maintain concentration.”

-- FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM --

The Fellowship program helped Ami feel empowered to survey students, invite students to be a part of the focus group, and ultimately, to create the Pomodoro event. “I learned a lot about ABCD in Fellowship and it taught me to figure out what the strengths and skills of your fellow members are and how to learn from each other.” Through the focus group, Ami was able to

determine students’ passions and hopes around studying. “Another really big thing that I took away from Fellowship was just learning to be open and start conversations with people. I learned how to connect with others. That helped me with the focus group because I got to know the participants a little and helped people warm up before jumping into the actual focus group. I feel like it helped me get better feedback and more honest opinions.”

Selma also felt that the Fellowship program helped her hone the tools to be a successful moderator for the Climate Cafe: “I realized facilitation is one of those gifts I didn’t think I had until I came to Pace and was asked to share it. Once I kind of told myself, ‘Really, this is just making a space for people to listen in a way that lets every person share,’ I was like, ‘I can definitely do this!’”



Ami Zhang used techniques learned in Pace’s Fellowship to start a study community.

Servant Leadership in the Wild

When students learn Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) techniques, they're practicing Servant Leadership. Servant Leaders help promote the specific gifts of those they are leading. By doing so, they empower members of their communities to become leaders as well. Pace leaders learn the principles of Servant Leadership and then practice them through the programs and events they create at Pace. We asked some current and former Pace students how they continue to practice Servant Leadership in their roles after VCU.



**MICHAEL
WOODS**

**@ NUCLEAR
ENGINEER**

Michael graduated from VCU in 2019 with an MD in Nuclear Engineering. He now works at the Idaho National Laboratory. "Other than all of the recipes I noted down and shamelessly lifted from the many friends who cooked for Community Café, I learned that there is always potential for community improvement. Pace started with a building, a leader, and a few students, which seems like a lack of or abundance of resources depending on your perspective. I also learned that ABCD in particular can help any individual or group to start engaging and improving that community. I have used ABCD at my workplace community, encouraging others and myself to identify and lean into their assets (leadership skills, communication, geniality, organization, etc.) as we engage with each other."



**NIARA
GRAY**
**@ 6TH GRADE
ENGLISH TUDOR**

Niara is a VCU senior with a dual major of Biology and Forensic Science. During a semester off, she worked as a 6th-grade English tutor at Albert Hill Elementary School.

"Being at Pace has made me more open-minded and helped me to focus on finding ways to inspire people to recognize the knowledge they have to offer the world. I found ways to give students the opportunity to share something they liked or share about their personal lives during my tutoring sessions. They are a lot more engaged when they are offered space to contribute versus just asking them to do a worksheet. They are able to share their assets with the group and I'm always pleasantly surprised by how much the students have to share with me and teach me."



**VICKY
TRAN**

@ DENTISTRY PROGRAM

Vicky graduated in 2022 and is currently studying at the University of California San Francisco's Dental School. "SF is a very different community than what I am used to and it's taking me time to adjust. But, I think Pace has really primed me for whatever community I may be in and taught me to find ways to connect to others through food, music, etc., Pace also helped me realize that I bring a unique set of experiences to the table that I can share with others and help widen their perspective. My dental program encourages students to be a part of the community through high school outreach and free dental clinics. It's a prime example of ABCD as we get to share our skills in dentistry with the community."

Meet Lynn Pelco

Dr. Lynn E. Pelco is the Interim Director of the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) at the University of Richmond. Before coming to the University of Richmond, Dr. Pelco served for more than a decade as the Associate Vice Provost for Community Engagement at VCU and held an affiliate faculty appointment in the VCU School of Education. Lynn joined Pace's board in 2021 and is currently serving as the chair of the Strategic Planning and Evaluation Committee.

1) How were you initially introduced to the Pace Center? When I worked as the Associate Vice Provost for Civic Engagement at VCU several years ago, part of my role was to support faculty members who were interested in partnering with community organizations to enhance their teaching or research. Several of those faculty members were working with Pace, and it was through them that I was first introduced to Pace. I have always been drawn to assets-focused work, so after a long lunch conversation with Pace's director, Rev. Katie Gooch, I knew I wanted to get more deeply connected with the Center's work. When I left VCU in 2021, Katie approached me to ask if I'd be interested in serving on the board. I jumped at the opportunity, and since then I have deepened my understanding of the impact that Pace makes on the students who participate in its programs.

2) How has Pace's ABCD ideology impacted you? I have learned that once a person orients their perspective to the assets (ABCD) approach used at Pace, it becomes hard to ignore seeing assets in all contexts - and on the flip side, one begins to notice when an assets perspective is missing. Now that I have that insight I think I've become a bit of an ABCD promoter - introducing the ideology to others, especially to university students and the faculty and staff members who work with them. I definitely try to implement ABCD principles when I'm working with universities and especially when I am supervising staff members.



Lynn Pelco is a member of the Pace Center's Board of Directors.

3) What have you enjoyed most about working with Pace/VCU students? It was such a pleasure for me to be able to facilitate one of the Student Circles last semester and to interact regularly with the students who sit on Pace's board. The Pace/VCU students' knowledge and perspectives never fail to add an important dimension to the discussion, and they invariably provide unique insights into the work at hand. Last summer, for example, we collaborated with a few of the Pace/VCU students to create and present an organizational "pitch", which was videotaped and now lives on the Pace 'About Us' webpage. The student collaborators were brilliant, and it was their ideas that made our pitch truly authentic and engaging. We couldn't do what we do without them!

“I was afraid to come tonight because I was afraid that I was going to sound dumb, because I'm new to this. I just forced myself to leave my dorm. To start walking. Having other people share is helpful - watching other people feel vulnerable.”

- Freshman student attendee of Climate Café event



Much Love for the Virginia Conference's Campus Ministries

This spring, the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church made a video featuring campus ministries at Virginia colleges to highlight the importance of campus ministries in our collective faith communities. Pace's students were selected to design and paint part of the mural - huge, painted letters spelling LOVE - which is now on display at the VAUMC conference center. Student Carée McDonald, a VCU undergrad majoring in fine arts, enjoyed designing and outlining a cityscape to represent campus ministries in urban settings throughout Virginia. Pace's students were excited for the opportunity to share with the United Methodist Church the impact its support has had in their lives.



Scan the QR code to watch the full video or visit thepacecenter.com/press.

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REFER A VCU STUDENT

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