



INSTITUTE REPORT

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VMI Featured in TIME's Inaugural College Rankings

VMI ranked No. 73 out of 500 colleges and universities in TIME magazine's inaugural America's Best Colleges of 2026-2027 list, released Aug. 25. The publication partnered with Statista, a data research firm, on the list, which focused on three pillars: student outcomes, learning environment, and attractiveness to students, with student outcomes weighted at 75% of the overall scoring.

VMI received a final score of 81.3 out of 100. TIME stated that "schools with historically strong STEM programs—and pipelines into high-paying tech jobs—rank high on the list."

The full list of Best Colleges and the methodology can be found here:



VMI on Money's Best Colleges in America 2026

VMI once again scored well on Money magazine's Best Colleges in America list, earning 4.5 stars out of 5. In recent years, the rankings have been done using the star system, based on quality of education, affordability, and student outcomes. VMI also landed on Money's Best Public Colleges and Best Colleges in the South lists for 2026. Money shared that VMI graduates have a median salary of about \$75,000 four years after entering the workforce. More

than 97% of VMI alumni have jobs or are in a continuing education program within five months of graduating.

This year's rankings included 735 schools from across the country, with each having at least 500 undergraduate students, not being in financial distress, and having a graduation rate at or above the median for its category. Schools are then ranked in the five-star system on 25 factors.

Truman Scholarship

Syed Eshan Shah '27, a history major from Clarksville, Maryland, was one of the finalists of the highly competitive and prestigious Truman Scholarship administered by the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Foundation. The scholarship is the premier graduate fellowship in the U.S. for those pursuing careers as public service leaders. Shah is a Peay scholar, an Institute Honors cadet, and

a Department of History Honors cadet. He is minoring in Arabic, military history, and national security. He serves as treasurer for the Class of 2027, as a cadet chaplain, as president of the VMI Muslim Student Association, and as an India Company platoon lieutenant. ✳

Cadets Take Part in EMT Training

Following the end of spring semester, 25 cadets chose to spend four and a half additional weeks on post to learn how to be emergency medical technicians (EMT). Emergency Medical Service (EMS) at VMI is responsible for providing emergency medical care to the Corps of Cadets, staff, faculty, and visitors on and around post, and is a certified non-transport EMS agency that can handle 911 calls on post. The cadets who are certified EMTs are vital to the Institute and part of the regimental system. They are on duty during Corps parades, at all athletic games and competitions, and throughout rat training.

EMT summer instruction is contracted with Mountain Gateway Community College (MGCC). The costs of the course, room, and board are fully covered for the cadets, but they are obligated to serve the Institute as EMTs for two years. MGCC instructor Rob Brooks is a full-time firefighter and paramedic with the Department of Fire and EMS for Amherst County. He has taught EMS for five years. This summer was his first experience teaching at VMI. Upon passing the National Registry EMT exam, the cadets will be awarded a license to operate as an EMT in the Commonwealth of Virginia.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye.



Institute Report

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The Institute Report, VMI's news magazine, publishes eight issues during each academic year. Inquiries, suggestions, news items, and address changes should be directed to Editor, Institute Report, VMI Public Information & Marketing, Lexington, VA 24450-0304; 540-464-7207; or VMIREport@vmi.edu. © 2026 Virginia Military Institute.

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Career opportunities are available across post. Learn more about faculty, staff, and hourly career opportunities at www.vmi.edu/jobs.



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On the cover: Alex Chirido '28 holds the Band Company guidon at the top of Big House Mountain.—Photo by H. Lockwood McLaughlin.

View the latest Institute stories and updates at www.vmi.edu/vmi-stories.



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COW Celebrate 40th Year

Story and photo by Marianne Hause

College Orientation Workshop, Inc. (COW), a four-week challenging educational enrichment and leadership development program held each summer at VMI, observed its 40th year of transforming the lives of promising, male, minority and at-risk high school students.

Eugene Williams '74 recognized early in his cadetship that many high school aged males could benefit from the VMI style of training, even if they could not meet the requirements to become VMI cadets. So in 1985, with the support of others, Williams founded COW. In 1987, the first contingent of 12 students from Virginia, New York, and New Jersey arrived to VMI.

This year, 30 students from nine states participated in the program that taught them to overcome obstacles through intense physical training and classroom instruction in mathematics, English, public speaking, financial literacy, and career exploration. The students engaged in choral music, improved their swimming skills, completed an obstacle course as a team-building exercise, engaged in community service activities, and learned firefighting and lifesaving skills with the Lexington Fire and Rescue Team. They were challenged to overcome their fears by scaling both the indoor climbing wall in the Corps Physical Training Facility and the pamper pole, a 25-foot tall wooden pole on North Post which participants attempt to climb, stand atop, then leap to grab a trapeze; responding to powerful animals as they rode horseback; and learning the fundamentals of boxing. They also enjoyed kayaking, canoeing, camping, and hiking House Mountain.

Williams, who currently serves as the executive director, stressed that COW is not a summer camp, but a transformational experience. "We take these young fellows who have promise, but have failed to achieve their



Eugene Williams '74 discusses the many successes as well as the challenges of the COW program during the 40th anniversary reunion picnic in Collierstown July 11.

potential, and coach them out of their comfort zone. Our philosophy is, 'You can't sharpen steel with cotton. You have to sharpen steel with steel,' he said.

The students heard from many notable guest speakers who shared their life experiences and imparted knowledge of how they overcame adversity and life challenges to successfully attain their goals. Providentially, the late mayor of Lexington, Frank Friedman, spoke with the COW students about financial planning June 30. Later that night, Friedman suffered a medical emergency which led to his death. Williams shared how he broke the tragic news to the students, "I reminded them that they were the last group of people to have interacted with Frank before he started his journey down that long 'Valley of the Shadow of Death,' and that I hoped they left an impression with him that would lift his spirit as he traveled to heaven."

