

VCU ASPIRE

With the spirit of innovation in mind, in fall 2021, the VCU ASPIRE, VCU Globe and VCU LEAD living-learning programs will merge into VCU Transform. Learn more about VCU Transform (<http://bulletin.vcu.edu/undergraduate/university-college/certificate-of-completion-transform/>).

VCU ASPIRE, the Academic Scholars Program in Real Environments, is an innovative and comprehensive community-engagement-focused living-learning program for undergraduates that transforms students into engaged citizens and acts as a powerful force for positive social change in the community. VCU ASPIRE aims to enrich and deepen students' understanding of their capacity to create positive change in communities through the connection of course work, cocurricular activities and a vibrant residential experience. Students selected as VCU ASPIRE scholars will live in the West Grace Street Student Housing – South residence hall in the Grace Street Village, a collaborative group of living-learning communities. The residence hall contains state-of-the-art classrooms, meeting rooms, study areas, social lounges, two courtyards and modern apartment-style living.

The VCU ASPIRE living-learning community consists of 450 sophomores, juniors and seniors engaged in a two-year interdisciplinary program of studies that focuses on community engagement. Along with the students enrolled in the program, the residential staff, faculty and program leaders all share a commitment to service and community engagement. Experiences include a curriculum that builds knowledge and skills in civic responsibility, experiences within the residence hall that build social capital, service trips in the nation and abroad and sustained engagement within local communities. The VCU ASPIRE program promises to develop a generation of VCU graduates who are civically engaged citizens in a global society.

Through participation in sustained partnerships within local communities, VCU ASPIRE students' educational experiences are strengthened. Students participate with peers, community partners and faculty in authentic learning in real-world environments. Students also gain career experience through workshops, internships and field visits. The skills and knowledge of service and community engagement enhance students' academic and career choices. Further, service-learning class experiences increase students' desirability in the work force and distinguishes graduate school applicants.

During their two years in the program, VCU ASPIRE scholars take two three-credit classes in the academic facilities located within the residence hall and complete three one-credit community-based seminars led by outstanding faculty from across the university. Students select their service-learning class experiences from four interdisciplinary focus areas: vibrant, youth, health and green. Vibrant includes community arts, culture, economic development and public safety. Youth includes education, mentoring and community programming for children and teens. Health includes community health and wellness initiatives. Green includes community environmental initiatives.

Certificate of completion

The academic component of VCU ASPIRE develops students' knowledge, skills and best practices for community engagement across all academic disciplines. The courses required for the community engagement certificate of completion emphasize community engagement across

academic disciplines and take either a project-based or service-learning approach.

The VCU ASPIRE community engagement certificate of completion consists of nine credit hours taken during the two-year program. These nine credits are spread across five courses and are shown below in the order they are taken in the program. The initial two classes, UNIV 200 (or an approved equivalent) and CMST 300, focus on service and community engagement, the final three courses, CMST 301, CMST 400 and CMST 401, are community-based and utilize service-learning pedagogy.

The required course sequence for the nine-credit-hour certificate of completion, to be taken in conjunction with individual major requirements, is as follows.

Course	Title	Hours
First program year, fall semester		
UNIV 200	Inquiry and the Craft of Argument (or equivalent upon program approval)	3
CMST 300	The Foundations of Community Engagement	3
First program year, spring semester		
CMST 301	Neighborhood Research Seminar (service learning)	1
Second program year, fall semester		
CMST 400	The Community Engagement Seminar (service learning)	1
Second program year, spring semester		
CMST 401	The Capstone Community Engagement Seminar (service learning)	1

VCU ASPIRE sections of UNIV 200 and CMST 300 are taught on the first floor of the West Grace Street South residence hall in state-of-the-art classrooms. The remaining three community-based service-learning seminars are taught in the Metro Richmond area by an interdisciplinary faculty that collaborates with a wide variety of community partners. Nonprofit organizations, schools, community associations, businesses, government offices and agencies develop sustainable partnerships with VCU ASPIRE to provide students with real-world experience that results in positive social change within local communities.

In addition to the classroom experiences, the certificate of completion requires a minimum of 100 hours of cocurricular experiences across the two-year program. A cocurricular experience can occur within the residence halls of the living-learning community, on campus, in the community or as part of a national or global VCU ASPIRE service project. These out-of-the-classroom experiences provide students with community-engagement-focused learning experiences in nontraditional settings. Community engagement cocurricular activities fall into three broad categories: (1) community-based service (volunteering); (2) community-based learning (speakers, workshops, training, etc.); and (3) community- or campus-based leadership (organizational or event leadership). To satisfy all cocurricular requirements of the certificate, VCU ASPIRE scholars must complete at least 75 hours in community-based service, 15 hours in community-based learning and 10 hours in community or campus leadership.

Finally, the community engagement certificate of completion requires participation in a few program milestone events, which all students must complete. Milestones include but are not limited to program

orientation, meetings with the program adviser, program meetings and exit requirements.

To promote the success of VCU ASPIRE scholars, the ASPIRE program provides students with access to unique student support resources that integrate a commitment to community engagement with academic success. These student support resources are provided within the West Grace Street South residence hall and focus on three key areas: student learning, writing and career development. VCU ASPIRE will work with existing resources on campus to provide support services, except for program advising, which is conducted by the program staff.

The application process

Students with professional or personal interests in service and community engagement are sought as residents in the VCU ASPIRE living-learning community. Students from all majors are welcome. Only full-time VCU students may apply for the program during the fall semester of their freshman or sophomore years. Rising seniors who have two more years of undergraduate studies remaining may petition the director for entry. The online application deadline is posted on the program website ([aspire.vcu.edu](http://www.aspire.vcu.edu) (<http://www.aspire.vcu.edu>)). In addition to completing the admissions application, students must complete a housing contract for the West Grace Street South residence hall for two consecutive years.

The successful applicant will demonstrate commitment and interest in service and community engagement. Applications are reviewed for genuine, thorough and thoughtful responses to posted questions. The admissions committee is looking for students who have a passion for community engagement, a desire to actively engage in the ASPIRE curricular and cocurricular requirements and the intent to live in the West Grace Street South residence hall for 24 months. Students with a minimum GPA of 2.0 and an approved application will be admitted into the program. Students with approved applications and a GPA of less than 2.0 will be required to meet with the program staff before admission into the program is offered. Students need not have experience in service or community engagement in order to apply.

Certificate completion process

All VCU ASPIRE scholars must complete the curricular and cocurricular requirements for the certificate of completion on schedule and in the intended progression. Students who fail to satisfy program requirements, including living in the West Grace Street South residence hall, will be removed from the program. Students failing to meet program requirements also may be relocated to another housing assignment. Students are expected to uphold university, VCU ASPIRE and community partner expectations for professional and personal conduct. Any behavior that violates standards of conduct may result in removal from the certificate program and the West Grace Street South residence hall.

Students who complete all of the above listed requirements will be awarded the Certificate of Completion in Community Engagement at the time of graduation. The program staff maintains a record of progress for all students. However, it is the student's responsibility to monitor their own program of studies and seek assistance when needed. A program adviser is available to all students. Regular communication with the program leadership and the ASPIRE program adviser in particular is critical to the successful completion of all certificate program requirements.