

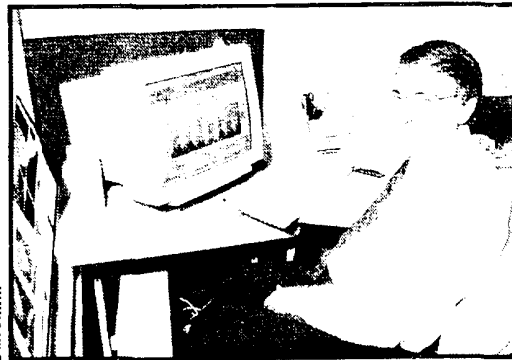
Tech takes lead in preventing brain-drain

By hiring an economic development officer and forming internal and external economic development advisory boards, Virginia Tech is working to create symbiosis

BY STEPHANIE PAS

The dreaded brain drain: (brane'drane'), noun — 1. a thorn in the side of educators and economic developers; 2. a thief which steals the minds educated in the Blue Ridge Region. To combat this illusive criminal, Virginia Tech has created internal and external economic development advisory boards under the leadership of economic development official John Phillips. With this new arsenal, Tech hopes to become an easily accessible point of entry for industry and ensure that the minds and dollars of Western Virginian's stay put and multiply.

Virginia Tech has been in the business of educating for 125 years now and has become the largest university in the Commonwealth. A few years ago, three events prompted the school to expand further and take a role in economic development in the area, according to Phillips. The New Century Council recommended that Tech create a single access point for industry; the Virginia Business Higher Education



Dan Smith

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Council recommended the appointment of an economic development officer; and, the state government acknowledged the importance of improving economic development in the area.

"Tech wanted to take a leading role in that change," says Phillips. And, according to Phillips, Tech is one of the first and few universities to take that direction. In October last year, University President Paul Torgerson announced the creation of the external Economic Development Advisory Committee, an internal Economic Development Council and the search for a full-time economic development officer. The search ended in February this year with the

hiring of Phillips.

The external Advisory Committee had its first meeting in September and members are enthusiastic about doing what they can to encourage economic development in the area. "There is a lot of desire to help each other," says committee member Ken Anderson, owner of the engineering firm Anderson and Associates in Blacksburg. "Tech realizes it is a big attractor in the state,

and industry likes to be near a technical university."

The primary purpose of the first meeting was to bring all the 23 members on the Committee up to speed on what Tech has to offer. All the members received information on Tech's services and broke into small groups to discuss Tech's current operations. "It was generally agreed that it is hard to find your way around Tech," says Anderson. "There are so many nooks and crannies. We all agreed that there needed to be an easier way to make experts available."

The members also advised Tech to work on their marketing efforts. The committee found that there are so many resources, not all are pub-

licly known, and it recommended making current resources known versus creating anything new.

"There is a lot of detail," says committee member Donald Finley, of the Virginia Business Higher Education Council. "We want the committee to help keep Tech in touch with the business community and make sure they get feedback from the community and don't just do what they think the community wants."

Phillips echoes this concern and says that is why they created a committee rather than a focus group for economic development. "We want to make sure their understanding as a group is on the same level," he says. "We really want to develop the members of the board and their knowledge of Tech over time."

This way, they will have a continued relationship with the university and be able to connect the resources of the institution to the community's needs, according to Phillips. Tech has 33 advisory boards, he says, and has found that having advisory boards is much more productive than utilizing focus groups, which is usually a one-shot deal. Phillips says that through one annual meeting and possibly a semi-

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annual day meeting, the committee will provide input from the community's point of view on what is needed from Tech to help draw industry to the area.

The Advisory Committee's remarks are taken to heart by Phillips, who, as economic development officer, puts them into motion. Since the creation of the committee about a year ago and his appointment about nine months ago, Phillips has been working on being the primary access point at Tech for industry and is developing a marketing plan with university spokesperson Larry Hincker. In addition, he is in the process of creating a number of publications, including a brochure, which serves as a quick and easy reference guide to Tech's services; a business resource guide, which is an expanded version of that information; and a fact book, which goes into even further detail, providing very specific information on Tech's departments.

Phillips also is coordinator of the 18 major organizations within Tech that work with private industry. "Before, these groups didn't look at themselves as resources for each other," he says. "Now, they see the synergy and benefits of working together."

Different groups which before might not have known about each other, now work jointly with public entities. Phillips also works with these organizations to assist industries that are interested in relocating to the area. By making a single point of entry for industry, Phillips postulates that industry will see the university as a simple organization to work with.

"Decentralization is perceived as complex," says Phillips. "A single point of entry removes the fog and matches needs to resources in a quicker fashion." Tech, which brings in \$150 million in research a year, is among the top 15 research universities without a medical school.

Phillips points to five ways the university aids in economic development. First, Tech provides an education source for the region, which makes an impact on where industry prefers to locate. Second, Phillips works with Tech's Economic Development Assistance Center (EDAC).

Third, Phillips works with Virginia Tech Intellectual Properties (VTIP) on the technology created at Tech. Fourth, Tech provides experts on everything from writing a business plan to answering a technical question about engineering.

And, finally, Tech creates jobs directly through its resources.

According to Phillips, more than \$600 million in Tech expenditures feeds directly into the economy. He says that approximately 8,500 jobs

have been created state-wide by Tech, resulting in \$143 million in salaries, and that is not including jobs at the university itself. In fact, as a land-grant university, Tech's agricultural extension alone has 107 offices throughout the state and has at least one office in every county in the commonwealth. "We need to speak to our role in that area," he says.

The top priority of Phillips in his economic development efforts is to

develop an overall marketing plan for addressing private industry, as recommended by the advisory board. "We would like to develop the means by which we can garner technological assistance in a simplified manner," he says. "Our faculty's time is at a premium," which makes streamlining the process important. Phillips says that enrollment has increased over time, increasing demands on faculty members' time. Meanwhile,

salaries have decreased.

Along with taking action on the Advisory Committee's recommendations, Phillips has already spent a great deal of time showcasing Western Virginia to companies considering relocating here and plans on maintaining an active role in promoting the area. "If a company is coming to the Blue Ridge Region, economic development organizations can count on Tech to be an active participant."
