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## CECE visits Hampton Roads

The Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) team recently embarked on a retreat to the Hampton Roads region to meet with partners. The team toured the [Virginia Seafood Agricultural Research and Extension Center](#), the [Virginia Tech Coastal Collaborator](#), and the [Virginia Tech Newport News Center](#).

The team spent a day at the Newport News Center and heard from Daniel Haskett, business planning specialist for Canon, Monty Mason, senior director of community affairs and partnerships at William & Mary, and Liz Povar, principal of the [RiverLink Group](#).

Curtis Friedel, director of the [Virginia Tech Center for Cooperative Problem Solving](#), and Elli Travis, senior economic development specialist for CECE also facilitated a workshop focused on the Kirton Adaption-Innovation theory. This theory explains how an individual's personality and problem-solving style influence their preferred way of working in a team.

On the final day of the trip, the CECE team visited Matheson Oyster Co., an oyster supplier in Gloucester County, VA, and Oyster Seed Holdings, an oyster hatchery in Mathews County. Sarah Matheson-Harrison, owner and chief marketing officer of Matheson Oyster, provided a tour of the facility, including a boat trip to see the oyster farm. At Oyster Seed Holdings, owner and operator Michael Congrove and hatchery technician Gretchen Davis shared insights into their oyster-raising processes.

[View the Hampton Roads retreat's photo gallery.](#)



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## September trivia question!

This issue's economic development trivia question is:

**Which Virginia county has the most incorporated towns?**

- a. Loudoun
- b. Rockingham
- c. Accomack

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

*July Trivia Question:*

What is the oldest Main Street America Program?

- a. Michigan
- b. West Virginia
- c. Louisiana

Answer: Launched in 1984 and taking up 74 square blocks, Louisiana's Hammond Downtown Development District is the longest-running Main Street America program.

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## Project spotlight

### Child care needs assessment for Danville-Pittsylvania County



CECE recently completed a child care needs assessment for the Danville-Pittsylvania County region. The center engaged with local stakeholders — including parents, providers, and employers — to gain a holistic perspective on the issue of child care availability.

Out of the nearly 700 parents surveyed, only 6 percent were completely satisfied with child care offerings and 15 percent were mostly satisfied. These findings, presented at a child care summit in Danville, indicate a significant portion of the population is unsatisfied with the available options — which could be due to cost, lack of availability, or quality of care.

[Read more about CECE's child care projects.](#)

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## Office updates

Welcome new graduate assistants!



CECE recently welcomed four graduate assistants for the fall semester.

**Will Heltzel** is a second-year student in the Master of Urban and Regional Planning program. Originally from Warrenton, Virginia, Will earned his bachelor's from Virginia Tech in international relations and French in 2022. Will is researching planning history, urban design, and the institutional biases that make American cities car-friendly but not people-friendly. In the future, Will hopes to work as a city planner, redesigning streets to improve accessibility and quality of life.

**Katie Lee** is a first-year student in the Master of Urban and Regional Planning program in Arlington, VA. She is originally from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania but has settled in Virginia after studying environmental science and history at William & Mary. Her master's degree is focused on disaster resilience and community engagement.

**Makenzie Mann** is a first-year student in the Master of Urban and Regional Planning program. She is originally from Aurora, Illinois and previously attended the University of Kentucky, earning dual degrees in management and community & leadership development. She is most interested in transportation safety and pedestrian infrastructure. She has previously worked for local transit authorities and in the auto-insurance industry.

**Sadhana Manthapuri** is a PhD candidate in the School of Public and International Affairs at Virginia Tech. She is committed to the study of urban economic development. Her research aims to unravel the factors behind the growth, sustenance, and decline of cities worldwide. With a wealth of experience in tackling diverse urban development issues and engaging a wide range of stakeholders, she brings a unique and intriguing perspective to the field.

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## CECE names Bryan Jones economic development specialist



The Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement recently hired Bryan Jones as an economic development specialist.

Jones has a bachelor's degree in smart and sustainable cities and a master's degree in urban and regional planning from Virginia Tech. He is a graduate of [Virginia Tech's 4+1 Master of Urban and Regional Planning \(MURP\) Accelerated Program](#), which allows students the opportunity to take graduate courses during their final year of undergrad. He is originally from Fort Washington, Maryland.

Jones first connected with CECE while working on his master's. He took the class "Urban Economy, Equity, and Society" from Director for Research Development Sarah Lyon-Hill, who mentioned the center was looking to hire a graduate assistant.

"I had always been interested in urban development and communities and saw economic development as a field where I could make an impact," Jones said. "I wanted to be a part of the work CECE was doing." He applied for the graduate assistant position and was hired in January 2023.

