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Whistles Against Street Harassment (WASH)

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WHISTLES AGAINST STREET HARASSMENT (WASH)

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Angela Reynolds, Professor, Mathematics and Applied Mathematics, College of Humanities and Sciences

Project Sponsor: John Venuti, Associate Vice President for Public Safety, VCU & VCU Health and Chief of Police

PROJECT ABSTRACT

As an urban university nestled in a bustling city, VCU is committed to having all members of the community feel safe in public spaces. The Whistles Against Street Harassment (WASH) initiative aims to improve the safety of our VCU community by (1) providing a whistle, a practical and easy-to-use tool that the target or bystanders can use to disrupt street harassment, and (2) raising awareness and dialogue related to street harassment and public safety. RAINN defines street harassment as "unwanted comments, gestures, or acts directed at someone in a public space without their consent."¹ Street harassment is not limited to gender- or race-based intimidation; however, it negatively affects the entire community.

In a recent web-based survey, VCU students, faculty, and staff identified the top safety interventions on the Monroe Park and MCV campuses to be pedestrian safety (33%), increased lighting (26%), addressing street harassment (25%), more police visibility in the evenings (25%) and additional patrols in VCU parking lots (20%).² The WASH initiative aims to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, street harassment on our urban campuses.

QUEST 2028:

The project addresses the following QUEST 2028 themes:

Theme 1: Diversity Driving Excellence

Goal 1.1 Nurture an institutional culture and climate that is diverse, inclusive, equitable and engaged.

Theme 2: Student Success

Goal 2.2 Enhance the university culture of care and responsiveness supporting student engagement, success and sense of belonging.

A central theme of the University's Quest 2028 strategic plan is creating a diverse and inclusive environment. The WASH initiative is an opportunity to implement these key values in the real world. VCU community members cannot be successful in an environment where they feel unsafe. Street harassment is an ongoing problem requiring a community effort to confront the issue and empower everyone to stand up for themselves and each other. Developing a campaign and educational opportunities will highlight the issue and foster the culture of appreciation and respect VCU strives for.

¹ *Street Harassment* | RAINN. www.rainn.org/articles/street-harassment. Accessed 13 Sept. 2022.

² 2022 VCU Safety Perceptions Survey

PROJECT GOALS

The Whistles Against Street Harassment (WASH) initiative aims to improve the safety of our VCU community by (1) providing a practical, easy-to-use tool, a whistle, that the target or nearby bystanders can use to disrupt street harassment and (2) raising awareness and dialogue related to street harassment and public safety. The ultimate goal of the WASH initiative is to decrease street harassment.

PROJECT STRATEGIES

Initially, the team held a brainstorming session to generate project ideas. One idea involved bystander intervention training for countering harassment. The team also discussed how to empower targets of harassment to act. We conducted preliminary research on other programs and resources for combating street harassment, including Stop Street Harassment, Right to Be (formerly Hollaback!), and RAINN among others. Each of these resources recommends that if people feel safe doing so, they can calmly confront the harasser or use some creative action to disrupt the harassment. Furthermore, bystander intervention is strongly encouraged as a method for combating street harassment.

Given this context, we proposed a whistle as a useful tool for either the target of harassment or a bystander to use to interrupt the interaction. With the use of a whistle, it was also imperative for us to consider the implications of using a whistle. Thus, an accompanying education campaign was included in our consideration of implementing WASH, as it is imperative to provide information on how and when to use the whistle. Overall, using the whistle can interrupt the act by scaring away the harasser and drawing others' attention. Users should exercise their best judgment and gauge their comfort level with responding to the act. The education campaign should also include reminders of unconscious biases while addressing potential unintended consequences.

The team met with Chief Venuti to gain his input and determine whether this initiative met the community's needs. He indicated that street harassment is a problem - one that students had brought to his attention. He also indicated that WASH would be a good first step in addressing the issue. Chief Venuti suggested the team talk with Athletics (to discuss students' access to whistles as a possible disruption at basketball games) and the Student Government Association (for student feedback). The team presented to these groups and received their support. The Chief agreed to have VCU Police fund and implement the project.

Next, the team met with members of the VCU Police to discuss planning and rollout. We developed an implementation plan which included a drafted infographic, VCU Police website content, project's budget, and sample whistles. It was agreed upon that the whistles include a QR code which directs users to VCU Police website. WASH's initial launch is underway for Fall 2022.

