



New Engineering Major to Play Vital Role in Virginia's Economic Growth

VFIC schools make sure that skills-based learning is a vital part of the educational experience. That means the critical thinking cultivated in the classroom translates into practical skills that help students secure lucrative, meaningful jobs—jobs that sustain the economic vitality of communities across Virginia.

This past fall, Randolph College launched “Mechatronics and Robotics.” A new engineering major, this program provides students with a challenging, high-tech educational foundation in an environment with small classes, accessible professors, and numerous opportunities for real-world research experience—all unique benefits of the independent liberal arts college.

Mechatronics and robotics is an interdisciplinary branch of engineering. Mechatronics involves mechanical, electrical, and computer engineering. Robotics is a subset of that, focusing on applied systems to design, build, and operate smart machines.

The program launch was funded in part by a Go Virginia grant and will play an important role in Virginia's economic growth by directly addressing workforce needs in the region. One of Randolph's professors, Peter Sheldon, proposed

the major after a conversation with a former student, who told him about the shortage of manufacturing engineers in Central Virginia.

“We have seen a growing interest in majors such as this and believe offering robotics and mechatronics engineering at Randolph will meet the needs of current and future students,” said Travis Carter, dean of admission and financial aid. “This is an exciting addition to our already strong academic program.”

The College has hired two new full-time professors of engineering and is renovating an entire floor in Presser Hall, which will be home to a new teaching lab, research spaces, and machine shop. These developments are in addition to the ongoing multimillion-dollar renovation of the Martin Science Building.

“While manufacturing and robotics are big everywhere, this area is a particular hotbed for that kind of engineering,” Sheldon said. “We are well-situated with a lot of engineering companies and others in the industry, which is one of the reasons why we chose this major. There are going to be substantial partnership opportunities.”

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The Applied Ethics Bowl: A Quarter-Century of Inquiry

The Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges will convene the 25th Annual Applied Ethics Bowl on February 7, 2025. Hosted by the University of Richmond, this landmark event will draw student teams from VFIC institutions to deliberate this year's theme: "Ethics and Artificial Intelligence."

"The event was rebranded this year as the Applied Ethics Bowl to acknowledge the real-world implications of the ethical challenges addressed," says Locke Ogens, VFIC president. "Students will still compete for the coveted Batten Trophy before an audience of distinguished business leaders from across the Commonwealth of Virginia."

The 25th anniversary of the Applied Ethics Bowl condenses the programming to a single day in a convenient location to facilitate the participation of leading scholars, business and civic leaders, and philanthropists. A series of concurrent 30-minute rounds will take place in the morning and afternoon. Teams will present their arguments and engage in dialogue with each other, ensuring a rigorous and systematic approach to ethical inquiry. At the end of the day, there will be a reception in the Jepson Alumni Center, during which the championship round will be held.

"VFIC schools and faculty are determined to help students secure lucrative, meaningful jobs," says Ogens. "So new this year is a networking lunch between the morning and afternoon rounds. Seated tables will feature specific career paths, such as law, healthcare, and finance."

VFIC trustees and other special guests will host conversations over lunch with students, giving them an opportunity to engage with business leaders and learn more about career



Left: Student team at 2024 Ethics Bowl; Right: Batten Trophy



paths in the fields that interest them. Students are encouraged to bring resumes, and corporate representatives are encouraged to share business cards.

Rather than honor a single donor, the VFIC's practice over the years, the 25th Annual Applied Ethics Bowl will honor the living men and women who have dedicated their talents to chairing the VFIC since the event's inception. These individuals include Nancy Howell Agee, George Y. Birdsong, James C. Cherry, G. S. Fitz-Hugh, Jr., Barry J. Fitzpatrick, Thomas E. Goode, H. Hiter Harris III, C.T. Hill, John L. McElroy, Jr., Thurston R. Moore, William R. Van Buren III, Jeremiah J. Sheehan, Gary R. Thomson, Sen. Mark R. Warner, and Robert W. Woltz, Jr.

"If we are serious about our mission to educate tomorrow's citizen leaders—and we are—then we need to provide students with opportunities to examine ideas, explore ethical nuance, and exercise discernment when making decisions about right and wrong, good and bad," says Ogens. "In the end, the decisions our students make affect not only them, their friends and family, but also their coworkers and communities."

