Reimagining Public Service

Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service
2020-2025 Strategic Plan
This transformative time in the nation and at the University of Virginia inspires broader and greater civic engagement than we have seen in over a half century. Political norms, governmental institutions, and traditional notions of civil society are called to change, to prioritize equity, and to embody inclusivity. We can see clearly now that public problems are interconnected and not limited by jurisdictional boundaries across Virginia’s rural and urban communities, the nation, and around the world.

Within this shifting landscape and through this five-year strategic plan, the Weldon Cooper Center aims to build on our historical strengths, while joining forces with the increasingly diverse group of stakeholders and leaders working diligently to improve public life in Virginia and beyond. The spark of public service has been ignited; the reality of our interdependence is now clear; the need for a new approach to public service essential.

We step forward now inspired by core values of access, collaboration, communities, and impact which guide us in all that we do.

Please join us in this journey. Only by working with you in common cause to Reimagine Public Service will we realize a new vision for living and thriving together.


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From the Director

Larry D. Terry, Executive Director
Public life and functions of government have changed in many ways since the 1931 origin of the Cooper Center’s mission. Today’s civic challenges are interconnected and problem-solving requires engaged communities, multiparty dialogue, and collaboration across traditional governmental, sectoral, and organizational boundaries. This reality frames the context in which we work in the 21st century, and guides us as we examine what it means to engage in public service today.

Higher education, particularly public higher education, is also facing an imperative to evolve. In the words of UVA President Jim Ryan: “to be excellent, but excellent for a purpose….to be great and good…to (realize) the return on investment, whether it is the investment that families make when they pay tuition or the investment that legislatures make when allocating funds to support universities”.

This strategic plan calls that evolution “reimagining” and represents the steps we will take in the next five years toward our vision of thriving regions and communities shaped by informed, innovative, and inclusive civic leaders. The plan outlines how we will extend the University’s public service impact through researchers, faculty, students, and our partners in communities across the Commonwealth. Through collaboration, innovation, inclusion, and attention to impact, we aim to do nothing less than to engage the University of Virginia in making the Commonwealth a national model for good governance and resilient communities.
Who We Are

Designated as the Commonwealth’s center for public service in 1931, we catalyze experience and expertise from across the center and the University of Virginia to accomplish mission and impact-driven service to individuals, organizations, governmental bodies, and communities. We conduct advanced and applied research collaboratively with clients who make a difference in governance and community life. We offer skill and strategy development to public leaders who are sustaining and transforming communities across Virginia and the nation.

Through these five groups, the Weldon Cooper Center reimagines and delivers on its mission of public service to the Commonwealth: the Center for Economic and Policy Studies, the Center for Survey Research, the Demographics Research Group, the Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership, and the Virginia Institute for Government, which includes the LEAD/SEI programs.
Informing the practice of governing

Through our public impact research, we help leaders in Virginia localities to:

- Plan school facilities and hiring, based on population needs
- Forecast the economic impact of significant events on local tax revenues
- Identify priorities of residents through community surveys
- Locate solar facilities to meet community energy needs
- Visualize and address racial/ethnic segregation
- Evaluate program effectiveness through survey research

Building capacities of public leaders

Through our public leadership development programs, we help leaders to:

- Recognize and address the wide variety of needs across Virginia
- Plan and run ethical election campaigns
- Build strong and responsive teams in local governments
- Collaborate regionally to address large priorities
- Create coalitions to accomplish goals
Our Place-Based Impact

Individuals who benefit from our leadership development and other training programs contribute significantly to their home communities. We also engage in collaborations in multiple communities and regions to advance the future of the Commonwealth. Here are a few examples.

Connecting students with local communities to serve the Commonwealth

Students served in summer Wallerstein program internships with the Danville/Pittsylvania Chamber of Commerce and the Danville Regional Foundation; with the Virginia Municipal League in Richmond; and with several community organizations of government in Charlottesville and Albemarle.

Partering with local organizations to increase renewable energy opportunities

Virginia has adopted some of the nation’s most ambitious clean energy goals, and we are pleased to help achieve them. Through the SolSmart program we assist Virginia localities smooth the path for solar adoption. Recently, Pulaski County and the City of Williamsburg earned designations of Gold and Silver (respectively), and we are working with communities in southwest Virginia to develop strategies to redevelop brownfields and abandoned mine lands for solar.

Working with others to make communities stronger

From measuring availability and training needs of child care providers in Fairfax County to illuminating youth risk behaviors in Culpeper, our survey research enables localities to maximize benefits to area residents through strategic allocation of resources.
Vision

Good governance, equity, and resilience in every Virginia community

Mission

Recognizing the challenges of 21st-century governance, we deliver public impact research and multi-sector leadership development to build the capacity of Virginia’s communities, organizations, and institutions to serve the Commonwealth.

Values

Values are enduring. They form the foundation of our identity and underlie everything we do. Each value represents a continuum of effort and will be put into action thoughtfully and with intention.
We recognize that our professional expertise is only one part of the process of working with the unique knowledge and talents of partners and clients. We ask: “Who else should be at the table? Who understands this challenge best? Who will be needed to implement effective strategies?” We invest in building, convening, empowering, and participating in teams to address the complex nature of contemporary social problems. We devote time and attention to working effectively within our organization to deliver cohesive services, programs, and ongoing support. We encourage students to engage with us in service to Virginia.

We succeed when teams develop capacities to initiate and sustain effective approaches to shared challenges.

ORI VALUES

Access

We invite engagement. Our work should be easily found, widely known, and open to all.

