One Corps — One VMI A Unifying Action Plan



Office of the Superintendent Virginia Military Institute Lexington, Virginia 24450

Assessment by the Superintendent and accompanying Unifying Action Plan



Superintendent Virginia Military Institute

May 19, 2021

Upon my arrival in November, VMI was in the midst of a crisis. Despite its long history of producing leaders of character of all races and gender, media reports of VMI led state policymakers to believe VMI glorifies a dark time in our nation's history, lacks diversity and was making no effort to improve, and has a culture of structural racism in its treatment of minority cadets. My 35 years of military and civilian service permitted me to have first-hand interactions with leaders and organizations that performed at their best because of their diversity. This experience would not have been possible however, without the rigorous education, tough discipline, and honorable living impressed upon me at VMI.

My priority as interim superintendent was to perform a personal assessment of the Institute's climate, culture, policies, and procedures. Of particular concern was understanding the current status of what is fundamentally the VMI experience: the unique method of education that challenges cadets physically, mentally, and academically while instilling in them traits of character built on honor, integrity, civility, personal conduct and discipline, and a lifelong bonding through the "brother rat" spirit. One Corps, One VMI is the product of that assessment.

With the ongoing turbulence, I believe we find ourselves needlessly fractured. We must return our collective focus on VMI's mission which defines the Institute and what it means to be a VMI cadet. Our method of education develops young leaders beyond the classroom and is critical to their success in military, civil, academic, and corporate life. The Institute must focus on the 21st Century ensuring the culture and climate of VMI is such that any cadet, faculty, or staff member can find their place. Therefore, One Corps, One VMI focuses on five outcomes:

- Honor. The VMI Honor Code must continue to be a way of life for each and every cadet and alumnus.
- **Diversity and inclusion.** VMI must ensure that every cadet, regardless of race, gender, religion, or nationality, feels a part of the VMI legacy.
- **The VMI brand.** The outward face of VMI should be built around young leaders of character who exemplify honor, civility, and service above self.
- Competing and winning. VMI cadets must compete to win in the classroom, on the hill through their cadet life in barracks, and on the field of competition.
- One VMI. VMI's strength is in its diversity of experiences, thought, abilities, and backgrounds. No single cadet's challenge is greater than another's. It is through the reliance on their fellow cadets that the Corps succeeds.

VMI continues to be a leadership laboratory that is among the finest in the nation. There's no question that VMI continues to produce young leaders the state and our nation needs to take on 21st Century challenges. Through this Unifying Action Plan, and in coordination with partners throughout the commonwealth, VMI will set a path to remedy any perceived wrongs that may exist and to continue to fulfill its mission of educating cadets to be citizensoldiers and leaders of character.



A Unifying Action Plan

INTRODUCTION

This is VMI's Unifying Action Plan. It is intended to achieve a single purpose – advance the VMI experience, traditions, and culture to be more positive and inclusive producing leaders prepared for the complex world we live in today and into the future. This plan aligns with the long-term Vision 2039 benchmarks.

Allegations of structural racism must be taken seriously. We must look at ourselves critically and ensure that VMI presents a welcoming environment to any young man or woman seeking the benefits of the VMI experience. As a top-performing state, national and international institution, VMI's contribution over its 182-year existence is invaluable. VMI produces high-caliber leaders who fill essential roles throughout our society and with global impact. A plan is required to address the allegations, reveal any evidence of racism, initiate appropriate corrections, and reverse any perceptions among the wide range of VMI constituents that VMI supports an environment of institutional racism.

The VMI Unifying Action Plan takes the 14 descriptors of Vision 2039 and reinforces the focus on the Cadet as an individual committed to the unifying principles of 'One Corps, One VMI' – a Cadet fully embracing pride in the accomplishments and diversity of the Corps, inclusive of all Cadets and respectful of the tests of character each Cadet must overcome in academics, athletics and within our military system.

This plan ensures VMI's unique method of education and training continues to prepare future generations of America's leaders for honorable and devoted service to our state, nation and society. The VMI Unifying Action Plan will produce graduates whose life experience at VMI is based on mutual respect, built on the strength diverse talent offers and a collective commitment to the greater good of those they serve and lead in life.



