Dear Parent,

One of the unique learning opportunities that will be available to your student when they start at Virginia Commonwealth University this fall is the opportunity to take part in a voluntary and confidential, university-wide research opportunity to engage incoming freshmen. This research project, called “Spit for Science: The VCU Student Survey,” is led by VCU scientists and is an effort to bring research alive for VCU students in an area of great importance for college students – alcohol use and mental health related outcomes, which affect one in four individuals over the age of 18. The scientific goal of the project is to understand how genetic and environmental factors come together to contribute to the development of problems associated with the use of alcohol and other substances, and emotional health.

Alcohol use and mental health are key areas of research focus at VCU. In fact, VCU is home to the Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics, an interdisciplinary group of top researchers who are working to understand how genetic and environmental factors contribute to a variety of mental health and substance use outcomes. Historically, most of the Institute’s projects have been conducted in different places around the world, including Ireland, England, Sweden, Finland, and China. This project is an effort to bring this research expertise home to VCU in a way that can benefit our students. We hope that students will find it fun to be involved in a shared opportunity to learn about research. Students will also have the opportunity to be involved in coordinating the study and can earn research credit by being a part of the research team. Importantly, the results from the study can be used to feed back into the prevention and intervention programming at VCU, providing a means to improve student health and wellness.

“Spit for Science” represents an effort to create an educational experience unique to VCU that reflects one of the strategic priorities of the university: to become a leader among national research universities in providing all students with high quality experiences focused on inquiry, discovery, and innovation.

There also will be a variety of educational objectives associated with the project. We will be creating newsletters with results from the study, and we hope that these will stimulate discussion about substance use and mental health-related outcomes, and about how our genes and our environments influence our behavior.

The study is made up of two parts - an electronic survey and a DNA sample via saliva, hence “Spit for Science.” Both components are voluntary. The survey inquires about a student’s alcohol use and other behaviors and activities. Survey information will be kept on a secure server. The DNA samples from those who choose to participate will be given a unique and random identifying number and maintained separately from the surveys, never connected to the students’ names or other identifying information. The faculty who are leading the project will never have access to any identifying information about participants.

You can learn more about the project by visiting www.spit4science.vcu.edu. Again, participation is completely voluntary and confidential. All incoming freshman who are 18 years of age or older will have the opportunity to participate in this groundbreaking research. Your son or daughter will also be receiving information about the project. We look forward to initiating this exciting effort to engage our students in the cutting-edge research going on at VCU.

Kenneth Kendler, MD
Principal Investigator,
Spit for Science:
The VCU Student Survey
Director, Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics

Danielle Dick, PhD
Principal Investigator,
Spit for Science:
The VCU Student Survey
Associate Professor of Psychiatry,
Psychology, and Human Genetics