

New Center Connects the Community with University Resources



Interim President Chris Fiorentino, center right, meets with, from left, Interim Director of External Operations Lisa Montgomery and Center for Community Solutions staff Carol Aichele, Tanisha Mahlawat and Susan Argentieri.

Robyn Jewitt of West Chester knows a lot about home staging and interior design and has years of experience in real estate and facilities management. So her decision to open a home staging and home organizing business made a lot of sense. But when she started her business, last winter, she needed help with her business plan, website and social media marketing. That's

where Tanisha Mahlawat and WCU's Center for Community Solutions comes into the story.

We're going to give away the ending to this story right now – it's a happy ending. Today, just seven months after launch, Jewitt's business is booming, in large part due to her professional expertise, organizational skills, creative ideas and love of design. But at least a small part of her success can be attributed to Mahlawat and the Center for Community Solutions. The center serves as a central point of contact between community members or organizations that have a problem and University faculty, staff and students who can help solve that problem. Mahlawat is one of two interns currently with the center. She graduated from WCU in May with a degree in economics and finance and plans to attend graduate school. Her long-term goal is to open her own business.

Jewitt found out about the Center for Community Solutions from SCORE, the nonprofit that helps businesses get started and grow. Susan Argentieri, the center's outreach coordinator, knew that Mahlawat would be the perfect fit to assist Jewitt. Mahlawat had previously worked in WCU's Information Services division and has a natural knack for web design.

"Tanisha was extremely responsive," says Jewitt. "She was quick to set up my business Facebook page, added necessary areas to my website, and assisted with my business plan. I am so impressed by Tanisha's knowledge and ambition, and so grateful for the opportunity to have worked with an organization that assists new small business owners like me."

"Faculty, staff and students at the University have always been out working in the community on various research studies, community service projects and collaborative partnerships," notes Lisa Montgomery, interim director for External Operations at WCU. "What our center does is to provide 'one-stop shopping' for community members seeking assistance. You don't need to call department after department trying to find the right person. We can tell you whether a University resource will be able to

assist, whether you're a nonprofit looking to improve your mobile app or a township that needs help eradicating an invasive beetle from its woodlands."

The examples Montgomery gives are recent success stories. West Chester's Uptown Entertainment Alliance received help with its mobile app and East Bradford Township obtained student support to control the destructive Emerald Ash borer beetle. And they are just two of more than 25 projects completed since the center opened last year. Other completed projects include a mentoring program that pairs WCU students with high school students, work with the Chester County Department of Community Development to provide transportation to low-income areas, and social media marketing for a local fitness center. Additionally, there are 29 projects currently under way or in development for local nonprofits, municipalities, school districts, government agencies, and others.

The Center for Community Solutions was the brainchild of West Chester Borough Mayor Carolyn Comitta and former WCU president Greg Weisenstein.

In the summer of 2013, Mayor Comitta and Matt Bricketto, who recently retired from the position of WCU vice president of Student Affairs, attended the International Town and Gown Association's annual conference. Comitta says she was struck by the words of keynote speaker Michael G. Gartner: *"If you have a university in your community, the first question you should be asking when a problem surfaces is, 'I wonder how our university can help us.'"*

"People know I'm a West Chester alum and that I have a strong relationship with University administrators, faculty and staff. So I was always getting asked about how the University could help with different issues," says Comitta. "While I was happy to offer assistance, I also knew I wouldn't be mayor forever. Listening to Michael Gartner made me realize we needed to formalize the process and institutionalize this knowledge. Greg Weisenstein was in complete agreement, and made the decision to move forward with the Center for Community Solutions."

Carol Aichele serves as the center's external outreach coordinator. If someone can be considered too successful at their job, Aichele fits the bill. Since being hired last summer, after a long career in state and local government, she has met with community groups, business associations, government officials and others to explain what the center can do for them.

"We are getting a tremendous response from the community," notes Montgomery. "People are eager to tap into the considerable expertise that exists at WCU in many different fields and disciplines."

Each project request submitted is evaluated based on several factors, including whether resources exist at the University to assist in the problem; the size and scope of the issue; and whether the project is sustainable after the University has completed its work.

"In the case of Tanisha's partnership with Robyn Jewitt, she was teaching Robyn the skills she needed to maintain her website and social media presence and to update her business plan long after the project was completed," says Montgomery.

Mahlawat beams as she talks about this assignment. "It felt good to play a part in getting this business launched," she says. And since I want to go into business for myself someday, it also benefitted me

personally. As a center intern, I'm gaining real-world experience that is moving me closer to achieving my long-term goals."