

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

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 21st 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 50th 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 stair climb, 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 21st 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
Sept 2024	123	66	396	5	34	111	43	30
Oct 2024	113	55	446	6	49	194	42	41
Nov 2024	68	146	684	4	41	115	37	36
Dec 2024	64	44	176	1	46	111	45	44
TOTAL	368	311	1,702	16	170	531	167	151
AVG. / Month	92	77.75	425.5	4	42.5	132.75	41.75	37.75

* 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
- [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.)
Homepage	173,555 -17.49%	70,600 -17.08%	2.46 -0.49%	00:00:37 +3.75%	606,335 -16.76%
About	129,811 -15.1%	47,805 -4.05%	2.72 -11.52%	00:01:08 -13.18%	413,606 -8.27%
News	74,090 +24.02%	51,252 +138.4%	1.48 -47.98%	00:00:25 -54.63%	242,021 -60.59%
Academics	97,295 -0.63%	35,988 +19.03%	2.70 -16.52%	00:01:14 -20.3%	312,753 +6.86%
Admissions	44,891 -1.81%	22,718 +13.88%	1.98 -13.78%	00:00:55 -21.71%	140,559 +4.4%
Apply Page	15,609 +20.78%	10,089 +50.56%	1.55 -19.78%	00:00:31 -41.35%	48,352 +30.73%
Financial Aid	17,801 +2.34%	9,164 +5.22%	1.94 -2.74%	00:01:09 -1.54%	53,910 +6.79%
Cadet Life	52,015 -13.77%	25,880 -0.98%	2.01 -12.92%	00:01:13 -16.52%	160,733 -7.76%
ROTC	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]

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-ment With VMI’s Mascot](#),” and several *Behind the Balance* features.

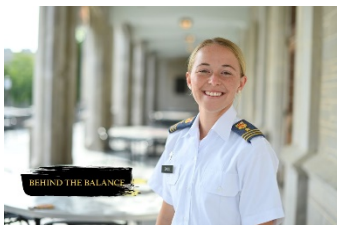


exciting and engaging series.

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

Behind the Balance features cadet-athletes and how they balance cadet responsibilities along with being a NCAA Division I athlete.

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.



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.



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, 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 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.

