



April, 2026

News & Updates

Thriving Communities Research Pilot Grant Program: Request for Proposals VCU Division of Community Engagement

The Thriving Communities Research Pilot Grant Program, offered by VCU's Division of Community Engagement, provides up to \$25,000 in seed funding for community-engaged research projects across all disciplines. The program is designed to support VCU faculty and research staff in piloting community-engaged research projects that respond to community-identified needs. The submission deadline is 6 p.m. Friday, May 15. See the request for proposals at the following URL.

<https://community.vcu.edu/resources/grants/thriving-communities-pilot-grant/>

Community-Engaged Research Scholars Collaborative (CERSC) VCU Division of Community Engagement

This collaborative offers a dynamic opportunity for tenure-track faculty to connect across disciplines and strengthen community-engaged research. All sessions will be held in person and focus on peer exchange and shared learning from September 2026 to May 2027. Those who complete the program will receive a \$1,000 stipend in support of professional development. Apply at the following URL by Friday, May 29.

For more information, contact Division of Community Engagement at engage@vcu.edu or visit [https://community.vcu.edu/media/community/2026CERSCCall\(1\).pdf](https://community.vcu.edu/media/community/2026CERSCCall(1).pdf)

Awards & Honors

Dina García, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.Ed. receives Graduate Faculty Mentoring Award

Dra. García was honored at the VCU State of the Research Address on April 8th for graduate faculty mentoring in the category of early career. A huge congratulations to Dra. García!



- Dr. Jessica LaRose received the Women In Science Dentistry and Medicine Professional Achievement Award for the School of Public Health at the 34th annual WISDM Leadership Conference on April 24th.
- Dr. LaRose received a K12 award as MPI alongside Drs. Oxana Palesh and Pat Nana-Sinkham. The VCU Massey McCaskill-Stevens K12 for Community Oncology and Prevention Research will mentor promising, multidisciplinary, early-stage clinical investigators in the conception, development, and implementation of community-based, cancer prevention and control trials.

Student Spotlight

Announcing Dr. Fariha Tariq!

Fariha successfully defended her dissertation on March 6th. Her topic was "An in-depth examination of psychological distress in breast cancer survivors." She celebrated with her colleagues and dissertation committee: Drs. Jessica LaRose, Vanessa Sheppard, Robert Perera, and Teletia Taylor of Howard University.



SBS Outstanding Student Award

Malik Phillips, MPH has been selected as the 2026 Outstanding Student! Congratulations, Malik!





Farnese Motto published a first author paper:
 Motto, F.M., Edwards, E., Hong, S., Sheppard, V. B., & Kim, S. J. (2026). Relationship between patient-provider communication about cannabis, online information-seeking and healthcare outcomes among cancer survivors. *Journal of Consumer Health on the Internet*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15398285.2026.2647311>

On March 15th, Paula Rivera delivered a virtual presentation on implicit bias in nursing at the Organización Colegial de Enfermería of Colombia.

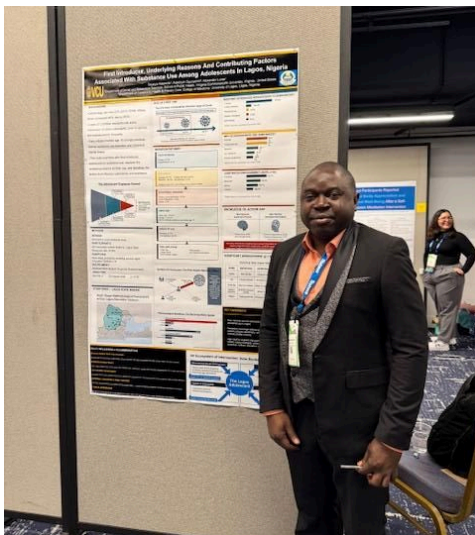


On March 25th, she was invited to present to the Latinos and Hispanics for Health group at VCU. She discussed her dissertation research, the pathway that led her to this stage of her career, shared tips for first-generation and Latino students, and provided an overview of the Coquí Lab, led by Dr. Katherine Tossas.

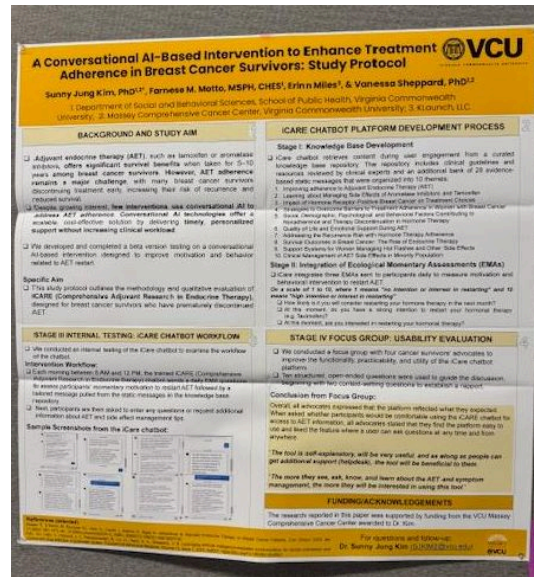
Research Spotlight

SBS at SBM

Faculty and students attended the 47th annual meeting of the Society of Behavioral Medicine in Chicago, IL, April 22nd-25th.