A celebratory 40th anniversary reunion picnic was held at Crockett Farm in scenic Collierstown July 11. In attendance were COW students; staff; Board of Director members; supporters; friends; and alumni, including U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Kendall Clarke, a COW student in 1989 and 1990; and Marvin Adames,

assistant vice president for student retention and dean of students at Kean University in New Jersey, a COW student in 1988. Adames shared stories from his troubled youth and how the COW program provided hope. "I grew up in Newark, a tough place. When I was about 8, I saw a person die for the first time in my life. It was a violent death. Looking out from my window on the eighth floor of the housing projects building where I lived, I saw a car speeding and swerving down the road. Two guys in the car pushed out a third guy from the back seat. He hit a dumpster and I saw his head blow up to the size of a pumpkin. I went to school with that guy's younger brother. Later I witnessed people stabbed and others who overdosed. I saw someone in a stolen car flip the car and die in front of me. I was their age," he said, pointing to the COW students. "When I was born, my father was 16, their age," indicating the students again. "My mother was 18. I had old school grandparents who encouraged them to get married, and they both dropped out of school. A few years later, they divorced. My mom went on public assistance. She tried working several different jobs, but we lived in those housing projects until I was 22. So, everything around

me told me that I should not have succeeded. My mother always told me that through education, despite the poverty we were suffering, despite what I was seeing outside of my window, I could be anything in this country. So, I did my very best in school, but I still had to walk day after day through the drug dealers and the gun slingers.” Adames described how the COW program gave him a chance to experience something different. “I had the opportunity to actually believe and to dream about the possibilities. My mother believed in me, and now other people believed in me too. The words spoken and the actions displayed by Gene Williams really were definitive. They made a difference. I left the COW program and went back to my neighborhood, understanding where I was headed. It was because of individuals like Gene who gave me a chance to see something very, very different.”

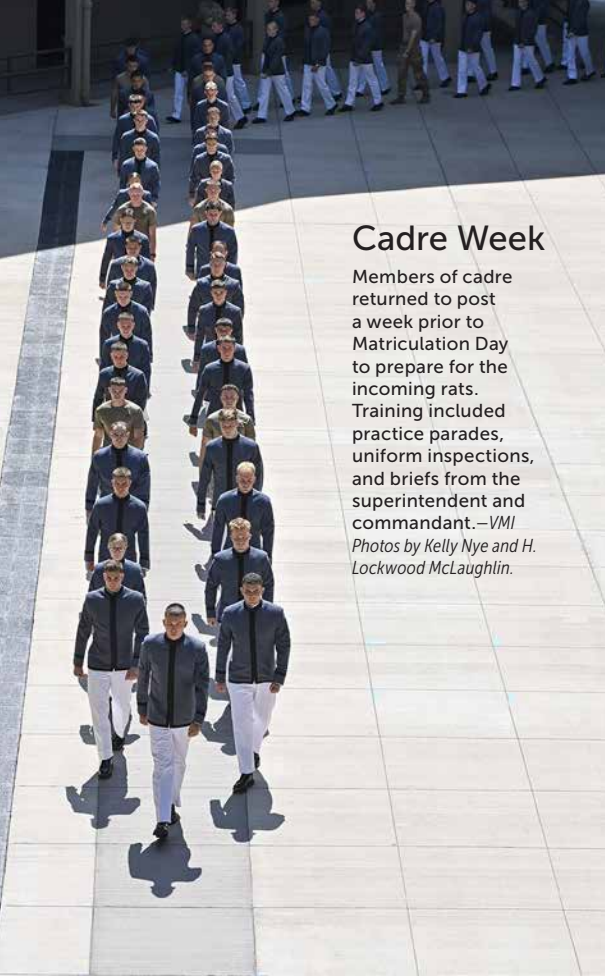
Over the life of the program, approximately 75% of participants go on to attend college. From that percentage, 3% have attended VMI. The other 25% have attended trade schools, entered the military, or worked in other civilian pursuits.

Interested students submit an application for the program that includes an essay and an agreement to “pay it forward,” meaning they will do acts of service in the future to repay the generosity shown to them through the program. There is no charge to the students selected to the program, since in most cases, neither the participant nor his family have the resources to cover the costs. It is a fundamental tenet of the COW program, which is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, that lack of economic resources should not prevent a deserving student from participating. All funds to cover the costs of the program are raised by private donations, small foundation gifts, or through the annual signature fundraising event, the COW Golf Classic at the Country Club of Virginia in Richmond. For more information or to donate, visit the website cow4life.org. 🐾

Summer Transition Program

The Summer Transition Program, designed to enhance the academic and physical fitness of incoming cadets before they officially matriculate, was held for three weeks in July. Over 200 participants were able to complete one required class, prepare for the physical demands required of all rats and cadets, experience life in barracks, and form relationships before the intensity of the Rat Line.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye.





Cadre Week

Members of cadre returned to post a week prior to Matriculation Day to prepare for the incoming rats. Training included practice parades, uniform inspections, and briefs from the superintendent and commandant.—VMI
Photos by Kelly Nye and H. Lockwood McLaughlin.



Kent Represents VMI in Africa

By Marianne Hause

Photo courtesy of Lt. Col. Molly Kent

Lt. Col. Molly Kent, associate professor in the Department of Biology and director of the Center for Undergraduate Research, spoke at the International Behavioral Neuroscience Society (IBNS) 35th Annual Meeting held during the summer in Cape Town, South Africa. The IBNS is dedicated to advancing understanding of the biological bases of behavior and fostering collaboration, communication, and mentorship among neuroscientists worldwide.

Kent, whose specialty is neuroscience, the scientific study of the nervous system, has been affiliated with IBNS since 2015 and a member of the IBNS executive council for four years. Her presentation, "The Neurobiology of

Behavior in Fish: From the Wild to the Lab and Back Again," highlighted innovative research examining how laboratory environments influence the brain and behavior of widely used fish models, including sticklebacks, betta fish, and zebrafish. Her research compares fish from natural environments with those raised in laboratories, and she demonstrated that including more real-world conditions in neuroscience research can help scientists better understand how the brain influences behavior and improve the usefulness of research findings. Her work is part of an international effort to make science more reliable and relevant to everyday life.

