In this issue...

Our theme for this first issue of the second year is retention. Thus, we have highlighted the College of Engineering’s aggressive approach to recruit and retain minorities and women.

• On page 3, we ask people what would make the university more welcoming.
• On page 4, we introduce the new Multicultural Fellows, and John Easterwood looks at commitment to diversity.

The Virginia Tech Conductor

The Virginia Tech Conductor is a guide to university resources that can help you
• learn more about diversity,
• share in multicultural experiences, and
• benefit professionally and personally.

Regular features in this twice per semester publication include quotes and facts, resources and events, good news, dialogue, essays, and explorations of the assumptions we make about one another.

To learn more and participate, visit www.multicultural.vt.edu or www.diversity.vt.edu/Forum.html. You are invited to participate electronically and are definitely welcome to contribute.

Publisher: Office of Multicultural Affairs 332 Burruss Hall 0176 540-231-1820 acohen@vt.edu
Staff: Multicultural Fellows and anyone who is interested

Good News

McNair Scholars a university resource
by Miya T. Simpson, director, Ronald McNair Program, Center for Academic Enrichment and Excellence

The Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program began its first year at Virginia Tech in October, 1999. One of eight federal TRIO* programs, the McNair Scholars Program is fully funded through the U. S. Department of Education and designed to encourage students from groups currently underrepresented in higher education to complete the bachelor’s degree and pursue doctoral study. Targeted populations include low-income, first-generation college students and students of African-American, Native-American, and Hispanic ethnicity.

To date, a total of 16 scholars have been selected to participate in a variety of activities throughout the academic year and summer that will assist them in their pursuit of graduate education. These include academic support activities, faculty mentorship, workshops, seminars, networking opportunities, and a summer research experience, all of which are intended to motivate scholars to set goals and experience the satisfaction of attaining them.

As the program approaches the end of its first year, I am pleased to have this opportunity to highlight the work of the 11 McNair Scholars who participated in the summer research experience. Scholars were involved in an intensive 10-week summer research experience and worked closely with a Virginia Tech faculty member. At the end of this experience, the scholars were able to present their research findings at the First Annual Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program Research Symposium and Closing Brunch on July 29, 2000.

The following is a list of the Summer 2000 McNair Scholars, their faculty mentor(s), and a brief description of the research project.

* TRIO refers to the three original programs funded in the 1960’s — Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Special Services.

Scholar: Crystal Armes, Human Development
Mentor: Bonnie Billingsley, Teaching and Learning
Research: Teacher Attraction and Retention in General and Special Education

The 1990’s literature review explores the research findings on special educators' career decisions and seeks to analyze the problem of teacher shortages, especially within the field of special education.

Scholar: Marché Barnes, Communication Studies
Mentor: John Tedesco, Communication Studies
Research: Public Relations and Technology

The research investigates the impact of the Internet and other communication technology on the field of public relations. The study explores the perceptions of practitioners regarding the effects of technology on the profession and the training provided for future public relations professionals.

Scholar: Brandi Collins, Environmental Policy and Planning
Mentors: Diane Zahm, John Randolph, Urban Affairs and Planning
Research: State Brownfield Redevelopment Initiatives: Do They Further the Goals of Environmental Justice?

The study explores the interrelationship between environmental justice and brownfields in the National Environmental Justice Movement. It examines the elements of environmental justice, social, and economic effects of brownfields, and tenets of the environmental justice movement.

Scholar: Dana Dillon-Towns, Industrial and Systems Engineering
Mentors: Bevlee Watford, Kerri Danna-Link, Office of Minority

Making a difference

Office of Minority Engineering Programs

The Office of Minority Engineering Programs was started in the College of Engineering in 1992. The director is Bevlee Watford, associate dean for academics. The objectives of the office are to increase the number of students from underrepresented populations who apply to, enroll in, and graduate from the College of Engineering. To increase the retention rate of underrepresented students, the office’s staff provides academic, professional, and personal support programs for students. To encourage underrepresented students to enter the engineering profession, staff members try to increase the awareness within specific underrepresented groups that engineering and other technical fields provide exciting and rewarding careers. The office also supports student chapters of the National Society of Black Engineers, the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers, the Society of Women Engineers, and other student organizations that support the office’s mission. Finally, the office tries to foster collaborations among the university, industry, and the local community to support its mission.