ACTION STEPS

The WASH initiative is in the process of implementation due to the commitment of the VCU Police department. Below we share key action items the team addressed to reach this point and items for future consideration for the project.

Funding: Due to the material nature of a whistle, identifying a funding source was a key first step to implementation. While the VCU Police was the obvious initial choice for a project focused on safety, future funding sources need to be identified to expand and sustain it over time.

Community Engagement: The VCU Undergraduate Student Senate was consulted to ensure there was agreement that this is a significant problem worth addressing, as well as student buy-in for the WASH initiative as a possible solution. Future community engagement with the graduate schools, faculty, and staff across the MCV and Monroe Park Campuses would help ensure the project's successful implementation. VCU Police Team Members are assisting us with a VCU

News Article and possibly a short video to raise awareness of the issue of street harassment and the WASH initiative.

Distribution of Whistles: For the initiative to be successful, whistles must be readily available and easily obtained by the VCU community. We plan to make whistles available at community events through tabling efforts and at common access points, such as VCU Libraries and student housing.

Continual Reassessment of the Initiative: As with all initiatives, following implementation, public reception, lessons learned, and outcomes from the campaign must be reviewed and addressed before the project's continuation or expansion. Public reception can be queried through student government bodies and the faculty senate. Outcomes can be reviewed by reports of street harassment on campus and through the Annual Safety Perceptions Survey.

OUTCOMES

The overarching goals and potential impact of the WASH initiative are to decrease street harassment, improve safety and the perception of safety on and near VCU campuses, and raise awareness of street harassment as an important issue through the distribution of whistles. Members of the VCU community should feel and be safe in the environment they choose to learn and work in, and with the partnership from the VCU Police, we think this initiative can play a role in accomplishing this.

SUSTAINABILITY

Chief Venuti and the VCU Police are key stakeholders in this project. His team is skilled in implementing large-scale public safety projects like this, and have assisted us with funding and public relations to date. For WASH to be sustained, involvement from additional stakeholders, such as the VCU Graduate and Undergraduate Student Senates, Student Affairs, Human Resources, and GRTC, is desirable. These groups will be valuable both in the potential financial resources they could offer and in tying the initiative more directly to the community to raise awareness.

FINANCING AND RESOURCES

Full implementation of the WASH initiative ensures that all students, faculty, and staff of VCU and VCU Health System receive a whistle. With over 28,000 students and 23,000 employees, a quantity of 52,000 is recommended for the initial purchase of whistles. To minimize costs, the team decided only to include the dedicated website QR code and the project title WASH imprinted on the whistle. This decision will avoid the associated licensing fees to manufacture whistles with an official VCU brand.

As previously stated, in order to ensure the success of WASH, educating the VCU community on how and when to use the whistle is critical. The team suggested creating an informational card to distribute with the whistles. Initial feedback from VCU Police indicates that handouts are often discarded by students; however, printing estimates are included as an option for future reference.

In researching vendors to manufacture the whistle, samples were solicited from Brandfuel Promotional Products and Apparel as they are currently an established vendor with the University. The manufacturing costs are approximately \$1.40 per whistle, which includes assembly and purchase of a zipper pull so that it can be easily attached to items such as a lanyard, keychain, backpack, etc. The required setup fee for the graphic is minimal, at less than \$100 per order.

Implementation of WASH will require the use of unrestricted local (donor) funds from identified stakeholders. In an effort to ensure funding for annual purchases, consideration can be given to include the WASH initiative as a highlighted project for the next VCU Giving Day in spring 2023. The start-up and annual investments required are detailed below.

Start Up Cost

				Students Only	Full Implementation
Quantity	8,000	15,000	20,000	28,700	52,000
Whistles	\$11,300	\$21,100	\$28,100	\$40,300	\$72,900
Info card (optional)	\$3,500	\$6,500	\$8,700	\$12,500	\$22,600
Total	\$14,800	\$27,600	\$36,800	\$52,800	\$95,500

Annual Cost

Quantity	8,000
Whistles	\$11,300
Info card (optional)	\$3,500
Total	\$14,800

**Annual cost estimates based on first-time fall/spring enrollment and contingency for new employees

RECOMMENDATIONS

To date, WASH is currently in the initial rollout phase and featured on the VCU Police website. The VCU Police department is discussing the program during public safety events. 2,500 whistles have been ordered for the fall rollout. We recommend that the key stakeholders assess the outcomes of the project after this semester.

