

## Virginia Tech outreach program assists small businesses

Grayson Natural Foods, a company established by cattle farmers in Southwest Virginia, needed a business plan to get its naturally raised beef to the marketplace. Roanoke, Va.-based Interactive Achievement wanted a better understanding of the competitive environment for its interactive educational software. Schuelke & Associates Laser Services, a Virginia Beach, Va., medical technology company, sought more market data for a strategic review of its future market opportunities.



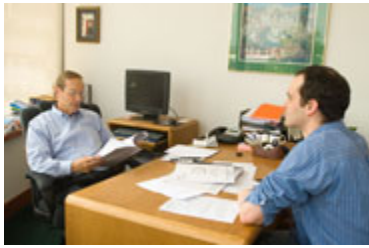
During the 2008-09 fiscal year, Virginia Tech's Business Technology Center logged more than 4,400 consulting hours in helping more than 100 Virginia high-tech businesses.

The three companies turned to Virginia Tech's Business Technology Center (BTC) for expert and affordable assistance. The center, managed by the Pamplin College of Business, is one of several university programs aimed at promoting economic development in the region and the state.

Located in the university's Corporate Research Center, BTC focuses on emerging and evolving technology-based companies. This feature helps distinguish it from other small-business assistance programs, said BTC director Dick Daugherty.

BTC's services, Daugherty said, cover key aspects of small business operations that include market research, business plan development, and financial modeling.

In addition to one-on-one counseling from Daugherty, clients receive the assistance from students that Daugherty employs, trains, and supervises. When appropriate, clients are offered the specialized expertise of Virginia Tech faculty members. The center can also provide referrals to independent consultants and venture capitalists through its ties with VT KnowledgeWorks, a regional technology business acceleration center.



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During the 2008-09 fiscal year, BTC logged more than 4,400 consulting hours in helping more than 100 Virginia high-tech businesses. It conducted in-depth studies for 16 businesses, including 10 start-ups.

Through recent projects, Daugherty said the center has identified business opportunities with the potential of creating more than 100 new jobs. The center has helped set up a similar operation in Martinsville, and the two offices work closely together.

While assisting businesses, students working on BTC projects get individual instruction in how to think about and tackle a complex

assignment. Daugherty provides one-on-one guidance and feedback in weekly meetings with each student during the semester.

### Common problems

While the client list is growing, Daugherty said his single biggest task often is networking. “People who need us haven’t heard of us,” he said.

Once hired, Daugherty said he found that BTC clients lack the time to collect the data needed to make a decision that is typically market related.

Sometimes, he added, “the client hasn’t even gotten that far — they haven’t had time to figure out the questions they need to ask. All they have is an idea for the product and an idea of potential demand.”

Other times, Daugherty said he finds that the client’s business model does not work for the business in mind. Many clients also don’t know how to do research efficiently on the Internet.

Daugherty said helping small entrepreneurs research and develop their technology ideas is not so different from his former career in industry. Whether it’s a fledgling undertaking, an established multinational enterprise, or something in between, he said, “all new products or ventures have the same fundamental concerns and issues, and the general approach is the same.”

The center’s outreach — originally local and regional — has been expanded to every corner of Virginia, Daugherty said. While supporting economic development will remain the backbone of BTC’s operations, Daugherty said the center also aims to strengthen ties with the academic community through expanding research, learning, and entrepreneurial opportunities for faculty and students.



Grayson Natural Foods president Danny Boyer (right) and his son Daniel are pictured with some of their cattle. The cooperative turned to Virginia Tech’s Business Technology Center to help formulate its business plan.



Jacob Gibson (standing), president of Interactive Achievement, and Megan Flora, the company's district manager, evaluate testing software that the company develops to give teachers and schools accurate assessments of student performance. Tech's Business Technology Center to help formulate its business plan.

During 2008-09, BTC also helped connect 20 undergraduates with companies, creating projects for the students to tackle in their business courses. Students gain substantially from working on BTC projects, whether in class or as interns at the center, Daugherty said.

Students can apply classroom concepts to actual business problems, and the interactions with clients are good opportunities for polishing interpersonal and communication skills, Daugherty said.

### **Thumbs-up from clients**

BTC has built a good foundation and gained statewide recognition for quality business assistance, said Pamplin Dean Richard E.

Sorensen, who chairs BTC's advisory board. "That progress is being continued under Daugherty's leadership," Sorensen said.

The testimonials that matter most come from the center's clients themselves.

"I value the expertise, wisdom, and technical capabilities of BTC," said Marvin (Skip) Schuelke, chief executive officer of Schuelke &

Associates Laser Services, which has called on BTC's help for several projects. "Especially for small businesses and entrepreneurs, this service provides support, guidance, and encouragement on a very tough road to success."

- *For more information on this topic, contact [Sookhan Ho](#) at (540) 231-5071.*