

# VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE

OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

TO: VMI Board of Visitors External Relations Committee

FROM: Lt. Col. Sherry Wallace  
Director of Communications & Marketing

DATE: February 2025

RE: Communications & Marketing Update

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This update covers the communications and marketing activities for fall semester 2024, as well as projects currently in progress.

Regarding staffing, Lexie West resigned as videographer and her last day was Dec. 6. Chris Clark, publications assistant, announced her retirement after more than 50 years. Her last day in the office was Nov. 22 and she officially retired at the beginning of February.

## I. POST-WIDE SUPPORT, WORKING GROUPS, AND PARENTS COUNCIL

Members of the team participate in various working groups and long-term projects through the year. In the past few months, the most significant efforts included the rollout of the strategic plan, Forging 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leaders, and preparation for the inaugural parade.

For the rollout of the strategic plan, there was sincere thought into the order of the rollout and ensuring that all audiences felt connected to the plan's outcomes. Many hours went into creating an engaging website that is continuously updated with stories and progress of the strategic plan. Social media posts, videos, and other materials were drafted to gain traction and remind cadets, alumni, families, faculty and staff of the importance of the plan's initiatives. The employee rollout took place on Oct. 24 in the Hall of Valor with hundreds of employees representing all departments. The public rollout took place during the Founders Day weekend events, including the parade and a football tailgate. Each event had more than 20 building renderings on display to see the construction updates that are soon to come. There was swag available, including car coasters, lanyards, lapel pins, ink pens, post-it pads, and magnets, all specially designed by the Department of Communications and Marketing. Footballs were thrown out during the tailgate and during the football game Nov. 9. Since then and going forward, stories and social media have been tagged and optimized to connect them with strategic plan initiatives. This keeps top of mind awareness for the strategic plan and demonstrates that the plan initiatives are an integral part of our efforts at VMI.

While the Corps of Cadets did not end up participating in the Inauguration Day events, the preparation for the event was a heavy lift for many on post in the weeks leading up to Jan. 20. Work on the application began months ago, and required a video, photographs, a write-up, etc. Then it was a waiting game until the confirmation came in during winter furlough. Each cadet and adult participant needed to be entered into the Secret Service credentialing website.

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Members of several departments across post, including C&M, came in during the break to enter the information for each cadet, as well as get needed headshots. Media coverage was confirmed during the week the cadets were practicing for the event from all local stations in the Roanoke/Lynchburg market, with a wide variety of staff and cadets chosen for interviews.

The Communications and Marketing department also acts as liaison to Parents Council, assisting with the coordination of three annual meetings, a pre-matriculation social for incoming families, and fall tailgating activities. Members of Parents Council reach out to the department almost daily to gather answers for other parents, or to assist in recruiting and retention initiatives. Parents Council hosted tailgates for cadets before almost every home football game, had a successful fall meeting, and they are now preparing for the spring meeting that will include voting on new leadership and discussions about recruiting parents from the current rat class.

## II. MEDIA COVERAGE

Between Sept. 18, 2024 and Jan. 23, 2025, there were more than 4,000 news items that mentioned or featured information about VMI. More than 96% of the news items are categorized as positive or neutral in sentiment.

## III. NEWS & EDITORIAL SERVICES

The News & Editorial Services team actively worked with nearly every department on post to provide coverage of events, successes, milestones, and personnel recognition for the fall semester. The team averaged 11 stories per month for the VMI website, social media, local news coverage pitches, and for publications. These are in addition to coverage for items just used for social media posts, general media pitches, and public announcements of upcoming speakers or events.

The Institute Report, the most wide-spread publication developed by the news and editorial team, continued to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary through the 2023-24 academic year. Each issue looked back over the decades, featuring highlights from the publication, including high-profile visitors to post, academic updates, the changes in technology on post, and construction over the years.

TV news coverage included CAVU's appointment to brigadier general, the 9/11 stairclimb, the installation of the POW/MIA chair in Foster Stadium, the recognition of the cadets involved in the Cambrian Patrol, Founders Day and Gary Sinise remarks, a VMI professor identifying a new molecule in space, and Gov. Youngkin's visit to post. Understaffed news stations and weekend events have been a challenge when it comes to getting coverage for many things. Video, photos, and stories are put together for news stations for each event to ensure they have the materials needed for any coverage opportunities.

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Major event support, that featured photography, videography, stories for the website and social media, as well as programs, signage, media attendance, etc. included:

- Academic Convocation
- Ring Figure
- December commissioning and graduation
- Holiday events (Spirit Night, Lexington Christmas Parade)
- CLE speakers and conferences
- Braver Angels debates
- Health fairs and career fairs
- Open houses

Departments from across post have relied on our team for flyers, banners, logos, event programs, and other publications. These include:

- Social Media logos for various departments and clubs
- Guest speaker events
- VMI Theatre programs and signage
- VMI catalog
- Title IX materials
- Academic workshops

Looking ahead, the team is getting ready for spring events like breakout, FTX, conferences, graduation, etc.

## IV. BRAND MARKETING

### **Videos**

In addition to gathering b-roll for future projects, the videographer completed the following videos from September to December:

- Seven Days: The Beginning of the VMI Journey
- POW/MIA Chair
- Forging 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leaders: Strategic Plan 2024-2034
- Strategic Plan 2024-2034: Initiative 1: Prepare Exceptional Leaders

The videographer position was posted before winter furlough and the response was positive. Interviews are scheduled for late January.

### **Marketing**

As a reminder, the Assistant Director of Brand Marketing, Kelly Sandridge joined the C&M team in July. The fall was a very busy time, and she continues to work with departments and

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offices across post to bring brand consistency to all materials shared with VMI and external audiences.

