Spit for Science

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Spit for Science ([spit4science.vcu.edu](http://spit4science.vcu.edu)) is a longitudinal, VCU-wide research project that aims to understand how genes and the environment come together to influence substance use and emotional health. Launched in Fall 2011, the project has enrolled four cohorts of freshman (Fall 2011 - Fall 2014) and has over 9800 participants. In the fall of their freshman year, students are invited to take an online survey querying their emotional and behavioral health, personality, family and peers, and other environmental variables. Participants also have the option to donate a DNA sample. After a student is enrolled in the project, the student is sent an optional follow-up survey each spring. Given the large number of participants, and rich phenotypic data, we are eager to disseminate the data and project findings in an engaging, innovative manner.

The key audience for this dissemination project is comprised of VCU students. We want to place the findings back in the hands of the participants and larger VCU community to spark conversations, reduce stigma and inform policy and practice. Since the audience is comprised of college students, we sought an innovative, creative way to reach our audience, outside of the traditional peer-reviewed journal process. It was determined that an interactive website would be the best vehicle for dissemination. The website will be housed on the project’s home website and will have a “search” feature where students can look for basic descriptives (e.g., “how many sophomores drink alcohol on a regular basis?”) and/or do simplistic tests (e.g., “what’s the relationship between level alcohol consumption and number of alcohol-related negative consequences reported?”).

Luckily, Spit for Science has established a rich array of community and university partners to help us spread the word about the website including The Wellness Resource Center (and their “Stall Street Journal” campaign), VCU’s Center for Media + Health and VCU’s Department of Communication Arts. The recently founded College Behavioral and Emotional Health Institute (COBE; cobe.vcu.edu) also has a vibrant social media presence on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram on which to distribute information about the website. These partners and online platforms can also form a strong foundation for communicating research outcomes.

Research outcomes will be communicated through the website, as mentioned above. Students can peruse former student projects using Spit for Science data, look at pre-packaged descriptives put on the website by our undergraduate research assistants, or search through the data to ask and answer their own questions. Results will be displayed in a tabular and/or graphical format, depending on the nature of the result. Undergraduate research assistants will also help inform result wording to ensure non-researchers can understand the results. When a student finds a piece of information interesting, the website will have a “share” button enabled for them to tweet or post information through their own social media channels. In this manner, knowledge of our research outcomes could grow exponentially.
Impact will be evaluated in two distinct ways. First, traffic to the webpage will be recorded. Secondly, the “share” button the website will provide direct evidence of both engagement with the website and further communication about results.