



OUTREACH & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
VIRGINIA TECH.

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CECE advisory board meeting highlights collaboration



Sarah Lyon-Hill speaks at the March 18 CECE Advisory Board Meeting.

On March 18, the Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) held a meeting to share project and staff updates with advisory board members.

The center invited two guest speakers, [Philip Agee](#), professor of Building Construction at Virginia Tech and assistant director for the Center for Housing Research and [Christopher Williams](#), the L.S. Randolph professor in Mechanical Engineering at Virginia Tech to talk to the board about projects they are collaborating on with CECE.

[Read more about the March advisory board meeting here.](#)

Learn more about our faculty: CECE Speakers Bureau

On Instagram and Facebook, you can view short videos of CECE faculty sharing their expertise on subjects such as, but not limited to, childcare, outdoor recreation, and remote work. The videos are part of promoting [CECE's speakers bureau](#), which is an effort to highlight CECE faculty as speakers who can share their insights with the wider community.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/VirginiaTechCECE>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/vtcece/>

April trivia question!

This issue's economic development trivia question is:

What is the average age of successful entrepreneurs?

[Submit your guess here.](#) We'll reveal the correct answer in our next newsletter.

Project spotlights

Collaborating with the National Whitewater Center in N.C.



CECE is working with the [National Whitewater Center](#) in Charlotte, N.C., on a study to understand the economic impact it has had on the surrounding community.

CECE faculty Dylan Andrews, Scott Tate, and Sarah Lyon-Hill visited the Whitewater Center on April 1 to meet with staff and tour the center.

Along with whitewater rafting and kayaking, the center offers hiking and biking trails, yoga, ropes courses, climbing, ziplining, and ice skating in winter. It also recently opened a 70-acre off-leash dog park.

The Whitewater Center focuses on the promotion, preservation, and management of natural resources and enables over 1 million visitors to get outside and play each year.

Learning about arts and tourism in Allegheny County



On April 10th, a project team from CECE visited the Allegheny Highlands to meet with stakeholders related to the Vibrant Virginia initiative. Scott Tate and Dylan Andrews led two stakeholder meetings to learn more about the economy and opportunities in arts and tourism in Allegheny County, the City of Covington, and the town of Clifton Forge. Pictured is the Arts & Cultural Attractions Group engaging in a SWOT session facilitated by CECE faculty.

Office updates

Welcome Kim Gray!



Kim Gray joined the center as the office assistant in March. She previously worked for Virginia Tech as the executive receptionist for the Office of the President. Prior to that she was the administrative assistant for the Communications and Customer Support department at Blacksburg Transit. She has a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Bloomsburg University. Kim and her husband own and manage an Airbnb in Christiansburg. When not working, Kim enjoys spending time with her family and dog whether it be traveling, hiking, digging in her flower beds or attending Hokie football games.

CECE's Sarah Lyon-Hill named director for research development



CECE has named Sarah Lyon-Hill director for research development.

In her new role, Lyon-Hill will support center faculty in creating quality projects, helping CECE to become a benchmark center and national leader for community and economic development.

“We have an amazing team, and I love working with the people in our office. We collaborate well and complement each other's skill sets and knowledge,” Lyon-Hill said. “I like the variety of our projects and working to understand the nuances and components that play a role in community and economic development. You learn something new every day. It's been a privilege and honor to work with all the people both in CECE and across the university.”

In 2011, Lyon-Hill joined the center as a graduate assistant and became an economic development specialist in 2014. She was promoted to senior economic development specialist in 2017 and associate director for research development in 2022.

Lyon-Hill is currently [leading a project](#) with venture development firm ADL Ventures and Virginia Tech's Center for Housing Research that aims to address the affordable housing crisis and promote innovative and sustainable construction practices in seven states in Central Appalachia. The project team received an Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission.

She is also leading the [Virginia Advanced Manufacturing and Advanced Materials Hub](#), alongside Kevin Byrd, executive director of the New River Valley Regional Commission. The project received a Tech Hubs grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

“Sarah has a vision to see how technology can transform regional economies and the attention to detail required to develop complex proposals and implement the projects that follow. That was key to her success in securing these highly competitive wins,” said John Provo, executive director of the center.