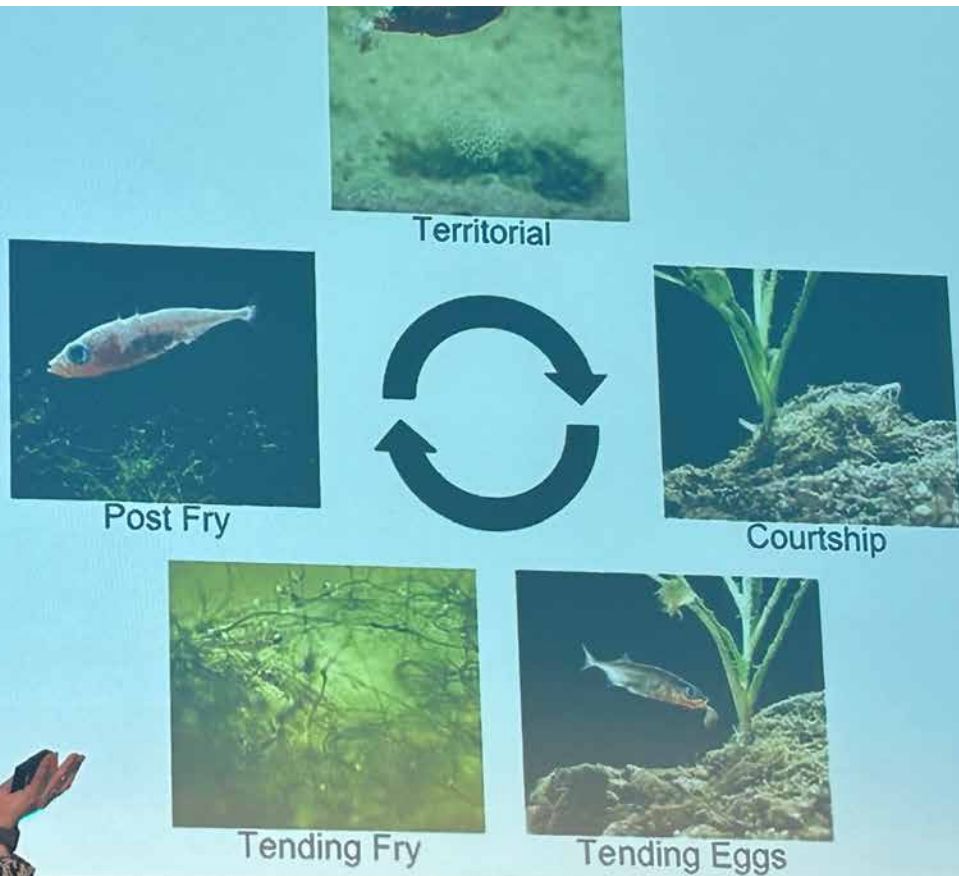
Kent shared that prior to the start of the conference, she met several other conference attendees in Johannesburg for a safari in Pilanesberg National Park. "We stayed for two nights and

participated in four game drives through the park. Our guides were selected for their expertise in local animal behavior, conservation efforts, and evolutionary biology, making the experience especially meaningful for a group of behavioral scientists. We were thrilled to observe in the wild many of the behaviors we study, including rough-and-tumble play, courtship, and mating. We saw an elephant courtship ritual, lion cubs engaged in play, and numerous animals foraging and feeding throughout the park. It was an amazing trip."

Kent stated she was honored to represent VMI to an international audience of leading neuroscientists and showcase VMI's commitment to excellence in research, international collaboration, and scientific leadership. Next year's conference will be held in The Bahamas, where Kent hopes a few cadets can join her in presenting research. 🌸

"We were thrilled to observe in the wild many of the behaviors we study, including rough-and-tumble play, courtship, and mating."

Lt. Col. Molly Kent discusses her research at the International Behavioral Neuroscience Society 35th Annual Meeting in Cape Town, South Africa.







Cadets stand at attention in New Barracks courtyard as their cadre slowly march in to meet them.

Record Number New Cadets Sign Matriculation Book

Story by Marianne Hause

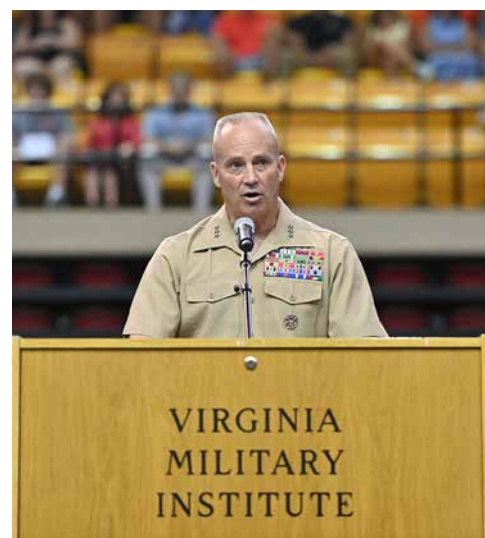
Photos by Marianne Hause, Kelly Nye, H. Lockwood McLaughlin, and courtesy of Glenda Dudley

If the residents of Rockbridge County felt a seismic shift Saturday, Aug. 15, it was almost certainly due to the arrival of the largest class of new cadets ever to matriculate at VMI. This historic milestone marked the beginning of the 187th year of the Institute. Since 1839, VMI has produced educated and honorable citizen-leaders, with a global reputation for academic excellence.

Throughout the morning, barracks rocked with families clamoring to move their students into their rooms and eagerly meet their roommates. In Cocke Hall, an informational fair was held for rats and their families to meet representatives from local churches, banks, restaurants, and other community organizations. VMI clubs and agencies were present, including the chaplain's office, VMI Police, and auxiliary services. In Cameron Hall, the rats were measured for their uniforms and issued athletic wear. In the Corps Physical Training Facility, they completed admission paperwork, met and talked with department faculty members, and as their last act as an ordinary teenager, signed the Matriculation

Book, adding their names to the long list of all who came before them in pledging to "No Ordinary College. No Ordinary Life."

In the afternoon, the chaplain's prayer was held in Memorial Hall. It is an optional non-



Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 welcomes the assembly during his first matriculation ceremony as superintendent.

See **Matriculation**, page 10

denominational prayer session for matriculants and their families. It was followed by the superintendent's welcome in Cameron Hall.

It was the first matriculation for Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 as superintendent. After welcoming the assembly, Furness provided a numeric breakdown of the matriculants. "Five hundred and thirty-two cadets from 36 states and nine countries comprise the Rat Mass of 2027+3. Three hundred and six are from the Commonwealth of Virginia and 226 from out of state. The 84 women who matriculated today comprise the third largest class of women since VMI became a co-educational institution nearly 30 years ago. One hundred forty-six matriculants are recruited NCAA Division I athletes. Two hundred fifty-three are majoring in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields and 279 in economics and



Community organizations and VMI clubs and agencies introduce themselves to the rats and their families during the Matriculation Fair in Cocke Hall.

business or the humanities. The average grade point average is 3.61 and 69 are on an academic or ROTC scholarship."