- New VMI PowerPoint Templates: Three new designs are now available on the Portal for faculty and staff to utilize for presentations.
- Business Cards: VMI business cards have been redesigned. They are now more consistent with the letterhead, department logos, and email signatures. An added benefit is the typeface is also larger for readability. In the wake of Chris Clark's retirement, the assistant director of brand marketing will be working with the publications manager on a new process that will allow departments a streamlined ordering process.
- Worked with the graphic designer and the publications manager to create strategic plan banners stands, light pole banners, and a variety of give-a-way items for the strategic plan rollout.
- Continuing to work with admissions on recruitment marketing. This included finalizing the viewbook, parent guide, the women's and ROTC brochures, which are annual publications used by admissions, in collaboration with the publications manager. Other projects include:
  - Created tabletop recruitment banners for use by recruiters at recruiting events
  - Designed yard signs and magnets for incoming rats to display once they have committed to VMI
  - Began the transition of managing the Apply and Naviance front facing profiles that high school students access when applying to colleges. Training has taken place, and updates will happen during the winter.
- Together with admissions, marketing is also now part of the Strategic Enrollment and Retention Faculty Advisory Committee. This provides the opportunity to keep open lines of communication open between faculty, communications, and admissions, ensuring that there is a consistent voice, and each area has what they need to properly market themselves. Additionally, the assistant director worked with the academic departments to:
  - Create open house one-sheets for each major that are consistent and meet brand guidelines. These can now easily be updated each summer before open house events begin.
  - Provide logos and letterhead – this is a work in progress and should be complete this winter.
  - Began discussions with Innovation Programming on materials they will need in the winter to promote the Summer Undergraduate Entrepreneurship Program and the Entrepreneurship Club.
- Worked with departments/offices across post on needed items including:
  - Band: Created a new parade banner. It was carried for the first time during the Richmond Christmas parade.
  - DOI: Created a branded tablecloth with the new DOI logo that is consistent with other department logos across post.
  - Auxiliary Services: Certificates to support a new employee recognition program they are launching in 2025. Also supported, through CLC and in collaboration

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with the digital communications team, a Black Friday and Cyber Monday campaign to promote the giving of VMI college gear.

- Career Services: Began work to rebrand their marketing materials. This initially included flyers for upcoming events, in collaboration with the graphic designer, and has expanded to the creation of email toppers for targeted emails, such as employer recruitment for career fairs. Continued work will be done in the winter on an email newsletter, social media and flyer templates, and branded thank you cards.
- Human Resources: Worked with the HR trainer to brand the new employee orientation PowerPoint presentation. Information new employees need to know from C&M was also added, including:
  - Everyone’s role as a brand ambassador
  - Email signature generator
  - Trademarks
  - Identity Standards
  - Style Guide
- Collaboration with the VMI Museum store to ensure understanding of trademark usage guidelines and the processes in place to protect all marks.
- Conversations with the Center for Leadership and Ethics marketing team to enhance collaboration and consistency.
- Continued work on a stylized and more robust identity standards guide, which will be used to create an online Identity and Brand Guide for the public, and an internal portal for staff.

### **Logos/Royalties (September – December)**

Since September, there have been 13 internal requests for logos, 20 external requests, and 11 requests for logo creation. Created logos include those for offices and departments.

### CLC

VMI earns royalties from the sale of licensed products. These items include apparel, accessories, and other brand items that feature the VMI logo and/or marks. Collegiate Licensing Company (CLC) manages the licensing for VMI and many other NCAA schools’ products.

YEAR	ROYALTIES
2024-2025 (2 quarters)	\$55,298
2023-2024	\$81,522
2022-2023	\$100,278
2021-2022	\$101,077

The top selling product category is typically men’s fashion apparel and this was consistent for the quarter Oct. – Dec. 2024.

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CLC Brand Manager Platform		
Time Period	No. of Artwork Approvals	No. of License Requests
Sept. – Dec. 2024	261	52

In early December, CLC notified us that they were working on a formal “cease and desist” letter to be sent on behalf of CLC schools to the owner of Vintage Brands. The letter will demand that he stop selling infringing products and note that any continued sales will constitute willful infringement. VMI merchandise is currently available on Prep Sportswear (<https://prepsportswear.com/>) and Vintage Brand site (<https://vintagebrand.com/>), both of which are owned by Vintage Brands. We notified our CLC Partnerships manager that VMI would like to be included in the cease-and-desist letter. At the time of the preparation of this report, there was no update.

## Upcoming

We are continuing to work with individual departments and offices to update materials to ensure all items represent and honor the VMI brand.

Other key projects include:

- Working in collaboration with the publications manager to design a wrap for the new VMI van.
- Continuing to update and redesign the identity standards and templates. Once complete, a training will be developed for staff, so they understand their role in brand management and how the Creative Marketing team can be of service to create marketing materials.
- Continue to work with Auxiliary Services and Athletics on the rollout new marks, including an official Moe mark.
- Developing a digital advertising campaign to compliment efforts of the Admissions team. This would including targeted digital ads, outside of social networks, with the goal of increasing the number of individuals in the admissions pipeline. A smaller advertising run would be done in the spring to test response, with a potential RFP for digital advertising services for the 2025-2026 academic year.

The Publications team continues to support the needs of the entire post. During the period Sept.-December, the publications team worked on the following projects:

- Admissions viewbook update completed
- Admissions women’s brochure update completed
- ROTC brochure update completed
- VMI parent guide update completed
- Admissions spider handout update completed
- Admissions senior travel print piece completed
- Strategic plan boulevard banners completed
- Strategic plan popup banners completed
- Strategic plan coin for the Superintendent
- Class of 1974 memorial program

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- Program for Marine birthday ball
- Chaplain Christmas cards and magnets
- Department informational sheets for open house
  
- The Publications team also printed [a number of reports, publications, and documents](#):
- December commencement program
- December commissioning ceremony program
- Certificates for Superintendent and Board of Visitors
- CLE workshop books
- Candlelight service program
- Track posters
- Financial aid flyer
- Posters for chaplain's office

## VI. DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

The Digital Communications team consists of C&M's assistant director of digital communication, social media specialist, and digital content specialist. The team collaborates with C&M's graphic designers, publishing team, news and editorial staff, and photographers & videographer.

