



DEMOCRACY IN ACTION



UNIVERSITY
of VIRGINIA

Weldon Cooper Center
for Public Service

Annual Impact Report
July 1, 2021- December 31, 2022

Reimagining Public Service

The faculty and staff of the Weldon Cooper Center are pleased to share this annual report highlighting just a few of the successes of the past 18 months. In that time we, like so many, weathered the second half of the global pandemic, emerging leaner and with lessons learned. Throughout 2021 and 2022, we kept our focus on our mission and vision, as described in our first strategic plan, [Reimagining Public Service](#). Guided by the values of access, collaboration, and impact, we have made significant strides in providing services designed to build strong communities across Virginia.

“The Weldon Cooper Center makes real the promise that democracy is delivered through everyday actions and decisions by public servants and policy makers across the commonwealth,” according to UVA Provost Ian Baucom. “This is a tangible expression of the center’s role as an experiential, practical arm of the Karsh Institute of Democracy.” The Cooper Center provides leadership development; consulting; data; analysis; and research-based, unbiased information to those who need it, so they in turn can make good decisions on behalf of our citizenry. This is an expression of our unique position at the University of Virginia, which strives to be both great and good in service to the public.

We hope you will enjoy learning about just a few of our efforts in this regard.



Public Impact Research in Action

Projecting School Enrollment

“Nothing could be more important than making sure our schools have the help they need. The Cooper Center is making a crucial planning tool available to all of our school divisions and helping state government understand the changing needs of the Commonwealth’s K-12 environment.”

SENATOR MONTY MASON
1st District, Virginia

The Weldon Cooper Center was awarded state funding in 2021 to produce five-year school enrollment projections for every school division in the Commonwealth. Prior to this, there was no centralized statewide production or delivery of this data, despite it being critical to school boards’ annual planning.

School enrollment projections help school leadership anticipate upcoming need for classrooms, teachers, and materials, and influences capital construction, school district alignment, bus routes, and the efficient operation of school divisions. Developing projections that are uniform across divisions and making them freely available regardless of divisional funds is critical for accurate planning in Virginia’s public schools.





Galvin Li, Graduate Research Assistant

Providing Critical Data for Virginia Communities

Galvin Li, a graduate student in Statistics, started working for the Cooper Center in spring 2022. A key project for Galvin was analyzing the reliability of school-age population counts for Virginia's towns, understanding that even a small discrepancy in the data could affect funding allocations. "This project let me truly appreciate the critical role demographic data plays in policymaking and the cascading impacts census quality has, even outside of politics," said Galvin. In addition, Galvin assisted with Virginia population estimates and country-wide usage trends of the Cooper Center National Population Projections.

"Numbers don't have any meaning by themselves, but visualizations and analyses breathe life into them, letting them tell a story of something that happened in the past, of what decisions should be made in the present, of what might occur in the future. Applying skills on the job could not be more different (and more effective!) than learning them in class."

GALVIN LI

UVA graduate student in Statistics

Virginia Institute of Government

Preparing Leaders for Current Challenges

One of the most powerful ways to change the world is through local government. With that in mind, the Virginia Institute of Government team met with local government leaders to find out what they most need in leadership programs. Based on those conversations, they retooled the Senior Executive Institute (SEI) and the Leading, Education and Developing (LEAD) programs to create a highly interactive experience, focused on the skills today's leaders need.

The new programming, implemented in 2022, is still rooted in the daily experiences of local government leaders while taking the present-day societal climate into account. New sessions feature inclusive leadership approaches; diversity, equity and inclusion; strategies for increased engagement; and leading at all levels. Participants engage with peers and local government experts to learn how to effectively lead an organization through change.

"In comparison to other leadership development programs, LEAD is one of the best I have attended. The new LEAD program is much more interactive. The sessions are interesting, engaging, and integrate modern concepts and methods."

JAY LEIPZIG

LEAD alumni (2017, 2021)
Johnson County, KS



Virginia Solar Initiative

Helping Localities Prepare for Solar

As solar development gains visibility and viability as an alternative energy source, localities need technical assistance related to developing land use, zoning, and economic policies and ordinances. Prior to the Virginia Solar Initiative, there were no sources of unbiased and research-based information that localities and developers alike could turn to in Virginia.

To gain better insights and a comprehensive view across the state, the Virginia Solar Initiative and Virginia Energy partnered to develop a statewide solar survey, publishing results in April 2022. Using the results, the Virginia Solar Initiative is developing online and computational tools and resources as well as best practices guidance to help localities navigate this new landscape.

