

Carving out a niche

Each school has unique attributes to offer prospective students

BY DEBORAH RIDER ALLEN
Special Correspondent

Virginia is home to more than 40 residential colleges and universities, including some of the most historic institutions in the country.

From the College of William & Mary, the nation's second-oldest college chartered in 1693; to University of Virginia, founded by Thomas Jefferson; to Virginia Union University, founded in 1865 to provide higher education for Freedmen.

Each school, however, has carved out a niche among the crowd, offering special programs, a unique way of approaching the learning process, and its own brand of campus life. The following is a sample of what several Virginia schools say sets them apart.

Honors and values

No one at Jessica Huang's high school in Chicago was familiar with **The University of Virginia**. But because of one high school teacher, Huang got a glimpse into the U.Va. philosophy of a self-governing honor system.

"When I was applying to different schools, what I looked for was something that made each stand apart from one another. The Honor System was the one thing that stood out to me even before I decided to apply," said Huang, whose teacher, a U.Va. alumnus, implemented the honor system in his classroom.

Huang, now a fourth-year student studying philosophy and biology, chairs the U.Va. Honor Committee – a system administered solely by students.

Along with the student self-governed Honor System,

the **University of Virginia** in Charlottesville is probably best known for its Academical Village.

Created by Thomas Jefferson, this complex of small structures placed around a landscaped open square and connected by covered walkways houses deans and professors in the pavilions on the Lawn and students in the adjoining rooms along the Colonnades.

The idea was to create a community where scholars and students living side by side would have lively interchanges and intellectual explorations outside the classroom.

"I think that any U.Va. student is aware of how much the school has been influenced by Thomas Jefferson and his ideals. But I really think it is apparent in the way our university works," Huang said.

Strong science programs

Sweet Briar College and engineering may sound like a dichotomy, but this small all-female school's engineering program will graduate its first class of engineers this spring.

"We are definitely a liberal arts college, but we take the point of view that engineering belongs in a liberal arts college," said Hank Yochum, director of the school's engineering program and associate professor. The school is located in the town of Sweet Briar in Amherst County.

"We like to think we are training engineers about the role engineers play in society and culture and the effect it has on people," Yochum said.

The engineering program started in 2005 as an extension of the school's strong science program.

Aeronautics and Equestrian Studies attract students to **Averett University** in Danville. Students in the aerospace management program can pursue concentrations in flight opera-

tions, aviation business, aviation maintenance operations, aviation technical systems and aerospace management/criminal justice.

Graduates of the equestrian studies program can go on to careers in everything from equine insurance and the design and construction of barns to equine journalism, racing, boarding or breeding stables.

In Norfolk, work in oceanography and modeling and simulation is what **Old Dominion**

University considers its top strengths.

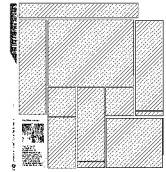
"Oceanography takes full advantage of ODU's coastal location with its own 55-foot research vessel, the R/V Fay Slover, a state-of-the-art laboratory facility in the Center for Coastal Physical Oceanography, and trailblazing faculty from Dennis Darby, who has led voyages to the Arctic Ocean, to Fred Dobbs, a world-renowned expert in marine microbial ecology and invasive species," said Scott M. Lowe Jr. in ODU's university relations office.

And the first of its kind in the commonwealth, the Virginia Modeling, Analysis and Simulation Center (VMASC) and the Tri-Cities Higher Education Center can virtually reproduce almost any environmental condition.

"The adaptable 60,000-square-foot facility can reproduce full simulations of the human body to train surgeons, military clashes to sharpen hardware and reflexes, and natural disasters to increase response efficiency," Lowe said.

Hampton University is a leader among Virginia universities in winning competitive federal contracts, according to figures from the USAspending.gov Web site.

From 2000 to 2007, HU received \$128.2 million in federal contracts – more than



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any other public or private university in Virginia during that eight-year period.

In 2007, Hampton University became the first historically black college or university to have total mission responsibility for a NASA satellite mission.

Student-faculty collaboration across all disciplines is a hallmark of a **Radford University** education.

A research article by senior biology major Brian Prall of Leesburg was recently accepted for publication in the journal "General and Comparative Endocrinology." He worked with his faculty mentor Mark Cline.