The team works to promote the mission and vision of VMI to the public, current and prospective cadets, families, alumni, and government officials. Collaborating with all departments and divisions across post, emphasis is placed strongly on harnessing VMI's digital presence as a recruitment tool as well as the main source of communication regarding activities and scheduled events on post.

### TEAM PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS SEPT. 2024 – MID-JANUARY 2025:

#### Ongoing:

- Update vmi.edu focused on search engine optimization (SEO), user experience, and telling the VMI story with focus on recruitment and challenging misconceptions about the Institute.
  - Connect to social media and video projects as appropriate
- Update vmi.edu site template coding to match industry standards and address increase federal accessibility needs & standards
- Continue to populate [Featured Stories](#), focused on recruitment with pieces highlighting cadet life and the uniqueness of the VMI experience
- Coverage and promotion of VMI events across [Institute social media platforms](#)

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- Create analytics reports for website and social media use and interaction and meet with offices to review and adjust content based on data
- Create & manage online forms for use on web and by C&M through Qualtrics
- Support and promote Admissions events through web design and content, social media promotion, registrations, and analytics
- Maintain all livestream and calendar events for the public
- Provide oversight, content as requested, and guidance for VMI social media, including affiliated channels
- Review web content, including PDFs, for accessibility
- Continue to work with external vendor, Mass Interact, on completion of virtual tour
- Research and preparation for shift of VMI.edu away from TerminalFour CMS
- Design and accessibility of Weekly Bulletin

### September:

- Strategic Plan Site and Social Media design and content work
- Support Registrar with creation of and edits to [PDF catalog](#)
- Increased coverage of Army ROTC for social media
- Redesign [NROTC Hall of Fame](#) portion of website and connected pages
- Redesign and update VMI org chart in coordination with Human Resources
- Begin build of new version of IRB Application system to alleviate issues with old app
- Design & accessibility work on [Annual Security and Fire Safety Report](#) with VMI Police

### October:

- Strategic Plan Site and Social Media design and content work
- Work with VITA to implement SiteImprove, a superior web accessibility tool, as part of statewide contract, allowing VMI to end Dubbot contract for a savings of \$3,866.
- Implement new sitemap to alleviate scan errors and Google miscues resulting from old build in TerminalFour
- Work with TerminalFour to correct system errors and publishing issues
- Collaborate with Operations & Planning to prepare for launch of 25Live System

### November:

- [Strategic Plan Site](#) Launch and Social Media push
- Collaborate with VMIAA to support and promote Day of Giving
- Coordinate with VCUR to design and launch [Research Report Blog](#)
- Collaborate with Operations & Planning to prepare for launch of 25Live System
- Begin design of new Postgraduate Scholarships & Pre-Professional Programs page



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December:

- Collaborate with Operations & Planning to prepare for launch of 25Live System
- Collaborate with Innovation Programming for upcoming program and event promotion
- Design webpage for mural in Memorial Hall with Col. Keith Gibson
- Documentation of social media items related to AIM/Crane
- Launch new IRB pages and [application systems](#)

January (first half):

- Facilitate redirects and site changes for Archives site move to Preston Library's systems
- Documentation of social media and web items related to AIM/Crane
- Documentation of social media items related to Inaugural Parade information
- New featured stories series highlighting hard-working cadets in each academic major
- Continued research and documentation for CMS replacement justification

## PLANS FOR 2025...

In addition to the day-to-day tasks of digital communications, new projects are taking shape to continue to improve and increase the digital footprint of the Institute to recruit and retain, as well as continue to connect with alumni, families, and the general public. New initiatives planned include:

- Site design upgrades and with move to modern CMS option:
  - Updated base template for better view on mobile devices and streamlined navigation through the entire site as well as updating code to latest versions and semantics,
  - Reworking of site structure for clearer flow and condensing of some pages such as administration to align more with higher education industry standards
  - Searchable document library,
  - Faculty & Staff page template overhaul to allow for more faculty detail pages to align more with higher education industry standards and requests from current faculty,
  - ROTC-specific templates to allow for more visuals and branch-specific design and features,
  - Distinct templates for VMI Museum System Pages for system consistency as well as appropriate color palettes and branding for each location,
  - News and blog templates that allow for related stories connections and links and more visual interest.
- SEO-targeted refresh of all academic majors' subsites, following the same process that was successful for the Civil & Environmental Engineering overhaul in 2024.

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- Continuation of featured stories series already in place (The Extra Mile, Behind the Balance) and introduction of The Vanguard, focusing on dedication, resilience, and growth of cadets across academic majors (in collaboration with faculty).
- Social media campaigns connected to strategic plan initiatives, beginning with Preparing Exceptional Leaders, working to highlight faculty/staff, alumni, and cadets who embody the mission and values of the Institute.
- LinkedIn collaboration with faculty to highlight academic research, which will also be published to the website for permanence.
- Increased coverage across social media and featured stories of ‘the average day’ at No Ordinary College, working to balance VMI’s uniqueness with trending and popular topics in higher education, in collaboration with Admissions.

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## DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS BY THE NUMBERS, FALL 2024

Month	Email Threads <u>Web</u> edits Inbox*	New Piece of Content Created for vmi.edu ^	Edits Made to Existing Content on vmi.edu ^	Featured Stories Written for vmi.edu* *	Facebook Posts	Instagram Posts +	X (Twitter) Posts	LinkedIn Posts
<b>Sept 2024</b>	123	66	396	5	34	111	43	30
<b>Oct 2024</b>	113	55	446	6	49	194	42	41
<b>Nov 2024</b>	68	146	684	4	41	115	37	36
<b>Dec 2024</b>	64	44	176	1	46	111	45	44
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>368</b>	<b>311</b>	<b>1,702</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>531</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>AVG. / Month</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>77.75</b>	<b>425.5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>42.5</b>	<b>132.75</b>	<b>41.75</b>	<b>37.75</b>

\* Change request threads vary from one item updates, such as adding a new staff member, to full section redesigns or large accessibility remediation projects. These numbers do not include requests or project needs sent directly to the Assistant Director for Digital Communication

\*\* Featured stories are predominantly written by the Digital Content Specialist but also include input from other members of the digital comms team.