We commit to responsiveness by listening deeply, replying promptly, and following up to determine satisfaction. We devote time and develop talent in effective communications via multiple channels to achieve maximum exposure and access. We work intentionally to engage the talents, expertise, and energies of individuals and groups previously underrepresented in governance. We hold ourselves to the highest standards of data integrity, rigor, transparency, and openness about methods and findings. We develop products, instructional models, and strategies to be affordable. We invite and seek out feedback and evaluate our processes regularly for effectiveness and inclusiveness.

We succeed when individuals, organizations, and communities engage with our work.

Collaboration

Powerful and sustainable solutions require thoughtful, ongoing conversations.

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Communities

Individuals, organizations, communities, and regions are the building blocks of a thriving Virginia.

We succeed when individuals, organizations, and communities work together to improve regional well-being.

Impact

We want our work to matter.

We strive for our work to be relevant, clear, and purpose-driven. We want to know the value that people find in working with us. We want to live up to that value and incorporate it in every project we undertake. We ask those we serve for the value they seek and establish our goals for impact. We commit to continuous improvement and innovation. We seek to engage students in meaningful research and service in the public interest.

We succeed when those we serve benefit from our efforts.
The following goals and strategies were thoughtfully developed with input from every member of the Weldon Cooper Center. Putting our goals in writing and making them publicly available clarifies and affirms our purpose and commitments to the Commonwealth. We have Reimagined Public Service in order to address the complexities that local governments, communities, and leaders face in the 21st century. Through these goals, we hope to move closer to realizing our vision: Good governance, equity, and resilience in every Virginia community.
GOALS & STRATEGIES

I. Leverage and build upon our nationally-recognized research expertise in service to organizations, communities, the Commonwealth, and the nation.

Data and research have become essential tools for designing solutions, maximizing impact, and evaluating efficacy. Our goal is to sustain, enhance, and continue our tradition of conducting top-quality demographic, economic, energy, and survey research in service of strategies that deliver results to communities and regions across Virginia. We aim to leverage our research with innovative delivery methods for maximum community-centered and regionally-relevant impact.

Reimagined Public Service conducts and makes accessible top quality, unbiased, nationally-recognized public impact research.

STRATEGY 1. A

Conduct, publish, and disseminate research on topics relevant to public life, governance, and the future of the Commonwealth, making our work accessible and directed toward action.

STRATEGY 1. B

Join in collaborative research projects; invite faculty, staff, students, and external experts as collaborators in our work; contribute to initiatives that foster democracy and establish the University as a leader in advancing informed policy and effective governance.

STRATEGY 1. C

Advance the professional impact, exposure, and relevance of our research by participating in professional and regional organizations and national conversations.
II. Build the capacity of public leaders to apply research and engage their constituents in fostering empowered and equitable communities.

Modern leadership requires government officials, citizen leaders, and stakeholder groups across communities and regions in Virginia to effectively apply research and data, build diverse networks, engage with their communities, advocate for diversity and equity, and work across traditional boundaries. Problem solving and policy design are at their best when data-driven research is applied in concert with community-based expertise and public dialogue.

Reimagined Public Service fosters continuous improvement in public leadership; affirms and incorporates a diverse array of individuals in addressing community, regional, and statewide needs; and enhances the capacity of governance to be strengthened by public engagement. Leadership capacity and effectiveness is built by helping leaders create networks and facilitate community-centered dialogue, discovery, and solution-finding.

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<td>Develop and assemble teams of experts across disciplines within the Cooper Center and beyond, including the expertise of faculty and the interests of students to focus on community- or region-specific issues to create greater public value.</td>
<td>Build the capacity of public leaders for evidence-based and data-driven management, planning, and development of policy.</td>
<td>Continue and enhance initiatives, trainings, and programs to develop talent and leadership capacity across a wide array of diverse individuals serving many roles.</td>
<td>Catalyze and convene partnerships with local, regional, and state public service organizations to address priorities, identify desired ends, design for results, maximize resources, and create tools for evaluating impact.</td>
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III. Develop the next generation of leaders by providing students opportunities for meaningful engagement in public service.

Contemporary events make clear the imperative to build the next generation of leaders by expanding opportunities for student engagement in public service and by providing opportunities for training, top-quality professional mentoring, and internships in rigorous, policy-relevant programs.

Reimagined Public Service introduces students to careers and opportunities in public service and fulfills our place in the public service mission of the University of Virginia in ways that are exemplary, innovative, inclusive, and meaningful.

**GOALS & STRATEGIES**

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<td>Develop and expand career-relevant opportunities for students through work assignments with our research teams and with programs in leadership development.</td>
<td>Recruit students to serve as Wallerstein scholars, working as interns in governance and bringing their academic research to applied settings.</td>
<td>Sustain our commitment to student engagement through support of student opportunities and skill development through the Media Team.</td>
<td>Encourage diversity of student experiences and career opportunities through participation in the Ph.D+ internship program.</td>
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IV. Evaluate and enhance Cooper Center operations, processes, policies, and frameworks to realize the full range of talents among our staff and maximize our capacity to serve.

To work more effectively and with greater impact, we must build infrastructure and incentives for collaboration; invest in professional development of new skills throughout our faculty and staff; amplify our role in service to the University mission; and maintain a culture of inclusivity, innovation, and advancement.

Reimagined Public Service invests in individuals who lead, and systems that support them.

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<td>Explore, evaluate, and invest in tools and platforms for internal communication, collaboration, efficiency, and innovation.</td>
<td>Improve and integrate centralized services in budgets, communications, finance, operations, and human resources to support groups and goals across the Center.</td>
<td>Advance, and deepen a new Cooper Center culture through the Community Council and the establishment of other working groups and initiatives.</td>
<td>Support professional growth through staff development programs.</td>
<td>In hiring and in our work, pursue partnerships with diverse individuals and organizations that share our values and commitment to inclusivity, tolerance, and respect.</td>
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Newport News, Virginia | Handshake by Gunther Stilling
Virginia Institute of Government member