Two programs fine tune strategies for retention

by Sheela Nath, Conductor intern and English student

“Virginia Tech in the past has struggled to develop a very strong comfort zone for minority students, whether they are international students or Americans,” says Larry Moore co-advisor with Randy Grayson of the Minority Academic Opportunities Program (MAOP). MAOP has furthered its goal to improve diversity on campus through various successful methods. The program has brought together groups of minorities to create a more welcoming atmosphere for students and is working to improve the recruitment and retention of students.

MANRRS (Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Related Sciences) and MAOP introduced me to a group of people bent on success,” says freshman forestry major Olivia Frederick about the programs. “Through these programs I have had numerous opportunities to volunteer my time toward the betterment of the college and the community. I enjoyed having a mentor and I look forward to being a mentor next year.” The programs help students to form a greater comfort level at Virginia Tech, giving them a better chance of succeeding here.

Moore attributes MAOP’s success in increasing the retention of minority students to linking with students through peer-mentoring programs, minority social organizations, networking, and positive goal-oriented faculty members and administrators. Because Virginia Tech recruits highly qualified individuals in the first place, Moore feels, they start out on the right track. However, to help minority students continue on that track, there is much that faculty members can do to create a more welcoming environment. “There’s a lot we can do as mentors and advisors to help students stay on track.”

Moore suggests taking a greater interest in diversity, in part by helping students grow accustomed to Virginia Tech. Although he says that “there’s been a campus-wide effort to improve diversity,” the effort and the comfort zone offered minority students could be improved. “Many faculty members, staff, and students are looking at where we fit and how we approach the under-represented student at Virginia Tech and to make sure that our approach is inclusive.”

By introducing minority students to other minority students, introducing them to their department’s career clubs, and maintaining a bridge with the students, faculty members can create a greater comfort zone for students. By taking time to talk to students, to actually be mentors and not just an advisor, to maintain contact with students, to help students to network, to work with students to create a course / research proposal plan, and to internationalize courses, faculty members can work with students to create a higher retention rate. Moore says, “It’s important for the entire university community to realize that we must have a comfort zone for everybody, regardless of gender or race, or we won’t be, from my perspective, a true land grant university that represents the entire population of the state of Virginia.”

What do you think?

Recruiting, hiring diverse faculty important to university's agenda

by Richard Conners of electrical and computer engineering, Multicultural Fellow

My November article on the campus climate for gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals was not one that matched much in the way of responses. I got only one response. It was from a lesbian graduate student. She indicated that the climate at Virginia Tech was basically fine but she did have some concerns about the way gay, lesbian, and transsexual partners are treated by the university. She said the problem was that she could not get a gym pass for her partner. Gym passes are for spouses only.

That said, let’s talk about the topic of this article. As you may know Virginia Tech is interested in becoming one of the top 30 research universities in the country. While the rankings for the top research universities are based solely on research dollars, I think that what the administration has in mind is not just generating more research funding but also improving the quality of education provided at Virginia Tech.

How can our educational quality be improved? To answer this question, look carefully at the demographics of the U.S. population, as well as at current business trends. You will find that the nature of the world is going to be significantly different in the next 30 to 50 years. In the United States, there will be no majority race and the globalization of business will require managers to cope with a very diverse work force.

If we at Virginia Tech are to prepare our students to be leaders in this world, I do not believe that we can any longer afford to be a one-race school. We need to diversify our student body so that our students can become accustomed to dealing with people from different races, different cultures, different ethnic backgrounds and, yes, different sex and sexual orientations. In my mind, the goal of diversifying our student body is not just so we can better serve under-represented groups in Virginia, but so all of our students, majority and minority, will benefit from the increased educational opportunities that having a diverse student body will offer.

I believe that President Steger shares these same views. I say this not only because of what he has said about these issues at meetings I have attended, but also because of the actions he has all ready taken. I note, for example, that he is working to increase the number of under-represented students at Virginia Tech by 20 percent in the fall 2002.

Virginia Tech cannot fully diversify its student body without making progress on diversifying its faculty. Virginia Tech cannot fully diversify its student body without making progress on diversifying its faculty. According to a study by Associate Provost Pat Hyer, the number of faculty members from under-represented groups has remained basically the same over the past 10 years. We must not allow this to continue. That means we must examine our current faculty recruitment and hiring strategies since they do not seem to be getting us where we want to go.