^ Involved major projects documented in this report which required a significant increase in edits to the site, including to page & site templates. This also does not capture items created first on the testing/development server for large-scale new design work.

+ Includes story slides, visible for 24 hours, often used to provide live coverage of major events and reshare VMI news and features.

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### VI. A. WEB

The VMI Web Team continues to focus on providing timely, accurate, and engaging content across the vmi.edu site, with emphasis on best representing the benefits of a VMI education and its varied programs, the successes and achievements of a diverse and talented Corps of Cadets, and important information related to health, safety, and upcoming events. Special project rearrangements and schedule adjustments continue to allow for a focus on recruitment. Large portions of the website are also undergoing overhauls to compete in design and content more directly with other senior military colleges (SMCs) and the service academies, as well as other state and private universities. This is done in partnership with many departments across post, most notably Admissions, the Dean's office, and the Commandant's office.

Significant issues with the content management system (CMS) vendor, TerminalFour and its many technical glitches continue to take away from the time the web team can spend on content creation and updates, and limits design options, but the team continues to create custom code and content to work around this major issue. An SOW was received from SiteVision, a VITA-approved and contracted vendor, to move the site to a new system. It is currently in progress for approvals following multiple discussions with IT.

Major design projects for this reporting period included:

- Reworking of base website code to continue to improve website accessibility and functionality
- A custom design and build of the 2024-2034 Strategic Plan website: [www.vmi.edu/forgingleaders](http://www.vmi.edu/forgingleaders)
- [Research Report Blog](#) – a VCUR project allowing for increased authorship by professors and cadets
- A new page with explanation and discussion of the [mural in Memorial Hall](#) (in progress)

### WEBSITE ANALYTICS

Overall page views across vmi.edu are down by 4.75% compared to the same period of 2023. This can be in large part attributed to the shift of the Library and Archives sites to a separate hosting system, managed directly by Preston Library. Considering the number of pages shifted, this decrease is quite small. Page consolidation and clean-up also continue as the web team works to streamline content and enhance the user experience, meaning less pages to navigate to for the same amount of information. Active users increased by over 13% despite this shift, implying that there is more organic traffic headed to the website, with a more streamlined visit for most users.

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## Sept. – Dec. 2024 as Compared to Same Period in 2023

Site Section	Pageviews	Users	Views per User	Average Engagement Time	Events (Clicks, Downloads, etc.)
<b>Homepage</b>	173,555 -17.49%	70,600 -17.08%	2.46 -0.49%	00:00:37 +3.75%	606,335 -16.76%
<b>About</b>	129,811 -15.1%	47,805 -4.05%	2.72 -11.52%	00:01:08 -13.18%	413,606 -8.27%
<b>News</b>	74,090 +24.02%	51,252 +138.4%	1.48 -47.98%	00:00:25 -54.63%	242,021 -60.59%
<b>Academics</b>	97,295 -0.63%	35,988 +19.03%	2.70 -16.52%	00:01:14 -20.3%	312,753 +6.86%
<b>Admissions</b>	44,891 -1.81%	22,718 +13.88%	1.98 -13.78%	00:00:55 -21.71%	140,559 +4.4%
<b>Apply Page</b>	15,609 +20.78%	10,089 +50.56%	1.55 -19.78%	00:00:31 -41.35%	48,352 +30.73%
<b>Financial Aid</b>	17,801 +2.34%	9,164 +5.22%	1.94 -2.74%	00:01:09 -1.54%	53,910 +6.79%
<b>Cadet Life</b>	52,015 -13.77%	25,880 -0.98%	2.01 -12.92%	00:01:13 -16.52%	160,733 -7.76%
<b>ROTC</b>	23,386 +16.58%	10,790 +16.76%	2.17 -0.18%	00:01:24 -2.38%	76,396 +23.22%

## Most Popular Pages by Visit, Sept.-Dec. 2024

1. Homepage
2. Calendar
3. Apply Page [Admissions]
4. Majors and Minors
5. Admissions Landing Page
6. Critical Dates and Academic Calendar
7. VMCW Landing Page
8. Visit Page [Admissions]
9. About Landing Page
10. Offices A-Z
11. Family Weekend
12. Job Openings
13. Tuition and Fees
14. Ring Figure
15. Cadet Life Landing Page
16. Academics Landing Page
17. ROTC Landing Page
18. Jackson House Museum Landing Page
19. Auxiliary Services
20. Bolton and Ramaswamy Draw Huge Crowd [News article]

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## Summary

Gains continue to be largely attributed to the search engine optimization (SEO) work done in partnership with BrightEdge, a contracted vendor, serving VMI pages to more web users. Both BrightEdge automatic features and the web team content development focus on a faster, more enjoyable interaction with the site. Additionally, less users coming from a search engine will be pointed to the homepage, but instead, will go directly to the most appropriate page due to the SEO work. This also can create the drop in views per user seen above. Notably, for news, this is due to not paging from story to story. A new site build will instead guide users to related items, rather than just clicking through based on date, making vmi.edu more in line with industry standards.

## SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO)

Every page on the vmi.edu site continues to undergo updates and upgrades, some more significant than others through targeted competitor research using the BrightEdge tool purchased for the web team. New pages created specifically to tackle SEO gaps since the purchase of this tool are indicated with an \* below. Pages where VMI was not previously ranked in the Top 100 on Google at all are indicated with a ^. VMI consistently adds to ranked keywords now for terms that may not have previously led a user to VMI, such as increasing our ability to display with any Army-related terms or academic/career specific terms as seen below.