Meet a CECE Advisory Board Member: Keith Holland, James Madison University



Keith Holland has a bachelor's degree in integrated science and technology from James Madison University and a Ph.D. in mechanical and aerospace engineering from the University of Virginia. As a graduate student at UVA, he patented an invention for remote monitoring of air pollutants and helped to launch a related technology company in Charlottesville. In 2008, he joined James Madison University's engineering faculty, was promoted to the role of interim vice provost for research and scholarship in 2018, and became the associate vice provost for research and innovation in 2020. In 2024, Keith stepped into a revised role at JMU as the associate vice president for research and economic development within the division of Research, Economic Development, and Innovation.

1. Can you tell me about your entrepreneurship background?

As a first-generation college student, I never dreamed an entrepreneurship pathway would be something I would pursue. Using my research to develop a commercial product from idea to worldwide distribution was incredibly fulfilling. I was excited to come back to academia and have an opportunity to inject entrepreneurship as a potential pathway for students. The reason universities, federal government programs, and private institutions offer grant funding to researchers is largely because of the impact those discoveries are going to have on society. To be a participant in the link between fundamental research and the application to economic advancement in the world is something that has always been central to my interest in academic research and economic development.

2. What projects are you currently working on at JMU?

JMU was recently designated the Carnegie Classification of Doctoral University with high research activity (R2). A lot of the work that I'm doing now is centered around growing the research support enterprise, the commercialization pipeline, and the broader impacts of the research conducted at JMU. I'm working to connect that to my most recent project, which is formalizing an office at the university that emphasizes and amplifies our institution's economic engagement, much like CECE.

3. What is your proudest accomplishment?

My family. I have three wonderful children, and my son is going to be attending the University of Virginia to study engineering in the fall. The community we've created and been a party to because of our children is something I'm very proud of. Professionally, I am proud of the impact JMU has made, showcasing how a university can make a difference in business development, community development, and vibrancy in the Shenandoah Valley.

4. What made you want to be a part of CECE's advisory board?

My current professional portfolio has me intersecting in a number of ways with the work CECE is doing at Virginia Tech. I grew up in Roanoke, so I'm personally invested in all the changes that Virginia Tech has been helping to drive in the region. I'm interested in learning and seeing how CECE has had an impact and what ways we can partner to advance the commonwealth and the East Coast region as a whole.

5. How would you like to collaborate with CECE in the future?

We have been interacting with CECE through the relaunch of the Virginia's University Based Economic Development (UBED) group. In this group, public institutions are able to have regular touchpoints about the topics that matter the most around talent, place, and innovation. I would also be interested in connecting on projects where we are driving big thinking about economic vitality and vibrancy in our regions. That's where we as universities can have significant impact – encouraging our partners to think big. Then we can provide the infrastructure, guidance, and support to make those ideas come to life.

6. What is the last book you read that you would recommend?

Impact Networks by David Ehrlichman. From a professional standpoint, that book guides my thinking and the work I engage in.

7. What activities or hobbies do you like to do in your spare time?

I'm still an engineer at heart so I love playing with the latest technology, creating new things, and tapping into that inventor side of my brain. I also enjoy running. I'm a distance runner and try to get out and put some miles on the pavement when I have time.

News roundup

[Aquaculture workforce development program now accepting applications](#) (News on the Neck)

[Bluefield Economic Development and Virginia Tech explore manufacturing](#) (Bluefield Daily Telegraph)

[Bluefield leaders host workshop to discuss industrialized housing jobs](#) (WVVA)

[EARLY YEARS: Region 2 internship collaborative event happening Wednesday in Lynchburg](#) (WDBJ7)

[Ten years later, the Harvester Performance Center put Rocky Mount 'on the map'](#) (Cardinal News)

[Internship event to help students build ties to the region](#) (The Roanoke Times)

[Patrick County holds economic summit to make connections and find opportunities](#) (Center for Economic and Community Engagement Blog)

[Spearhead Trails gets help for future](#) (Herald&Tribune)

[State lawmakers are working to reorganize Virginia's workforce development efforts](#) (WVTF)

We're known for our work across the commonwealth with GO Virginia, the Region 2 Internship Collaborative, and with the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) as a university center, but did you know that we're also instrumental in training the next generation of economic development professionals?

Through our economic development studio class, "Urban Affairs and Planning 5774," as well as student-led projects, Virginia Tech graduate students are gaining hands-on experience helping towns prosper.

Here's your chance to help us support student work. Your donation will fund future student projects, helping students make a difference in their communities.

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