Certainly, there are a small number of possible candidates in some disciplines. But we must make...
Unpack your assumptions

Race: America's original science fiction

by Joseph L. Graves Jr., professor of evolutionary biology, Arizona State University West, and American Association for the Advancement of Science fellow

My generation of science fiction fans was raised on Star Trek. I will always remember episode 70: “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield.” Bele, an alien whose body pigmentation is split equally between black and white and comments on the inferiority of the criminal Lokai, who has pursued and finally caught abroad the Enterprise. Curiously Lokai’s body is also equally split between black and white:

Bele: It is obvious to the most simple minded that Lokai is of an inferior breed.

First Officer Spock: The obvious visual evidence, Commissioner, is that he is of the same breed as yourself.

Bele: Are you blind, Commander Spock? Well look at me, look at me! Captain Kirk: You are black on one side and white on the other.

Bele: I am black on the right side!

Kirk and Spock did not understand why this arbitrary distinction, whether one was black on the right or the left, should be used to distinguish “racial” groups on the Planet Charon. However, for Bele, Lokai’s left side black pigmentation was a racial characteristic and a sign of inferiority. It is also clear that the value placed on this difference resulted not from biology, but instead from the social history of their planet. This story ends with the long-standing racial animosity of Charon leading to its destruction. Hence the title: Let this be your last battlefield.

It is unclear whether the author of this story was aware of how closely his story paralleled the origin of an America’s original science fiction. The American Indian seemed less on any particular race. Theories relating to the biology of the newly encountered populations could not help but reflect this process. For the first time, questions were posed as to whether the conquered and enslaved populations were truly human. Were they some sub-human varieties distinctly below Europeans on the scale of nature? Conquest and enslavement created the environmental conditions under which the natural (genetic) potentials of the populations involved were expressed. Thus, if naturalists of this period claimed that the African slave and the American Indian seemed less on any particular trait relative to the European, they sometimes accurately describing what they observed. They made two mistakes however. First was the fact that they were usually judging these populations by some European norm of cultural accomplishment and second they confused the degradation imposed on these people by colonialism and slavery for their “natural” condition. For example, Thomas Jefferson wrote of the natural inferiority of the Negro, particularly with regard to their supposed lack of intelligence, without being able to recognize his own role in the creation of the social conditions responsible for these same observations. In that sense, Jefferson was no different from the fictional characters Bele in Star Trek, American society has been dominated by the race fallacy for over three centuries.

Fortunately, as we enter the 21st century, we have understood for over 50 years that there are still several important on-going racial myths. These include claims concerning genetically determined racial intelligence, or predisposition to criminal behavior, and the mistake of conflating racial identity with vulnerability to a particular disease. If we recognize that biological races do not exist, then the legacies of our social construction of race are more problematic. For example, if there is no difference in...See ‘Race’ on page 3

As we enter the 21st century, we have understood for over 50 years that there are still several important on-going racial myths. These include claims concerning genetically determined racial intelligence, or predisposition to criminal behavior, and the mistake of conflating racial identity with vulnerability to a particular disease. If we recognize that biological races do not exist, then the legacies of our social construction of race are more problematic. For example, if there is no difference in...
How did ISE come to be an Exemplary Department?

The university recognized three departments for their work in diversity. This article features one of these: Exemplary Departments, the Grado Department of Industrial Systems and Engineering (ISE). John Casali is the department head. Ben Dixon is vice president for multicultural affairs.

Dixon: Why did your unit think it should apply for this recognition? Casali: The administration of the Grado ISE department believed that the department's achievements toward improving diversity had been successful over the past five years, and as such, that our efforts and strategies might be helpful to other departments that face similar challenges. For example, the recruitment of women faculty members to our department was a priority for a number of reasons, one of which is the need for gender role models for the 40 percent female enrollment at the undergraduate level. A challenge in this regard is the paucity of available women Ph.D.'s in engineering, and our ISE Faculty Recruiting Committee made a commitment to locate and interview top-notch female candidates. Since 1995, five women faculty members have been hired in ISE, compared to having only one woman out of 30 total faculty positions in 1995.

Dixon: What were some of the external benchmark organizations/groups you used to guide your diversity activities?

Casali: The ISE department annually and voluntarily participates in an industrial engineering program benchmark group of 12 universities, 10 of which are consistently ranked in the US News and World Report magazine's top-10 industrial engineering departments. Adding considerable enlightenment was the department head's participation in various external advisory activities for an industrial engineering department at a historically black university, North Carolina A&T. These relational and benchmarking activities have helped ISE at Virginia Tech to expand its activities toward improved multiculturalism and instilling a perspective which helps us accommodate the needs of a diverse student body.

Dixon: What proportion of your staff/faculty were directly engaged by the programs for which you were recognized?