### Notable Improvements in Blended Rank (place in Google results), Dec. 31 VS Sept. 1:

Keyword	Monthly Search Volume	Blended Rank	Blended Rank Change	Google Page #
rotc scholarships^	8,100	14	+87	2
nrotc^	4,400	14	+86	2
colleges with military programs^	5,400	16	+85	2
rotc air force colleges^	2,400	25	+76	3
chemistry degrees*^	1,900	31	+70	3
military university	2,900	12	+68	1
rotc program	8,100	34	+67	4
jobs in the army*^	74,000	69	+32	7
geotechnical engineering*^	14,800	54	+28	5

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## FEATURED STORIES SPOTLIGHT

September through mid-January saw 16 new feature stories on the website ranging from extracurricular activities, athletics, academics, and ROTC. Overall, there were 13,502 page views from all feature stories in this time with just over 10,011 users on that section of the website. There was an average engagement time of 22 seconds.

Top stories include “[Tales from the Hallowed Halls: Ghostly Encounters of Post](#),” “[Stealing a Moe-moment With VMI’s Mascot](#),” and several *Behind the Balance* features.



Tales from the Hallowed Halls was the highest performing feature story for this period with 820 page views, 34 seconds of engaged time, and a 26% engagement rate. The story is a compilation of several spooky tales of VMI, told from those who’ve gone here and now work here. This story followed a month-long social media campaign focusing on the haunting tales around post, which proved to be an

exciting and engaging series.

The story with Moe also received high engagement with 361 page views, 28 active users, and a 40% engagement rate. The social post and story had the highest reach of the month for September. It was also shared on athletics accounts.



These two stories prove to be good examples of showcasing that VMI is truly “No Ordinary College.” The Institute is filled with amazing history, along with deep archives, so we used that to our advantage to provide a fun, insightful piece regarding haunted history. Telling Moe’s story allows us to show the Institute in a different light.

Telling stories about regular college activities at a military school can make for highly engaging content because of the contrast between the unique context of a military institute and the universal nature of typical college experiences.

It also seemed to resonate with our designated audiences — alumni, current cadets, prospective students, parents, and more. These types of stories target a wide variety of audiences, thus proving to push VMI further into various markets, widening its social and marketing reach.

[Behind the Balance](#) features cadet-athletes and how they balance cadet responsibilities along with being a NCAA Division I athlete. These stories specifically shine light on various cadets that are involved in sports teams but may not be the captains or head leaders of each team. We wanted to feature those who not only work hard but may fly under the radar more.

Cadet-athletes at VMI not only have their responsibilities with their selected sport but cadet duties on top of that. Cadets are also required to take physical fitness classes twice a week, participate in ROTC all four years, prepare for room and uniform inspections, practice for parade, guard duty, and more.

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By showing how each cadet handles the stresses of cadet life and athlete responsibilities, these stories provide an honest example of what to expect once deciding to attend VMI for athletics and academics. The main stressor of these stories is the high workload many of these cadet-athletes take on for academics, many with full course loads along with their mandatory practices and other cadet responsibilities.



Behind the Balance has a total of eight stories during this semester, with a total of 1,621 page views, 1,263 active users, meaning users returned to the story more than once. The feature series also saw a 35% engagement rate, with 28 seconds of average engaged time on the page.

The highest performing story in that series during September through January was “[Behind the Balance: Sedona Dancu '25 — Women’s Keydet Soccer](#)” with 233 page views from 191 active users and over a minute and a quarter of engaged time (39% engagement rate).

## MAJOR FALL 2024 PROJECT: STRATEGIC PLAN WEBSITE & SOCIAL INITIATIVES

Fall 2024 saw the culmination of over a year of work and the launch of digital components for the official strategic plan rollout. Following the digital communications team’s contributions to the initial authorship and edits of the strategic plan, the team took on the task of developing an online version of the plan. In collaboration with other members of C&M, a new, custom site was designed to provide a unique, engaging, and eye-catching design for the strategic plan to make it stand out from the rest of the vmi.edu site. This was a large shift from the previous iteration, Vision 2039, which was developed before the current team was in place at VMI. Vision 2039 was presented as a text-only page with a link to the PDF.



For Forging 21st Century Leaders, the subsite combines VMI Institute-level branding and styles along with visuals used in physical marketing and promotional pieces. The site, found at [www.vmi.edu/forgingleaders](http://www.vmi.edu/forgingleaders), breaks down the plan into development, initiatives, and related accomplishments. Design work was also done to the news portion of vmi.edu to connect stories directly to the initiatives. A new site build will allow for these tags to also be used to find related articles and content (not available with current CMS build).

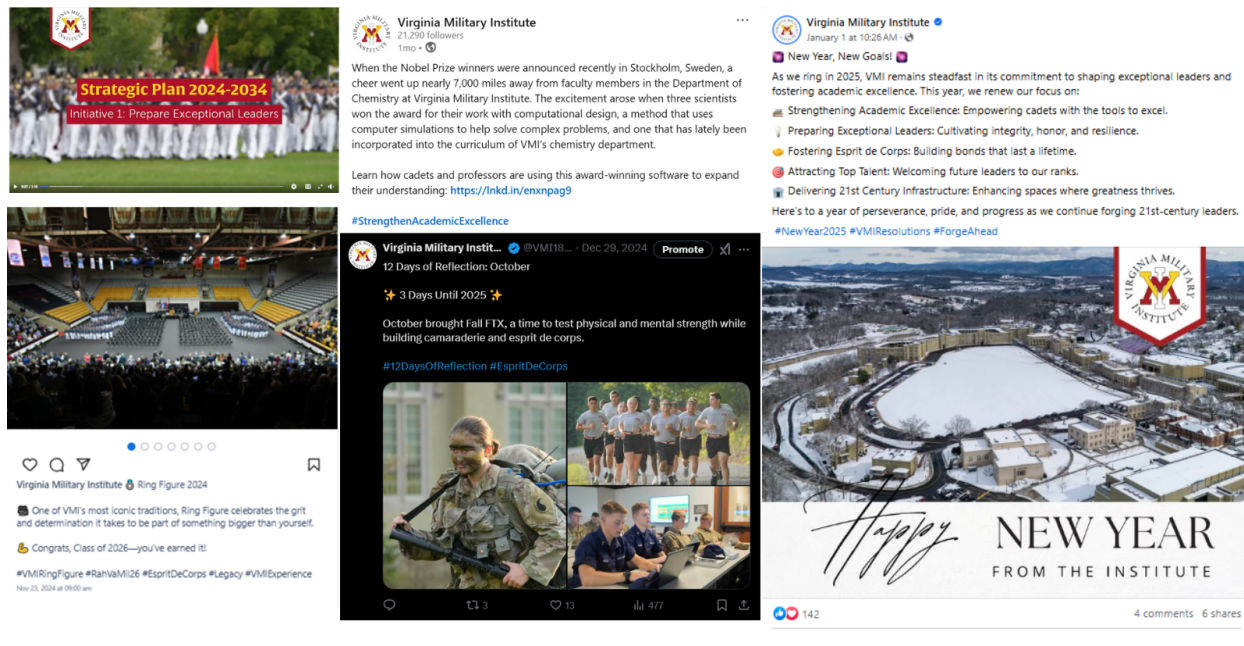
Social media has taken a two-pronged approach to promotion of the plan. First, in collaboration with the videographer – who has since left the Institute - video work was completed to have not only [a rollout piece for the whole plan](#) in conjunction with Founders Day, but also videos to launch the [first initiative](#). This process will resume once a new videographer is hired. Second, posts are designed specifically to use hashtags and phrasing connecting day-to-day life at VMI to the plan’s initiatives. This is crucial in keeping the plan not only front-and-center, but also



