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Discovering, Teaching, and Partnering

GW's Virginia Campus Outlines Strategic Vision, Prepares to Unveil New Buildings

By Greg Licamele

John Wilson arrived at GW to find some people still daunted by the physical distance between Loudoun County and the streets of Foggy Bottom. But he's been commuting to the Virginia Campus since his appointment as executive dean in January and Wilson says this physical distance is trivial.

Now, Wilson is embarking on a journey to bring the two campus cultures and resources closer together by clarifying the Virginia Campus' mission, dramatically increasing the size of the facilities, and bringing an infectious enthusiasm about the research and education taking place at the intersections of Routes 7 and 28.

"Our plan is to make what happens here so powerful and attractive that the distance becomes meaningless," Wilson says.

Since opening in August 1991, the campus has experienced a tenfold increase in its student base and grown its annual research funding from $50,000 to more than $7 million. Wilson and the teams of faculty and staff members will build on this success by focusing on three areas: graduate education, innovative research, and technology transfer.

Wilson says key faculty members from the School of Engineering and Applied Science, School of Business and Public Management, and the Graduate School of Education and Human Development will offer additional classes to further strengthen the graduate classes offered.

"Our plan is to expand our classroom offerings in our key areas of current strength to meet the demands of an evolving society," Wilson says.

Wilson says success in these areas will be complemented through innovative research in three fields: transportation safety and security, biotechnology, and information technology.

"Those three areas of strength accord well with our environment because in Loudoun County and Northern Virginia, we have some key institutions: Dulles International Airport, the future Howard Hughes Medical Institute, AOL, WorldCom, and many others," Wilson says. "I think we've chosen the right areas of emphasis to do discovery."

Transportation safety and security will take the next step as an area of emphasis, Wilson says. Faculty members already have been working for years on areas of transportation safety crucial to GW's success and the safety of the country. Automotive safety is led by Nabih Bedewi and Azim Eskandarian, associate professors of engineering and applied science. They lead the National Crash Analysis Center, funded in part by the Federal Highway Administration and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The professors, along with a cadre of colleagues,

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also conduct research at the Center for Intelligent Systems Research, which includes a driving simulator that processes human performance and pattern recognition for driving tasks.

Other government agencies have taken notice of GW's growing expertise in transportation safety, including the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The NTSB will open its new training academy, which will include the 60,000-pound fuselage of TWA Flight 800, on GW's campus in the summer. The FAA recently awarded GW a grant that could be worth up to $9 million over three years to develop an international training program to improve the safety and security of aviation in selected foreign nations. Darryl Jenkins and Vahid Motevalli lead GW's Aviation Institute in conducting research and teaching classes.

"Our thinking about the future has been validated by the main campus, which has been engaged in a strategic plan for the last year," says Wilson, whose initial position at GW focused on the University's strategic plan. "Two of the priority academic excellence areas in the strategic plan accord well with our priorities here — transportation safety and security and biotechnology."

To build on these transportation strengths, Wilson says new facilities will be needed, but his immediate challenge is to make the former PSINet building (now known as Building Two) an integral part of the 90-acre Virginia Campus next fall. Vice President for Academic Affairs Donald Lehman has convened a group that's mapping what the 204,000-square-foot facility has, what it needs, and what will be housed in it.

One area of focus on the Foggy Bottom campus that may expand to Loudoun County is biotechnology research. With the Howard Hughes Medical Institute planning a $500-million facility next door to the Virginia Campus scheduled for completion in 2005, Wilson says GW is already exploring partnerships with the institute.

The Virginia Campus also will focus on information technology and partnering with companies to conduct research. One shining example of this type of collaboration is America Online's Home of the 21st Century Lab, which explores different ways technology can be implemented in living rooms, kitchens, and other rooms of the house.

Though the economic climate has changed and companies do not have as many resources as they did in the late 1990s, Wilson is emphatically optimistic about the Virginia Campus' value for Northern Virginia companies.

"I feel that the value of this campus is in the brainpower that we have and that we make available to our partners and potential partners," Wilson says. "I think we can develop old and new partnerships based on the brainpower alone. I don't think it matters what's going on in the economy because it's always a good time for industry to be strategic."

Wilson says being strategic means being "connected to the right kind of brainpower and getting important information about how you are to approach your future."

As for the future of the Virginia Campus and the entire University, Wilson and many others at GW believe in the strategic value of this once-sleepy farmland and bringing Foggy Bottom and Loudoun County closer together.

"I believe the University's strategic plan points to this campus as a meaningful place to fulfill the University's potential," Wilson says. "I'm confident that we have the areas of expertise upon which to build."