Furness told the new cadets they should be proud of their accomplishments. "Your appointment represents a great deal of hard work over the past four years. You would not be here today if we didn't think you had what it takes to succeed as a VMI cadet. Your decision to choose a college path far less traveled speaks volumes about your

character, as well as your goals, dreams, and aspirations." He shared with them his own struggles of being a VMI rat 43 years earlier in order to reassure them when they too have doubts about continuing on the Rat Line.

He explained why their class year will be referred to as 2027+3 and not as 2030 as other colleges. "At VMI, this designation is withheld from the entering class until it has collectively met the challenges of our historic Rat Line and has been formally recognized by the upper

three classes. Only then—and this will take place on a date to be determined in the first few months of 2027—will you truly enter the Corps of Cadets as a VMI class."

He affirmed that the process of transforming rats into cadets has been a hallmark of the VMI experience, and asked friends and family members to maintain their encouragement along the journey. "It will test them, cause them to grow and mature, develop self-control and time management skills they didn't know they had, and ultimately, strengthen their character while developing their minds." But with the trials, he promised, lifelong



Fraternal triplets Matthew, Olivia, and Daniel Rozsa, begin Matriculation Day at the fair surrounded by their parents and older brother, Nicholas Rozsa '24.

bonds will develop. “The brother rat spirit will spread over the entire class, and individuals will depend on others for comradery, help, encouragement, fortitude, and guidance. Class unity will grow.”

He closed by disclosing the future possibilities that await the rats. “Four years from now, you will be fully prepared intellectually, physically, and in moral character to pursue whatever personal and professional goals and dreams you have set for yourself. You will have graduated and statistically 98% of you will be starting your professional lives immediately. Many of you will go on to distinguish yourselves in military or federal service; in business and private industry; as well as in medicine, law, academia, sports, and numerous other professions both here and abroad. And as far reaching as it might sound, it is possible that there is another chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff among you, a future Gen. George C. Marshall, VMI Class of 1901; or Gen. Dan ‘Razin’ Caine ‘90.”

Col. Lawrence Havird ‘90, commandant, also addressed the rats. He told them he looks forward to watching them grow and develop as citizen-soldiers, and that military discipline and commitment are still expected and demanded at VMI. “The word military is in our name, and we embrace all the virtues associated with military service. Additionally, you must still earn any privilege or reward you receive at VMI. We remain unapologetic for the rigorous tests and sacrifices you will make on your path towards earning your VMI degree. This place is special, and its output unquestionably sets our graduates apart from those who choose an easier path.” He told the rats that VMI will never quit on them in their journey, and he requested that they commit to never quit on themselves. “Give your best effort in everything you tackle at VMI, whether in the classroom, on the drill field, on the athletic fields, or within barracks. During this journey, you will need to surrender your individuality in favor of teamwork.” He advised them to give their best effort every day. “Listen to and apply the feedback you are given. Be better tomorrow than you were today. Always look forward and never dwell on the past, and flush whatever failure you encounter while embracing the next challenge ahead.”

With cheers, applause, warm embraces, congratulatory pats on backs, and a few tears, the rats bid their families goodbye, and formed up with their companies. They then held up their right hands and with one voice resoundingly took their oath. Cameron Hall

shook as Regimental Commander Kimlong Nguyen ‘27 led the rats out to Main Street, marched them up Letcher Avenue, through Marshall Arch, and into New Barracks where they fell into formation.

The arch gates were closed and locked, physically and symbolically separating the matriculants from the world they left behind in order to begin a new life chapter. As the rats stood at attention on both sides of the barracks courtyard, their cadre—a group of cadets holding rank in each company, and chosen based on performance and ability to serve as instructors for the Rat Mass—slowly marched between them to the haunting beat of a bass drum, and quickly introduced them to the tests and trials of the Rat Line. Commands were shouted as the rats scrambled in various directions to obey their first orders. Some ran to the trunk room to store their luggage, some clambered to their stoop to be introduced to



Emmanuel Lamour embraces his identical twin brother, Gabriel, after they both sign the Matriculation Book.

their company cadre, and some scurried to the barber shop to get their VMI signature rat haircut.

Leo Goyette, a matriculant from Arlington, had been growing his hair in anticipation of his haircut. His parents had informed him that he could donate his hair to an organization that makes wigs for children suffering from hair loss. “I was happy when I learned that, because I didn’t want all my hair to go to waste. Helping a child have a sense of normalcy and giving them joy felt like the good and Christian thing to do,” he said.

A set of fraternal triplets from Greer, South Carolina, followed the journey of their older



Leo Goyette ‘30 receives his rat haircut in the barber shop. Goyette donated his hair to an organization that makes wigs for children suffering from hair loss.

brother, Nicholas Rozsa ‘24, in coming to VMI. Matthew, Daniel, and Olivia Rozsa joined the Rat Mass together. According to Matthew, none of them wanted to go to a normal college. They were meant to do something more. “Even though we are choosing to follow different paths at VMI, it’s still nice to know they’re here with me.”

Daniel agrees. “I was drawn to VMI because it doesn’t tolerate mediocrity. The Rat Line will be challenging. I’m not sure we’ll see each other a lot, but knowing that my brother and sister are there, trying to survive like I am, makes it bearable.”

Olivia believes she and her brothers may have an advantage going into the Rat Line together. “But we will be separated and at square one like everyone else. It is comforting to know, however, that somewhere they will be enduring the same things as me.”

Their parents, Miklos and Tracy, are extremely proud to have each of their children independently choose the disciplined and structured path of VMI. “They’ve accepted the ‘Don’t Do Ordinary’ challenge, and we are looking forward to seeing how much they grow as a result,” Tracy shared.

A set of identical twin brothers, Emmanuel and Gabriel Lamour from Chesapeake, Virginia, also signed the Matriculation Book. Coming from a military family, the brothers embrace the demands of VMI. “I get to challenge myself physically and intellectually. I really love that, because I have never been challenged like this anywhere else,” said Emmanuel.