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showing that it is involved in everyday life at VMI, and not just a one-off document, but a living, actionable ethos for everyday life at the Institute.



## VI. B. SOCIAL MEDIA

Work continues daily to harness social media platforms as engaging outreach opportunities to connect with current and prospective cadets, families, employees, alumni, and the public. Posts and campaigns are consistently reviewed and analyzed to see what worked best and where improvements and growth can continue.

VMI's channels did see some drops in metrics in December 2024 compared to December 2023, tied directly to the departure of our videographer early in the month. We were not able to produce the same amount of video content, which had an effect particularly on Facebook not having as many holiday-related videos. Comments are down on some platforms, but part of this is due to increased sharing of posts, so comments happen off our accounts and the fact that all platforms have cracked down on spam users.

Additionally, social media, particularly META placing continued emphasis and priority on paid content (ads and boosts) is a problem for our channels as state regulations do not allow us to store a credit card on file. This can be seen across the reporting period and is a problem for all higher education social media based on research with other schools, most notably on [Facebook](#). The digital communications team is looking into partnering with a vendor to alleviate this roadblock, but this will also require additional budget line items.

[Instagram](#), which was the most targeted platform due to its importance in recruiting as the platform used most by younger generations saw growth in followers and most notably, huge

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gains in impressions (times content is seen) and reach (unique accounts viewing content). This is crucial to promoting the advantages and uniqueness of cadet life and a VMI education. A consistent uptick was seen in non-followers viewing our content – which is the key to increasing those followers and shows that those who are connected find the content to be of high quality and worth sharing on their own feeds, as seen by large gains in the brand awareness metric. Use of stories and live video content mitigated the drop for December that was seen on Facebook. This would not be possible without a full-time social media specialist and would see even more success with dedicated cadet interns/collaborators with their own equipment, as is common in higher education.

LinkedIn saw mixed results with some increases, notably in followers, and in some metrics each month. Last year (2023) was affected by events such as the winning of the Silver Shako and a few notable TAPS releases, which appeal to the alumni contingent found predominantly on LinkedIn. The team is also working more to promote job opportunities, which lead to website visits, but do not necessarily result in the same level of interactions per post. New initiatives working directly with faculty to post research should help drive more conversation on this platform.

While many colleges and universities are steering away from X, VMI maintains its presence and is active on the platform. There was a marked follower gain and consistent interaction with and sharing of content. Particularly, X provides a strong platform for supporting cadet-athletes and the accounts run by VMI Athletics through shares and interactions.

### Channel Growth

Platform	August	September	October	November	December
Facebook Likes Followers	37,786 (NEW METRIC)	37,853 (NEW METRIC)	37,888 47,541	37,906 47,811	37,935 47,867
Instagram	26,281	26,582	26,673	26,772	26,784
LinkedIn	20,842	20,968	21,075	21,129	21,202
X (Twitter)	6,397	6,459	6,587	6,611	6,676

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## PLATFORM ANALYTICS SNAPSHOT

*Comparison percentages versus previous year to show similar content (i.e. not comparing September posts to Matriculation numbers from August).*

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/vmi1839/>

Date	Reactions	Comments	Shares	Engage. Rate	Impressions	Brand Awareness	Video Views
Sept. 2023	12,417	419	863	2.2%	617,345	996	51,159
Sept. 2024	13,759	374	634	1.6%	944,917	1,095	115,291
Change	+10.8%	-10.7%	-26.5%	-27%	+53%	+9.93%	+125.4%
Oct. 2023	14,374	369	686	1.6%	969,540	819	88,112
Oct. 2024	11,299	294	692	1.2%	998,894	1,147	53,708
Change	-21.2%	-18.9%	+0.9%	-25%	+3%	+40%	-39%
Nov. 2023	16,108	556	762	1.8%	950,317	891	19,712
Nov. 2024	10,041	543	606	1.1%	1,045,515	627	72,232
Change	-37.7%	2.3%	-20.5%	-38.9%	+10%	-29.6%	+266.4%
Dec. 2023	18,793	443	1,152	2.8%	741,653	1,177	139,449
Dec. 2024	10,945	341	592	1.8%	664,524	597	8,986
Change	-41.8%	-23%	-48.6%	-35.7%	-10.4%	-49.3%	-93.6%

### Most Popular Post by Month according to Reach

Month	Day	Content	Reach	Engagement Rate by Reach
Sept. 2024	Sept. 10	<a href="#">Moe Featured Story</a> [photos and story link]	22,210	14.1%
Oct. 2024	Oct. 31	<a href="#">Halloween in Barracks</a> [Reel]	78,669	2.2%
Nov. 2024	Nov. 23	<a href="#">Beginning of Thanksgiving Furlough</a> [photos from supper]	14,862	15.5%
Dec. 2024	Dec. 9	<a href="#">ROTC Cavalry from Archives</a> [photo]	43,105	13.5%