Casali: The Grado ISE department is a large industrial engineering department with 66 employees, of which 28 are instructional faculty. We are proud of the fact that all employees made a commitment to helping to foster a sense of diversity, as well as a friendly climate within which students and employees of varied ethic, race, and other backgrounds will experience an accommodating, supportive environment.

Dixon: What are some practical benefits your unit received or will receive from its focus on diversity?

Casali: The benefits are many, but perhaps the most important is that we, as a group, came to a firm realization that the development of special programs, initiatives, and target goals do not alone create a sufficient condition for success in insuring that a strong multicultural perspective flourishes. The most important realization was that it is a shared responsibility in the department, involving faculty, staff, and students alike, to create an atmosphere of support and understanding for the needs of different types of people. In other words, the right kind of attitude, once conveyed and nurtured, can become contagious, and then the specific initiatives and target goals fall readily into place. As a result, our faculty, staff, and student diversity has improved significantly, and our ability to attract people of different cultures has heightened. For instance, the presence of students from multicultural backgrounds greatly broadens the students' perspectives and understanding of different cultural needs. Not only is this important to their preparation for a career in business or industry, it also helps bring them for more rewarding and meaningful interactions in life.

Dixon: What's the one thing you would like to see happen university-wide that would support and encourage you in the particular diversity/multicultural work taken on by your unit?

Casali: It would be beneficial to have some basic programs to help the faculty and staff through diversity awareness and accommodation training. Such programs could be an effective subject in the context of a faculty or staff retreat, and help bring employees closer together. Also, from departments that have been particularly successful in implementing programs that improve diversity and multiculturalism, "best practices" documents could be prepared and/or short workshops provided.

Race...

Continued from page 2

By John G. Casali, Grado Professor and Head Grado Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering

Since 1995, the Grado Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering (ISE) has made significant strides in improving the diversity in the department, and in fostering an environment wherein multicultural and attitudes and perspectives are welcomed, even prized. ISE's efforts and achievements in this regard transcend all personnel categories — faculty, classified staff, and students. Furthermore, ISE has integrated multicultural aspects into its undergraduate curriculum and has developed active ties with minority institutions, such as North Carolina A&T, as well as universities abroad. These relationships have helped broaden ISE's students' awareness, as well as improve the department's ability to recruit students from under-represented cultures into its academic programs.

Looking toward recruitment of women and under-represented minority candidates to the faculty, the ISE administration and faculty knew it would not be easy, because, for example, national statistics show that less than 10 percent of Ph.D.'s in industrial engineering are women, and more disappointingly, less than 1 percent of Ph.D.'s (non-gender specific) are African-American. But with solid commitment, targeted recruiting, a new mentoring program for junior faculty members, and other recruiting enhancement, ISE's efforts paid dividends. Out of 28 faculty slots, the department now has six women faculty members, five of whom were hired since 1996. To broaden the multicultural perspectives brought to the...
School forum cultivates diversity

by James C. Klagge

Attitude ...

Continued from page 3

The problem was not that we didn’t get minority applicants, or didn’t take them seriously. The problem was often that they, ultimately, didn’t take us seriously. That may be a reflection on the community generally; or it may be a reflection on the university. Though we can’t always know these things, and sometimes can’t do much about them, sometimes we can. I want to describe some efforts to make the community a more attractive place for minority job candidates. These efforts are ongoing, and are a part of the puzzle of how to make Virginia Tech a more welcoming place for minorities generally.

Several years ago, the NAACP approached the Montgomery County School Board with concerns about equity of discipline for minority students, hiring practices, and curriculum coverage of minority history. The School Board commissioned an investigation of disciplinary actions at the secondary schools over the previous few years, and found that though there were not systematic inequities in discipline of minority students, there were notable problems. Minority students were getting in trouble more than students on average. This could have a variety of explanations. The school board and superintendent decided at that time (spring, 1998) that it was worth addressing — and formed the Discipline Committee. This was a group of about 40 teachers, administrators, community members, and school board members who came together on a monthly basis to look at the discipline study, and figure out ways of productively engaging all students and families in the education process.

In the three years that this group has been meeting, it has changed its name to the Diversity Forum and broadened its focus. Its meetings are open to anyone that has an interest in helping to increase the engagement of all students and families in the educational process. It has continued through dozens of meetings to attract 40 or more attendees, and generate on-going enthusiasm for its projects. The key to its success has been that it has avoided top-down solutions: “This is the problem, and that is how you’ll fix it.” Its approach has not been “This is what you need to do,” but “This is what we can do.” It has purposely included all parties to the concerns it addresses and tried to find ways for those parties to figure out what to do. Several members of the NAACP, who saw themselves as critics of the school system, now see themselves as participants in that system.