BACKGROUND

Founded in 1839, the Virginia Military Institute is the first state supported military college in the United States. Located in Lexington, Virginia, VMI is the second institution of higher education created by the Commonwealth of Virginia and is a highly respected and ranked institute of higher education. Nationally, under Title 10 of the United States Code, VMI is one of six institutions of higher education designated as a Senior Military College and unique among them where its entire student body is organized as a military corps.

VMI has many distinguished alumni among its graduates, including:

- 11 Rhodes Scholars
- 7 Medal of Honor recipients
- 285 Generals and Admirals
- Professional sports athletes
- Numerous college and university presidents
- Industrialists
- Countless business leaders
- Scores of historic and legendary civic, political and military leaders.

Our Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs supporting the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps frequently top the nation in innovative military educational and training practices. VMI leads the nation's colleges and universities as a significant source of commissioned officers.

VMI, through its rigorous military-like environment and its comprehensive academic and physically demanding program, is anchored on a regimental, class, honor, and educational system producing young men and women who embody the values of honor, integrity, respect, civility, duty, service above self, and academic excellence. These attributes are in high demand in our society and highly sought after in military, government, medical, legal, and private and public industry throughout the nation. Society needs, now more than ever, self-disciplined leaders with a resolute sense of duty. As our record soundly shows, VMI produces those kinds of people.

The Commonwealth of Virginia has directed an independent, third-party review of VMI's culture, policies, practices and equity in disciplinary procedures. VMI came under scrutiny due to accusations of structural racism by some of its Cadets and alumni. These serious accusations led Virginia's Governor, The Honorable Ralph S. Northam, a VMI alumnus, to announce he would launch an independent probe into "structural racism" at VMI.

Accusations were made that VMI is flawed with institutional racism, outdated, obsolete and should be shut down. Further, the symbology of the American Civil War on VMI's Post does not provide the appropriate environment and culture, exacerbating the situation, as social stress across the United States found its way to Lexington and the Institute itself.

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia issued a Request for Proposal on 5 November 2020 to contract a third party to conduct the investigation and announced on 7 December 2020 they intended to award the contract to Barnes and Thornburg LLP, a law firm with a national reputation.



PROBLEM STATEMENT

As a highly valued state, national and international institution, VMI's contribution over its 182-year existence has been invaluable. VMI produces high-caliber leaders who fill essential roles throughout our society. In light of racism allegations, VMI has and will continue to actively take the opportunity to assess itself and implement necessary change, so that:

The Virginia Military Institute recasts the VMI experience, traditions, and culture, to be inclusive and honorable for all VMI Cadets, faculty, staff, alumni, parents and friends. Should the Institute fail to change, it risks altering or eliminating the pillars of its proven unique educational model.

VMI reaffirms its commitment to providing an environment that emphasizes the dignity and worth of every member of its community. As such, there is **zero tolerance** for racism, sexism, discrimination, hatred, intolerance, or prejudice of any kind. Behavior which attacks diversity, inclusion, equal-opportunity and accountability is unacceptable.

To ensure VMI operates in and supports an environment and culture which emphasizes and inculcates in its members this commitment, the following actions are ongoing or will begin:

- VMI welcomes the independent third-party investigation and equity audit with full cooperation and grants full access to the Institute;
- VMI will review the report produced by Barnes and Thornburg, assess their recommendations to determine those which are actionable, and establish a plan and timeline for implementation.
- VMI will make all efforts to actively respond to any and all acts of racism and eliminate or correct it as appropriate;
- In addition to the independent review, VMI has commenced with a top-down, bottoms-up internal review of the Institute and will take immediate, near-term and long-term actions to correct identified shortfalls.
- VMI has already taken steps to: address iconography, memorials and symbols of the institute; examine
 hiring practices; implement training and education to address diversity and inclusion; review Cadet led
 governance and administrative oversight that holds the Corps accountable for racist and sexist acts; develop
 plans for recruiting and retention of a diverse student body, faculty, administrative and administrative
 support staff, and classified workforce.
- Under Title IX, existing VMI policies address discrimination, harassment and sexual misconduct, equity and retaliation. Those polices require periodic review to ensure they are understood and continue to appropriately address reports of infractions among the Corps. Similar policies, consistent with state laws and human resource regulations, exist to protect the rights of our faculty, staff and administrative support staff.

