

W&M launches Commonwealth Center for Energy & Environment

By Joseph McClain

(December 6, 2012) William & Mary has launched its new Commonwealth Center for Energy and the Environment, a combination of think tank and incubator to expand interdisciplinary research opportunities and address complex issues at the intersection of energy, public policy and the environment. The Commonwealth Center is open to participation by all William & Mary faculty—arts and sciences, law, business, education, and VIMS.

VIMS professor emeritus Dennis Taylor, who is overseeing the startup of the new initiative, says the idea is to “encourage the broad innovative discussion of urgent questions that require us to cross disciplinary boundaries in order to develop new integrative solutions.” It will be an opportunity for William & Mary’s scientists, legal scholars, government and policy specialists to discover how to tackle problems by working with each other, he said.

“We want people to discuss ideas and possible directions for future research in what, essentially, will be a think-tank environment,” Taylor explained. “The more promising of these initiating groups will develop a proposal to move their project on to the next level of development.”

Taylor said that the Commonwealth Center will have two types of working groups. Environmental Enquiry Groups (EEGs) will involve groups of 5 to 8 faculty who will explore multi-disciplinary research and/or teaching opportunities related to a particular environmental issue or question. The final reports from these EEGs will form the basis to select proposals for more advanced planning and development in a Long Term Environmental Quest groups (LTEQs). Taylor said the LTEQs will focus on seeking long-term sponsored support for the work.

Taylor said he expects initial request for proposals to form Environmental Enquiry Groups to go out before the end of 2012. The Commonwealth Center will seek to fund 3 or 4 EEGs in this initial phase. Topic areas are open.

VIMS Dean and Director John Wells said that he welcomes new initiatives that offer opportunities for better collaboration.

“The Commonwealth Center has the potential to open new areas of research opportunity for our faculty that incorporates the talents and expertise found here at William & Mary,” he said. “We can give depth to the



New Center: William & Mary’s Commonwealth Center for Energy and the Environment aims to encourage the crossing of disciplinary boundaries. Professor VIMS emeritus Dennis Taylor (R) is coordinating the center, with help from W&M undergraduate Sharon Hartzell ‘14, sustainability web intern. Photo by Stephen Salpukas

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science while at the same time adding vital contributions from law, economics, public policy and a wealth of other disciplines that can address the challenges we face in the future.”

Wells added that an area of VIMS research involving storm surge modeling developed by Harry Wang, professor of physical sciences at VIMS, may be one such example. Wang’s computer model incorporates factors such as wind speed and direction, tide levels, and rainfall to predict how high storm waters will rise—and where—during events such as hurricanes and tropical storms. The predictive power of Wang’s model is a tool for policy planners, officeholders and others concerned with land-use issues.

“Harry’s work raises questions about decisions on the coastline,” Taylor explained. “What areas of the coastline do you most want to protect and harden? What are the implications for urban planning in Norfolk and Virginia Beach? How will storm events affect the Port of Norfolk? How do you locate and provide support to citizens, including the most needy?”

Taylor stresses that the Commonwealth Center aims to address both teaching and research through its projects.