While this office administers a number of programs directed toward reaching these goals, only those activities directed at improving retention of students from underrepresented groups will be highlighted here. These retention efforts start even before new students’ classes begin in the fall. For example, office staff members conduct the ASPIRE program — a five-week long summer program designed to bridge the gap between high school and college. ASPIRE students take classes on mathematical, chemical, and engineering problem solving. They also participate in various academic and professional development activities. This program is currently limited to African American and Hispanic students. In the near future, the office expects to expand the program to include all women entering engineering. Also, during July, daily orientation sessions introduce the Office of Minority Engineering Programs’ services to the first-year students and their families. This is an opportunity to meet the staff and learn about the various programs and activities that are provided for the students.

Once a student from an underrepresented group arrives on campus, Watford and her staff direct an aggressive mentoring program. Each new African American, Hispanic, and women engineering student is invited to participate. The mentors, upper class engineering students, meet with the first-year students weekly to provide the opportunity to discuss both academic and social issues. New students are invited to a welcoming reception at the start of the academic year, where they meet their “team leaders” and fellow team members. Various faculty and staff members also attend to welcome the students to the College of Engineering. The mentors typically live in close proximity to those students for whom they are responsible. This encourages interactions between a student and his or her mentor on a regular basis.

This mentoring program has become a model for similar activities on campus.

After the academic year begins, the office staff tries to keep in touch with underrepresented students. For example, the office maintains several listservers, which they use to provide information to students about scholarships, internships, and summer research opportunities. The Office also distributes a monthly electronic newsletter for underrepresented engineering students to keep them
Call for Campus Child Care: Part II

Virginia Tech hosts first conference on stepping

Stepping is a complex performance involving synchronized percussive movement, singing, speaking, chanting, and drama. Developed by African American fraternities and sororities, it is now practiced by people throughout the world.

Now, a conference at Virginia Tech, organized by Humanities Programs director Elizabeth Fine, will not only showcase this exciting art form, but will bring together scholars and students to discuss issues associated with stepping.

The first ever national conference on stepping will be April 6-7, 2001, at the Donaldson Brown Center. The conference deals with all aspects of stepping, including:

- history of stepping
- role in Black Greek-letter organizations
- relationship to African movement patterns
- role in developing leadership, character, and community involvement
- role in social action and/or cultural promotion
- adaptation by Latino, Asian, and multicultural groups
- role in popular culture (film, television, advertising).

The event will feature a benefit performance by Step Afrika!, U.S.A. for the recreation of the Christiansburg Institute, an historic African American school.

There will also be a round table discussion on leadership issues and stepping with Michael Gordon, immediate past executive director of the Pan-Hellenic Council, and representatives from the nine National Pan-Hellenic Council member organizations.

Sponsors are the Virginia Tech Black Studies Program, Humanities Programs, Center for Interdisciplinary Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, Department of History, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action Office, Virginia Tech Chapter of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, and the Christiansburg Institute.

For additional information, contact Fine at 231-9593 or bfine@vt.edu, or visit www.cis.vt.edu/humanities for updated conference information.

COLORS

by Shel Silverstein

“My skin is kind of brownish
Pinkish yellowish white.
My eyes are greyish blueish green
But I’m told they look orange in the night.
My hair is reddish blondish brown,
But I’m told they look silver when it’s wet.
And all the colors I am inside
Have not yet been invented yet.”


