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'Shore U' could be a game changer

VCU Executive MBA students present a business plan to Gov. Ralph Northam on creating a four-year university on the Eastern Shore.



Executive MBA students in the VCU School of Business presented a business plan for the creation of a four-year University of the Eastern Shore of Virginia to Gov. Ralph Northam (left), a Shore native. (Kevin Morley, University Relations)

By **Leila Ugincius**

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Like many rural areas, the Eastern Shore has experienced population decreases and stagnant economic growth, according to 2019 U.S. Census data. Fewer people living and working there has had a direct negative effect on the local economy. Locals are looking into the creation of a four-year, degree-granting university to unlock the region's potential.

In 2019, residents created the nonprofit [University of the Eastern Shore of Virginia Foundation](#) to promote the establishment of such an institution. Foundation members contacted administrators from universities across the state for guidance. While most were open to the idea, leaders at Virginia Commonwealth University took things one step further by offering the help of its most valuable asset — its students.

"Here at VCU we recognize the economic impact of higher ed in a community and we are always open to improving the quality of life for Virginia residents by building new educational pathways," said "Butch" M.K. Sarma, director of the Executive MBA program at the VCU School of Business.

For 26 years, Executive MBA teams at VCU have taken on strategic dilemma projects — challenges from private and public organizations on big issues that can materially affect their future. "Strategic dilemma projects have successfully taken on many high-profile challenges and we believed that this would be another really great project for our students," Sarma said.

This year's team — Tanner Clements, Kate Lee, Nicole McMullin, William Nicoll, Jin-Li Richardson and Seth Roby — put together an exhaustive business plan that found that, like other rural areas in Virginia, the Eastern Shore has experienced population decreases and stagnant economic growth.

"Through our research, we highlighted the economic conditions on Virginia's Eastern Shore and the need to stimulate the economy in that region," McMullin said. "But we also learned about what makes the area unique. The Eastern Shore is the only place in Virginia where a student studying engineering could intern at NASA. And one of few places where a student interested in environmental sciences could start their day in the classroom and end it on a commercial fishing vessel. This combination of economic need and relationships to businesses unique to the area would allow the state to create a destination for higher education that would attract students to a one-of-a-kind program."

With population declining and poverty rates increasing, the Eastern Shore of Virginia needs economic stimulation to catch up to the rest of the state and nation, said Terry Malarkey, president of the Shore U foundation. "It could supercharge economic development by attracting students from other counties, states and nations. The University of the Eastern Shore of Virginia, or 'Shore U,' will be the launching point to drive this economic growth."

The students presented their plan to Gov. Ralph Northam on June 4.

"I enjoyed meeting these hardworking VCU students and hearing their proposal for Shore University," Northam said. "As a native of the Eastern Shore and a firm supporter of public education, it was a pleasure to see the research, creativity and attention to detail that went into this project. I admire the students' dedication, and I thank them for all their hard work."

The business model calls for an extension of an existing accredited Virginia college — similar to the University of Virginia's College at Wise — to be located on the Eastern Shore, with upper-division courses in partnership with local businesses.

According to the students' plan, key factors would set Shore U apart from its peers:

Opportunity: Shore U would combine the college experience and exclusive opportunities with businesses such as NASA and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport on Wallops Island, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and the large seafood industry.

Program: To support these opportunities, Shore U would work alongside Eastern Shore Community College to offer a heavily focused STEM-B program. Shore U's programs would complement those of ESCC.

Location: Shore U would be located on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, the longest stretch of wild coastline remaining on the East Coast.

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