



VIRGINIA HBCU/MSI CHESAPEAKE BAY SUMMIT

March 27 - 29, 2026

Roslyn Conference & Retreat Center

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



We thank the Steering Committee members for their energy and coordination support over the past year to bring this Summit to fruition. The Virginia HBCU/MSI Chesapeake Bay Summit would not be possible without your extraordinary efforts.

Summit Steering Committee Members

Mrs. Meredith Dash, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay

Ms. Chloe DiStaso, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay

Ms. Emma Gregory, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay

Dr. Ashley Haines, Norfolk State University

Ms. Jenny McGarvey, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay

Dr. Margaret Mulholland, Old Dominion University

Dr. Chinedu Okala, Norfolk State University

Dr. Carolina Lewallen, Hampton University

Dr. Indu Sharma, Hampton University

Dr. Shruti Syal, Virginia State University

Dr. James Vonesh, Virginia Commonwealth University

Dr. Matthew A. Whalen, Virginia State University

The Summit also would not be possible without the generous support of our sponsors:



WELCOME REMARKS

Welcome to the Inaugural Virginia HBCU/MSI Chesapeake Bay Summit! The Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay is thrilled and truly honored to help host this special event — and we're so glad you've joined us!

This Summit was born from the spirit of collaboration, inspired by our annual Chesapeake Watershed Forum and shaped through meaningful conversations with our partners at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) across the region. Building on the momentum of the MD/DC Bay Summit, this gathering is meant to be more than just a conference — it's a space to connect, share ideas, and uplift one another.

Acknowledging that much has changed over the course of the past year, and that there's a great deal of uncertainty in the world right now, creating spaces like this is more important than ever. Thanks to the collective vision of our dedicated Steering Committee, the Virginia HBCU/MSI Bay Summit is also part of a larger movement — one that aims to ensure there's a space for *everyone* in the environmental movement. By fostering peer connection, hands-on learning, and meaningful dialogue, we hope to empower students and future leaders to take up space, bring fresh ideas, and make lasting change in the environmental field.

While the Alliance's programming inherently focuses around restoration, conservation, and environmental resilience, ongoing collaboration with community voices from across the watershed is core to the Alliance's programmatic delivery. The Alliance believes that clean water and access to nature should be available to each individual that lives in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. We know that a people-centered approach and expansive mindsets lead to more creative and permanent solutions! Because when every voice is at the table, our solutions become stronger, more creative, and more lasting.

We hope this Summit sparks deeper partnerships between HBCUs, MSIs, and the Bay restoration effort — not just for this weekend, but for the future of our shared environment. So, we invite you to dive in — meet someone new, ask big questions, learn something you can carry with you — and most of all, enjoy the experience.




KATE FRITZ
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



SUMMIT SCHEDULE

Friday, March 27

Time	Activity	Location
9:30 am to 10:00 am	Arrival	Observation Deck @ Richmond City Hall
10:00 am to 10:20 am	Welcome Remarks	
10:20 am to 11:00 am	Opening Speakers	
11:00 am to 11:30 am	Connections Across the Watershed	
12:00 pm to 1:30 pm	Travel to Maymont & Self-Guided Time to Visit Robins Nature Center	Robins Nature Center @ Maymont
1:30 pm to 2:30 pm	Lunch	
2:30 pm to 3:30 pm	Community Showcase Panel - <i>Intersection of Urban Planning & the Environment</i>	
3:40 pm to 4:00 pm	Surprise Animal Ambassador Visit	
4:00 pm to 4:30 pm	Travel to Roslyn Retreat Center	
4:30 pm to 5:30 pm	Lodging Check-In	Powers Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center
5:30 pm to 6:30 pm	<i>Optional: Professional Headshots</i>	Tucker Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center
7:00 pm to 8:00 pm	Dinner	Dining Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center
8:00 pm	<i>Optional: Bonfire</i>	Tucker Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center



Saturday, March 27

Time	Activity	Location
8:00 am to 9:00 am	Breakfast	Dining Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center
9:30 am to 10:30 am	Opening Remarks & Keynote Address	Tucker Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center
10:45 am to 11:30 am	Career Breakout Sessions (choose 1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wildlife Conservation & Rehabilitation • Elected Leadership in Action 	
11:45 am to 12:30 pm	Career Breakout Sessions (choose 1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Health & Nature-Based Design • Sustainable and Safe Transit for All 	
12:30 pm to 2:00 pm	Lunch & Networking Hour	
2:00 pm to 3:00 pm	Outdoor Activity	Tucker Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center
3:30 pm to 4:30 pm	Closing Plenary	
4:30 pm to 5:30 pm	Design Your Life - Odyssey Plans	
6:00 pm to 7:00 pm	Dinner	
7:30 pm	<i>Optional: Art Showcase</i>	