Chemistry students Chris Estes of Riner and Sabrina Hash of McGaheysville were the only undergraduates to make presentations at the 11th Annual Green Chemistry and Green Engineering Conference in Washington.

And anthropology professor Donna Boyd is routinely contracted to assist with investigations of homicide cases when skeletal remains are involved. Her advanced students often assist in those investigations.

Not politics as usual

The **University of Mary Washington** in Fredericksburg has a strong political science and international affairs department.

Teresa Mannix, director of news and public information, said that the school's proximity to Washington and Richmond gives students opportunities to get involved in government, politics and nonprofit organizations.

Many interns and alumni work on Capitol Hill and with members of the Virginia General Assembly. Mary Washington alumni include an FAA administrator, chair of the U.S. International Trade Commission and Ambassador Frances Cook.

Civics and strong character

Virginia Military Institute prides itself on producing the citizen-soldier. More than half

the Institute's graduates go into the military immediately after graduation, and about 18 percent pursue military careers.

"But for VMI, founded in 1839, the term citizen-soldier means more than someone prepared to go into battle when needed. It also means someone who is ready to serve his community, state, or the nation in whatever capacity is needed," explained Stewart D. MacInnis, Lt. Col., USAR (Ret.), in VMI's communications and marketing office.

And it's not a one-time thing. Being a citizen-soldier is a lifelong commitment, MacInnis added.

Norfolk State University is known for instilling virtues, strong character and strength in its students, according to Sharon R. Hoggard, interim executive director of communications and marketing.

She cites a myriad of "character values" that the university strives to teach its students to use both on and off campus. These include wisdom, creativity, curiosity, courage, integrity, humanity, justice, temperance, humility, spirituality and a love of learning.

In Southwest Virginia, **Emory and Henry College's** commitment to serving the regional community and instilling students with a sense of civic responsibility is part of the public policy and community service major at the school.

Students use class time to learn skills in community-centered analysis and action research and to understand the impact of local, regional, national and global structures and institutions on social change. Then they become agents of change working at the school's Appalachian Center for Community Service.

Dirk S. Moore, director of public relations, said, "Our students do more than serve the need; they seek to attack the problem at its source."

Just this year, The Buechner Institute came to the forefront as a unique focus for **King College** in Bristol, Tenn. The institute is named for renowned

minister, memoirist, essayist and novelist of more than 30 books Frederick Buechner, who spent a lifetime exploring the engagement of faith and culture.

The institute is dedicated to exploring the intersections and collisions of faith and culture that define our times and to examining the ways in which faith informs art and public life.

Honing communication skills

The English and creative writing programs at **Hollins University** in Roanoke have received national recognition, with *U.S. News & World Report* ranking the graduate program in creative writing in the top 20 in the nation.

"English and creative writing is Hollins' most popular academic discipline, with more than 100 majors and well over half of the student body enrolled in English and creative writing classes at any time," said Jeff Hodges, director of public relations.

Hundreds of graduates have published books, and three are Pulitzer Prize winners: Natasha Trethewey, Annie Dillard and Henry Taylor. Graduate Kiran Desai won both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle fiction award.

Hampden-Sydney College in Farmville has a nationally recognized Rhetoric Program that requires writing throughout the school's curriculum, proficiency in written expression and proficiency in oral expression of the English language.

"To ensure that all graduates of the college are able to write and speak clearly, cogently and grammatically the faculty in 1978 established the Rhetoric Program," said Linda Cassada, public relations assistant.

"In order to graduate from the college a student must satisfy all components of the rhetoric proficiency requirement."

Two new faculty members at **American University** in Washington have taken the school of communications to a new level. Veteran journalist and television host Nick Clooney is this year's Newseum

Distinguished Journalist in Residence.

And two-time Academy award winner Russell Williams, who did the sound work for the movies "Glory" and "Dancing with Wolves," will continue the work he started in 2004 teaching aspiring filmmakers about the industry.

Community outreach

One discipline that stands out at **Washington and Lee University** in Lexington is the Shepherd Poverty Program. Julie Cline, communications office manager, said the Shepherd Program for the Interdisciplinary Study of Poverty and Human Capability integrates academic study and learning through service and reflection.

