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CECE's Quina Weber-Shirk promoted to program manager

The Center for Economic and Community Engagement has promoted Quina Weber-Shirk to program manager. Previously the project coordinator for the Region 2 Internship Collaborative, Weber-Shirk will continue to lead the collaborative and also provide support with marketing, outreach, and onboarding for GO Virginia Region 2.

In the Region 2 Internship Collaborative's first year, Weber-Shirk worked to convene stakeholders and form a steering committee; conduct and share a directory of existing opportunities for employers to engage with students; and design sub-region collaborative events to connect employers and students annually.

"I'm energized by the opportunity to meet partners in their own spaces across the region and build collaborative networks," Weber-Shirk said. "Both the GO Virginia and Region 2 Internship Collaborative programs build on the place-based strengths within our region, and I'm excited to expand my work to champion both initiatives."

Read more about Quina: <https://www.outreach.vt.edu/news/cece-weber-shirk.html>



Fulbright Scholar Joanie Willett works with CECE to study the important role main streets play

Joanie Willett, senior lecturer in politics at the University of Exeter and co-director of the Institute of Cornish Studies, is motivated by the desire to revitalize rural places and connect people to opportunities

they have right in their hometowns. She recently received a Fulbright Award to conduct research on main streets with the Center for Economic and Community Engagement.

The US-UK Fulbright Commission works to promote peace and cultural understanding through educational exchange and provides scholarships to academics and professionals to lecture or conduct research at any U.S. accredited university.

Joanie first connected with CECE five years ago when she was doing ethnographic fieldwork in her hometown of Cornwall and wanted to include a case study outside of her home country. She had been reading Barbara Kingsolver's books and was fascinated by Appalachia.

In 2019, Joanie visited Bristol and became interested in the vibrant main street program. The equivalent of main streets in Britain are town centers, and in the wake of increased out of town and online shopping, these centers are in need of better support.

Read more about Joanie: <https://blogs.tlos.vt.edu/cece/2023/02/21/fulbright-scholar-joanie-willett-works-with-cece-to-study-the-important-role-main-streets-play/>



Meet A CECE Advisory Board Member: Karen Roberto, Executive Director of the Institute for Society, Culture and Environment



A lifelong academic, Karen Roberto has a bachelor's degree in Psychology and a master's and Ph.D. in Human Development. She started her career as an assistant professor and coordinator for the Gerontology program at the University of Northern Colorado. She came to Virginia Tech in 1996 as a professor and director of the Center for Gerontology. She later founded the Institute for Society, Culture, and Environment (ISCE) and serves as its executive director.

ISCE enhances Virginia Tech's capacity and status in the social sciences by catalyzing innovative, interdisciplinary, and translational research and scholarship addressing critical individual and social concerns impacting the lives of people and places. The institute supports preliminary research in four thematic areas: global policies and practices; health and human development; risk and resilience and community and environments.

1. What is your favorite part of your job as executive director of the Institute for Society, Culture, and Environment?

Being an institute director is a dream position. I work with a great team who contribute greatly to the success of ISCE. I like staying on top of the research opportunities and helping to elevate the social sciences at Virginia Tech, but I would say the best parts are engaging with faculty as they pursue external funding and sharing in their joy when they succeed.

2. What projects are you currently working on at the institute?

This year, in addition to some of our established programs, we have several new initiatives. Our newest program is the Preparing your Research for an Extramural Proposal (PREP) program. This is a year-long program for faculty in the social sciences who are newer to preparing proposals for external funding. In the fall, we helped them get their one-pagers ready to submit to program officers for feedback. This semester, they're working on all aspects of their proposals, with the goal of having a proposal ready to submit by the end of the summer, or soon thereafter. In addition, the Institute is leading the development of the Whole Health component of Virginia Tech's Health Research Frontier. I have tasked a faculty working group with creating its structure and functions that will provide opportunities for collaboration among faculty, clinicians, and community partners whose expertise addresses areas of behavioral, social, and environmental health.

I also have my own research program and maintain close ties with the Center for Gerontology. Right now, a lot of my attention is focused on implementing our National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded study of extended family caregivers of persons living with dementia.

3. What is your proudest accomplishment over the course of your career?

Conducting transformative research, mentoring students and colleagues, and implementing creative leadership strategies have allowed me to give back to the communities in which I have worked, lived, and thrived. Being honored as a university distinguished professor here at Virginia Tech was certainly one of the highlights of my career. It is very humbling to have achieved this title. But at the end of the day, it's when I give talks in the community, and the people in the audience come up to me afterwards and say, "How do you know my story?" I feel like that says our research is right on, and that is very meaningful to me.

4. What is the best advice you've ever received?

Listen with an open mind. Act with humility, accountability, and a calm confidence. And don't forget the incredible power of relationship.

5. What have you learned from being a part of CECE's advisory board?

It has reinforced for me the importance of community engagement and collaboration in making change

beyond the walls of academia. What I see in the work of the center and the office that preceded it is the mindset of making things happen. I look forward to continuing to seek out new opportunities for collaboration with CECE, particularly with the faculty in the social sciences. They're often engaged in community efforts and have a lot to offer.

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

I recently read two books that were very interesting, but for different reasons. *Dinners with Ruth* by Nina Totenberg focused on the power of friendships, in particular the author's relationship with Ruth Bader Ginsburg, former justice on the Supreme Court. *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson was a very powerful and eye-opening account of America's Great Migration of African Americans from the South to cities in the North and West.

Help us support student work!



Graduate assistants conducting an interview at Primitive Coffee. Photo Credit: Sarah Lyon-Hill, Ph.D.

We're known for our work across the commonwealth with GO Virginia, the Regional 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.

For example, CECE's graduate students are helping Stuart, Virginia understand the challenges and benefits of purchasing the historic Star Theatre, and the 2023 studio class is working with Main Street

America on an effort to strengthen localities' remote worker and resident attraction efforts.

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.

Visit Our Giving Page.

<https://cece.vt.edu/index/give.html>

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