Some challenges to WASH's continuation include sustainable funding and communication. Ensuring the project's future will require assessing the effectiveness of WASH. This may be achieved by soliciting community feedback and assessing incidents of street harassment reported to VCU Police. That is,

- Have community members used the whistles or had conversations about street harassment because of them?
- Do community members feel safer?
- Do community members feel comfortable sharing incidents with VCU Police?
- Have the number of incidents increased or decreased?
- Are community members using other avenues to report incidents or to seek support, such as the LiveSafe app or University Counseling?
- Do bystanders feel empowered to assist?

WASH is only the first step in ending street harassment. Others may want to build on this program and include initiatives such as bystander intervention training and additional education on street harassment. Recruiting additional stakeholders to fund and assess the project will be necessary for sustainability and future expansion.

FINAL PITCH

The WASH Initiative is an opportunity for VCU to improve the perception of safety on and around campus for all community members. Students, faculty, and staff identified street harassment as a top safety priority. Our initiative is based on previous successful anti-street harassment campaigns, combining evidenced-based messaging with a physical tool in the form of a simple whistle to address this important issue. VCU Police is leading the initial rollout, but further investment and expansion of this program by other campus entities will allow for a long-term impact on the safety of our community.

Whistles Against Street Harassment (WASH)



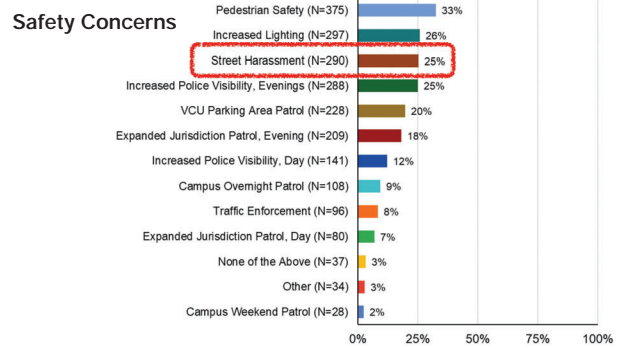
VCU Leadership Development Program
Class of 2022

TEAM INNOVATE

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Dwayne Cooper, Interim Director of Patient Transportation, VCU Medical Center
Margaret Kidd, Access and Electronic Records Archivist, VCU Libraries
Hannah Miller, Pediatric Hospital Medicine Fellow, Children's Hospital of Richmond at VCU
Melyatta Powers, Senior Executive Director of Finance, VCUarts
Angela Reynolds, Professor, Systems Modeling & Analysis; Ph.D. Program Director, Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics



2022 VCU Perception of Safety Survey (1,156)



Street Harassment is ...

"Street harassment includes unwanted comments, gestures, or acts directed at someone in a public space without their consent."

(RAINN definition of street harassment)



Street harassment can be gender-based or based on other factors like race, nationality, religion, disability or class.

Goal of WASH: Improve safety @ VCU

- Provide a simple tool that has a low learning curve -- a whistle
 - Whistle noise can disrupt an active act
- Encourage conversations
- Raise awareness
- Eradicate street harassment



Designed by Freepik

QUEST 2028 : One VCU Together We Transform



Theme 1: Diversity Driving Excellence

Goal 1.1 Nurture an institutional culture and climate that is diverse, inclusive, equitable and engaged.

Theme 2: Student Success

Goal 2.2 Enhance the university culture of care and responsiveness supporting student engagement, success and sense of belonging.

"Community members cannot be successful in an environment where they feel unsafe"

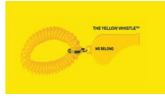
Some Considerations

- Education on when/how to use
- Acceptance
- Effectiveness
- Bystander involvement
- Misuse or possible negative effects
- Distribution of whistles
- Cost per whistle



Created by Michael V. Suriano from the Noun Project

Research



3D Prototype

ReDesign



Vendor: Brandfuel Promotional Products and Apparel



Project Sponsor

- Associate Vice President for Public Safety, VCU & VCU Health and Chief of Police, John Venuti
- Street harassment is a priority for his department
- Tracking with LiveSafe App
- Funded initial launch



The Initial Launch



Image created by Renaissance Studios from The Nucleus Project

The Initial Launch

- Fall 2022
- 2,500 whistles
- VCU Police website "Services and Programs"
- Incorporated into Police outreach messaging



Website- Answers key questions



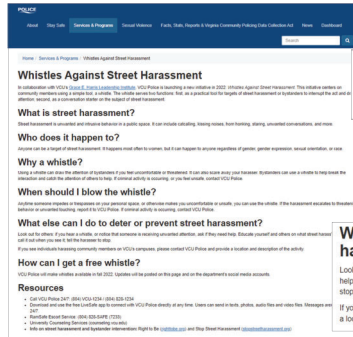
Why a whistle?