The matriculation process continued throughout the week with the cadre leading the new arrivals in military drills and physical training, culminating with the Rat Crucible Sunday, Aug. 23. The Rat Mass will officially become the Class of 2030 in the spring semester, after Breakout. ❄



Matriculation Week

On Aug. 15, matriculants arrived on post. Cadets, faculty, and staff assisted them as they learned about academics, received parts of their uniform, moved into barracks, and signed the Matriculation Book. Later that afternoon, matriculants were called down by company in Cameron Hall. After the ceremony, cadre marched the rats into barracks for the beginning of their training. The training continued through the week prior to classes starting. The week also included each company climbing House Mountain and Rat Sunday, an opportunity for them to engage with local churches. Additional photos can be found on the VMI Flickr account.—VMI Photos by Kelly Nye, H. Lockwood McLaughlin, Lexie West, and Jake Falcone '27.







Urban Meyer closes the symposium in Gillis Theater with his keynote speech on establishing a winning culture.

By Marianne Hause
Photos by Kelly Nye

VMI held a three-day seminar in June for all its athletic coaches and staff, along with support Institute personnel, to study and share best practices and procedures of competitive success. The “On Winning” symposium, proposed by Superintendent Lt. Gen. David Furness ’87 and facilitated by the Center of Leadership and Ethics, provided a forum for the participants to delve into ways to instill and sustain a winning culture without compromising the characteristics and traits that make VMI unique. Specifically, the symposium emphasized the three core values of academics, military leadership, and athletics, symbolized by VMI’s Three-Legged Stool.

Guest speakers included a mix of exemplary military leaders and athletic coaches. Retired Marine Corps Gen. Robert Neller, the 37th Commandant of the Marine Corps, spoke on organizational leadership. Retired Navy Rear Adm. Jamie Sands, who served as commander of the Naval Special Warfare Command, spoke about optimizing high performance teams.

Jamaal Walton ’07 holds up the Three-Legged Stool as he shares the importance of each of the three pillars of a VMI education.

Former VMI head soccer coach, Ben Freakley, Ed.D., CMPC, founder of Ready. Set. Resilient., a coaching business that uses best practices to help individuals and teams optimize performance, shared his thoughts on winning at VMI and the psychology of coaching. Ivin Japser, football coach at the U.S. Naval Academy, discussed the winning culture there. Retired Marine Corps Maj. Mike Ettore, author and founder of Fidelis Leadership Group, an executive coaching and leadership development firm, talked about servant leadership, trust, and standards. Leonard Hamilton, who retired in 2025 as the winningest basketball coach in Florida State history, provided insights on establishing a winning culture. The keynote speaker was Urban Meyer, analyst on FOX Sport's "Big Noon Kickoff" and former head coach of the Jacksonville Jaguars who was inducted into the National Football Foundation Hall of Fame in 2025. Meyer also headed up the Florida Gators football team when they won national titles in 2006 and 2008, and oversaw an Ohio State third-string quarterback defeat Oregon in his last college national title. He closed the symposium with his insights on talent acquisition and culture, highlighting relentless effort, competitive excellence, and brotherhood.

In addition to hearing expert speakers, participants divided into working groups to brainstorm and discuss topics such as collectively defining success of athletics; identifying the non-negotiable behaviors demanded of a VMI athlete; retaining and graduating athletes; and increasing athlete acceptance, compliance, and involvement in Corps life.

Jamaal Walton '07, director of intercollegiate athletics at VMI, stated the symposium was an opportunity for Institute leaders to place their sole focus on winning in athletics. "It allowed each individual the voice and space to listen, learn, and contribute to enhancing the athletics leg of the stool. All three legs are equally important, but the attention paid during the symposium has allowed the Institute to take the necessary steps to not just compete but to win! It was a 'whole damn team' effort!"

Men's head basketball coach, Andrew Wilson, agreed with Walton. "It was great having the opportunity to learn from two legendary hall of fame coaches, Leonard Hamilton and Urban Meyer. All of the speakers were great, but getting to hear from two of the best in the history of the college sports industry and gain insight into what made them successful was very special." ❄️



Retired Navy Rear Adm. Jamie Sands talks about optimizing high performance teams in Gillis Theater.

Bissell Retires Following Illustrious Career

By Marianne Hause
Photos by Kelly Nye



Col. Gary Bissell '89, assistant superintendent in the Office of Operations and Planning (OPs), has retired, effective Aug. 1, after a wide-ranging and illustrious career as both cadet and staff member.

The Bissell family has a multigenerational VMI legacy, beginning with Gary's father, the late Brig. Gen. Norman "Mike" Bissell, who graduated from the Institute in 1961, enjoyed a career in the Army, then returned to VMI as the first non-active-duty commandant of cadets. Mike was instrumental in VMI's coeducation transition. Gary, the oldest of seven children, graduated in 1988 and his brother Drew, VMI Class of 1995, graduated in 1994. Another brother, Brandon, graduated in 1998 and currently serves as the chief operating officer of the VMI Alumni Association. Gary's son Joshua graduated in 2018.

Mike's extensive military career took him all over the world and naturally his large, close-knit family accompanied him. Gary and his siblings spent their formative years living in foreign lands, meeting

extraordinary people, and relocating to multiple schools. When asked if it was hard on them as children having to frequently make new friends, he replied, "We had each other." Gary attended three different high schools before graduating from Seoul American High School located in Yongsan Garrison, Seoul, South Korea, in 1982.

Knowing he wanted to serve in the military and fly, Gary applied to all the United States service academies and settled on the United States Coast Guard Academy (USCGA) in New London, Connecticut, where he played the trumpet in the band and was on the football team as a kicker, punter, and defensive end. "It was a great experience. I would not change the experience, it's just not what I needed at the time," Gary confessed. So, after one and a half years, he left the USCGA to work full-time and take classes at a community college part time.

A short time later, Gary began to consider his father's alma mater, VMI. Initially, his parents questioned his rationale that VMI would be a good fit for him when the USCGA was not, but in the end, they supported his decision. So, in August 1985 he matriculated as a rat, but because of all the college credits he had already acquired, he was academically categorized as a 3rd Class cadet.

