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Join the American Resilience & Equity Networks Initiative (ARENI)

The American Resilience & Equity Networks Initiative (ARENI), sponsored by the University Economic Development Association, is the best way to network with other higher education leaders who are interested in advancing equity and resilience for the regions they serve.

Join ARENI because you can:

- Join for **free!**
- Access resources that can improve your strategies and strengthen your partnerships;
- Take advantage of ARENI's in-person and virtual peer networking opportunities;
- Attend highly relevant and informative webinars and discussions to help you work through challenges and identify opportunities;
- Highlight your own projects and initiatives and obtain feedback and support from your peers around the country.



A Year in Review: Explore our 2021-2022 magazine

Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement, formerly the Office of Economic Development, completed its first full year as a university-level center in 2022.

[You can read about our year here: https://issuu.com/vtcece/docs/cece_magazine_2022](https://issuu.com/vtcece/docs/cece_magazine_2022)



Students' dashboard helping alumna's Hampton Roads nonprofit close Black wealth gap

A community's economic and social growth can be difficult to measure, but for the Black community in Hampton Roads, a collaboration with Virginia Tech students and the Center for Economic and Community Engagement is laying a foundation to make calculating progress easier.

[Read about the collaboration with Black BRAND: https://vtx.vt.edu/articles/2022/06/outreach-black-brand.html](https://vtx.vt.edu/articles/2022/06/outreach-black-brand.html)



If we're in a war for talent, what are the rules?

John Provo offers a perspective on incentive programs as stress around talent affects the region.

[Read more about talent incentive programs: https://blogs.tlos.vt.edu/cece/2022/07/05/if-were-in-a-war-for-talent-what-are-the-rules/.](https://blogs.tlos.vt.edu/cece/2022/07/05/if-were-in-a-war-for-talent-what-are-the-rules/)



Roundtable discusses what's next for Virginia's cannabis industry

A roundtable consisting of Virginia Tech faculty, local business owners along the hemp supply chain, and members of the Virginia Cannabis Control Authority met to discuss challenges and opportunities surrounding cannabis in Virginia.

[Read about the roundtable: https://blogs.tlos.vt.edu/cece/2022/07/06/roundtable-discusses-whats-next-for-virginias-cannabis-industry/.](https://blogs.tlos.vt.edu/cece/2022/07/06/roundtable-discusses-whats-next-for-virginias-cannabis-industry/)



Meet our new graduate assistant: Kit Friedman

Kit is a second-year master's student in the Urban and Regional Planning program at Virginia Tech, originally from Long Island, New York. They are also pursuing an additional certificate in Science, Technology, and Society (STS). They graduated from Virginia Tech's College of Natural Resources and the Environment in 2021 with a Bachelor's degree in Natural Resources Conservation and Recreation Management. They are interested in environmental planning and policy, sustainable land stewardship, and grassroots conservation movements. Kit has held several positions engaging with local communities, ranging from environmental education as a park ranger at Natural Bridge State Park to serving over 10,000 meals to food insecure families across the New River Valley as the Summer Feeding Program Coordinator with the YMCA at Virginia Tech. They also serve as the Urban Affairs and Planning Department senator to the Graduate and Professional Student Senate, representing the graduate students in university governance and policy decisions. They bring their experience and passion for service and community engagement and background in natural resources and STS to CECE's research projects. In their free time, Kit enjoys spending time outside with their dog, Molly, and can frequently be found kayaking on the New River, ziplining through the forests of the Blue Ridge, cooking on the grill, and playing guitar around a bonfire.



Meet a CECE advisory board member: Leah Fremouw, CEO of Bridging Virginia

1. What is your career history?

I transferred to Virginia Commonwealth University as an older student where I earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Through a fellowship at the L. Douglas Wilder School at VCU, I was placed at the Richmond Redevelopment & Housing Authority. After the fellowship ended, they created a role for me there where I stayed for about three years. I then moved on to the Performance Management Group at VCU, where I did strategic planning, consulting, and leadership development with state agencies, non-profits, and some for-profit businesses. From there I went on to become the director of talent management at CarLotz, which at the time was a young and fast-growing startup company. At the same time these career moves were happening, I was volunteering and getting more deeply engaged in the city as a community leader through initiatives like Impact 100 Richmond and TedxRVA. From CarLotz, I stepped into the role of senior vice president and director of community innovation at Virginia Community Capital and worked there for just over six years. I'm now CEO of Bridging Virginia, a community development loan fund designed to offer small business lending at the \$50,000 and under mark. We are focused on the Richmond region right now, but we will look to expand as businesses need us in other parts of the state.

