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2022 Women in Leadership Cohort Accepts Vanessa Vandergraaf

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March 14, 2022

FOCUS St. Louis announced its spring 2022 Women In Leadership cohort and Department Head of Advanced Graduate Programs and Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, Vanessa Vandergraaf, was one of 28 women selected.

The Women In Leadership program, held each fall and spring, offers professionals the opportunity to refine their leadership competencies, gain a deeper understanding of the St. Louis region, and connect with women from diverse backgrounds. Through interviews and field days, participants explore different styles of leadership and tap into the wisdom of area business, community, and civic leaders, while also honing their facilitation, negotiation, and communication skills.

“The application to the selection process happened within a month, but my commitment to advance positive change began decades ago,” Vandergraaf said. Being a first-generation immigrant, minority, and woman, she has always “sought opportunities to advance positive change by contributing to our region in various ways, specifically through philanthropic efforts.”



Through her participation as a board member for Young Variety, Vandergraaf built a diverse network of peers and mentors who introduced her to FOCUS St. Louis.

She intends to make the most of this opportunity, with plans to implement aspects of the leadership cohort into her teaching. Topics such as critical thinking, civil engagement, contributions to regional issues, personal branding, inclusion, and innovation can be integrated into any learning and teaching space.

“When learners are given opportunities to contribute, I believe our students will show up, recognize disparities, take part in reducing them, and lead. I do

not believe there is a single policy, initiative, or program solution, but involving the community, particularly learners and young people, in these processes is critical,” Vandergraaf reflected.