

## Communicating success in research and encouraging a culture of celebration

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### FSLI Project Summary

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**Project need:** Many stakeholders remain unaware of the valuable work being carried out by Land-Grant universities. To strengthen and sustain our research enterprise, we must diversify our funding sources and better align our research, outreach, and extension efforts with the evolving needs of industry. This includes fostering a culture of entrepreneurship among faculty and ensuring that all employees feel recognized and valued. By investing in strategic communication, deepening stakeholder engagement, and cultivating a culture of celebration, we can bridge the gap between land-grant research and public understanding—amplifying our impact and reinforcing our relevance.

**Project objectives:**

1. Increase the frequency of internal and external communications about research success, direct and potential impacts to our stakeholders
2. Increase faculty skills at clearly expressing achievements, potential, and gratitude to those that help them achieve research goals
3. Increase investments in the research enterprise

**Potential obstacles:** Funding is needed to support ongoing efforts, shift university culture, and overcome the inertia of doing things the way they've always been done.

**Measures:** subscription to external emails, number of stories about CALS Research, submissions to impact databases, use of impact statements at a national level by Ag Innovation, USDA-NIFA, NSF, NIH

**Project goals:** Legislative success, more stories in national media, major donation to CALS to support research, get people talking to each other

**Activities:** We regularly send internal and external emails featuring a “Researcher of the Month,” highlighting impactful Hatch projects with clearly defined outcomes. These stories are repurposed for impact databases, legislative handouts, and other stakeholder requests. Internal communications also include updates on college-level committees, policy changes, and other relevant news. To recognize achievements, we send handwritten congratulatory notes to researchers who receive major awards (over \$100K), secure their first grant as a Principal Investigator, or earn professional honors. Additionally, we've facilitated visits for university stakeholders—who might not otherwise engage with Agricultural Research and Extension Centers—by using the university plane to foster mutual understanding of opportunities and needs. We also use the “Concentric Circles”

activity, introduced by Dean Kress at the Ohio session, with stakeholder advisory committees to explore shared values and identify areas for growth.

**Key accomplishments include:**

- Launching targeted internal and external communications that significantly increased engagement (email open rates of 48% vs. 35% industry average).
- Implementing the “Concentric Circles” prioritization model to align research investments with core institutional values.
- Enhancing stakeholder involvement through surveys, field days, and legislative outreach, resulting in increased support and visibility.
- Establishing new platforms like the upcoming *Agency 229* magazine and “Summer of Service Labs” to showcase impactful research and extension.
- Reorganizing the research office, hiring a dedicated communicator, and identifying signature research areas through data-driven assessments.
- Others within the college are expressing appreciation to their team.

These efforts are fostering a more connected, celebrated, and strategically aligned research culture across Virginia Tech’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

**FSLI experience:** FLSI has been instrumental in shaping my role at Virginia Tech by providing invaluable peer mentorship and learning opportunities. One of the most impactful elements was the opportunity to engage with bold, visionary leaders in higher education—individuals whose fearless leadership is rarely modeled in day-to-day settings. These experiences have inspired me to broaden my leadership skills, lead effectively from my current position, and invest in mentoring the next generation of leaders