VFIC Scholarship Program

VFIC scholarships help our seventeen member institutions enroll students who would not otherwise consider independent higher education, and the scholarships help keep them in school until graduating with a degree.

Since 2000, the VFIC has awarded nearly 15,000 scholarships, many to students who are underrepresented and underserved, giving them an opportunity to chart a successful future. We are grateful to the following donors who provided scholarship support in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2024.

Scholarships are listed in order of generosity. Fully endowed scholarships are noted in bold.

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STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Soaring with Nya Bradshaw at Hampton University



“At Hampton University, I feel surrounded by students, faculty, and staff who are committed to showing up every day at their best,” says Nya Bradshaw, a junior majoring in airport administration.

“The school’s culture of excellence inspires me and holds me accountable for achieving the goals I want to reach.”

As a high school student in Alexandria, Virginia, Nya found her way to Hampton University thanks to teachers and counselors who were recent graduates. “I was surrounded by a network of people from HU!” says Nya. “And learning about their experiences really made me want to attend school there. Then I toured the school on their high school day. When I met professors from the aviation department in person and sensed their genuine energy and interest in me, I became obsessed.”

One aspect of HU that Nya truly appreciates is the school’s size and the closeness of her department. “The aviation management department is small, and the professors I had my freshman year I also have now,” says Nya. “They all know me and encourage me. I’ve also met a lot of recent grads, and they tell me about their amazing job experiences when they return to campus. They also share opportunities for professional growth.”

Nya is particularly grateful for her internship experience with Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport.

“Working at BWI showed me there are so many opportunities in the aviation industry,” says Nya. “I can work at an airport, the Department of Transportation . . . there’s so much flexibility. I even connected with HU alums at BWI, too, along with other grads of HBCUs.”

Nya is confident that her decision to attend Hampton University was perfect for her and has helped her grow into a better version of herself. Looking ahead, she’s considering the possibility of graduate school. Her focus, ultimately, is on airport management.

“All the HU grads I’ve met on my journey, including those in my internship cohort, have poured so much of their experience and insight into me,” says Nya. “When I returned to my high school over a break to share my experiences with students, I sensed fully the cycle of support at work. It feels so rewarding! Whether I’m on campus interacting with faculty and fellow students, meeting with alumni at school events or professional settings, or serving an internship, it’s clear to me that Hampton University emphasizes a standard of excellence that’s unique.”



The Role of Sports at VFIC Schools

The concept of a true student-athlete is alive and well at VFIC schools.

Over 50 percent of students at these schools are active in athletics at the varsity, club, or intramural level. Fifteen of the seventeen VFIC schools participate in Division III sports, which prohibits offering athletic scholarships.

At the January VFIC Board of Trustees meeting, Old Dominion Athletic Conference Commissioner Brad Bankston led a panel discussion on the role of sports at VFIC schools. Presidents Allison Morrison-Shetlar (University of Lynchburg), Bob Lindgren (Randolph Macon University), and Frank Shushok (Roanoke College) shared insights from their schools.

The importance of sports to VFIC schools reaches far beyond the playing field, and the benefits of healthy competition cascade over the entire community. President Lindgren described coaches as teachers, just like other faculty. They develop close relationships with students and teach athletic skills. They also develop the entire person, emphasizing important life lessons like leadership and time management skills while cultivating personal ethics and developing character. Students learn from their teaching coaches that there's more to victory than the score of a competitive event.

Coaches also serve as an extension of the admissions department. They recruit student-athletes and drive enrollment. Often, the opportunity to play a varsity or intramural sport is a deciding factor when students choose a college.

Adding new sports to attract students is a sound strategy for growth. For instance, some schools have recently added women's wrestling, flag football, and men's volleyball. When Roanoke College reinstated a men's football team in 2023, a marching band and competitive cheer team were close behind. Together, these activities increased the student body by more than 100 students. The school had discontinued its football team in 1942 due to constraints of World War II.

And what about VFIC student-athletes? They are frequently campus leaders. These students typically have higher grade point averages and retention rates than most students and head important clubs and organizations. They are also more engaged as alumni.