"It endeavors to inform our students about poverty and what can be done to foster human capabilities for communities and individuals who have been left behind in domestic and international development," she said.

Virginia Tech's major focus is its dedication to enhancing the commonwealth and "making the commonwealth a better place," according to Mark Owczarski, public relations director of the Blacksburg university.

"As a high-performing research university with a world-view that advances the land-grant values of discovery, learning and outreach, Virginia Tech not only provides a quality education infused with research, innovation and technology, it also provides a strong sense of community for its students, faculty and staff."

Bluefield College is planning for the future with the construction of a \$14-million Campus-Community Center. Fostering a partnership with the Town of Bluefield in Southwest Virginia, this private Christian college will have an athletic and recreational facility that will be open to students and the community.

"It will serve as an intersection where the college and the

community come together," said Dr. David Olive, college president.

Student support programs

Keeping students in school is **Virginia Commonwealth University's** focus.

Located in Richmond, its "University College" program was launched in 2006. "It is working," said Anne Buckley, associate director of the office of communications and public relations, about the program that helps first-year students manage the transition to college.

"After the UC program's first year at VCU, a record number of students finished in good academic standing and a record number of freshmen returned for their sophomore year in the fall of 2007."

University College gives first-year students access to academic advising, the Campus Learning Center, the Writing Center and testing services.

"Sections of the courses are intentionally kept small to allow students to get to know each other and learn in a small setting," Buckley said.

The financial aid program at the **University of Richmond** is one of the school's greatest strengths. A private school, it performs need-blind admissions.

Holly Rodriguez, media and public relations officer, says that 68 percent of its undergraduates receive financial aid.

"Undergraduate students with a family income of \$40,000 or less, with a demonstrated need, qualify for grants to cover full tuition, room and board," she said.

"This year, \$42.2 million in grants and scholarships was awarded to undergraduate students."

Personalized education

The **College of William and Mary** in Williamsburg specializes in a personalized education for its students.

"William & Mary holds a unique position in American higher education. That we are a top-ranked, midsize, public university with an enviably low student-faculty ratio is known by most Virginians.

What is less apparent is that W&M has become a place where teaching and research are not only in balance, but so inextricably bound together that faculty and students cannot tell you where one begins and the other leaves off.

The result is that students become co-seekers after truth with faculty and faculty become co-learners with their students," said Provost P. Geoffrey Feiss.

With an 11-to-1 student/faculty ratio, Feiss said, the faculty works as senior colleagues, partners and guides in learning and research.

"Here, there is almost always someone to go to for help – a person with a name who can guide, advise and assist. We are a strong community of scholars and learners in which the individual counts," he said.

The Shenandoah Conservatory at **Shenandoah University** in Winchester is one of the country's premier conservatories and the oldest of SU's five schools.

It offers students more than 60 degree programs in music, theater, art and dance and produces more than 300 performances each year.

"Faculty members are highly qualified and sought-after practitioners in their fields, and students have many opportunities to interact with faculty in- and outside the classroom and participate in scholarly research," said Cathy Loranger, director of public relations.

Southern Virginia University (formerly Southern Seminary) is a unique liberal arts college, at which most of the students and faculty are members of The Church of Jesus Christ

of Latter-day Saints.

This school, located on 155 acres in Buena Vista, is a private, four-year coeducational institution.

"Southern Virginia is a good fit for students who want to know and be known by their professors and want to be in an environment that is designed to strengthen their faith," said Burke Olsen, director of university communications.

While applications for admission have exploded by more than 500 percent in the last decade at **Christopher Newport University**, the school purports

"an atmosphere that feels like a private school ... at a public-school cost," said Patty Patten, dean of admissions. She noted that CNU received nearly 8,000 applications last year for a freshman class of 1,200.

Located in Newport News, the school has small classes – averaging about 24 students – creating a student-centered environment where creativity and excellence can flourish, she said.

The college is grounded in the principles of liberal learning and dedicated to the ideals of scholarship, leadership and service.

"Your CNU professors will get to know you as an individual," Patten said.

Real-life experiences

At **Marymount University** in Arlington all undergraduates must complete an internship related to their field of study. With its proximity to Washington, many students work in congressional offices, federal agencies, international businesses, the Smithsonian Institution and the National Institutes of Health.

