Q&A with Kevin Boyle
Developing an interdisciplinary real estate program

Where did the idea of the real estate program come from?

“The real estate program started from contact with one key person, Mike Miller, who has an appraisal firm in Richmond. He is a Virginia Tech graduate and former Board of Visitors member. He has hired a lot of students who have gone through the minor we offer on campus. He knew that a key faculty member in our department, Leon Geyer who taught two of the courses in the minor, was nearing retirement. He asked me what was going to happen when Leonretires because the program had been important to him to recruit new employees in the industry. From there, we discussed and attended a housing conference in Roanoke where we met with William Park, another Virginia Tech graduate who has a construction and property management business in Charlottesville. The idea was hatched to do something bigger than just trying to replace Leon. The question that they posed to me was, … with all of the assets that Virginia Tech has, why can't we have the best real estate program in the country? We have construction, we have finance, we have planning, we have economics, and we have property management, among other strengths. Their thought was that if we could bring these academic areas together to integrate the curriculum, Virginia Tech real estate graduates could be the best trained of anywhere in the country. That was the initial genesis of the program.”

Initial work to build the program began in 2006. Now, in 2013, we are anticipating approval from SCHEV this spring.

Is that a typical timeline to start a new degree program?

“This program is different from what the university has done before. We are bringing six colleges together. To my knowledge, six colleges have never collaborated on an effort like this before at Virginia Tech. There has been a lot of work to bring everyone together, put all of the pieces together, and get everyone going on the same path. It wasn't that people didn't want it to happen. The challenge was really getting everyone to come to one vision. It was a team effort from the start with one faculty member from each college participating in the development of the real estate program. Then, structurally within the university, an approval process for something like this was not established. We have had to work through every step to figure out the correct process. We have been the guinea pigs of how this will work in the future.”

What makes this program different from others across the country?

“A lot of real estate programs are at the graduate level, not undergraduate. Coming in with an undergraduate program is helping to fill a need. … Where we are really different at the undergraduate level is as an interdisciplinary program, pulling together six different colleges. I don't know of another program across the country that is as interdisciplinary as what we are proposing.”

“One thing I think is really unique about this program is if you look at other programs that have tried to put together interdisciplinary programs, they try to pull pieces from a lot of different areas across campus and piece them together. But what we decided to do is create a set of courses called REAL courses. … The REAL courses will integrate the knowledge that students get from classes from traditional departments within each of the six participating colleges. That is a real key part of our program. It's also on the frontiers of education today. Instead of sitting in a classroom, listening to the faculty talk, and taking notes, these courses are going to be much more experiential. They are going to have faculty from different disciplines teaching and advising students. They will have industry professionals in class to mentor students. As we move forward from a principles course to the senior level courses, the students take leadership for their education. We have a way to integrate the knowledge in an experiential, student-led education. It's going to make students more successful from day one after graduation.”