Using a whistle can draw the attention of bystanders if you feel uncomfortable or threatened. It can also scare away your harasser. Bystanders can use a whistle to help break the interaction and catch the attention of others to help. If criminal activity is occurring, or you feel unsafe, contact VCU Police.

When should I blow the whistle?

Anytime someone impedes or trespasses on your personal space, or otherwise makes you uncomfortable or unsafe, you can use the whistle. If the harassment escalates to threatening behavior or unwanted touching, report it to VCU Police. If criminal activity is occurring, contact VCU Police.

Website



When should I blow the whistle?
Anytime someone impedes or trespasses on your personal space, or otherwise makes you uncomfortable or unsafe, you can use the whistle. If the harassment escalates to threatening behavior or unwanted touching, report it to VCU Police. If criminal activity is occurring, contact VCU Police.

What else can I do to deter or prevent street harassment?
Look out for others: if you hear a whistle, or notice that someone is receiving unwanted attention, ask if they need help. Educate yourself and others on what street harassment is and call it out when you see it, tell the harasser to stop.
If you see individuals harassing community members on VCU's campuses, please contact VCU Police and provide a location and description of the activity.

Next Step: Evaluation from Initial Launch

Possible questions for follow-up evaluation:

- Have community members used the whistles or had conversations about street harassment because of them?
- Do community members feel safer?
- Do community members feel comfortable sharing incidents with VCU Police?
- Have incidents increased or decreased?
- Are community members using other avenues to report incidents or to seek support, such as the LiveSafe app or University Counseling?
- Do bystanders feel empowered to assist?



A Full Launch



Financing and Resources

- VCU branding and licensing requirements
 - QR code and project title only to minimize fees
- Vendor research
 - Existing purchasing partnerships
 - Brandfuel Promotional Products and Apparel



Financing and Resources



Start-Up Cost	
Quantity	52,000
Production Cost	\$72,900

Annual Cost	
Quantity	8,000
Production Cost	\$11,300

*Full implementation across VCU and VCU Health

Financing and Resources

- Implementation is scalable
- VCU allowable expense limitations
 - unrestricted local (donor funds)



Full Launch: Education

- Educational materials
 - Video
 - Infographic
- Content

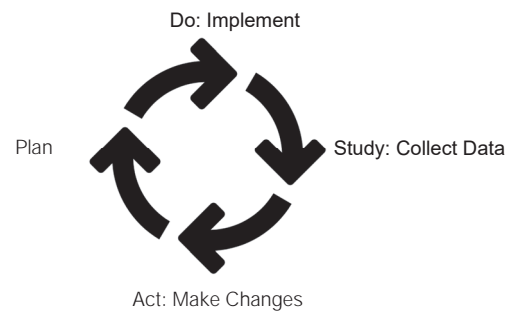


Full Launch: Distribution

- Tabling efforts
- Common access points
 - VCU Libraries
 - Student housing
 - Vending machines
 - Community partners



Full Launch: Continual (Re-)Assessment



Full Launch: VCU and Richmond Community Partners



- Decrease street harassment
- Improve safety on VCU campuses and streets near campuses
- Encourage conversations about street harassment
- Raise awareness of street harassment as an important issue



The FINALPITCH

Let's work together to blow the whistle on street harassment!



Resources

Learn more

- [Right to Be](http://righttobe.org) (righttobe.org)
- [Stop Street Harassment](http://stopstreetharassment.org) (stopstreetharassment.org)
- [RAINN](http://rainn.org) (rainn.org)
- [Taking Back the Streets](#) (informational comic by Aubrey Hirsch)

Safety initiatives using whistles

- [Community Safety Whistle Campaign for Western PA](#), QBurgh
- [Self-defense kits](#), Health Brigade, RVA (kit includes a whistle)
- [The Yellow Whistle](#), campaign against discrimination and anti-Asian violence
- [Whistle Alert Campaign](#), Grootte Schuur, South Africa (anti-crime initiative)
- [Whistle Your Way to Safety](#), Portsmouth Police Department (personal safety initiative)
- [Whistle Program](#), Washington University, St. Louis
- [Wildcats Stop Street Harassment](#), University of New Hampshire
- [Whistle for a Whistle](#), India



Created by Jan Niklas Prause
from the Woun Project