"Marymount provides opportunities for students in all disciplines to conduct original research or develop creative projects under the direction of faculty mentors," said Dr. Liane

Summerfield, associate vice president for academic affairs.

The Summer Research Program supports student

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and faculty research, and the University's Discover Office conducts workshops, matches students with faculty research advisers, organizes the annual Student Research Conference and enables students to participate in regional and national research conferences.

Longwood University in Farmville requires that students complete an internship, experimental learning, field experience, research or teaching practicum before they can graduate.

"Internships are exceptional ways for students to apply and test the theories and skills they have learned in their coursework at Longwood," said Gina M. Caldwell, media specialist.

Longwood internship sites have included Walt Disney World, Microsoft, Chrysler Corporation, Northrup Grumman, National Geographic, Time-Life Books and congressional offices.

Educating tomorrow's teachers

While **Virginia Union**

University is best known for the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology – the second oldest African-American seminary in the United States – the strongest undergraduate program at this Richmond school is in the School of Education and Interdisciplinary Studies for teacher preparation.

"With 95 percent of its faculty possessing doctoral degrees and considerable teaching experience, the school has received national recognition for its programs," said Vanessa Moody Coombs, vice president for university relations.

"Accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, the school boasts a nearly 100 percent placement rate for students completing program requirements."

This fall, a new accelerated

degree program has evening and weekend classes so students 25 and older can complete a degree in elementary education.

Cultural and travel programs

Eastern Mennonite

University's strength lies in its cross-cultural program – a first-of-its-kind in the country to be required as part of its general education curriculum.

"At EMU, cross-cultural is a chance to truly see the world through new lenses," said Jim Bishop, public information officer.

Located in Harrisonburg, EMU offers 3½-week cross-cultural seminars from May to early June, as well as semester-long and yearlong Washington (D.C.) Community Scholars Center programs. Last spring, faculty-led semester-long programs were held in Guatemala, Mexico and the Middle East.

Study abroad and foreign travel programs are also strong

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at **U.Va's College at Wise**.

"Students interested in spending a semester or a year in Austria may attend the college's sister institution, the Padagogische Hochschule Niederosterreich in Baden, Austria," said Kathy Still, assistant director of college relations.

There is also a three-week summer program offered in Spain as well as opportunities to travel to France. International internships are also available.

At **Randolph-Macon College** in Ashland, students often use January Term (J-Term) to study abroad.

"An impressive 91 percent of our students participate in this optional semester-long program, making it one of the highest rates in the country," said Pam Harris Cox, media and communications specialist.

"In 2009 R-MC will offer 21 one-of-a-kind study/international study courses, such as studying social and environmental problems in Brazil,

climbing the Great Wall in China while exploring the country's culture and society, teaching computer skills at orphanages in Haiti, traveling to India to study mathematics, conducting field anthropology research and studying Indian culture and society, or studying social transformation in South Africa."

Environmental stewardship

The Environmental Science Program at **Ferrum College** in the town of Ferrum in Southwest Virginia is the second oldest in the nation.

"The undergraduate program offers a modern introduction to the environmental sciences, and the challenging background enables students to deal with important environmental issues of the 21st century," said Natalie Faunce, college spokesperson.

"Rather than a traditional biological approach to the environment ... environmental problems are approached from a holistic perspective."

Randolph College in Lynchburg (formerly Randolph-Macon Woman's College) says it is known for its environmental focus.

"The focus on sustainability is cross-disciplined and campus-wide," said Brenda Edson, strategic communications manager. "For instance, our English professors work with our environmental science professors on curriculums that are combined."

One group of students created a business selling eco-friendly laundry detergent. Others created a bike-sharing program with the community through a pool of donated and rejuvenated bikes.

And a group of students and faculty has created a sustainability plan for the college

designed to limit the school's impact on the environment.

At **Lynchburg College**, the 470-acre Claytor Nature Study Center is a focal point of the strong environmental science program. The center offers open fields, woodlands, riverside cliffs, wetlands, a variety of flora and fauna and a mile of the Big Otter River.

