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STUBBLEFIELD INSTITUTE CELEBRATES STUDENTS FROM THREE CAMPUSES

SHEPHERDSTOWN, W. Va. - The Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications proudly celebrated the statewide expansion of its **Community Leadership and Civil Advocacy Certificate (CLCA)** with two student recognition events hosted on April 14 at Shepherd University and April 15 at West Virginia University. These events marked the successful achievement of the certificate by students from Shepherd University, Blue Ridge Community and Technical College and West Virginia University.

Students completing the CLCA program at Shepherd University include Sherri Alayya, Karen Lewis-Dryden, Nesryn Kelsey, Grace McNelly and Kevin Murphy. Veronica Parker, a criminal justice student at Blue Ridge Community Technical College, completed the CLCA certificate. At WVU, students who completed the CLCA program include Ariana Burks, Agnes Mathenage and Garrett Oursler.

“One of the most exciting and impressive realities of this certification program was the opportunity for students from multiple West Virginia colleges and universities to interact via an in-person or virtual format,” said Stubblefield Institute Program Coordinator Elaine Bobo. “Students with varying backgrounds, fields of study, education levels, and areas of advocacy passion were able to share their story and watch one another's advocacy project develop and grow with meaningful impact for their individual community. The opportunity to share life experiences and provide feedback to each other made this certificate a true statewide collaboration.”

Throughout the 7-month program, community leaders instructed students on best practices related to community leadership and advocacy. Many of these community leaders attended the celebration at Shepherd University, including former WV Delegate Paul Espinosa. Others who shared their expertise and experiences with students throughout the program include former WV Senator John Unger, Grassroots Impact Senior Associate Joanna DiStefano and Speechwriters of Color Executive Director Michael Franklin.

In addition to teaching in the program, several university and community leaders made time in recent weeks to listen to the students' advocacy presentations. WV Delegate Michael Hornby was one of several leaders who listened to a student's advocacy presentation, provided feedback, and offered to work with the student in the fall to bring the student's project to fruition. The project relates to providing mental health resources and support to K-12 educators.

"Since its founding in 2019, the Stubblefield Institute has often acted as a bridge between community members and their elected officials," said Ashley Horst, Stubblefield Institute executive director. "The Institute has hosted candidate town halls and debates, forums for the discussion of challenging issues, and opportunities for students, staff, faculty, and community members to engage in civil discourse with each other and our nation's policymakers. For the Stubblefield Institute, the Community Leadership and Civil Advocacy Certificate is the next step in connecting individuals with those in positions of power in ways that effectively drive change in our society."

The April 14 celebration took place in the Reading Room on the main floor of Scarborough Library at Shepherd University. The event began with opening remarks from Dr. Mary Hendrix, President of Shepherd University, followed by the presentation of certificates by Horst and Bobo.

In a keynote address, Stubblefield Institute Board Member David Bancroft highlighted the bipartisan potential of advocacy work speaking from his own experience as director of the "Just Label It" campaign regarding genetically modified foods. Bancroft congratulated the students for their own efforts in finding common ground across divides.

Students showcased individual advocacy projects on a broad range of topics—from institutional policy change to community-based initiatives. Advocacy projects tackled issues such as financial literacy, religious observance policies, community engagement, mental health resources, and how K-12 students are assessed for educational accommodations.

On Tuesday, Bobo and Horst travelled to WVU to present certificates and graduation stoles to the three WVU students who completed the CLCA program. The ceremony was held on WVU's main campus, with Stubblefield Institute Board Member Hoppy Kercheval and WVU Center for Community Engagement Program Coordinator Klarissa Benneman assisting in the presentations. Afterward, students Ariana Burks and Agnes Mathenage shared their projects with WVU President E. Gordon Gee and the group celebrated this first collaboration between the Stubblefield Institute and WVU before posing for a group photo.

“I wish I had taken this class as a freshman or sophomore,” said Ariana Burks, WVU student majoring in International Studies and Geography. “It helped broaden the way I think about a problem.”

The Community Leadership and Civil Advocacy Certificate was offered as 50+ hour extra-curricular program at participating schools during the 2024-25 academic year. This statewide expansion was funded in part by a grant from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, which supports projects in the areas of Education, Economic Development, Health, and Community Development throughout West Virginia and in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

“We are grateful that the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation recognizes the potential in our students to shape society,” said Horst. “Their investment in both our students and the Community Leadership and Civil Advocacy Certificate speaks to their commitment to the future of our communities.”

Looking to the future, the Stubblefield Institute is offering the Community Leadership and Civil Advocacy program as a 3-credit course at Shepherd University in fall, 2025. It will then be offered as an online course in spring, 2026. Registration for either the in-person or online version of the course is open to anyone who wishes to participate. For more information on how to register for the course, email Ashley Horst at ahorst@shepherd.edu.

Shepherd University CLCA Certificate Recipients:

- Sherri Alayya, Senior, Nursing
- Nesryn Kelsey, Sophomore, Social Work
- Karen Lewis-Dryden, Senior, RBA
- Grace McInelley, Junior, Social Work
- Kevin Murphy, MA, Appalachian Studies

Blue Ridge Community and Technical College Recipient:

- Veronica Parker, Criminal Justice

WVU CLCA Certificate Recipients:

- Ariana Burks, International Studies & Geography
- Agnes Mathenage, Geography
- Garrett Oursler, Environmental Soils & Water Sciences

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Photos sent as separate attachment and included here for cut-line reference:



April 14, 2025 – Shepherd University – From Left: Kevin Murphy, Nesryn Kelsey, Sherri Alayya, Grace McNelly, Karen Lewis-Dryden, Veronica Parker



April 15, 2025 – West Virginia University – From Left: Ashley Horst, Ariana Burks , Hoppy Kercheval, Gordon Gee, Klarissa Brenneman, Agnes Mathenage, Elaine Bobo