Recognizing this dynamic, the University of Lynchburg is using the athletic model of student recruitment and retention to inform how best to manage the academic side of campus life. By doing so, schools can lift the engagement and experience of all students. Mentorship programs and other methods of building community have been adapted to the academic side to develop the passion and purpose felt by athletes for all students, faculty, and staff.

Sports at VFIC schools are thrilling and entertaining. There's more to the event on the field, mat, or court, than the game. Athletics provide the schools and their students with an important connection to their local communities. Teams participate in community service, and athletic events offer local fans entertainment. But more than those benefits alone, sports extend a student's learning experience beyond the classroom, exposing students to coaches, serving as teachers, who offer new ways to discern and resolve life's dilemmas.

Education & the Human Connection

How do VFIC schools differ from the more than 4,000 individual institutions of higher education in the United States? The human connection.

That's the view of Edward L. Ayers, former president of the University of Richmond. In a keynote speech at the VFIC Harris Family Faculty Awards luncheon last November, Ayers spoke about what makes our independent schools with their liberal arts traditions unique even with the similarities they now share with larger public institutions.

"Despite differences in funding and governance, the publics and the nonprofits have grown more alike in facilities, the range of extra-curriculars, and, in our own ways, sports," says Ayers. "In this era of convergence, what do we offer students that differentiates us? Why would students attend a VFIC school rather than a larger school that apparently has more to offer? Our advantage is intangible: human connection."

Ayers notes that faculty, coaches, and administrators at VFIC schools bring something extra: deep connection in a community environment. He adds that "our schools are welcoming and supportive in ways larger institutions simply cannot be."

Referencing Corbin Campbell's 2023 book, *Great College Teaching*, Ayers cites evidence that shows college teaching is stronger across the board in liberal arts institutions. Not only that, courses in liberal arts colleges like those in the VFIC consortium were more rigorous in terms of cognitive complexity, and there were higher standards and expectations for student preparedness and participation.

"Education, despite the noisy headlines, is quiet, hidden, behind closed classroom doors, in hushed libraries, or labs intent with close attention," says Ayers. "Often, the most powerful education comes from a single conversation that no one else hears. VFIC colleges have been built and sustained to create those conversations."



Edward L. Ayers

"Being smaller makes us larger in the ways that count in students' lives."

Recognizing Excellence in Teaching The 2024 Harris Family Faculty Awards

Six faculty members were recognized at the VFIC's annual fall luncheon held on November 7, 2024, at the Virginia Museum of History & Culture in Richmond, Virginia. Recognized for their dedication to higher education and student success, the recipients each received stipends to support their scholarly research and professional development.

The Harris awards were generously created through endowments by the Harris family. The Harris family endowed these awards to highlight the special features of VFIC colleges and universities by recognizing faculty members whose professional history reflects a strong, clear, and abiding commitment to excellence in classroom teaching within the undergraduate liberal arts and sciences.

The Libby and Hiter Harris Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching Award



Elizabeth Malcolm, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of
Atmospheric & Oceanic Science,
Virginia Wesleyan University



Alison Ridley, Ph.D.
Professor of Spanish,
Hollins University

The H. Hiter Harris III Rising Star Award



Brett Frye, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Biology,
Emory & Henry University



Kimberly Garza, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of
Public Health Studies,
Roanoke College

The H. Hiter Harris III Excellence in Instructional Technology Award



Sara Hanson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
of Marketing,
University of Richmond



Wendy Traynor
Instructor of Mathematics
Emory & Henry University



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Mission

To secure financial support that enables college-bound students to access and graduate from outstanding Virginia independent higher education institutions.

Vision

Academically qualified college-bound students will access personalized, values-based higher education at VFIC colleges and universities, regardless of their financial situation.



VFIC Annual Fund

The VFIC seeks to ensure that the personalized educational experience of independent colleges in Virginia remains an affordable choice for tomorrow's citizen leaders. Without VFIC funds, the available pool of financial aid would shrink, and many of our more than 34,000 students would not be able to attend the VFIC college of their choice. If you have already given to the 2024–2025 Annual Fund, thank you. If not, we hope you will consider joining the Honor Roll of Donors. Your support provides resources students need to achieve their goals and lead lives of service and distinction.

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