While a zero-tolerance policy is an important and immediate action, VMI will ensure that it keeps pace and better exemplifies our society in the 21st century, while producing graduates who represent the best of our nation, capable of leading in the complex world in which we now live. As VMI moves forward, whenever and wherever opportunities are found to better the Institute, the VMI experience, or the quality of our current Cadets, then such improvements must and will be made.



STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

"The character of the individual Cadet is directly influenced by the prevailing culture of the Institute..." "The way Cadets – men and women – live together and work together while at VMI lays the foundation for the way they will live and work throughout their lives."

Vision 2039 - Focus on Leadership

As a result of my own initial assessment through a series of listening sessions with Cadets, faculty, athletic coaches and staff, as well as engagements with the VMI Board of Visitors, alumni and senior national leaders, I have concluded VMI must move past accusations of institutional racism by placing increased emphasis and focus on diversity, equity and inclusion with accountability at all levels. To transition this assessment into action, I formed a focused planning effort to produce and implement this action plan.

My 45-day assessment identifies the following key areas that need addressing:

- 1. Diversity and inclusion: Since 1968, the experience, reflection, and achievements of VMI graduates is built upon the cumulative changes made and now reflected in VMI's multiracial, international, co-ed student body and the leaders we have produced who continue to excel in the military, private industry, public and governmental service and politics. While measures of diversity racial, gender, ethnic and economic grew slightly over the past five years, among that diverse group, the quality of high caliber Cadets with strong credentials who desire to excel at VMI, has proven to be undeniable. We must ensure we are using appropriate and achievable benchmarks which reflect VMI leadership's attention to diversity in the Corps of Cadets, faculty and staff. More can be done to improve on the diversity of our Corps, faculty and staff.
- 2. Visible manifestations of VMI: Understand how to recalibrate VMI's visible emphasis on traditions, symbology and outward manifestations of our culture towards the accomplishments of the Institute and its notable alumni in the 20th and 21st century. VMI has a long history spanning nearly two centuries. The earliest part of that history has a very different meaning through the modern lens. Extensive discussions with Cadets, faculty, staff and some alumni suggest our traditions and symbology, in certain cases, are divisive. We must find common ground about what exemplifies the bonds created during one's Cadetship that is inclusive of every member of the VMI community. We cannot erase our history, but we will place ourselves properly as a part of Virginia's and our Nation's history reflecting the more relevant, diverse and inclusive world our graduates will lead into the future.
- 3. The Honor Code and its application through the Honor System: Review the governance and oversight of the Honor System ensuring fair and equitable enforcement of our enduring, single sanction Honor Code. The Honor Code is foundational to the educational experience and, as such, its administration through the Honor System must be beyond reproach. There remains a perception that Cadets are targeted, guilt is applied first, and punishment rendered unevenly. Better education of Cadets on their obligation to remain personally accountable for conduct that runs counter to the Honor Code during their Cadetship is needed. We must ensure all Cadets understand and are committed to their personal development to attain achievement through hard work, merit and avoiding shortcuts.



- **4. A Unified Corps of Cadets:** Return to the strength of a **unified** Corps, stratified only by the class system. The notion that there are opposing components of the Corps athlete versus non-athlete; permit versus non-permit runs against the fundamental notion of a common purpose for producing young men and women who represent the fulfillment of the VMI mission. A truly unified Corps represents one of the best opportunities to demonstrate that the Cadet experience VMI's learning laboratory where character is honed is incompatible with the notion that racist, sexist or homophobic acts of any kind are tolerated.
- 5. The three pillars of the VMI experience: Rebalance the three aspects of a VMI education: academics, athletics, and military life. We've become imbalanced with redundant requirements, unclear standards and our application of systems that dominate the daily lives of our Cadets. Each pillar tests (and expands) the limits of a Cadet's abilities, so they are prepared to address the demands of life. Challenging our Cadets to excel to the best of their abilities in all three areas simultaneously is what makes VMI unique in its development and educational system. While the military and athletic components are integral parts of the VMI experience, VMI is an institution of higher learning where the resource of time must be applied appropriately to academics as a focus. Cadets and faculty both expressed a need to devote adequate time to their studies while also investing in academic opportunities beyond their normal coursework.