Sunday, March 28

Time	Activity	Location
8:00 am to 9:00 am	Breakfast	Dining Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center
9:00 am	Room Check-Out & Key Return	Powers Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center
9:30-11:00 am	Design Your Life continued	Tucker Hall @ Roslyn Retreat Center
11:00-11:30 am	Closing Remarks and Close of Summit	



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Friday, March 27

Arrival | 9:30 am to 10:00 am

Observation Deck (City Hall, Richmond, VA)

All students and faculty should arrive at the newly reopened Observation Deck on the 18th floor of the Richmond City Hall. Light snacks and drinks will be available. Be sure to arrive early so you can enjoy the panoramic views of downtown and beyond!

Welcome Remarks | 10:00 am to 11:00 am

Observation Deck (City Hall, Richmond, VA)

Join us as we open the VA HBCU/MSI Chesapeake Bay Summit! We will hear remarks from Meredith Dash, VA Environmental Education Specialist at the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Michael Smart, the Sustainability Engagement Coordinator at the City of Richmond, and Qui Nguyen, the Community Forests Projects Coordinator at the City of Richmond.



Michael Smart is the Sustainability Engagement Manager for the City of Richmond's Office of Sustainability, where he leads community engagement and partnerships supporting the RVAgreen 2050 Climate Equity Action Plan. His work focuses on advancing climate resilience, environmental justice, and equitable access to sustainability initiatives across Richmond's neighborhoods. Michael collaborates with community organizations, residents, and local institutions to develop programs that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, address energy burden, and build stronger, more resilient communities. He is a proud graduate of Norfolk State University and is passionate about connecting people, ideas, and resources to create lasting impact at the neighborhood level.



Qui Nguyen serves as the Community Forestry Project Coordinator for the City of Richmond's Parks & Rec. Over the past couple years, Qui has been leading community engagement in urban forestry work, from hosting volunteer tree plantings and collaborative management of public lands, to helping shape local municipal policy and processes. Combining her background in engineering and project management, to her passion for environmental justice and community stewardship, she hopes to create more sustainable and equitable public spaces for all members of the community to enjoy.

Connections Across the Watershed | 11:00 am to 11:30 am

Observation Deck (City Hall, Richmond, VA)

Get to know other attendees and university faculty with a community building exercise designed to foster connections and bolster energy levels.



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Tour Richmond from Above | 11:30 am to 12:00 pm

Observation Deck (City Hall, Richmond, VA)

Walk the Observation Deck's 360° city views with Rachel Pater to learn more about the history of Richmond, important landmarks and connection to water through the James River.



Rachel Pater is the Founder and Executive Director of the Richmond Story House, a nonprofit that unearths and amplifies Richmond's stories through writing workshops, programs, projects, and more.

Transition to Maymont & Robins Nature Center | 12:00 pm to 1:30 pm

Robins Nature Center (Maymont)

The Robins Nature Center showcases the remarkable ecology of the James River and Chesapeake Bay watershed. It is the largest facility of its kind in central Virginia, with close to 30,000 gallons of aquaria filled with fish, turtles, reptiles and amphibians, plus two river otters. Explore at your own pace until lunch is ready.

Lunch & Welcome Remarks | 1:30 pm to 2:30 pm

Robins Nature Center (Maymont)

Break bread with us and continue getting to know your fellow Summit participants. We will hear from Delegate Alex Askew (D) of the 95th District representing parts of the Cities of Norfolk and Virginia Beach. We challenge you to introduce yourself to someone you haven't met yet! Food catered by Roots Natural Kitchen.