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Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/virginiamilitaryinstitute/>

Date	Likes	Saves	Comments	Engagement Rate / Impression	Impressions	Reach	Brand Awareness
Sept. 2023	37,097	509	245	8.8%	432,798	7,588	198
Sept. 2024	24,035	493	162	3.5%	804,277	10,940	351
Change	-35.2%	-3.1%	-33.9%	-60.2%	+85.8%	+44.2%	+77.3%
Oct. 2023	33,924	456	222	5.2%	664,539	7,327	291
Oct. 2024	28,658	687	126	3.6%	925,752	10,474	469
Change	-15.5%	+50.7%	-43.2%	-30.8%	+39.3%	+43%	+61.2%
Nov. 2023	33,480	377	183	7.8%	417,805	6,485	197
Nov. 2024	28,422	395	112	4.1%	745,605	11,012	659
Change	-15.1%	+4.77%	-38.8%	-47.4%	+78.5%	+69.8%	+234.5%
Dec. 2023	25,949	326	97	8.2%	323,371	5,516	143
Dec. 2024	30,334	371	75	4.7%	694,321	9,481	196
Change	+16.9%	+0.35%	-22.7%	-42.7%	+114.7%	+71.9%	+37.1%

## Most Popular Posts by Month according to Reach

Month	Day	Content	Reach	Engagement Rate by Reach
Sept. 2024	Sept. 7	<a href="#">First Parade/Home Game Recap/Reunion</a> [photos]	21,588	9.7%
Oct. 2024	Oct. 19	<a href="#">Family Weekend Recap</a> [photos]	13,859	13.9%
Nov. 2024	Nov. 11	<a href="#">Veterans Day</a> [graphic]	15,065	4.3%
Dec. 2024	Dec. 29	<a href="#">Remembering President Carter</a> [photos]	13,576	14.9%

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Not captured in these overall post stats is performance of stories, content viewable for only 24 hours. A production target in 2024, these not only contain team-created content, but also photo submissions, encouraging interaction and contributions from cadets and families. For these, there was a total reach of over 1,000,000 Sept.-Dec. (up nearly 50% over the previous four months), and an average reach of 2,643. Engagement (interactions/clicks) was up nearly 40%.

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LinkedIn <https://www.instagram.com/virginiamilitaryinstitute/>

Date	Likes	Comments	Shares	Reached Users	Impressions	Engagement Rate / Impress.
Sept. 2023	5,104	237	128	77,314	169,455	16.2%
Sept. 2024	3,847	175	28	80,635	175,146	26.4%
Change	-24.6%	-26.2%	-78.1%	+4.30%	+3.36%	+63.0%
Oct. 2023	4,363	175	58	76,114	168,435	15.9%
Oct. 2024	2,985	212	16	56,846	137,217	22.4%
Change	-31.6%	+21.1%	-72.4%	-25.3%	-18.5%	+8.9%
Nov. 2023	4,075	173	30	64,970	142,924	25.4%
Nov. 2024	3,360	323	9	55,841	134,059	16.2%
Change	-17.5%	+86.7%	-70%	-14.1%	-6.2%	-36.2%
Dec. 2023	3,655	100	13	51,190	124,490	30.2%
Dec. 2024	3,384	6	6	51,745	133,002	18.7%
Change	-7.4%	-94%	-53.8%	+1.1%	+6.8%	-38.1%

## Most Popular Posts by Month according to Impressions

Month	Day	Content	Impressions	Engagement Rate by Reach
Sept. 2024	Sept. 9	<a href="#">This Day in History: Unveiling of Plaques for 10<sup>th</sup> Anniv. of Sept. 11<sup>th</sup></a> [Archives photos]	13,192	23.8%
Oct. 2024	Oct. 31	<a href="#">Happy Halloween</a> [photo]	8,412	27.6%
Nov. 2024	Nov. 25	<a href="#">Ring Figure Recap</a> [photos]	11,073	74.6%
Dec. 2024	Dec. 13	<a href="#">Gov. Youngkin Visit Recap</a> [photos]	11,787	83.7%

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X (Twitter) <https://www.twitter.com/vmi1839/>

*Due to API changes from the change in platform ownership, comparison data is not available for X at this time. Comparisons year-to-year will be implemented again starting in March 2025. Also of note, since the purchase by Elon Musk, X is no longer able to be viewed without an account, which results in smaller numbers than other platforms.*

Month	Mentions	Likes	Replies	Quote Posts	Reposts	Total Engagement
Sept. 2024	104	606	29	29	89	857
Oct. 2024	152	1,717	160	82	377	2,488
Nov. 2024	102	532	11	27	72	744
Dec. 2024	203	528	18	20	590	1,359

## *Most Popular Posts by Month according to Engagement Rate*

Month	Day	Content	Impressions	Engagement Rate by Impression
Sept. 2024	Sept. 17	<a href="#">Bolton/Ramaswamy Event Promo</a> [graphic and link]	569,078	1.6%
Oct. 2024	Oct. 16	<a href="#">Behind the Balance: Terrell Jackson '25 Featured Story</a> [photo & link]	1,809	4.4%
Nov. 2024	Nov. 14	<a href="#">Day of Giving Kick-Off</a> [video from VMIAA]	1,862	3.1%
Dec. 2024	Dec. 15	<a href="#">Exam Prep Encouragement</a> [photo]	961	6.3%

As year-to-year analytics are not available, instead growth can be tracked comparing Sept.-Dec. 2024 to the previous period of May-Aug. 2024.