The VMI Unifying Action Plan begins by declaring what VMI stands for:

VMI is renowned for taking a diverse group of individuals, immersing them in the curricular and co-curricular experiences and over time, carefully and deliberately building leaders who:

- Possess unwavering character
- Demonstrate great skill in sound reasoning
- Make appropriate ethical decisions
- Lead naturally among their peers and in their communities
- Engage in societal problem-solving yielding wide impact
- Stand and deliver through strength and conviction
- and above all else, lead honorably and serve selflessly

The VMI Unifying Action Plan also defines what VMI is not for:

At VMI, we are not for violating the simple Honor Code; "A Cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, nor tolerate those who do." We are not for personal gain above personal honor.

At VMI, we are not for those who engage in or tolerate acts of racism, sexism, discrimination, hatred, or prejudice. There is zero tolerance for this type of dishonorable behavior.

At VMI, we are not for behavior that fails to treat all Cadets, faculty and staff with respect and dignity.

On the grounds of this premier military institution, everyone must be treated with respect, civility and honor. We must hold ourselves accountable to demonstrate the very best of VMI. The second there is a departure from ethical conduct into hatred, discrimination, bullying or marginalization, then we are moving backwards; and that is not where VMI needs to be – VMI is moving forward towards continued betterment and future achievements.



For the future, the VMI system will successfully achieve these outcomes through the VMI Experience:

- #1. The VMI Brand. The outward face of VMI is built around young leaders who carry themselves honorably, with civility and humility. It's what our alumni, parents, local and national leaders and potential employers come to expect of a VMI Cadet. It's reflected in an inclusive legacy from the VMI Post to the classroom; from the field of competition to the battlefield, from the training grounds to the boardroom. We are prepared and can be trusted to lead our subordinates or support our superiors. That is what others outside of VMI must see in us, and what we must see in ourselves.
- **#2.** A VMI which is Diverse and Inclusive. A diverse and inclusive VMI begins with a Corps of Cadets who build on our legacy. A legacy based on the VMI experience with every Cadet being a part of its traditions; living in a positive and meaningful culture; inclusive and respectful of all. That diversity extends to how we recruit the best talent in our faculty, coaches and administrative staff to train and develop Cadets, because we believe, respect and advocate that diversity is our strength.
- **#3.** Committed to Honor. The heart of VMI is the Honor System. Cadets live by a simple code which pervades all aspects of Cadet life, rapidly becoming a lasting lifestyle. A Cadet's honor is their most guarded possession, a cherished leadership trait, an outcome which is only found so strongly in a single sanction honor system.
- **#4.** A VMI that Competes to Win. The VMI experience is appropriately balanced and centered on academic excellence. It has the right measure of high achievement coupled with physical and mental rigors of a military-like environment which are intended to build resiliency, character, and leadership qualities. We play at the highest level in athletics well represented by Cadet athletes who are pursuing a quality education and always compete to win.
- #5. One-VMI. VMI accepts individuals from all walks of life and builds successive classes of leaders, imbued with a high sense of public duty, possessing the skills to successfully lead across the military, government, public, and private sectors. At VMI, one is no less than any other and success comes from working together as a team and supporting one another. Our athletes must embrace opportunities to demonstrate their leadership and commitment to the VMI experience both on and off the field. The Corps of Cadets must recognize the efforts of all Cadets and that all are being challenged academically, militarily, and athletically; each constrained by time and resources, all in a pursuit of excellence.



ACTION CONCEPT

Moving VMI forward means adopting an action concept where VMI looks, thinks, and acts facing forward to the future. This best practice ensures a diverse and inclusive environment, with equal opportunity for all and where we reaffirm VMI's core values and avow what VMI is not for. My intent for implementation is for the Institute Planning Committee (IPC) leaders to review, refine and identify actionable tasks that are measurable and focused on achieving the identified outcomes.

The action concept achieves the previously stated outcomes and is descriptive of VMI in the 21st century. VMI will succeed in these outcomes through the pursuit of five functional areas. These five areas continue forward to:

- 1. improve the health, welfare and resiliency of the Corps of Cadets;
- 2. maintain and provide modern facilities and quality of life;
- 3. provide greater leadership, mentorship and talent management;
- 4. increase faculty and staff efficacy; and,
- 5. produce effective internal and external communications.