Gary thrived at VMI, where he majored in economics, was a member of Band Company, held rank, played football, was a cheerleader

in the Keydet spirit club, and sang in the Glee Club. He graduated in 1988 and immediately commissioned into the Army.

He completed the Aviation Officer Basic Course (AOBC), the Initial Entry Rotary Wing Course (IERW), and Air Assault School (AAS) in 1989. During this time, Gary met Marti Eaton, who was going through AOBC, IERW, and AAS with him. They both went to Camp Page, Korea, for their first tour of duty and married mid-tour in 1990. At Camp Page, Gary served as an aeroscout platoon leader, flying OH-58 helicopters. In 1991, he completed the Aviation Officer Advanced Course, Airborne School, and Ranger School before being assigned to Fort Riley in Kansas, where he served as the assistant battalion flight operations officer.

He later transferred to the Kansas Army National Guard, where he served as the Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance Platoon leader, General Support Aviation Platoon leader, and the Company Operations officer. While in Kansas, he completed a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Kansas State University.

In 1994, Gary and Marti moved to Germany where she had been transferred. It was at that time Gary switched his commission and served in the U.S. Army Reserves for the 166th Aviation Regiment while also teaching



Lt. Gen. David Furness '87 congratulates Col. Gary Bissell '89 during the Retirement Parade last spring.

middle school for the Department of Defense Dependents Schools in Wurzburg.

Wanting to be closer to family when Marti transitioned from active duty to the Virginia National Guard in 1997, she and Gary relocated to Lexington, where Mike was working at VMI. Gary taught science for two years at Rockbridge Middle School and worked part time in VMI barracks as an assistant officer in charge. By the following year, he was working full time at VMI. Throughout this period, he and Marti worked in various positions supporting the Institute.

The first position he held was assistant commandant for operations and training. During that time, both he and Marti were involved in assisting with the integration of women, which he said was overdue. "It was a good decision for VMI, although a bit of a tough transition for some staff members and students. But it was really neat to be here and make those connections and help VMI through the process. Over the years, Marti and I have been able to keep in touch with a number of cadets from that time."

Institute physician, Dr. Melissa S. Krawiec '01, was one of the first female cadets to matriculate. She said Gary was a tactical officer at that time and always treated the cadets fairly and with respect. "Returning to VMI as an alum allowed me to appreciate Gary as a person and to see his amazing efforts in support of the Institute. It's been wonderful to be colleagues with him here, and he and his family will always be in my heart as a vital link in the chain of my success at VMI."

Later VMI positions Gary held include associate registrar, officer in charge of the

Company Tactical Officer program, officer in charge in barracks, cadet veteran's liaison, advisor to the Class of 2007, deputy chief of staff, then finally assistant superintendent for OPs from which he retired. Gary shared one of the best things about working at VMI in all his positions was working with cadets. "I enjoyed developing future leaders and building relationships with the cadets. Helping them be as prepared as they can be when they graduate, whether they're going into the military or the civilian sector, has been rewarding. VMI does a great job of teaching time management, right down to the minute. But another thing important for cadets is learning their limits and strengths, and understanding that anything they do is a team effort. That's one thing about going through the Rat Line, you can't do it by yourself. It's a class effort. That's important. When you get out in the real world, you never do anything by yourself."

For many of the years he was employed at VMI, his career in the reserves continued. He served in the 5-159th Aviation Battalion and commanded a heavy-lift helicopter company in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom; was branch chief in the operations division in the District of Columbia Army National Guard; was mobilized for a tour in the Army Operations Center at the Pentagon; served as battalion commander of the 1-320th in Abingdon, Virginia; was assigned to the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of the Army working with the Army Science Board; and was brigade commander of the Forces Command Augmentation Unit at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. His last assignment was

as reserve advisor for the Joint Staff at the Pentagon. He retired from the Army Reserves as a colonel in 2018.

Gary's many military awards and decorations include the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal with four oak leaf clusters, the Air Medal, and the Army Commendation Medal with one oak leaf cluster.

Gary holds a Master of Education degree from Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont, and a Master of Strategic Studies degree from the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Though he is not a VMI alumnus, Gary's brother, Lt. Col. Collin Bissell, has served as assistant in OPs alongside Gary for the past two years, and stated he has learned a tremendous amount from his older brother. "It was great to see Gary, not as a brother, but in a professional manner and as a boss. I saw his passion for VMI and a drive to do anything to help cadets gain all they could from the Institute. He feels strongly that every action taken, whether from operations and planning or from anywhere else on post, should be with the cadets as our first priority. VMI is special and unique. I've seen firsthand the positive impact it has had on three generations of my family."

Marti retired as an Army major general. She and Gary have two adult children. Joshua is currently an Army captain and Briana is an insurance consultant.

Gary said he plans to spend his retirement "traveling, visiting family and friends, and doing fun things I have put off over the years like learning to play guitar." ❀



VMI Community Theatre Presents "The Odd Couple"

The VMI Community Theatre presented the female version of Neil Simon's comic classic, "The Odd Couple," July 24-26 in Gillis Theater. Included in the cast were community members Emma Hawes as Olive Madison, Emilie Davis as Florence Unger, Linda Gorman as Mickey, Melou Piegari as Renee, Paula Oxendine as Sylvie, Marianne Hause as Vera, Tom Oxendine as Manolo, and Tim Price as Jesús. The play was co-directed by Price, along with Andrew Hartless, who also served as stage manager. The light and sound booth was run by Joe Hawes.—VMI Photo by Kelly Nye.



Israel Strategy & Policy Tour 2026

By Col. David Gray

Photos courtesy of the Center for Leadership and Ethics

From June 2 through 11, VMI cadets participated in the Israel Strategy and Policy Tour sponsored by the MirYam Institute.

Col. David Gray, executive director of the Center for Leadership and Ethics and Sgt. Maj. Sowers, Corps sergeant major, led the VMI contingent. Fifteen VMI cadets, along with cadets from West Point, participated this year.

The trip reinforced Israel's emphasis on a strong U.S.-Israel strategic partnership. Due to the continuing war, the trip centered on visits to Normandy and Poland. The trip tied together the Allies "Great Crusade" to liberate Europe, including freeing those in the concentration camps. Upon arrival in Paris, the cadets toured the Musée de l'Armée located at Les Invalides and then traveled to the Normandy coast for a three-day tour of the Normandy beaches. The cadets visited Utah and Omaha Beaches, Pointe du Hoc, and the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) American Cemetery at Normandy.