ADD diagnosis requires multiple tests

by Daniel B. Porter, co-director of the ADHD Specialty Clinic at Cooper House

The Diversity Forum is now working on issues of staff development to increase attention to ways to engage all students productively and ways to address students about diversity issues in elementary school. The forum is also beginning to devise its approach into the schools and involve hundreds of students directly. Through the Diversity Forum, the school system has included community members, including minority leaders, in recruiting trips to try to get a more diverse faculty.

If you are interested in becoming involved in the public schools on these kinds of issues and in these kinds of ways, please feel free to attend our meetings. For information about when meetings are scheduled, please call the superintendent’s office (382-5104). Meetings are held in the basement of the School Board Office at 200 Junkin Street in Christiansburg. And if you are interested in helping to inform minority job candidates in your department about what the community and public schools are doing to make Montgomery County a more welcoming place for all people, please feel free to contact me (231-8488 or jklagge@vt.edu) or the superintendent’s office for more information.

A diverse community cannot be dictated, but it can be cultivated.

... of the ADHD Specialty Clinic at Cooper House

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), while the focus of numerous pharmacological and medical research efforts over the past 35 years, continues to be enshrouded in myth and mystery.

Numerous practitioners are known to provide assessment and or treatment services to the public. Pediatricians, family physicians, mental health therapists, psychiatrists, and clinical social workers, to mention a few, are among the professional groups that offer various interventions, which may take the form of medications and/or counseling. Unfortunately, there are standards of clinical care in the areas of both assessment and treatment that are significantly outdated and increase the risk of misdiagnosis and consequent professional mismanagement.

In a landmark position paper on ADD treatment standards, the American College of Pediatrics has issued recommendations on diagnosis of the disorder. Thoroughness of a single behavioral measurement scale to diagnose ADD is now discouraged in lieu of multiple tests (comprehensive psychological test battery) that use normative data.

Specialists in ADD treatment now realize that is common for ADD to mask other serious clinical conditions that, when left undiagnosed or untreated, will worsen as a result of interaction with ADD symptoms or the medication used to treat ADD. When thorough testing is conducted and these other conditions are recognized, alternative medications are often employed. A child or adult diagnosed with ADD runs a high risk of having other clinical disorders, such as a 50 percent chance of developing multiple anxiety disorders versus a 14 percent risk for non-ADD people. The ADD individual has a 52 percent chance of developing a substance abuse disorder and a 31 percent chance of having clinical depression, versus 27 percent and 5 percent respectively for non-ADD people (Murphy & Barkley, 1998).

The American College of Pediatrics has also concluded that early diagnosis and the combination of appropriate medication and counseling translates into better treatment outcomes.

We now have convincing data to suggest that ADD is a neurobiological disorder with strong evidence of genetic inheritance among first order biological relatives. It is also believed that ADHD, the predominantly hyperactive form of ADD, may be significantly over diagnosed in children due to its visibility and resemblance to behavioral disorders. The inattentive form of ADD may, conversely, be under diagnosed due to its low level of behavioral visibility. ADHD is characterized by restless activity, uncompleted tasks, disorganization, impulsive behavior, and distractibility. The inattentive form of ADD is characterized by inattention, poor concentration, disorganization, impulsive behavior, and beginning many projects but completing very few.

Undiagnosed ADD adults will often present to the medical profession with marital or relationship difficulties. The partner or spouse complains that their mate is detached, emotionally unavailable, or insensitive to the family’s emotional needs. Adults with ADHD will present as having efficiency problems on the job, complaining of feeling driven but completing few projects.

Developmentally, hyperactivity often drops or is significantly reduced as one moves from adolescence to young adulthood.

One of the most frequent concerns of individuals seeking treatment are the myths and misconceptions surrounding medications, such as Ritalin, that have been traditionally used to treat ADD. Many of the claims of potential dangers of these medications remain unsubstantiated when subjected to the rigors of controlled studies. More importantly, many other medications have been developed over the past 10 years, so that medications such as Ritalin no longer appear to be the first choice of medical specialists treating ADD adults. And the risks of psychoactive, social, relational, and occupational difficulties are much higher for ADD adults that do not receive proper treatment. Often we explain that an individual diagnosed with ADD may attempt treatment then compare their quality of life before and after treatment. Consequently, a choice is available to those who desire a change.

Dr. Porter of Roanoke and Harvey Barker of Radford are co-directors of the ADHD Specialty Clinic within the Blacksburg Cooper House’s counseling and psychological services. Call 540-552-2473 for an appointment.