Former Virginia Gov. L. Douglas Wilder Inspires Participants in the Policy Pathways Summer Leadership Academy

Students from across the world build policy and leadership skills at the 2026 Policy Pathways Summer Academy held at Virginia Commonwealth University



Gov. L. Douglas Wilder speaking about Nelson Mandela at the 2026 Policy Pathways Summer Academy

RICHMOND , VA, UNITED STATES, September 28, 2026 / EINPresswire.com/ -- The 2026 Policy Pathways Summer Academy for Policy Leadership and Public Service in partnership with the Virginia Commonwealth University's L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs once again welcomed a talented cohort of up-and-coming policy leaders from across Virginia to a week of programming and action. Through policy workshops, leadership training, capstone projects, and meetings with public officials, the student participants learned how public policy can be used as a tool to solve today's pressing challenges and better their communities.

> Jump in early and don't be afraid to speak up."
>
> *Jule T. Trent, Summer Academy 2026 Alum*

One of the week's highlights was a visit from the nation's first elected African American governor: Governor L. Douglas Wilder. Governor Wilder spent decades as a leader and public servant and provided participants with anecdotes from his historic contributions to abolishing South Africa's apartheid system.

Governor Wilder outlined the transformation that has taken place politically and socially since the end of apartheid and spoke about the vital need for courageous political leadership. He discussed the lessons he learned during conversations with leaders, including Nelson Mandela, in order to build a more democratic South Africa. He stated that integrity, perseverance, and

justice are required for lasting change. Governor Wilder challenged students to consider how public policy might be used to strengthen democratic institutions, expand opportunity, and lend every voice an opportunity to be heard.

Wilder told the students that leadership was a lifetime commitment to service and compared the struggle for equity in South Africa to the continuing work of strengthening communities in the United States. He stated that courageous change happens only when informed citizens listen, discuss, and take action to transform their communities.



2026 Summer Academy Participant: Jule T. Trent

Throughout his keynote address, Governor Wilder challenged delegates to view leadership not as a title, but as a lifestyle. He reminded students that true leadership starts with knowledgeable citizens who are prepared to have conversations, listen, and respond.



Gov. L. Douglas Wilder speaking at the 2026 Policy Pathways Summer Academy

Inspired by the discussions they had with policy practitioners throughout the week, Academy delegates worked their way through the policy process. They identified issues in their own communities and conducted research, proposing and presenting solutions in group Capstone Projects. Delegates were pushed to think critically and respectfully about policy areas and to develop the leadership skills Governor Wilder talked about necessary to be an effective policymaker.

For Trent, the experience reaffirmed her passion for a career in criminal justice and public policy. "I wanted to deepen my understanding of systemic issues and learn how to structure actionable solutions," she said. "Having served as a Research Assistant with Policy Pathways, joining the Summer Academy felt like the perfect next step to sharpen my policy analysis skills alongside

peers who share my dedication to public service."

Since June 2025, Trent has been working as a Research Assistant with Policy Pathways, developing her policy and analysis skills with professionals dedicated to improving communities and people's quality of life. Outside of the program, she has been involved with the Y Street Leadership Team, Partnership for the Future, the SOAR Program, and the Library Media Lab Innovators. She also competed on the wrestling team and volunteered with Feed More.

Throughout the Academy, Trent honed in on issues she hopes to tackle in her career, namely transparency and reform in Virginia's incarceration system. She believes that policy can improve conditions for families and youth in their communities:

"My goal is to take the advocacy tools and analytical frameworks I learn here and apply them throughout my career," Trent said. "Whether I'm working in government or alongside community organizations, I want to help create a justice system that is more transparent, equitable, and focused on opportunity."
In addition to the policy curriculum, the Summer Academy gave delegates the opportunity to work with fellow students from across the state, bounce ideas off one another, and build relationships. In many ways, this reflected one of the central themes of the week: that effective leadership begins with a willingness to listen and learn from fellow citizens.

Trent now attends UVA Wise and studies Criminal Justice and Public Policy. She graduated fourth in her high school class, earned an Advanced Diploma and 14 graduation cords, and received a full-ride scholarship to the university. She aspires to serve in a local government position to work on legal reform and youth engagement in Virginia.

Trent believes that the Academy experience strengthened both her confidence and her commitment to public service:

"Jump in early and don't be afraid to speak up," she said. "Whether it's volunteering, participating in leadership programs, or getting involved in your community, every experience builds your toolkit. Your voice matters, and you're never too young to start advocating for change."

As the 2026 Policy Pathways Summer Academy came to a close, delegates departed with new knowledge, meaningful relationships, and a deeper understanding of the value of public service. Reflecting on the inspirational address she heard from Governor Wilder, Trent was reminded of a powerful quote by Nelson Mandela that captures the spirit of the Policy Pathways Summer Academy:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."
- Nelson Mandela

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