



Dr. Atif M. Qarni is an educator, scholar-practitioner, and higher education leader with experience spanning teaching, research, policy, and executive leadership. He currently serves as Assistant Teaching Professor at Georgetown University, where he teaches courses in education policy, school finance, civic engagement, and educational equity.

Dr. Qarni previously served as Virginia Secretary of Education, where he coordinated policy and strategic initiatives across the Commonwealth's educational system, including 16 public universities, 23 community colleges, 132 school divisions, and five higher education centers. In this role, he worked closely with university presidents, governing boards, faculty leaders, legislators, and workforce partners to advance student success, institutional effectiveness, and educational opportunity.

Following his public service, Dr. Qarni served as Associate Director and Managing Director of External Affairs at the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University. There he led external partnerships, fundraising, policy engagement, and research dissemination, helping secure more than \$3 million in foundation and research support.

His research focuses on educational finance, college affordability, and student success for historically underserved populations. His doctoral dissertation examined the impact of the Virginia College Affordability Network program at Virginia State University on retention among Pell-eligible students.

Dr. Qarni earned an Ed.D. in Leadership and Learning in Organizations from Vanderbilt University, an M.A. in History from George Mason University, and a B.A. in Sociology from George Washington University. His leadership philosophy centers on shared governance, student success, academic excellence, innovation, and mission-driven service.

Dr. Atif M. Qarni

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EXECUTIVE & ACADEMIC PROFILE

Higher education executive and scholar-practitioner with statewide leadership experience across PK–20 systems, foundation-funded applied research expertise, and university-level teaching in education policy and finance. Former Virginia Secretary of Education overseeing 16 public universities, 23 community colleges, 132 K–12 divisions, and five higher education centers. Experienced in faculty partnership, board engagement, accreditation awareness, student success strategy, and mission-aligned fiscal stewardship.

My leadership philosophy centers on faculty partnership, shared governance, data-informed decision-making, and equity-centered institutional design. I believe academic excellence is sustained when faculty expertise, student voice, and fiscal stewardship are aligned around a clear institutional mission.

Research agenda focuses on K–12 school finance equity and its intersection with higher education affordability, particularly for Pell-eligible and historically underserved students.

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Secretary of Education

Commonwealth of Virginia | 2018–2021

Statewide executive leader responsible for coordinating Virginia’s public education system across PK–20.

Scope of Leadership

- Oversaw 16 public four-year universities
- Oversaw 23 community colleges within the Virginia Community College System
- Coordinated with 132 K–12 school divisions serving over 1.2 million students
- Provided oversight engagement with five higher education centers:
 - Southern Virginia Higher Education Center
 - New College Institute
 - Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center
 - Roanoke Higher Education Center
 - Institute for Advanced Learning and Research

Organizational Leadership

- Direct reports included:
 - Deputy Secretary for K–12 Education

- Deputy Secretary for Higher Education
- Assistant Secretary for Early Childhood Education
- Policy Advisor
- Executive Assistant
- Confidential Assistant
- Coordinated cross-sector strategy involving multi-billion-dollar public education budgets; exercised direct discretionary oversight exceeding \$3 million.
- Regularly engaged university presidents, community college presidents, K-12 superintendents, higher education center directors, local elected officials, industry leaders, and community stakeholders to advance regional education and workforce priorities.
- Served on statewide workforce and economic development advisory bodies supporting education-to-workforce alignment.

Academic & Governance Engagement

- Engaged with presidents, provosts, and faculty governance leaders on academic quality, institutional performance metrics, and policy alignment.
- Attended Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) proceedings and participated in accreditation-related discussions.
- Worked collaboratively with governing boards while respecting campus-level shared governance structures.

Associate Director & Managing Director, External Affairs

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (Temple University) | 2021–2023

Senior executive overseeing external strategy, policy engagement, and research advancement at a nationally recognized higher education research center.

Leadership & Management

- Supervised 12 staff, including Finance Director, Strategic Communications Director, and two Senior Policy Directors.
- Managed annual operating budget exceeding \$4 million.
- Led strategic partnerships with colleges and universities serving more than 100,000 students.

Fundraising & Sponsored Research

- Secured over \$3 million in foundation and research funding.
- Contributed to foundation-supported research initiatives funded by organizations including the Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, National Science Foundation (NSF), and Institute of Education Sciences (IES).
- Wrote and co-developed grants supporting applied research on college affordability, student basic needs insecurity, and institutional equity reform.

Applied Research & Policy Scholarship

- Co-developed policy briefs, commissioned research syntheses, and institutional strategy reports focused on affordability and student success.
 - Presented research findings at national higher education policy convenings and institutional forums.
 - Translated research insights into practical recommendations for institutional leaders.
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FACULTY EXPERIENCE

Assistant Teaching Professor, Georgetown University | 2025–Present

Designed and taught undergraduate courses integrating policy analysis, applied research, and community-based learning.

Courses Designed & Taught

EDIJ 2850 – School Finance Policy and Practice: Dollars, Disparities, and the Struggle for Public Education

- Designed course using a Course-Based Undergraduate Research Experience (CURE) model.
- Students conduct comparative state-level finance research using federal and state data.
- Integrated analysis of Title I–IV, IDEA, ESSA, Head Start, and pandemic-era funding.
- Emphasized data literacy, policy analysis, and equity-centered reform design.

EDIJ 3500 – Seminar in Education: Policy, Politics, and Power

- Examined governance, legislation, and community advocacy in education reform.
- Connected historical movements to contemporary policy debates.

EDIJ 3200 – Seminar in Urban Education (Community-Based Learning)

- Gateway course examining structural inequities in urban schooling.
- Required 40+ hours of field-based engagement in DC public schools.

EDIJ 2700 – Social Movements in Education

- Explored grassroots and national advocacy shaping education policy.
- Partnered with organizations including Southern Education Foundation, National Equity Project, The Hechinger Report, and Council for Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA).

EDIJ 2400 – Education, Liberation, and Literacy (Community-Based Learning)

- Inspired by Paulo Freire’s literacy theory.
- Students provided weekly tutoring in partnership with local DC education programs.

Teaching Approach

- Integrates research, civic engagement, and applied scholarship.
 - Emphasizes equity, data-informed inquiry, and reflective practice.
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RESEARCH AGENDA

Primary Focus: K–12 School Finance Equity

Examines how local property wealth, state funding formulas, and federal programs shape educational opportunity and disparities across communities.

Higher Education Intersection

Investigates how affordability initiatives and institutional interventions influence persistence and retention for Pell-eligible and historically underserved students.

Doctoral Dissertation

Qarni, A., Rooks, B., & Manikandan, B. (2024).

Evaluation of the Virginia College Affordability Network (VCAN) program at Virginia State University and its influence on retention of Black students who are Pell-eligible.

BOARDS & SYSTEM-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT

- Collaborated with public university and community college boards across Virginia.
 - Served on statewide workforce and economic development advisory bodies.
 - Facilitated cross-sector alignment among higher education, K–12 systems, and industry leaders.
 - Experienced navigating complex governance environments while maintaining institutional mission focus.
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EDUCATION

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.), Leadership & Learning in Organizations | Vanderbilt University

Dissertation:

Evaluation of the Virginia College Affordability Network (VCAN) program at Virginia State University and its influence on retention of Black students who are Pell-eligible.

Master of Arts (M.A.), History | George Mason University

Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), Sociology | George Washington University