- Followers: **+4.4%**
- Engagement: **+111.7%**
- Total Likes: **+94.6%**
- Total Reposts: **+109.3%**

## DIGITAL COMMS GOALS WITHIN VMI'S STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

### ***1.1: INCREASE ENGAGEMENT WITH QUALITY PROSPECTS –***

The digital communications team continues to support the Admissions Office in focusing on recruitment of and engagement with prospective applicants. A systemic overhaul of VMI main social accounts continues to incorporate more video/reels, update styling consistent with competitors while remaining 'on brand' for VMI, Platform content is also now tailored more specifically by audience, with Instagram being heavily tilted towards promoting VMI as a top choice for high school students. The team also designs and supports web-based engagement tools and forms, custom page builds to support ad campaigns with VMIAA, and increased video content linked to subpages on the VMI homepage.

### ***1.3: EXPANSION AND BETTER LEVERAGING OF DATA –***

C&M's digital communications team continues to work with IT, admissions, institutional research, and internally to obtain and utilize proper data for recruiting strategies and initiatives and project decisions. This is handled within C&M using analytics from the vmi.edu website, social media platforms, and Qualtrics online forms. Data is shared more widely and more often with various stakeholders, particularly Admissions and Financial Aid. The new SiteImprove tool has also provided expanded analytics tools, including a more efficient way to track visit paths, such as comparing VMI applications to CommonApp link clicks for Admissions.

The web team continues to focus on search engine optimization (SEO) for VMI.edu as well as various campaign websites. This includes the continued use of BrightEdge software for professional guidance and support in optimizing VMI.edu, with a focus on not only increasing SEO efficiency, but specifically targeting competitor-shared keywords to increase enrollment.

### ***1.4: BOOST SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE & ENGAGEMENT –***

Social media continues to be a crucial tool for Virginia Military Institute to communicate with the VMI community and the world, offering instant access to cadets, alumni, staff, faculty, prospective cadets, and other groups.

VMI's social media accounts publish pictures, videos, articles, and news briefs highlighting the unique qualities and successes of the Institute, bolstering VMI's reputation, brand recognition & identity, and recruitment efforts. Posts on social media accounts include:

- Major events, announcements, and activities on post
- Cadet-focused, with emphasis on the leadership journey
- Cadet events, activities, clubs, and organizations focused on the VMI college experience
- Academic, ROTC, and Athletics achievements, milestones, and event promotion
- Performance and highlights of faculty staff contributions to VMI and beyond
- Photo and video highlights depicting everyday life at the Institute



RELATED C&M PLAN STATUS UPDATES FOR GOAL 2: ENHANCE DIGITAL AND WEB-BASED COMMUNICATIONS

### ***2.1 INCREASED FUNCTIONALITY***

C&M was able, thanks to the support of Lt. Col. Shannon Eskam and Col. Bill Wyatt, to obtain some funding to purchase a new content management system (CMS) and facilitate some of the content shift. Approval is still pending from IT as of Jan. 20 when this report was finalized, to move to the next phase of contracting with SiteVision, which holds VITA's statewide "Citizen Facing Website & Application and all associated services" contract, as well as a statewide hosting contract VA-190906-STVN, to move to a new service. A scope of work was finalized that would not only move the vmi.edu site to a more stable and better supported system with modern technologies but also incorporates design and layout assistance, as well as content migration, to expedite the move. The hold-up in approval means that the potential launch may not be in 2025, meaning another year of having to fund and use TerminalFour.

The problems with TerminalFour continue in the meantime. Most notably, there is often a sizable lag between content updates in the CMS and its reveal on the live website. In some cases, support tickets have had to be submitted to refresh and repost content 'stuck' on pages. This continues to negatively affect the Institute's ability to communicate in a timely fashion during emergency notification situations or public relations concerns.

There are still outstanding support tickets from years ago with TerminalFour stating that they are awaiting bug fixes or upgrades. A 'workaround' was provided for the issue where deleted items were still available on the site, but it removes the team's ability to have a true 'staging' site to preview items fully before they go live, meaning edits often take longer and sometimes must be redone due to glitches or unexpected layout issues not seen in preview mode.

With the limitations of our current CMS, the team must constantly write new, custom code to implement modern, mobile-friendly design styles. This takes time away from content overhaul and actual page updates.

### ***2.2: MODERN & ENGAGING DESIGN & 2.3: REPRESENTATION & VISIBILITY***

The team continues to update content types, styles, and layouts to ensure a more modern and enticing design in line with our competitors. The shift to a new CMS, referenced elsewhere in this report, is key to fully harnessing the website as a recruitment tool, and allowing the team to spend more time on content and design with the elimination of constant troubleshooting. Photos continue to be updated and refreshed to best represent the current Corps of Cadets and showcase the benefits and uniqueness of a VMI education. These graphics are also a key resource for SEO through alternative text, also an accessibility requirement, offering a place to include more keywords to target our top competitors. An additional feature of the BrightEdge contract was the implementation of Autopilot. This automated service, which can be customized by the web team, optimizes images for a faster load without quality loss, creating a better mobile experience while also allowing more design freedom.

#### ***2.4 INCREASE ACCESSIBILITY***

Increasing the accessibility of content across the vmi.edu domain continues to be a top priority for the Web Team. Thanks to a new tool provided at no-cost by VITA, vmi.edu continues to exceed industry standards regarding accessibility. The team is not only working to meet required levels of accessibility but is also pushing for higher standards to future-proof the site against federal changes in expectations.

A complete review and overhaul of all downloadable content is required to officially meet 100% accessibility for the site, as anything presented on the website, such as PDFs, must meet the same standards. Phase 1 of this process – cleaning unused PDFs off the server, is underway. Each document must then be verified for accuracy by the owner and remediated as necessary by the web team. This is a time-consuming process that will take multiple years to complete. The addition of SiteImprove (through VITA as explained above), which completes automated scans of all PDFs hosted on the web has decreased the time of the process slightly.

Quick guides for creating accessible documents have been shared with all employees via the C&M SharePoint page on the portal, in hopes of not only meeting federal requirements of all digital communications being accessible, but also alleviating some of the ‘lift’ required of the Web Team.

Research continues for the possibility of external remediation depending on the number of documents remaining as accessibility remediation is often a full-time role and the current staffing levels do not allow for any member of the team to focus solely on this important user experience and legal requirement project.