Tolu Kolawole presented his poster, "First introducer, underlying reasons and contributing factors associated with substance use among adolescents in Lagos



Dr. Sunny Jung Kim presented two posters with co-authors include Farnese Motto and Dr. Vanessa Sheppard:

Kim, S. J., Motto, F. M., Edwards, E., Palesh, O., Hong, S., & Sheppard, V. B. A mobile health (mHealth) intervention to support pain self-management and quality of life among cancer survivors: Protocol for a pilot study.

Kim, S. J., Motto, F. M., Miles, E., & Sheppard, V. B. A conversational AI-based intervention to enhance treatment adherence in breast cancer survivors: Study protocol.



Dr. Autumn Lanoye presented at a research spotlight session for weight related health:

Lanoye A, Casanave-Phillips K, Jones C. LaRose, JG. Moving beyond BMI: Waist circumference and body fat as risk indicators in behavioral obesity treatment.

Closing the Gap Summit

Drs. Jessica LaRose, Autumn Lanoye, Karly Casanave-Phillips, and Alexander Lucas attended the Closing the Gap Summit on March 21st. This year's event was co-sponsored by Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center,

the VA-ACCERT Center, and Macon & Joan Brock Virginia Health Sciences Eastern Virginia Medical School at Old Dominion University. The day was spent with events like research reviews, lived experience discussions, and cooking demonstrations, with the goal of empowering community members with everyday tools for cancer prevention.





Dr. Richard Brown gave a keynote address at the 47th International GERAS Conference in Dijon, France, entitled "Utilising a linguistic approach to develop ethical strategies to assist oncologists in seeking informed consent to cancer clinical trials."

Wrapping up the WE Project

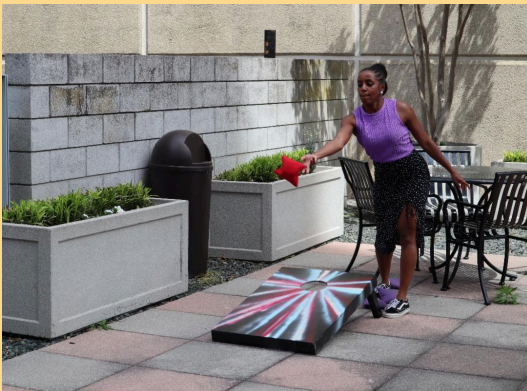
This year marks the end of a 14-year-long effort by MPIs Drs. Maghboeba Mosavel and Jessica LaRose. Wellness Engagement Petersburg (or "WE") was a study grounded in a decade of community-based participatory research in partnership with residents and community partners in Petersburg, VA. The trial tested a grassroots, multilevel lifestyle intervention to reduce adiposity and promote cardiometabolic health for Petersburg residents.

This spring, the team has hosted multiple events to mark the conclusion of the project and to disseminate study results back to the Wellness Ambassadors, participants, and the Petersburg community who helped make the project possible. Read more about the events on the OPT for Health lab blog [here](#).





SBS Events





Spring Picnic

In April we enjoyed a relaxing day on the terrace with food and games!

Recent Publications

Dr. Richard Brown:

Enrollment in Clinical Trials, Brown, R.F., Saha, A., Albrecht, T. 3rd edition volume: Kissane, D., Bultz, B., Putow, P., & Finlay, I. (Eds.), Handbook of communication in cancer and palliative care, Oxford University Press, London, UK.

Health Communication Coding Systems Butow, P., Piertse, A., Hillen, M., Brown, R.F. 3rd edition volume: Kissane, D., Bultz, B., Putow, P., & Finlay, I. (Eds.), Handbook of communication in cancer and palliative care, Oxford University Press, London, UK.

Dr. Jessica LaRose:

Tatum KL, Smith DI, Hung HS, Weinstock M, Rhodenhiser S, Blincoe J, Brewer AE, LaRose JG, Erby T, Haskins L, Starlings K, Garr K, Brickhouse TH, Bean MK and Hydration Community Advisory Board. Stakeholder perspectives of barriers and facilitators to enhancing hydration in elementary schools within a socio-ecological framework. *Front. Public Health* 2026. 14:1784617. doi: [10.3389/fpubh.2026.1784617](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2026.1784617)

Dr. Alexander Lucas:

B. N.Leitzelar, J. V.Costa, A. A.Aguilar, et al., "Qualitative Study of Breast Cancer and Lymphoma Patients Participating in a Physical Activity Intervention: The Case for Tailored Physical Activity," *Cancer Medicine* 15, no. 3 (2026): e71747, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cam4.71747>

Dr. Katherine Tossas:

Bahira Ahmed, Sadia Sayeed, Ciara Rhodes, Guleer Shahab, Bianca D. Owens, Myrna G. Serrano, Gregory A. Buck, Katherine M. Spaine, Laahirie Edupuganti, L. Ashley Cowart, Katherine Y. Tossas; Establishing a Cervical Cytology Biorepository: A Protocol for Advancing Translational Cervical Cancer Research through Biobanking. *Cancer Epidemiol Biomarkers Prev* 1 April 2026; 35 (4): 519–527. <https://doi.org/10.1158/1055-9965.EPI-25-1520>

Upcoming Events

Friday, May 8th 12-3pm
SOPH Commencement
Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

Wednesday, May 13th 12:30-1:30pm
Snack & Share with the chair
SBS scholars & Dr. LaRose

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