While progress toward the outcomes is measured by the five functional areas, they are sequenced by immediate, near-term and long-term tasks which are needed at specific points in the process to move forward.

Foundational to improving VMI is Cadet Life. Fundamental and meaningful change to VMI starts and ends with caring for VMI's Cadets. The VMI Corps of Cadets is the centerpiece of VMI and improving Cadet Life underpins the future VMI experience.

Ensuring there is a unifying balance between athletics, academics and the military is essential. The standard of living for Cadets should evolve as necessary to remain conducive to success by continuously upgrading facilities and classrooms; recent examples of which include safety and security enhancements and technological improvements within barracks.

A VMI oriented on improving Cadet Life will allow VMI Cadets to gain the skills, qualities and attributes for the future. Hence, as the Unifying Action Plan is implemented, all efforts ensure the VMI Corps of Cadets has a safe, trusted and healthy environment where they can learn and grow, immersed in a 21st century academic, athletic and military educational and training environment which operates under the premise of excellence.



KEY TASKS

Key Tasks + Focus Areas = Outcomes (VMI Cadet Life as the Foundation)

The first key task in the Unifying Action Plan is investigation and reviewing VMI's culture and eliminating any discovery of institutional racism on the VMI Post. As soon as that achievement starts, VMI pursues a deeper effort for a second key task to upgrade the VMI System. A third key task is focused on investing in the future with greater talent management for Cadets, faculty, and staff.

KEY TASK 1

Investigate and Review VMI's Culture for Any Institutional Racism and Intolerance - Immediate

Actions. Ending any institutional racism starts with reaffirming a zero-tolerance policy and ends when mandatory diversity education for the entire Corps of Cadets, faculty and staff is institutionalized. Steps along the way are:

- Reaffirm VMI's zero tolerance for racism, hatred, and intolerance; recognizing all are dishonorable;
- Advance VMI symbology to associate toward example-setting 20th and 21st century traits;
- Establish a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Program with a Chief Diversity Officer, directly reporting to the Superintendent and informed by other similar state and national entities and efforts;
- Continue strategic communications to inform varied communities of VMI's progress;
- Maintain the comprehensive training programs for the Corps of Cadets for ready and resilient Cadets, sexual harassment/assault response and prevention, suicide prevention, substance abuse and bystander intervention;
- Continue mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion education for the entire Corps of Cadets, faculty, and staff.

KEY TASK 2

Upgrade a VMI experience that leverages more Diversity, Equity and Inclusion - Near-Term Actions.

Advancing towards a culture which is diverse, equitable and inclusive with its own accountability means upgrading the VMI Experience. Modernizing VMI commences with building a Cadet governed system of diversity, equity and inclusion, and ends when a culture emerges where racism, prejudice, and hatred of any kind is not tolerated. Steps along the way are:

- An accountable Cadet leadership and governance which self-corrects and resolves any acts or inferences of racism, sexism, and harassment;
- Review and update VMI's organization and functions to improve the Institute's ability to achieve VMI's outcomes;
- Review VMI's policies, procedures, plans, and goals to verify incorporation of diversity, equity, and inclusivity;
- Continue a culture where racism, prejudice, and hatred of any kind is not tolerated or embodied as attributes of a VMI Cadet and graduate.



KEY TASK 3

Invest in the Future - Long-Term Actions. Building a diverse, equitable and inclusive culture is an investment which will take five years (a full cycle of a class plus an additional year) to incorporate final changes. The third key task commences with the Matriculation in August 2021 and ends when the Corps of Cadets, faculty, and staff more closely reflect the diversity of the United States population in the 21st century. Steps to get VMI there are:

- Institutionalizing continuous diversity and inclusion training for Cadets, faculty and staff;
- Partnership with organizations with proven track records of identifying qualified minority applicants who are seeking careers in higher education, civil and/or military service;
- Address challenges that inhibit VMI from recruiting Cadets, faculty, and staff to better reflect the population of the United States;
- Elevate to a talent management system which recruits Cadets for: (1) excellence in academics, career military service and/or civilian occupations and winning inter-collegiate teams; (2) faculty for a 21st century educational system; and (3) accomplished and deeply experienced military professionals who lead and mentor from the front;
- Continue to implement the major tenants of Vision 2039; the master plan aims at improving the academic, military, and athletic programs and the infrastructure of the Institute to enhance Cadet leadership development and the environment in which it takes place.