Hon. Alex Q. Askew is a dedicated public servant and lifelong resident of Virginia Beach. A proud graduate of Tallwood High School and Hampton University, Alex now represents the 95th District in the Virginia House of Delegates, where he champions policies that improve public education, community safety, and economic opportunity. During his time in the General Assembly, Delegate Askew has worked to expand workers' compensation for firefighters, implement lead-water testing in public schools, and deliver historic funding for the Hampton Roads transit system and Virginia's HBCUs. Delegate Askew sits on the Appropriations, Education, and Counties, Cities, and Towns Committees, where he fights for the resources and investments Virginia Beach and Norfolk families deserve. Alex is also deeply involved in his community. He is an active member of New Jerusalem Ministries, where he mentors and tutors local youth, and is a proud member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Community Showcase Panel | 2:30 pm to 3:30 pm

Robins Nature Center (Maymont)

The City of Richmond, like many urban city centers, has distinct environmental challenges. However, there are community partners working on actions that can be taken to protect communities through smart, informed, urban planning. During this panel, you will hear examples of work being done locally to improve climate resilience using urban planning and how the panelists' careers intersect with those examples.



Shruti Syal is an Assistant Professor at the Wilder School of Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University. She holds a BSc in Biology from McGill University, a MSc in Environmental Studies from The Energy & Resources Institute, and a PhD in Regional Planning from the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. She studies cities as integrated human-environment systems, focusing on water and waste dynamics, infrastructure, institutions, and “informality”. Her dissertation established environmental remediation of the river Yamuna and “slum” upgradation in Delhi as interdependent goals, challenging the dichotomies that plague planning practice in Indian cities, and received the ACSP Gill-Chin Lim Award for Best Dissertation in International Planning (2019).



Nathan Burrell a native of Essex County, Virginia, moved to Richmond in 1999 to study Parks and Recreation Management at Virginia Commonwealth University. With over 20 years of experience in parks management and land conservation, he has held leadership roles including Deputy Director of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and now serves as Director of Community Conservation and Government Relations for the Virginia Outdoors Foundation. Recognized for his impact in Richmond, he has received honors such as Style Weekly’s “Top 40 Under 40” and GRTC’s “Local History Maker.” In his free time, he enjoys biking and paddling the James River.



Eli Podyma is PlanRVA’s Environmental Planner, where he leads regional natural resources planning and coordinates the Lower Chickahominy Watershed Collaborative. His work focuses on watershed resilience, land conservation, green infrastructure, and integrating ecological data into regional planning and infrastructure decision-making. Eli has professional experience with state and federal forestry agencies and holds a B.S. in Environmental Resource Management from Virginia Tech.



Chieh Huang is a registered landscape architect and urban designer at MARVEL. Trained as both a designer and planner, the dual background has enabled him to work across various geographic and time scales, from small pop-up plazas to large-scale urban redevelopment projects, to a world atlas identifying the clash between global biodiversity and urbanization.



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Animal Encounter | 3:40 pm to 4:10 pm

Robins Nature Center (Maymont)

Meet some of Maymont's beloved animal ambassadors during close encounters of the scaly, feathered and furry kind. This encounter will feature animals that call the Chesapeake Bay home.

Transition to Roslyn Conference & Retreat Center | 4:10 pm to 5:30 pm

Roslyn Conference & Retreat Center (8727 River Rd, Richmond, VA 23229)

Take your university van or drive yourself to Roslyn Center. Once there, park in the circle driveway near Powers Hall for Registration. Get your room assignment from the Registration Desk and head to your room to relax, get to know your roommate and freshen up.

Professional Headshot Photography | 5:30 pm to 6:30 pm

Tucker Hall (Roslyn Retreat Center)

Head to Tucker Hall to find Black Pepper Photography set up for FREE professional headshots. Receive your digital, high resolution, headshot delivered via a private, online gallery following the event.

Dinner | 7:00 pm to 8:00 pm

Dining Hall (Roslyn Retreat Center)

Share a meal with Summit attendees and speakers. We challenge you to introduce yourself to someone you haven't met yet!

Free Time | 8:00 pm to 10:00 pm

Unwind after a busy first day at the Summit by connecting with other students on-site at Tucker Hall. There is no formal programming; each of these activities are optional. You're welcome to participate in any or none of them. To respect the sleep schedules of all Summit attendees, though, quiet hours will begin at 10:00 pm, and all students are expected to be in their accommodations with the lights out by that time.

Bonfire & S'mores | 8:00 pm to 10:00 pm

Outside Tucker Hall

End the day on a sweet note by joining us for s'mores. We'll provide all the materials and manage the bonfire - all you need to do is enjoy it!