Fresh Air Returns

People wishing to express their appreciation for the return of the program should contact WVTF: Grand Pavilion, 4235 Electric Road, S.W., Suite 105, Roanoke, Va. 24014-4145. Phone 540-989-8900; Blacksburg, 540-387-5000; VA-NC-WV, 800-856-8900. E-mail: wvtf@vt.edu.

Staff mentoring offered

Newly placed minority classified staff members working in grade 5-7 office/ clerical positions have the opportunity to participate in a mentoring program designed to provide professional support from mentors in existing similar positions.

The Mentoring Program for Minority Classified Employees of Virginia Tech, initiated during the past academic year, will hold a training program for new participants on Oct. 2, 1:30-4:30 p.m., Donaldson Brown Hotel and Conference Center Channel 100; and E. Training skills will be taught by Kimberly Townsend, a human development associate in the Office of Human Resources at Penn State University. Townsend is responsible for the leadership, development, instruction, and evaluation of the curriculum areas of leadership, career development, and personal effectiveness. She will share skills taught at Penn State for a similar mentoring program.

Additional information appeared in the Sept. 22 Spectrum. Any classified employees interested in joining the program as a mentor or mentee should contact Robin Atkins at akatkins@vt.edu or 231-1820 today.
I think that the larger a group gets, the more isolated individuals feel. When a person moves into this area it would be nice to have “easier” access to unusual special interest groups. Whether on campus or around town, advertisements in the local phone books and fliers can have listings for such activities as underwater hockey games to fondue tasting nights to ethnic musical gatherings. Most communities evolve around the popular and highly advertised events, such as football games or sorority/fraternity events. Those are positive and entertaining events but not everyone is interested. The wonderfully eclectic avenues in an area get lost in the growing fray. Most people like to be involved in some activity or event; accessibility to them is key to a happy, developing community.

Colleen Smith
Research Assistant
Force Plate Lab
Veterinary Medicine

Orientation for new employees would be extended to include a workshop on campus climate issues. As a condition of employment, staff and faculty members would be required to participate in and actively support events sponsored by the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Dean of Students office. Participation and support activities would be reflected in performance expectations and evaluations. Staff and faculty would not only be encouraged to participate, they would be required to participate. Education is the key.

Nancy B. Feuerbach
Program Coordinator
Energy Management Institute
Mechanical Engineering

Office of Minority Engineering Programs...

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McNair Scholars...

Continued from page 1

Engineering Programs
Research: The Retention Rate of Ethnic Minorities and Females in Engineering: A Study of Minority Engineering Programs at Virginia Tech

The work offers an analysis of the retention programs in place for ethnic minorities and women within the College of Engineering. It uses both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to examine the impact of existing programs on the target populations.

Scholar: Sonora Fletcher, Mass Communication and Marketing
Mentor: Stephanie Sargent, Communication Studies
Research: Gender Roles and the Psychological Effects of Sad Movies
The study examines autonomic nervous system activity during induced emotional states and the differences that may exist based on gender.

Scholar: Kasey Martin, Human Services
Mentor: Tammy Henderson, Human Development Research: Grandparent’s Visitation Rights
This is a study of the issues of grandparental visitation rights based cases litigated between 1986 and 1999. The study examines potential national trends.

This study explores the possibility of a relationship between wheat proteins and juvenile diabetes.

Scholar: Justin VanKleek, English
Mentor: Dennis Welch, English/CIS Humanities Research: Henry James Richer’s Daylight: The Developing Aesthetics of Early English Romanticism
This is an extensive study on the life, art, and thought of Henry James Richter, with an emphasis on his work, *Day-light; a recent discovery in the art of painting; with hints on the philosophy of the fine arts, and on that of the human mind*, at first dissected by Esmarael Kent (1817).

Scholar: Chaketa Whitfield, Political Science
Mentors: Susan Gooden, Raquel Becerra, Center for Public Administration and Policy Research: Childcare Needs of Montgomery County
A comprehensive assessment of the childcare needs of individuals and families in Montgomery County.