The Weldon Cooper Center and Virginia Energy also serve as no-cost technical partners with SolSmart to help local communities gain SolSmart Bronze, Silver, or Gold designation, indicating readiness for solar. These efforts contribute to expanding local solar markets and creating local jobs. As of this writing, 28 communities in Virginia are SolSmart designated.

82%

of cities and
counties
responded
to a statewide
Solar Survey



Irene Cox, Public Policy Intern at UVA

Advancing Solar in Virginia

Irene Cox is earning her master's degree in Public Policy at the University of Virginia's Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy. In spring 2022, she was hired to work as a research assistant with the Virginia Solar Initiative (VSI), part of the Weldon Cooper Center's Energy Transition Initiative. The goal of VSI is to meet localities' need for unbiased and research-based resources, tools, and guidance in their decisions about solar implementation.

Like any major industry, plans for solar include both the installation and eventual retirement and removal of utility-scale facilities. Irene was tasked with helping local governments think through how they would decommission solar sites when the time came.

"As a public policy intern with the Weldon Cooper Center, Irene conducted public impact research, producing an important white paper on solar decommissioning. Due to the high quality of her work, her paper is regarded as the state's preeminent resource on solar decommissioning."

ELIZABETH MARSHALL

Senior Project Manager and Irene Cox's supervisor

Irene researched state and local laws, recommendations from state and federal agencies, and approaches in other markets and compiled her findings in a report, "Decommissioning Utility-Scale Solar Facilities: Financial Best Practices for Virginia Localities," that provides stakeholders with a roadmap to consider when implementing solar.

68

students
interned with
the Weldon
Cooper Center





Culpeper County Public Schools Survey Helping Schools Keep Students Healthy

In both 2017 and 2022 Culpeper County Public Schools contracted with the Center for Survey Research to conduct a “Youth Risk Behaviors and Experiences Survey” through a grant provided by the Culpeper Wellness Foundation. The anonymous survey asked about a number of health-related behaviors and the experiences of 7th through 12th grade students.

The data from the surveys were used by the School Health Advisory Board to develop goals and strategies to improve student wellness in the domains of nutrition, physical activity, and social and emotional well-being. The survey data has been deployed by the School Board to win numerous grants for the public schools and other community organizations that have developed services and programs promoting safety and good health for Culpeper County youth.

“The report has been widely disseminated throughout the Culpeper community. I have people calling me regularly to get it. And it’s not just the schools that have been using the data from Weldon Cooper. It’s really given area nonprofits data to enhance their missions.”

RUSSELL HOUCK

Executive Director, Student Services
Culpeper County Public Schools

Local Government Equity Clinic

Bringing Equity Training to Local Leaders



"The Equity Clinic opened my eyes to a lot of different things. DEI is about equity for all, inclusion for all. The program challenged me to look through a different lens and taught me how to start conversations when appropriate or think of other ways to engage people."

LETECIA LOADHOLT
Fredericksburg, Virginia
Equity Clinic attendee

Our purpose

is to better understand what it means to
{ apply an equity lens }
in practice and to increase confidence
in articulating that process to other people.

SIRI RUSSELL

Equity Clinic Co-Founder | Assoc. Dean, DEI, UVA School of Data Science

The Local Government Equity Clinic was developed jointly by the UVA School of Data Science and the Virginia Institute of Government to promote good governance, equity, and resiliency. In the fall of 2021, Equity Clinic co-founders, Molly Harlow and Siri Russell, welcomed the first cohort of local government leaders from across the Commonwealth who met monthly online. They discussed common challenges, reviewed nuanced terms and topics, and experimented with new ideas, focusing on the role of local government in facilitating equity in the community.

Clinic participants had the opportunity to hear from a variety of speakers who have been DEI pioneers in their own localities and to engage in hands-on work sessions to apply the concepts discussed in sessions. A second clinic began in September 2022 and will run through May 2023.

Virginia Flood Resilience Initiative

Working Together for a More Resilient Virginia

Businesses forced to close for days at a time, residents unable to access emergency services, damage to critical infrastructure—the danger, expense and stress caused by flooding is not only common to the urban coastal regions in Virginia, but also to rural inland localities, like the town of South Boston. But rural areas typically have fewer resources to dedicate to flood planning and mitigation strategies.

The Virginia Flood Resilience Initiative recognizes this challenge and is helping underserved Virginia localities assess their flood risk and develop actionable flood resilience plans. An interdisciplinary team of UVA experts from the Weldon Cooper Center, the School of Engineering and Applied Science, and the School of Architecture are working together with community leaders to develop customized plans that meet unique regional needs.