Since 1998 the entire property has been managed for environmental conservation and restoration as part of agreements with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The newly completed Education & Research Center on the property provides classroom, laboratory, seminar and retreat facilities.

George Washington University's academic curriculum focuses on corporate and social responsibility. Its School of Business works through the Institute for Corporate Responsibility to prepare the next generation of business leaders to take an active role in initiating and integrating corporate responsibility.

"We have several professors in our School of Business who focus on corporate responsibility," said Tracy Schario, director of media relations at the Washington university.

The GW School of Business also has an Environmental and Social Sustainability Initiative that addresses how a company's economic, social and environmental footprint will become an increasingly valued skill set.

Fields of study include environmental law, sustainable landscape design and the Institute for the Analysis of Solar Energy.

Preparing for the real world

Students at **Jefferson College**

of Health Sciences in Roanoke have the opportunity to do clinicals, study programs and utilize mentoring programs with their affiliate, Carilion Clinic, one of the largest health systems in Virginia.

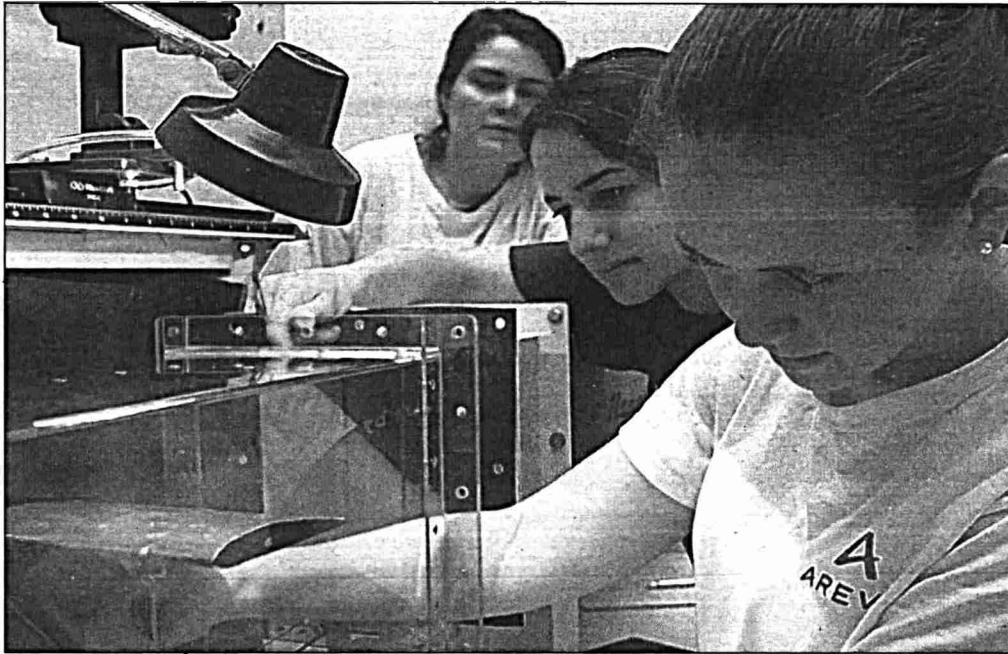
"Our network of health-care systems includes such places as Roanoke Memorial Hospital, New River Valley Hospital, Franklin Memorial Hospital, Giles Memorial Hospital and a dozen independent clinics in the area," said Mark Lambert, coordinator of communications and college relations, about this private, professional college that offers master's, bachelor's and associate degrees in health care.

Students also have the option to apply for Carilion-sponsored scholarships that pay for portions of their tuition with an agreement to work for a Carilion affiliate after graduation.

"**Mary Baldwin College** has demonstrated the courage to produce transformational opportunities for 167 years," said President Pamela Fox.

The Staunton college said its strength lies in its innovative liberal arts education that instills the knowledge, creativity, discipline and determination graduates need to thrive in their lives and contribute to their communities and the world.

"Among the most diverse and inclusive campuses in the country, the women of the residential college and the men and women in the Adult Degree Program and graduate programs exceed their own aspirations to become Boldly Baldwin: confident, compassionate, creative change-makers, disciplined and making a difference," she said.