Focus Areas are the avenues traveled to achieve the Five Element End-State. These Focus Areas are sequenced in time as the key tasks are achieved and produce the conditions, improvements, changes, and advancements necessary to realize VMI's End-State and a diverse, equal, and inclusive environment representative of our nation.

Focus Area 1

Health, Welfare and Resiliency of the Corps of Cadets.

Objective: Continue to provide and care for the VMI Corps of Cadets including; good order and discipline for the Corps; an advantageous place to learn and grow; streamlined systems to resolve misconduct and misbehavior and reward success and achievement; empower Cadets to gain strength through diversity, acceptance by inclusion, and the building of resiliency.

Reason: Protect Cadets from negative influences and safeguard them from harm. The Corps of Cadets is the centerpiece of VMI. Their health, education, welfare and resiliency are the primary focus of the Institute.

Focus Area 2

Facilities and Quality of Life.

Objective: Further a positive environment where Cadets can learn and grow, where faculty educate with the latest means available, and staff can provide an open, safe and positive workplace and living accommodations. Facilities are modern and functional, allow essential connectivity within VMI and outside, and are well-maintained

Reason: Cadets are safe with an appreciable level of comfort to live in. A healthy, clean, comfortable and positive learning environment; safe and positive.

Focus Area 3

Leadership, Mentorship and Talent Management.

Objective: Always embracing a system where Cadets, faculty and staff live positive leadership attributes and demonstrate respect, thriving in a diverse and inclusive environment with supporting mentorship. A place where role-models are prevalent, sound judgement is the order of the day, and the right talent comes from the VMI experience.

Reason: Focus VMI on building the right talent for America, which is intolerant of hatred, prejudice and unacceptable behavior which prevents diversity, inclusion, equal-opportunity and accountability. Prejudice, dishonorable behavior, and intolerance is not perceived as systemic at VMI, and if it surfaces, it is eliminated.



Focus Area 4

Greater Academic Diversity - Faculty and Staff Efficacy.

Objective: As academics are the cornerstone of the Institute, greater academic capability is required. Enhance VMI faculty's ability to deliver world-class academics through 21st century technology and pedagogy designed to meet the needs of today's Cadets, along with cutting-edge courses/curriculum which further a Cadet's ability to synthesize knowledge. Increase VMI's staff's ability to support the VMI mission with diversity, equity, inclusion and accountability. Provide education tailored to teach leadership and success in the complex 21st century domestic and international environment.

Reason: Ensure VMI's System attains the VMI vision and includes diversity, equal opportunity, inclusion and accountability.

Focus Area 5

Internal and External Communications.

Objective: Continuous communication to varied and wide audiences the VMI vision, mission and ability to produce a superior education free from prejudice and intolerance.

Reason: VMI's processes to stop intolerable behavior are communicated and clearly understood. Precise, succinct and clear communication (up and out, and down and in), demonstrating that VMI is vigilant and that immediate action is taken to swiftly resolve issues encountered.



VMI is at a crossroads. As the world around VMI changes, the Institute must continue to evolve or risk becoming irrelevant. Keeping pace with change, if not leading it, is necessary to meet the demands and complexities of the 21st century. With change so comes opportunity.

At this point in VMI's history, we have a tremendous opportunity to recast our proud and strong legacy, to advance the VMI experience, traditions, and culture, and to be increasingly positive and honorable for all VMI Cadets, faculty, staff, alumni, parents and friends. The goal of the VMI Unifying Action Plan is to move VMI forward, while maintaining our best traditions and producing leaders who positively contribute to a modern 21st century society. This means we must look at ourselves critically, fix the problems we find, and change our ways with an eye towards the future.

The difference between success and failure in this life of ours is mostly hard work, so you must constantly work to try to improve yourself.

Burke Davis, Marine! The Life of Chesty Puller.

On this 19th day of May 2021

By Order of:

Major General Cedric T. Wins, '85 Superintendent The Virginia Military Institute