Games & More | 8:00 pm to 10:00 pm

Inside Tucker Hall

Use the time to gather with other summit attendees to play cards, challenge someone to a board game, be creative with some magnetic poetry or just hang out.



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Saturday, March 28

Breakfast | 8:00 am to 9:00 am

Dining Hall

Fuel up for the day ahead by sharing a meal with other Summit attendees. Breakfast will only be served during this period so be sure to arrive on time.

Opening Remarks & Keynote Address | 9:30 am to 10:30 am

Tucker Hall

Join us in Tucker Hall as Kate Fritz, CEO at the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay opens the second day of the HBCU/MSI Chesapeake Bay Summit. Following Kate, hear from our featured keynote speaker, Jazmin Albarran, Executive Director of Seed Your Future. Learn about her personal career trajectory, what it means to be a woman of color and first generation to attend college, get a Master's degree, enter the horticulture field and manage a non-profit. Jazmin's story is one you don't want to miss!



Jazmin Albarran, MBA, is the Seed Your Future Executive Director with over a decade of change and systems management experience. With a solid knowledge of associations and philanthropy, she brings to the movement her skills and expertise in planning, leading, and managing development projects and programs. She has experience in a broad range of nonprofit organizations, including those focused on crisis support, youth development, and workforce development. Jazmin is leading Seed Your Future's next phase of growth, promoting horticulture sectors and the nationwide expansion of career development opportunities with plants.

SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Environmental Careers Breakout Session # 1 | 10:45 am to 11:30 am

Tucker Hall

How do you translate your passion for the environment into a career that makes a difference? Join professionals from different career paths and learn how their work intersects with the environmental sector. Bring your questions because these sessions will be interactive!

Wildlife Conservation & Rehabilitation



Jess Dyer joined the Wildlife Center of Virginia in 2018 after earning degrees in Veterinary Technology and Captive Wildlife Care. Starting as a Veterinary Technician Intern, she advanced to Licensed Veterinary Technician, Technician Supervisor, and is now Hospital Manager. Jess is passionate about the mission of WCV and values the opportunity to mentor and engage with future wildlife professionals, while still enjoying the clinical aspects of her work in wildlife medicine.



Bella Canovas currently works as the Facility Supervisor for Rockwood Nature Center in Chesterfield County, Virginia. She has a background in animal husbandry and environmental education, with experience ranging from large hoofstock, birds, and small mammals, and a specialty in herptiles and fish. Through her work with Chesterfield County, she has developed and implemented a large-scale environmental education initiative bringing programs and field trips to public schools, as well as community science opportunities for the general public. She is also an artist specializing in environmental illustration and is excited to share her journey as a young professional in the environmental field.

Elected Leadership in Action



Mr. Frank Johnson, Jr. serves on the Board of Directors of the Northern Neck Soil and Water Conservation District (NNSWCD), headquartered in Warsaw, VA. The NNSWCD is responsible for assisting the agricultural community, landowners, and residential property owners of Lancaster, Northumberland, Richmond, and Westmoreland counties in the wise management and maintenance of the region's valuable natural resource base. His expertise includes strategic planning, critical thinking, public speaking, and education. He attended Hampton University!



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Environmental Careers Breakout Session # 2 | 11:45 am to 12:30 pm

Tucker Hall

How do you translate your passion for the environment into a career that makes a difference? Join professionals from different career paths and learn how their work intersects with the environmental sector. Bring your questions because these sessions will be interactive!

Mental Health & Nature-Based Design



Justin Sykes received his bachelor's in Sustainable Development in 2021 at Appalachian State University, North Carolina. He is passionate about racial justice and holistic approaches to community care. He believes system change is possible through story centered approaches. At Virginia Community Voice, Justin is leading a team of neighbors and community partners through a listening and design process for the new Center for Rest & Well-Being aka the Healing Hub. To learn more about this project: <https://vacommunityvoice.org/center-for-rest-healing>

Sustainable & Safe Transit for All



Kyle A. Gilmer AICP, serves as the Transportation Strategic Planner, where he oversees transportation planning efforts within the City of Norfolk's Department of Transportation, with multimodal planning serving as a key pillar of his work. He helps shape the City's transportation vision by guiding projects from concept to implementation, leading initiatives such as Vision Zero, the micromobility (Lime scooters and e-Bikes) program, public outreach and engagement, securing state and federal funding, and working closely with local, regional, and state partners to turn thoughtful planning into real, visible improvements for the community. Before joining Norfolk in October, Kyle worked in regional transportation planning, building a strong foundation in long-range planning, data analysis, and project development. He holds a Master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning from Virginia Commonwealth University and a Bachelor's degree in Geography/GIS from Old Dominion University, and is passionate about creating safe, connected, and accessible transportation solutions that make it easier for people to move through and enjoy the city.