From left, Sweet Briar Junior Victoria Nilsson, assistant professor of engineering Dorsa Sanadgol and 2008 graduate Christina Johnson set up a wind tunnel to test the effects of adding electrostatic charge to airfoils on flow separation. Engineering courses at Sweet Briar include studying the role engineers play in society.



Aeronautics is among Averett University's distinctive programs. Averett offers a bachelor's degree in aerospace management with concentrations in flight operations, aviation business, aviation maintenance operations and aviation technical systems.



STEWART MACINNIS/VMI

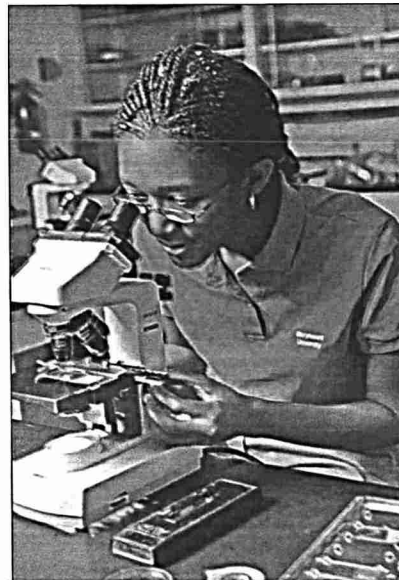
Virginia Military Institute in Lexington takes pride in its citizen-solder graduates, meaning graduates are prepared not only to serve the country through military service, but in whatever capacity is needed.



Students from the University of Mary Washington gather around Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine for a photo during "Mary Washington Lobby Day." The Fredericksburg school has strong political science and international affairs programs, giving students many opportunities to work with government, political and nonprofit organizations.



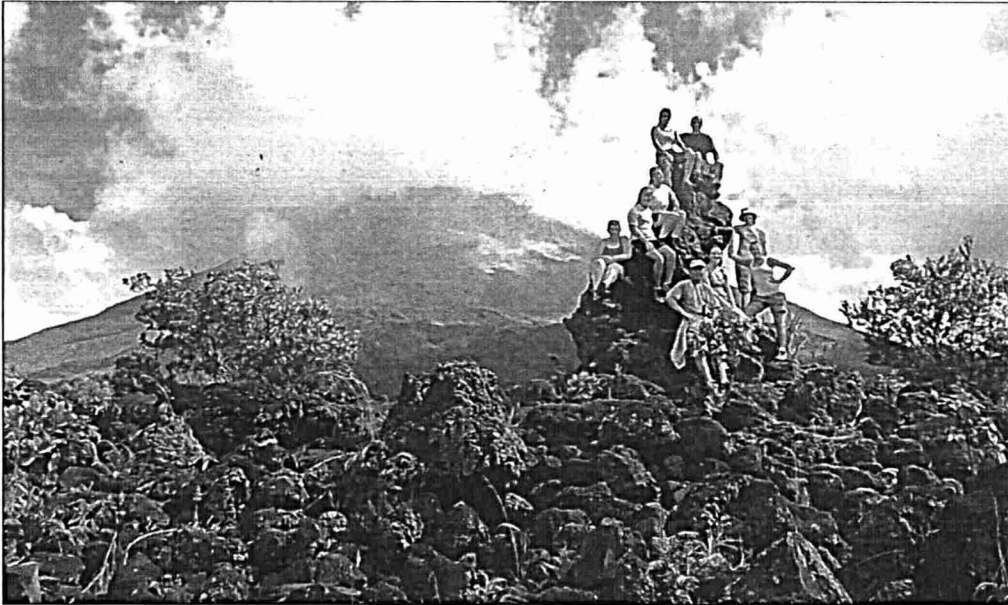
The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg is known for personalized education. Small classes and close interaction between professors and students are a result of the 11-to-1 faculty/student ratio.



Boloye Gomero peers into a microscope at Marymount University in Arlington. Undergraduate research and internships are emphasized at the school.



Longwood College in Farmville requires students complete an internship, field experience or practicum before graduating. Shown here are students participating in an archaeological dig.



At Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, students often use January Term to study abroad. Here, students gather for a group shot in Costa Rica.



The Claytor Nature Study Center at Lynchburg College offers a spectacular view of Sharp Top Mountain. The center is a focal point of the school's strong environmental science program.