The success of the initiative depends on effective engagement with community leaders. This year, the Flood Initiative partnered with two planning district commissions to develop roadmaps: one in Southwest Virginia (LENOWISCO) and one in Southern Virginia (Southside). The UVA team plans to seek additional funding for further studies and implementation.

“We aim to provide critically needed assistance to vulnerable communities across Virginia through developing partnerships and working closely with localities.”

BILL SHOBE

Flood Initiative Lead and
Center for Economic and
Policy Studies Director

Brandi Schaffer

UVA Wise undergraduate student Brandi Schaffer joined the flood resilience team for an interdisciplinary summer internship with the Weldon Cooper Center and School of Engineering. Brandi is pursuing a B.A. in Earth Science and chose to join the VCFPF team “in search of a meaningful and educational summer internship opportunity or assistant research position in climate resilience.”

Over the course of her internship, Brandi worked with the Cooper Center to learn project management and planning skills, and under the direction of Assistant Professor of Engineering Majid Shafiee-Jood, she learned and practiced technical research and analysis, mapping and evaluating areas of flood risk and vulnerability in the region where she lives and goes to school.

student
spotlight

Wallerstein Scholars Program

Shaping the Next Generation of Public Service Leaders

“My experience as a Wallerstein Scholar helped me understand the genuine importance of community engagement. Written data or calculated numbers can only tell you a fraction of what there is to understand about any population. It’s listening to the lived experiences of people—to what local knowledge they want to share—that is key to understanding a community as an outsider.”

ALANNAH BELL

Repair Lab intern and fourth-year UVA undergraduate

Alannah Bell served as a Wallerstein Scholar policy intern for the UVA Repair Lab’s Environmental Justice Policy Clinic, which seeks to understand more deeply the relationship between racial injustice and climate change. Her project, “Wading between Two Titans,” aims to develop a policy proposal protecting renters living in areas of Norfolk, Virginia that are at risk of flooding.

According to Jonna Yarrington, director of the Clinic, “Alannah went far beyond straightforward research assistance to engage creatively in developing policy recommendations, investigating a variety of source materials, collaborating with the clinic’s practitioner, seeking feedback from experts, and making policy and history accessible to the public.”

The Wallerstein Scholars Program is a collaboration between the Virginia Municipal League, the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center, and the UVA Internship Placement program. It was established in 1973 to foster interest and research in Virginia local government. The program annually engages UVA students in policy research and analysis; it aims to equip students with hands on public service and policy experience, to support their professional development, and to provide the Commonwealth of Virginia with practical, useful research.





The Sorensen Institute

Emphasizing Ethics in Public Leadership

Sorensen programs have long featured a component on ethics in the context of public leadership. Questions about what constitutes ethical behavior have become more visible and important over the last decade. In response, Sorensen has expanded its ethics training, thanks to a five-year grant. In the newest ethics segment, participants consider how they would respond to scenarios posing real-world ethical dilemmas faced by public leaders, in the atmosphere of trust and honest exchange that is a hallmark of Sorensen's training.

The expanded ethical curriculum is presented in Hampton, Virginia, together with a visit to Fort Monroe. This site has deep connections to both Virginia's and the nation's history, and gives a meaningful context to important ethical challenges we have faced—and continue to face—as Americans and Virginians.

"A key goal for Sorensen is to strengthen current and future leaders' capacities, so they are more conscious of ethical challenges that arise, and they feel capable of addressing situations that pose difficult ethical choices."

LARRY ROBERTS

Director, Sorensen Institute For Political Leadership

Virginia Institute of Government Consulting with Local Governments

In the wake of the pandemic, local governments and state agencies are seeing the ripple effects of federal-level partisanship and have difficulty attracting and retaining a qualified workforce. These organizations rely on the Virginia Institute of Government's expertise to navigate the challenges facing their communities. VIG answers this call to service by offering strategic planning, organizational development, community/economic development, facilitation, mediation, diversity, equity, and inclusion training, and customized consulting services to elected local governing bodies, city/town managers and county administrators, state agency leaders, and the teams they lead. By deploying Director Charles Hartgrove and a cadre of consultants with decades of government service, VIG has served 18 localities and two state agencies over the past two years – and counting.