Lunch & Networking Hour | 12:30 pm to 2:00 pm

Dining Hall and Tucker Hall

Share a meal with speakers from the morning sessions and then head down to Tucker Hall for additional networking. Check out the exhibitor tables featuring the HBCU/MSI universities and the programs they offer. Ask questions to university faculty and discover what other opportunities exist across HBCU/MSIs!



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Outdoor Activity | 2:00 pm to 3:00 pm

Outside Tucker Hall

Get outside with educators from the James River Park System who will lead the group in environmental education activities to get us moving after lunch. Time to get some Vitamin D!

Closing Plenary | 3:30 pm to 4:30 pm

Tucker Hall

During this year's closing presentation, hear from Cirse Gonzalez, Training & Engagement Program Coordinator for the Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve in Virginia (CBNERR-VA). She will share insight from her career at the intersection of community engagement and marine science.

*As Training and Engagement Program Coordinator with Chesapeake Bay NERR in Virginia, **Cirse Gonzalez** works to inform and empower decision making in coastal resource management through capacity building, technical assistance and community engagement. To her efforts in education, access and engagement, and any participatory process, Cirse brings experience in communications and outreach, natural resource management, responsible recreation and marine science from her work and research with a variety of agencies and organizations, including: the U.S. Federal Recreation Council (aka FICOR), where she served as Executive Director, NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, five U.S. marine laboratories and the Hispanic Access Foundation, for whom she recently wrote a report on Latinos and the Ocean. While navigating her career, Cirse has lived and worked in geographies from Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska, to Madagascar (nearish antipodes!). Cirse has a B.S. in Biology from Duke University and a Master of Marine Affairs from the University of Washington.*



Design Your Life | 4:45 pm to 5:30 pm

Tucker Hall

You may not know what career path you will end up on now, but you can visualize how to Design Your Life. By imagining two unique, five-year journeys, you create your own possibilities! VCU professor and Steering Committee member Dr. James Vonesh will serve as your guide through this experience.

Dinner | 6:00 pm to 7:00 pm

Dining Hall

Share a meal with Summit attendees. We challenge you to introduce yourself to someone you haven't met yet!



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Free Time | 7:30 pm to 10:00 pm

On the final night of the Summit, connect with other attendees at Tucker Hall. There is no formal programming; each of these activities are optional. You're welcome to participate in any or none of them. To respect the sleep schedules of all Summit attendees, though, quiet hours will begin at 10:00 pm, and all students are expected to be in their accommodations with the lights out by that time.

Student Art Showcase | 7:30 pm to 10:00 pm

Tucker Hall

Art is a powerful way to tell environmental stories and raise public interest in important environmental topics. Artwork by fellow attendees across the watershed will be on display. Ask them about their art or make some yourself.

Games & More | 7:30 pm to 10:00 pm

Inside Tucker Hall

Use the time to gather with other summit attendees to play cards, challenge someone to a board game, be creative with some magnetic poetry or just hang out.



SESSION DESCRIPTIONS

Sunday, March 28

Breakfast | 8:00 am to 9:00 am

Dining Hall

Fuel up for the day ahead by sharing a meal with other Summit attendees. Breakfast will only be served during this period so be sure to arrive on time.

Packing Up & Checking Out | 9:00 am

Powers Hall

Pack up your belongings and check out by turning in your key at Powers Hall. Be sure to turn in your name tag and feedback form to receive a raffle ticket for the last prize drawing.

Closing Remarks & Design Your Life, Continued | 9:30 am to 11:00 am

Tucker Hall

Join us back in Tucker Hall for some brief closing remarks from the Summit planning team. Be sure to turn in your name tag and feedback form to receive a raffle ticket for the last prize drawing. The last raffle ticket will be pulled during these remarks, so be sure to be there on time for your chance to win!

We will wrap up the Summit with peer-led coaching on the next steps in your career journey.

Departure | 11:00 am

Roslyn Center

Thank you so much for coming! We hope you enjoyed the Summit!

