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Project spotlight

CECE evaluates Appalachian Regional Commission projects



Elli Travis meets with George Whitley.

Economic Development Specialist Dylan Andrews and Associate Director for Impact and Evaluation Elli Travis visited Abingdon, VA with Ida Williams, a recreation planner from SE Group, to learn about the William King Museum of Art (WKMA), as part of a project funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission that will evaluate ARC tourism and outdoor recreation grants.

The William King Museum of Art's ARC grant will allow them to develop an accessible park that will include a meadow, pollinator garden with native plants, walking trails, and event space.

To understand the impact of WKMA's grant, the team met with Betsy White, the executive director of the William King Museum; George Whitley, WKMA board president; Brad Kreps, director of the Nature Conservancy Clinch Valley Program; Mike Cochran, town manager of Abingdon; Shana Carrico, president of the Virginia Highlands Festival executive committee; and Susan Mole, volunteer with the Master Gardeners.

Outdoor recreation is a significant driver of the Appalachian economy. This project will help ARC highlight the benefits of outdoor recreation while also helping them make decisions about the types of projects to fund in the future.

May trivia question

This issue's economic development trivia question is:

What country did Virginia export to the most in 2024?

- a. China
- b. Canada
- c. India

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

March Trivia Question:

What is the largest megasite in Virginia?

- a. Progress Park in Wythe County
- b. Sussex County Megasite
- c. Southern Virginia Megasite at Berry Hill

Answer: C, Southern Virginia Megasite at Berry Hill. The Berry Hill site is 3,528 acres.

Office updates

Congratulations!

Dr. Elli Travis



The Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) has named Elli Travis associate director for impact and evaluation.

Travis joined the center in 2015 as an economic development specialist. In her new role, she will lead development and implementation of high-quality applied research projects and build the center's capacity to do impact and evaluation work, serving as a resource for community partners and Virginia Tech faculty who need evaluation assistance. She will also help to improve CECE's internal processes, including data and knowledge management.

Travis earned her Ph.D. in evaluation from the Virginia Tech Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education in April 2025. Her dissertation, titled *The Making of Impact: Causal Validity and Epistemic Justice in International Development Impact Evaluation*, focused on different methods of evaluation across the world.

[Read more about Elli Travis.](#)

Dr. Sadhana Manthapuri



CECE graduate assistant Sadhana Manthapuri earned her Ph.D. in planning, governance, and globalization from the School of Public and International Affairs. Her dissertation, titled *Developing a Framework for Urban DNA Analysis*, focused on the dynamics of urban economic development and aimed to unravel the factors behind the growth, sustenance, and decline of cities worldwide.

Will Heltzel



CECE graduate assistant Will Heltzel earned his master's in urban and regional planning.

CECE visits Lexington



CECE faculty and staff visited Lexington, Virginia to meet with higher education and community economic development partners.

Partners included Colonel Cliff West, director of innovation programming and professor of economics and business at Virginia Military Institute; Keith Holland, associate vice president for research and economic development at James Madison University; John Rainone, president of Mountain Gateway Community College; Eric Bendfeldt, extension specialist with Virginia Cooperative Extension; Rebecca Logan, executive director of Main Street Lexington; and Annette Patterson, president of the Advancement Foundation.

The CECE team also enjoyed a tour of downtown Lexington, led by Rebecca Logan.

Meet a CECE Advisory Board Member: Conaway Haskins, Virginia Innovation Partnership Corporation



Conaway Haskins is Vice President of Entrepreneurial Ecosystems for the Virginia Innovation Partnership Corporation (VIPC), a nonprofit that creates technology-based economic development strategies to accelerate innovation, imagination, and the next generation of technology companies. Haskins has spent 20 years working in economic development, government affairs, and public policy at the national, state, and local levels. Before he stepped into his role at VIPC, he was the associate director of the Virginia Tech Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation and a faculty affiliate of the Center for Economic and Community Engagement.

He has a bachelor's degree in government and politics from George Mason University and a master's degree in regional planning and economic development from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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

My first job was a cashier at a local Hardee's when I was in high school, and it taught me a lot about the value of hard work and blue-collar jobs.

It also taught me how important everybody's job is, particularly in regional economies in small towns. Every job that was available was so important because of the different economic changes happening.

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

When I was in college and graduate school, I had many opportunities to participate in internships, allowing me to learn the value of work-based learning early on.

Once I was in a position to do so, I hired my own interns whenever I could. My proudest accomplishment is seeing the great things a lot of my interns have gone on to do in their careers. Now I'm calling them and asking them for help. These were folks that started with me when they were kids, and they have grown up to be incredible adults and wonderful professionals.

3. What projects are you currently working on at VIPC?

I run two of our divisions. I manage our entrepreneurial ecosystems division, which does a lot of work with regional ecosystem stakeholders, accelerators, incubators, and local economic development agencies. I've recently assumed management of our commercialization program as well, which collaborates with our universities to encourage technology transfer and research commercialization in the marketplace.

I'm starting to bring together these two interesting portfolios with the goal of having a more holistic innovation ecosystem development approach for the commonwealth.

4. What do you like most about serving on CECE's advisory board?

I enjoy maintaining my connection to Virginia Tech through serving on the advisory board. I worked at Virginia Tech for about six years before coming to VIPC and did a lot of work with the CECE team.

I like learning about the variety of projects CECE is working on and seeing how older projects are progressing. It's been exciting watching CECE evolve as an organization inside the university.

[Read more about Conaway Haskins.](#)

News roundup

[Unemployment numbers show a "slow leak," but are worse conditions on the horizon?](#) (WMRA)

[Carroll supervisors presented with resolution requesting study of impact to Medicaid cuts](#) (The Carroll News)

[CECE Advisory Board meeting focuses on building capacity in Blacksburg and Roanoke](#) (CECE Blog)

[Group works to highlight high-tech manufacturing in New River Valley, Danville regions](#) (Cardinal News)

[Politecnico di Torino professors share how Italy is building a rural renaissance](#) (CECE Blog)

[Welcome to the Pitch Pit! Lynchburg event helps students find internships and build ties to the region](#) (CECE Blog)

Support our work

Your investment in the Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement means more access to resources for communities across the Commonwealth.

CECE provides expertise, resources, and project support to catalyze action that benefits local communities and economies, specifically in economic, community, and workforce development. CECE's evidence-based research and university connections help to address needs identified at the local level through strategic partnerships and direct services.

Every dollar you donate allows CECE faculty to bring their knowledge and experience to communities from Abingdon to Arlington, Covington to Chincoteague, Damascus to Danville, Melfa to Martinsville, New Market to Newport News, and Radford to Richmond, ensuring that every region in Virginia can thrive.

Together, we can build stronger communities and brighter futures across the Commonwealth.

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