Scholar: Tamia Williams, Accounting and Information Systems (AIS)
Mentor: Kelly Hilmer, AIS Research: Developing On-line Tutorials for Information Systems Instruction
The work is the creation of a visual computer simulation of Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) using Macromedia Flash. The simulation will be implemented on the Web and used by information systems professors teaching telecommunications.

Scholar: Zhongji Phyllis Wu, Biochemistry
Mentor: Neal Castagnoli, Chemistry Research: Mechanistic Study on Parkinson’s Disease
The research is a synthesis of molecular probes for MAO and its mechanistic study. It focuses on the mechanism of MAO catalysis and its significance in the development of Parkinson’s Disease.

Additional 1999-2000 McNair Scholars include: Sharma Artsi, Dominque Greene, Jamie Smith, and Carl Tinsley, all in engineering, and Nicole Jones, biology.

Learn more at www.eng.vt.edu/affairs/perspective/mep.html
Unpack your assumptions

Is it enough to be open to all?

by John Easterwood, associate professor of finance, insurance, and business law

Recently, I was looking for something on the web, when I stumbled across an article about a major state university in the south and the composition of its faculty and student body. The university’s student body was about 6 percent African-American and had remained at or near that figure for 15 to 20 years. The faculty of this university is even less diverse. Two African-American seniors were interviewed for the article about their experiences, and, between them, they could only remember having three Black teachers.

The article also talked about the climate on the campus. This university had largely ignored the issues of diversity and integration of minority populations, except when threatened with court action. About 10 years ago, the university’s administration began to seek improvement in this area. The university administration had, at the time of the article, just completed a survey of African-American students to gauge their perception of the campus environment. Despite this official interest, the two seniors described feeling isolated during most of their stay on this campus. In most cases, the two students stated that they were the only African-American students in their classes. They stated that most white students kept contact with them at a superficial level. Another Black student remarked that his experiences seemed similar to those of his mother 25 years earlier.

Sounds remarkably like the university described above. But is this opinion accurate?

One means of assessing where Virginia Tech stands is to simply look at the composition of our student body and faculty. VT’s undergraduate population is currently about 4 percent African-American, down from 5 percent a decade ago. My own college’s current figure is about 3 percent, down from 4 percent a decade ago. This decline has occurred despite administrative efforts to increase our population of African-American students. An assessment of faculty composition yields similar conclusions. A casual look at the numbers suggests that most of our university is not diverse and, unfortunately, becoming less diverse. While it is unreasonable to expect the university demographics to match the state’s population out to the tenth decimal place, prospective students are apt to wonder about a university that is so different from the state.

Another means of assessing where Virginia Tech stands is to examine attitudes. The Campus Climate Survey conducted recently polled undergraduate students, staff, and the faculty to gauge attitudes toward race, gender, and other aspects of diversity. The Pamplin College Multicultural Diversity Committee sponsored a presentation of the undergraduate results by Valerie Conley of Institutional Research in the fall of 1999, and presentation of the faculty results by Associate Provost Pat Hyer in the spring of 2000. Among the questions, survey respondents were asked to classify the general climate at Virginia Tech as racist, neutral, or non-racist. In the student survey, 59 percent of white student rated the climate non-racist, 27 percent rated it neutral, and 14 percent rated it racist. In contrast, 24 percent of Black students rated the climate non-racist, 36 percent rated it neutral, and 40 percent rated it racist. A similarly suggestive finding emerged in the faculty survey. Clearly, opinions suggest that many students and faculty members of color see problems on the Tech campus that white students and faculty members fail to perceive. These perceptions are important because they shape the beliefs, actions, and reactions of those who hold them.

So, where does Virginia Tech stand and what does it attempt to do? The first and most important problem for our university community is to admit that a problem exists. As long as the faculty and students, in general, deny that any problem exists, no solution will be found.