On the 82nd anniversary of the landing, the cadets participated in the D-Day wreath-laying ceremony at Langrune-sur-Mer. The group then traveled to Warsaw, Poland. While in Poland, the cadets visited the Okopowa Street Jewish cemetery, the second largest cemetery in the world, viewed the synagogue in Kielce before traveling to Kraków and the Jewish quarter. The cadets explored the Rapoport's Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, Treblinka extermination camp, and Majdanek death camp, concluding with a service at the Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum. ❄️

"I have never experienced history in the way I did over our two weeks together. I now understand the direct connection of the liberation operations of D-Day and the horrors of the Holocaust to the state of Israel in present time. ... I speak for more than just myself when I say I will take with me what I learned into my officership."—*Alexandra Black '28*

"As a future officer in the United States Navy, understanding these geopolitical realities is invaluable, and the framework provided is one I will carry throughout my career."—*Brentton N. Fentress '27*

"While I expected to learn about history, I never anticipated how deeply personal it would become. Standing in places where unimaginable atrocities occurred and hearing firsthand testimonies transformed historical events into real human stories. Those experiences challenged me, broadened my perspective, and changed the way I view the world."—*Isabelle Haer '28*

"One of the most valuable lessons I took away from the program was understanding how Israel's history, geography, and security concerns shape its foreign policy and strategic outlook... The friendships formed with members of our team and with those who share their stories... transformed what could have been a historical study into a deeply personal experience."—*Sam Castle '27*

Cadets and staff gather at "The Spirit of American Youth Rising from the Waves" statue located at the center of the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in Colleville-sur-Mer.



Isabelle Haer '28 and Alexandra Black '28 admire a Sherman Tank at the Airborne Museum of Sainte-Mère-Église.



The VMI contingent displays the VMI flag on Omaha Beach in Normandy.



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Completely redesigned with visitors in mind, the recently updated and upgraded VMI.edu offers a fresh look and streamlined path to discover what makes VMI “No Ordinary College” and a top choice for those ready to commit to a life of honor and excellence.

Some hallmarks of the new design and layout include:

- » Guided pathways—including a self-select tool on the homepage and expanded main menu—to help visitors quickly find the information most relevant to them.
- » A clearer, more guided journey through the admissions process from inquiry to arrival at matriculation.
- » A new ROTC subsite that showcases the military mission and excellence found at VMI, where consistently 50% or more of graduates commission into the armed forces.
- » A reimagined newsroom—VMI Stories—gathering features by topic and providing direct social media share links.

Visit VMI.edu to explore the Institute’s academics, leadership development, and military structure, and learn more about the individuals who embrace the mission and values that set the VMI apart from other colleges and universities. ✱

Cadets Televised During Freedom 250

More than 30 cadets and Moe were featured on FOX Sports’ coverage of the Freedom 250 Grand Prix of Washington, D.C., Sunday, Aug. 23. Earlier in the month, FOX had reached out to U.S. Army Recruiting Command (ARC) looking for a stateside unit for a military watch party for the race. ARC thought immediately of VMI.

Several VMI departments including Public Information and Marketing, Operations and Planning, the commandant’s office, and Parkhurst Catering, worked collectively to smoothly organize the event. It was held in The Arsenal, the cadet activity center located on the ground floor of Crozet Hall. Prior to the broadcast, the FOX videographer led the cadets in rehearsing energetic and raucous cheers, as well as reactions of disappointment in the event of a wreck.

The cadets were featured in a 40-second clip that highlighted all the U.S. armed forces, along with details on VMI commissioning, rankings, and return on investment. According to FOX, the broadcast drew an average audience of 3,282,000 viewers, the largest non-Indy 500 rating since 1995.—Screenshot courtesy of FOX Sports.



Cadets Conduct Summer Research

By Marianne Hause

Photos by Kelly Nye

Over 30 cadets spent a large portion of their summer on post working on advanced research projects, most notably through the Summer Undergraduate Research Institute (SURI) facilitated by the Center for Undergraduate Research.

Aurora Abramov '27, an English major, chose to research protein supplement use (PSU) among military college students for her SURI project, "Exploring Motivations, Influences, and Perceptions of Protein Supplement for Use Among Military College Students: A Qualitative Approach."

Abramov, who grew up in the Northern European country of Estonia, came to the U.S. as a teen to be closer to her father and attend high school at Randolph-Macon Academy in Front Royal, Virginia. Throughout her life, she has participated in a variety of sports including swimming, running, dancing, horseback riding, and tennis. Though she previously investigated supplement use for her personal consumption, it was after a conversation she had last year with her swim fitness class instructor, Maj. Deanne Moosman, assistant professor in the Department of Human Performance and Wellness, that she decided to conduct a SURI project on the subject.

With Moosman serving as her faculty mentor, Abramov began her research. She recruited 16 VMI cadets, both male and female, commissioning and non-commissioning; and conducted one-on-one interviews, asking open-ended questions.

Her preliminary findings were that most of the commissioning cadets were more inclined to take protein supplements because they wanted to be physically strong. Whereas there was a mixed response among those not planning to commission. Not surprisingly, she

discovered many cadets preferred to get their protein from meals rather than supplements. "They told me if they had to choose between a healthy diet and supplements, they preferred the diet. But they admitted that supplements are a good substitute if they don't have time for a meal," reported Abramov.

Moosman stated Abramov's project is relevant, since dietary guidelines changed this year. "The protein recommendation significantly increased in 2026, encouraging people to seek out even more protein. So, consumers are reaching for supplements or products that contain added protein."

Abramov will present her project at the VMI Undergraduate Research Symposium. She hopes to continue the study during this academic year, interviewing more subjects, and collecting more data, in order to meet the requirements for publication in a scientific journal.

Abramov held dual citizenship, but because she plans on commissioning into the Army to work in intelligence, she gave up her Estonian citizenship. She serves as assistant cadet in charge within Band Company for Rat Challenge.

Rye Jackson '28, an international studies major and computer science minor, researched drone detection for his SURI project, "A Multi-Modal Survey of Drone Detection Methods: Acoustic, Visual, RF, and Fusion Approaches."

