

# Coalfield Progress

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## Focus Groups Provided Input on Student Housing

By Robert Baird, Staff Writer

A consulting firm gathered lots of opinions, thoughts and ideas from UVa-Wise students and staff as it analyzed housing demand and housing needs.

As part of its study, Brailsford & Dunlavey:

- interviewed key college administrators to identify the project's parameters and discuss background information;
- reviewed documents and data provided by University of Virginia's College at Wise;
- conducted a series of focus group meetings, which produced feedback from on- and off-campus students, student housing staff members and student leaders;
- interviewed randomly selected UVa-Wise students to confirm and support information gathered in the focus groups;
- reviewed the local off-campus housing market; and
- conducted an online survey, posted on the UVa-Wise Web site, of college students to determine students' criteria for selecting housing, student housing preferences and housing demand. A total of 325 students completed the survey.

### THE BASICS

The college is considering development of a "Corner Village" community adjacent to the UVa-Wise campus, according to the study. The proposed site - owned by the college - is located between Bee Line Market and the Carl Smith football stadium.

The project would create both residential and retail space. Housing would be configured as apartment-style units for students, according to the study. The retail spaces could include small restaurants and eateries, a bookstore with café, dry cleaners, copy center and small specialty stores.

Residential units would be geared toward UVa-Wise students while retail spaces would help connect the Wise community and the college, the study says.

In January UVa-Wise hired Brailsford & Dunlavey, of Washington, D.C., to evaluate the demand for new apartment-style student housing and study the feasibility of the housing and retail development project near the campus edge.

The consulting firm's study showed students support the Corner Village project and that a demand exists for "near-campus" housing of about 200 to 300 beds.

Study findings were unveiled in mid-May.

## **FOCUS GROUPS**

The focus groups were held to spark discussion about a variety of housing needs and preferences. The focus groups were designed to obtain feedback from a range of students who would potentially use housing facilities.

Three focus groups gathered during the early part of the spring 2005 semester. "In general, the group included a number of highly vocal participants with varying opinions regarding the issues discussed," the Brailsford & Dunlavey report says.

Four individuals, all female, participated in the first focus group. Nine individuals, six female and three male, attended the second focus group meeting. Sixteen individuals, nine female and seven male, participated in the third focus group.

Later, about 20 students were randomly selected for interviews, the study says. Information compiled through these interviews confirmed student opinions shared in the focus group meetings.

## **FOCUS GROUP COMMENTS**

Here's some of the input received from the focus groups:

- Most participants were impressed with the sense of community found on the UVa-Wise campus.
- Participants said they were surprised to find that a "very poor relationship" exists between the college and town of Wise. They indicated the Wise community is not wholly accepting of college students. One participant mentioned that it's difficult to get off-campus housing when the landlord knows you're a college student. Others agreed.
- Students acknowledged there is little to do in the Wise area. However, participants were not entirely negative about this situation. One student said, "There isn't a lot to do around here but it's not hard to make your own fun."
- A few students mentioned they were excited to find a multitude of leadership opportunities at UVa-Wise. One participant said, "It is surprisingly easy to get involved at this college."
- Students said college faculty had "surpassed expectations," the study says. Participants indicated UVa-Wise professors display a deep level of commitment to each student and are genuinely concerned with the academic success of their students.
- "Participants mentioned that it is difficult to find housing in the off-campus market especially for those students coming from outside of the Wise area. Participants also pointed out that much of the housing available in the off-campus market is cost prohibitive to students on limited budgets," the Brailsford & Dunlavey study says.
- Participants indicated many students view on-campus housing as the most affordable living option in the Wise market.
- Numerous people said a "true college experience" involves living on campus. Students say on-campus housing provides the most convenient access to college resources. "Participants made it clear that a large part of life at UVa-Wise occurs in the residence halls and students who choose never to live on campus miss (this) aspect of college life."

-- "Numerous focus group participants mentioned that on-campus housing has a community-building focus and positive environment. Participants felt that the community aspect of UVa-Wise housing is its most important feature," according to the study.

-- Students seemed satisfied with the physical condition, general maintenance and cleanliness of on-campus housing facilities. The only recurring complaint was the lack of air conditioning in many on-campus residence halls.

### **ELECTRONIC SURVEY**

The online survey asked what students have, don't have, want and think they need, UVa-Wise Dean of Students Jeff Howard said during a recent interview.

Brailsford & Dunlavey's report analyzes survey data, provides in-depth results and documents comments made by each student, he says.

The study also gives the demographics of the survey population, identifying total responses by gender, ethnic background, academic classification and enrollment status, Howard said.

The identities of students participating in the survey and focus groups are confidential and not included in the study document.

Seven of the 325 students answering the online survey did not indicate a gender, according to the study. Of those who did give an answer, 210 students were female while 108 were male.

A total of 311 individuals identified themselves as full-time students, with eight saying they were part-timers, according to the study.

Of those giving an answer, 81 students said they were freshmen, 80 were sophomores, 87 were juniors and 67 were seniors.

Three students identified themselves as Native American, five as Asian-American or Pacific Islander, 12 as African-American, 10 as Hispanic/Latino and 273 as "White, Non-Hispanic."