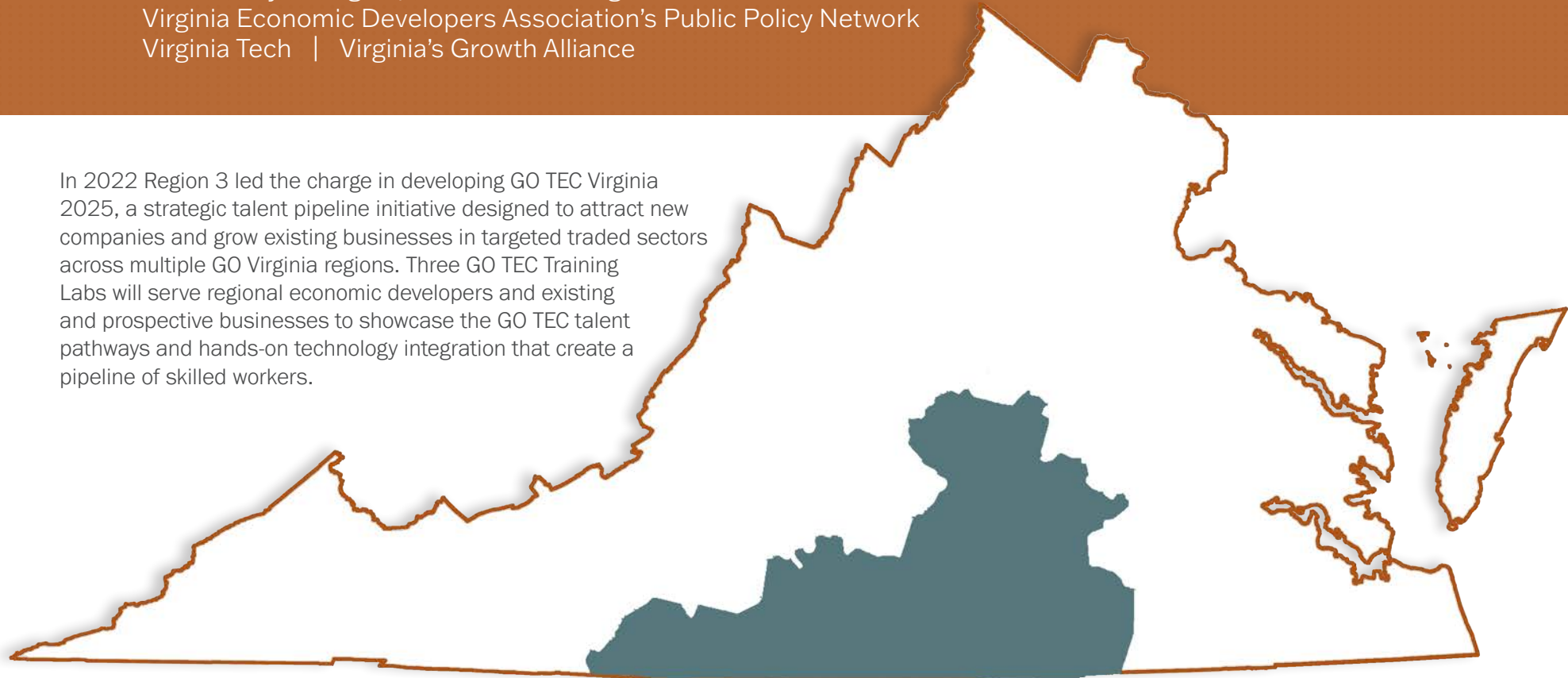
Cooper Center and Go Virginia Region 3

Building Partnerships in Southern Virginia

The Cooper Center's relationship with Go Virginia Region 3 has spurred effective partnerships throughout Southern Virginia. Program Director Bryan David has nurtured collaborations with a diverse range of entities interested in the success and vitality of this vibrant region of Virginia, including:

Commonwealth Regional Council | Community Flood Prevention Fund | Danville Community College
Institute for Advanced Learning & Research | Longwood University Regional Council | Mid-Atlantic
Broadband Communities Corporation | Patrick & Henry Community College | Southern Virginia
Partnership for Health Sciences Careers | Southside District Planning Commission | Southside Virginia
Community College | The Danville Regional Foundation
Virginia Economic Developers Association's Public Policy Network
Virginia Tech | Virginia's Growth Alliance

In 2022 Region 3 led the charge in developing GO TEC Virginia 2025, a strategic talent pipeline initiative designed to attract new companies and grow existing businesses in targeted traded sectors across multiple GO Virginia regions. Three GO TEC Training Labs will serve regional economic developers and existing and prospective businesses to showcase the GO TEC talent pathways and hands-on technology integration that create a pipeline of skilled workers.



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