Jackson was inspired to research drone detection while taking a business course during his rat year. "Drones are now widely used in both civilian and military settings, but their misuse near airports, critical infrastructure, and military bases creates serious security risks. By working with artificial intelligence, and computer coding, this is a real-world application I can explore after I graduate," he explained.

He described how researchers have explored several drone sensing approaches, including acoustic detection, deep learning-based visual methods, radiofrequency (RF) monitoring, and multi-sensor fusion systems. He studied 15 recent literature reviews across those approaches, focusing on techniques that could realistically be deployed in noisy, cluttered, and contested environments. "Because when it's raining you can't see it, when there's a thunderstorm you can't hear it, and when both of those things are happening, RF is essentially the only way you can detect a drone.

There are even stealth drones, which are very difficult to spot." Jackson stated the best means of drone detection is not just one method, but a combination of all three: acoustical, visual and RF.

Jackson's faculty mentors for the project were Dr. Sherif Abdelhamid, assistant professor in the Department of Computer and Information Sciences (CIS) and team

Aurora Abramov '27 interviews a cadet on protein supplement use for her SURI project.



member of the Cyber Defense Lab, and Lt. Col. Doug Wainwright, CIS instructor and IT manager.

Jackson was a participant of the investment club and the drone club and hails from Daleville, Virginia. His goal after graduation is to become an entrepreneur.

Xavier Zarza '28, a biology major, researched alternatives for prosthetic bones in his Summer Undergraduate Research Program (SURP) project, "Electroplating 3D Prints for Antiseptic and Inert Properties in Prosthetics."

3D printing is the process of creating three-dimensional objects from a digital file by building them layer by layer. Farming equipment, virtual reality simulators, and hobbyist models are all examples of ordinary items made from 3D printers.

The goal of Zarza's SURP project is to provide low-cost prosthetics for use in developing countries that do not have access to high-tech facilities. His ideal production method should be simple enough to complete with readily available equipment, and capable to assist a growing child needing replacements. He explained his process for designing and printing external and internal prosthetics. "I spent a lot of time with CAD software grafting the shapes and getting the right measurements. I printed the prosthetics using two different substances: polylactic acid, a non-conductive plastic filament; and ABS-like photopolymer resin, which is a light-sensitive material that mimics the durability and flexibility of ABS plastic. Resin printing requires three separate machines, while filament printing only requires one machine. The primary difference between the two materials is their

Rye Jackson '28 surrounds himself with drones while he researches methods to detect them.



strength. Resin is much stronger and smoother than filament, although prolonged exposure to resin is toxic to the human body."

In addition to the toxicity of resin, Zarza observed metal plating would provide increased strength, sterility, and flexibility, as well as preventing cracking or deformation under a heavy load. Additionally, copper and gold contain antiseptic qualities. He was unsure though how to apply the metal. He came up with the idea of electroplating while conducting an experiment in his general chemistry lab course taught by Maj. Christopher Shingledecker, assistant professor in the chemistry department. In order for the electroplating to be

successful, Zarza first coated his prosthetic with low electrical resistance graphene. This enabled the electroplated metal to better adhere.

For his capstone project during the next academic year, Zarza will attempt to simulate gold plated bones in the human body to ensure their safe use. If successful, he has no aspirations of selling his findings for personal gain. "The goal is to lower the cost and make it much more applicable for anyone else," he said.

Zarza is from Lewisberry, Pennsylvania. He plans to commission into the Army medical corps. 🇺🇸

Xavier Zarza '28 demonstrates the electroplating process while Maj. Christopher Shingledecker observes.



Keydets Build Playset for Young Cancer Patient

By Marianne Hause

Photos by Jake Falcone '27



Gianna De Cicco '27 prepares to sink a screw into the playset as her soccer coach and fellow athletes work around her.

Several days before classes began, a group of cadet-athletes, coaches, and athletic staff braved the August heat while participating in Roc Solid Foundation's "Play It Forward" program to build a playset and playhouse for 18-month-old, Oakley Clements, who is being treated for leukemia at UVA Health Children's hospital.

Roc Solid Foundation, a nonprofit headquartered in Chesapeake, Virginia, builds hope for kids fighting cancer through the power of play. With the support of community volunteers, they have built thousands of playsets for families throughout the country. VMI alumnus, Trey Barham '08, pitched for the Keydets baseball team when he was a cadet, then went on to play professional baseball for eight seasons with the Oakland Athletics. He currently serves as director of partnerships for Roc Solid. It was Barham who invited VMI athletics to build Oakley's playset at her home in Buena Vista. "When I heard where she lived, I knew who to reach out to for help, and VMI's immediate answer was yes! When kids are first diagnosed with cancer, they're not allowed to go to normal playgrounds. They're too immunocompromised. It's not safe for them. So, we build playsets in their own backyards. We can't cure cancer, but we

can be here for them while they have it. We can help the families enjoy a little bit of normalcy and have some fun, even if it's just for a couple seconds a day. That's what it's all about. It's very fulfilling," said Barham.

Shanna Clements, Oakley's mother, shared the toddler was 10 months old when she was diagnosed with Philadelphia chromosome-positive acute lymphoblastic leukemia. "It was a few days before her first Christmas.

Her doctor ordered lab work and discovered her white blood count was through the roof. He instructed us to go to UVA, and that's where we found out she had cancer." Shanna disclosed Oakley's medical treatment has been a long, difficult road. "There were some days in the very beginning when



Cadet-athlete, Dylan Friedman '29, works to assemble the playset.

VMI cadets and athletic staff celebrate after completing the playset and playhouse for Oakley Clements of Buena Vista.



we truly didn't think we would get this far. There were some rough complications we went through, but she's made it. She is happy and living her best life. The construction of this playset is very exciting because I know I can see Oakley being a toddler again, playing outside and having fun."

Jamaal Walton '07, director of intercollegiate athletics, said VMI is excited to do great things for the community. "I feel like I want to play on this once we finish," he joked while the cadets hammered and drilled. Earnestly he continued, "It's a lot of hard work and effort, but this is what we're all about at VMI." 🌸



Basketball athletes, AJ Clark '27 and Rickey Bradley Jr. '26, work together building the frame of the playset.



Rachel Baez '28 secures a metal bracket to the playset.



Nick Korta, assistant coach for men's basketball, reads the playhouse assembly directions before beginning work.



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