

## **Good News for Communities**

Virginia Tech's 2006-2012 Strategic Plan calls for more and more varied service-learning experiences for students, but what does this mean in practice?

At Virginia Tech, service-learning is a form of experiential education in which faculty incorporate community service into course work and provide structured reflection so that students work to meet actual community needs related to course content while analyzing the significance of their activities.

Educators around the world—and university alumni who participated in service-learning programs as undergraduates—are increasingly recognizing the effectiveness of hands-on educational experiences in preparing students for life beyond the academy. This is good news for communities and community organizations that can benefit from the assistance of college and university students.

A new university team called the Student Engagement Task Force formed in January 2007 with the mission of making recommendations that will assist the university in realizing the goals outlined in the strategic plan. The team is seeking to find a variety of ways to focus and coordinate university-wide resources to support the engagement of undergraduates and graduate students. Task force priorities are:

- Benchmark best practices in service-learning, student engagement, and developing and involving faculty in service-learning activities;
- Evaluate and assess the contributions of existing programs within the Service-Learning Center in relation to the advancement of the university strategic plan;
- Identify strategies or new initiatives that could be undertaken by the Service-Learning Center to achieve the performance goals outlined in the strategic plan;
- Identify reasonable annual benchmarks for colleges and the Service-Learning Center for progress toward performance goals outlined in the strategic plan;

- Identify faculty development needs that advance the goal of greater inclusion of student engagement in the curriculum and make recommendations on how to more fully involve faculty in student engagement activities;
- Identify potential partnerships and partner development programs for greater community involvement;
- Identify strategies for greater involvement of students in engagement activities;
- Provide recommendations on potential incentives/rewards for faculty, staff, and students;
- Identify ways that university leadership or the university community can better support student engagement; and
- Assess and provide recommendations on where new resources are needed to enhance the capacity of the Service-Learning Center to lead the university's student engagement program.

The Virginia Tech Service-Learning Center provides logistical assistance, resource support, and standards of best practice to faculty or departments wanting to incorporate community service into their educational mission. Between 1,200 and 1,500 students are currently involved through the Service-Learning Center each semester.