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CECE visits IALR in Danville, VA for staff retreat

(From left) President of IALR Telly Tucker; Business Manager Holly Carroll; Region 2 Internship Collaborative Program Coordinator Brenna Valle; and Associate Director for Community Innovations Scott Tate

The Center for Economic and Community Engagement recently visited the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research (IALR) in Danville, Virginia for a staff retreat. CECE faculty and staff worked on evaluating their strategic planning process and developing strategies for the future with senior economic development specialist Elli Travis and associate director for research development Sarah Lyon-Hill facilitating the discussion, and Ilsa Loeser, founder & principal of Letterpress Communications, offering insight as the session's guest speaker.

CECE faculty and staff went on a tour of IALR, where they were able to see the facility's science and manufacturing labs and meet with president Telly Tucker. From the tour, faculty and staff learned about the Great Opportunities for Technology and Engineering Careers (GO TEC) program, a GO Virginia funded project that introduces K-12 students to STEM careers.

CECE members also saw the Controlled Environment Agriculture Innovation Center, which is housed in a greenhouse complex on the institute's campus and is a joint project between Virginia Tech and IALR. The Innovation Center works to conduct research and educational programming to develop, promote and advance the controlled environment agriculture sector in the U.S. and internationally, bringing together industry, academia, and producers. In 2022 and 2023, CECE collaborated with IALR on a strategy and roadmap for supporting industry growth and workforce development for controlled environmental agriculture in GO Virginia Region 3.

(From left) Vice President for Applied Research at IALR Scott Lowman and CECE Executive Director John Provo

Get to know CECE's new hires

The following individuals recently joined CECE. Read more about them below!

Dylan Andrews

Dylan joined the center in July as an Economic Development Specialist. He graduated from Campbell University in 2020 with a B.S. in Economics and MBA. Before joining the center, Dylan served as a Lead for North Carolina Fellow with the UNC School of Government. In that role, Dylan worked with the Town of Vass to address critical community needs. He also researched infrastructure challenges facing rural North Carolina communities. Dylan enjoys spending time with his family, friends, and dog, Blue. He also enjoys kayaking and playing basketball.

Altan Mitchell

Altan joined the center in June as a graduate assistant. He graduated with a B.A. in Economics from Brown University in May of 2023. He is currently pursuing a Master of Science in Business Administration-Business Analytics at Virginia Tech's Pamplin School of Business. He has a special interest in the problem-solving aspect of community engagement. Outside of the office and the classroom, Altan enjoys reading and spending time with his friends. He is also a part of VT's Men's Track and Field Program as a triple and long jumper.

James Polhamus

James joined the center in June as a graduate assistant. He is working toward a Master's of Urban and Regional Planning at Virginia Tech and is anticipating to graduate in May 2024. Originally from Gainesville, Virginia, James has called Blacksburg home for four years now and earned a Bachelor's of Public and Urban Affairs from Virginia Tech in May 2023. His interests include economic development, local government, and transportation. In his free time, you can find him enjoying Blacksburg-area disc golf courses, hiking in Jefferson National Forest, or biking on the Huckleberry Trail.

John Register

John joined the center in June as the project coordinator. He manages the center's project portfolio, working to develop proposals and handle project finances. He has a bachelor's degree in business management from Radford University, as well as a master's of business administration with a concentration in data analytics from Radford University.

Brenna Valle

Brenna joined the center in July as the Region 2 Internship Collaborative program coordinator. She graduated in the class of 2023 from Roanoke College with a B.A. in English Literature. Her work at the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce and in the Student Activities department at Roanoke College inspired her passion for event planning. She looks forward to playing a role in the growth of the future workforces in Virginia. In her free time, Brenna enjoys hiking and finding new places to set up her hammock to read a good book.

Meet a CECE Advisory Board Member: Blair Durham, Black BRAND

Blair Durham is the president and co-founder of Black BRAND, a non-profit in Hampton Roads that works to increase Black wealth in the region by promoting professional development and community empowerment. In 2021 and 2022 Black BRAND and the Center for Economic and Community Engagement collaborated with Virginia Tech computational modeling and data analytics students to develop a data dashboard that enables Black BRAND to better understand the factors that affect the economic and social progress of Black residents in Hampton Roads. Durham graduated from Virginia Tech in 2005 with a degree in psychology. In April 2023, she received a Virginia Tech Influential Black Alumni Award in the area of social justice.

1. What was your first job and what did it teach you?

I served as a page in the Virginia House of Delegates for three months when I was 13. The job taught me the

importance of having confidence and being sure of myself. It also helped me learn how to network and make

friends. 25 years later, I'm still in contact with many of the people I first met during that job. The job also allowed me to gain a better understanding of politics and see the workings of government up close, which was a pivotal moment for me.

2. What was your reaction when you learned that you would receive a Virginia Tech Influential Black Alumni award?

I was so happy. The work I do now was fueled by my education from Virginia Tech. The fact that I am able to work in my field and do what I am most passionate about is something I am very grateful for. To then have Virginia Tech recognize my work has been a full circle moment for me.

3. What is your favorite part of your job as president and co-founder of Black BRAND?

It's the incredible people I work with and the business owners we engage with. The relationships I am able to build through my job are what make it fun.

8. What books have you read recently that you would recommend?

A lot of the reading I do is Bible focused. Through the people in the Bible, you can learn a lot about overcoming obstacles and how to tackle challenges in work and everyday life. In regards to leisure reading, my husband and I enjoy reading Dan Brown books aloud. Two of my favorites are Angels & Demons and Digital Fortress.

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

I love the outdoors. I enjoy taking walks and going on dolphin cruises. I have young children and we like going to the zoo and aquarium and finding new pizza places to enjoy.

10. What is the most memorable place you've ever visited?

I recently visited the Caribbean, which was incredible. The water was so clear, and you could see sea turtles and striped fish.

News roundup

City of Roanoke named among the Top 100 Employers for Interns on Virginia Intern Day (Center for Economic and Community Engagement Blog)

Collaboration with Southside community is reimagining a historically Black college (Virginia Tech News)

Small town in Patrick County looks to historic theater — and Virginia Tech — to spark growth (Virginia Tech News)

Thank you CECE graduate assistants! (Center for Economic and Community Engagement Blog)

Virginia Tech helps YWCA plan for wellness center in Glade Spring (Center for Economic and Community Engagement Blog)

Virginia Tech named among top employers for internship programs (Virginia Tech News)

With real-world research, economic development capstone students help Virginia communities attract remote workers (Virginia Tech News)

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