2. You are board president of the Virginia CDFI Coalition. What does the future look like for this initiative?

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) can be banks, credit unions, or loan funds that specialize in lending to individuals, organizations, and businesses in under-resourced communities. The Virginia CDFI Coalition is a relatively new initiative that came out of COVID. In 2020, a small group of us were successful in securing \$10 million through the General Assembly at the state level to provide grant funding to CDFIs in Virginia. What we recognized was we didn't have a voice for the work the CDFI industry is doing in the state. CDFIs are all very different, but all of them have very similar relationships with the federal and local government, and their borrowers. In 2021, we started to meet and form a group and, in the summer of 2022, we filed to become a 501(c)(3) to represent the CDFI industry in the commonwealth going forward.

3. What made you interested in community and economic development?

My undergrad was in women studies and political science, and I thought I would be more focused on women's issues and maybe even pursue a J.D. to lobby in D.C. After I received my master's in public administration, I had the opportunity to participate in the fellowship and volunteer in my community, which made me realize my love for this kind of work. I enjoy the diversity of the work, and my day never looks the same. There may be a common theme, but each meeting is a little different, and I love that part of it. And the people I get to work with are amazing.

4. What is your favorite part of your job as CEO of Bridging Virginia?

I'm a builder by nature, and I get my energy from the possible. We're starting from scratch, and that is very exciting, because we are continuing to develop this organization and learning along the way. With Bridging Virginia, we are actually filling a gap. We did some stakeholder engagement and received some feedback, and the data showed a strong need for \$50,000 and under loans. We take a little bit more risk than some of our partners because of the resources that we have. It is great to work on something that is valuable to the business owners we seek to support.

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

It's hard to pinpoint one accomplishment or one moment. I feel lucky that my day job allows me to work on projects that are a good fit for my values and passions. During the 2020-2021 timeframe, the organization I was part of was able to respond and be helpful during the crisis by getting money to businesses and relaunching the Small Business Development Center in Richmond. Those efforts showcased the importance of the work that I get to do – and that CDFIs and other economic development initiatives do – for the communities we live in.

6. What made you want to join CECE’s advisory board?

I was interested in the opportunity to bring ground-level experience and perspective from a practitioner’s point of view to a body that is connected to an amazing higher education institution like Virginia Tech. It’s great to see that the leadership of this center uses the feedback to create resources and drive research initiatives. It is also an opportunity for me to learn about what Virginia Tech faculty are working on and connect that to my work or my partners’.

7. What are you looking forward to doing most as a member of the CECE advisory board?

As an outside voice, I am not aware of some of the institutional politics or history, and I am in the position to say things very directly, and through that, can hopefully help improve the work. I am looking forward to more opportunities to share my thoughts and learn from members and leadership about what the data is showing and if the work we are doing is having a negative or positive impact. I think that type of cycle will be a lot of fun to be a part of.

8. What have you learned from the mentors you’ve had in your life?

I’ve had a lot of people spend time with me and give me feedback about how I can be the best version of myself. I’ve been fortunate to have people throughout my career who were willing to be honest and direct with me, even if their feedback was more constructive in nature and not a pat on the back. When you find out what you need to improve on, that’s where you can truly learn and grow into the next version of yourself. I have a friend, Susan Edwards, that would always say, “Feedback is the breakfast of champions.” I think that type of mindset is something that has been reinforced, and continues to be reinforced, in my career.

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

The Memory of Love by Aminatta Forna is one of my favorite books. And two books I wish I could read again for the first time are *Daisy Jones & The Six* and *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, both by Taylor Jenkins Reid.

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

I went to Guatemala in undergrad and worked for a week in the Mayan communities. Having that experience was definitely eye opening, and it was a very impactful and meaningful trip.