"What I appreciate most about working at CECE is I never felt like I was doing busy work," he said. "Every task I was assigned had some purpose, and I could see how it led to an end goal. That gave me ownership over the work that I did. As I've transitioned into my new role, I'm doing more work where I am leading projects, and I feel like I was really well prepared for that as a GA."

[Read more about Bryan Jones.](#)

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## Virginia Tech Therapy dogs visit CECE



[Virginia Tech therapy dogs](#) Derek and Epcot and their handler Trent Davis recently visited the CECE office in Blacksburg before the team's morning meeting. Derek and Epcot appear at many of Cook Counseling's outreach events across campus.

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# Meet a CECE Advisory Board Member: Omar Faison, Virginia State University



*Omar Faison graduated from Hampton University with a bachelor's degree in biology and from the University of Virginia with a Ph.D. in neuroscience. He joined Virginia State University in 2004 as a faculty member in the Department of Biology. In 2009, he became chair of the biology department, and in 2012, stepped into the role of director for the Office of Sponsored Research & Programs. He now serves as VSU's associate vice provost for research and economic development, interim dean for the College of Graduate Studies, and acting chair of the Department of Biology.*

## **1. What do you like most about working at Virginia State University?**

The team I work with. The president of VSU, Dr. Makola Abdullah, has done a great job of putting together an innovative team that is constantly looking for new ideas and new ways to expand on the concept of 'Greater Happens Here,' the motto of Virginia State.

The faculty, by and large, has picked up on that and feels empowered to go off and try new things.

## **2. What projects are you currently working on at VSU?**

One of the projects I am working on stemmed out of a collaboration we had with CECE back in 2019 where we worked together on a three-state Data Science for the Public Good program.

Last year, I had a grant funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) capacity building program. This grant will enable us to form a Center for Social Data Analytics, which allows us to take the expertise we have on campus in the data science space and work with community partners.

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

I'm most proud of the constant growth in research output here at Virginia State, particularly over the last couple years, in terms of research expenditures and the number of grants that we've had. We've definitely seen that number grow to new heights.

## **4. What do you like most about being a part of CECE's advisory board?**

Hearing the different things that are going on and using that to spark ideas for either collaboration between us or some new projects we might want to try here. I've had a relationship with CECE since 2019, and the team has been a great asset for me.

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

The U.S. EDA University Center grant that we have with CECE to advance economic resilience in Virginia is a good place to start. I think it's important to get a better understanding of where we overlap as well as places where we can fill gaps for each other.

There are some common pieces that both of our groups are focused on, including data science, computer science related areas such as generative AI and modeling, drones, and controlled environment agriculture. These are areas that are important for the state economy and are places where we could be working more collaboratively.

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

I'm a big Stephen King fan. The last book I read was a collection of short stories by him called *You Like it Darker*.

#### **7. What hobbies and activities do you like to do in your spare time?**

I DJ. I'm a big house music fan, and I will DJ in clubs when that opportunity comes up. I also put out mix shows online at least once a month, which you can check out at [www.mixcloud.com/omarfaizon](http://www.mixcloud.com/omarfaizon). My favorite house artist is a guy by the name of Osunlade. I had the opportunity to see him live a couple years ago, and I would say it was one of my top three live music experiences.

#### **8. What is the most memorable place you have ever visited?**

I was able to go to Ghana this past summer, and that was a phenomenal experience.

We were able to visit Accra and Cape Coast. That was my first trip to Africa, and I got to see the diversity of living and economic situations as well as experience the landscape and different cultures. I also got to see live Afrobeat music while I was there. I'm a huge Afrobeat fan, so that was outstanding.

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## **News roundup**

[CECE workshop looks to help build future of Appalachia's construction industry](#) (Outreach and International Affairs Website)

[Destination Area 2.0 grants awarded to five new transdisciplinary projects](#) (Virginia Tech News)

[New data shows a mixed bag in Virginia when it comes to job growth](#) (WVTF)

[Off-campus internships build skills while developing talent pipelines for local businesses](#) (Virginia Tech News)

[Region 2 Internship Collaborative highlights local internships in celebration of Virginia Intern Day](#) (CECE Blog)

[Virginia Tech collaborates with Spearhead Trails to strengthen outdoor recreation and tourism in Southwest Virginia](#) (CECE Blog)

[Virginia Tech hosts workshop focused on the future of the space industry](#) (CECE Blog)

[What's with Virginia's quit rate?](#) (WVTF)

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

CECE provides expertise, resources, and project support to catalyze action that benefits local communities and economies, specifically in community development, talent, entrepreneurship, and technology. 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, Cave Springs to Chuckatuck, Melfa to Martinsville, and New Market to Newport News, ensuring that every region in Virginia can thrive.

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