

WCU's no-charge human resources consulting service to continue, broaden

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Western Carolina University will broaden a service-learning initiative that provides human resources consultation free of charge to nonprofits, local governments and small businesses, thanks to a recent University of North Carolina General Administration grant.



Homeward Bound, a Western North Carolina nonprofit working to end homelessness, is one of several organizations, small businesses and local governments getting free human resources consultation from a WCU service-learning initiative. Taking part in a consultation are, from left, Jim Lowder, Homeward Bound's director of advancement; Emily Ball, housing services director with Homeward Bound; Marie-Line Germain, WCU associate professor of human resources and leadership; and Rachel Sossoman, a student in WCU's graduate degree program in human resources at the time of consultation and now a nonprofit coordinator for a human resources consulting initiative.

Students in the WCU master's degree program in human resources serve as consultants in a 10-week timeframe as part of their coursework. The nearly \$23,000 in funding will be used to create additional partnerships and expand opportunities on a broader scale. A total of 15 new consulting projects are planned to start this year in North Carolina and Tennessee alone.

The service-learning initiative is coordinated by Marie-Line Germain, associate professor of human resources and leadership, who also supervises each student's consulting project.

"We help our graduate students help organizations that, in turn, help people," said Germain. "That impact is incommensurable."

Since 2011, graduate students in the program have provided pro bono consulting on 75 projects for 32 nonprofit organizations and small businesses in North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. Clients have included Habitat for Humanity in Asheville; Autism Tennessee in Knoxville; Safe Harbor, a service provider in Greenville, South Carolina, for domestic violence victims; City Lights Bookstore of Sylva; the Dogwood Alliance environmental group headquartered in Asheville; the Town of Canton; and Jackson County government.

Each consulting project addresses a critical need, such as updating job descriptions and employee handbooks,

revising employee benefits programs, creating discipline action policies and procedures, and improving performance evaluation methods.

Seth Hendler-Voss, the town manager of Canton, said a WCU consulting team helped execute a pay study for the town to be more competitive in the regional market. Germain's students were able to compile and analyze a tremendous amount of data in short order and ultimately produced a tangible new pay plan for the Haywood County municipality, he said.

"Looking beyond compensation, the students challenged us to consider other measures that may increase retention and employee satisfaction," Hendler-Voss said. "The partnership with WCU gave Canton a professional-grade product at no cost and exemplifies the university's commitment to serving as a relevant resource to surrounding communities."

Based in the College of Education and Allied Professions, WCU's graduate degree program in human resources began in 1984. The program is now completely online, which typically attracts full-time working professionals who are either currently working in the human resources field or who want to transition into the profession. Although coursework is performed online, Germain said when it comes to consulting projects, she has students meet with the organizations whenever possible.

"What makes this initiative so unique is that it provides an opportunity for our HR students to apply the theoretical knowledge they acquire in our courses," said Germain. "Whether they are seasoned HR professionals or use this consulting as a resume builder, students find the experience personally enriching. They become more sensitive to social issues such as homelessness, child welfare or environmental sustainability. Our service allows organizations to focus on what matters to them the most, their mission. They are served by students who are as passionate about human resource management as the organizations are about their mission."

The human resources program's consulting initiative is consistent with the strategic direction of the university and the college, both stating an emphasis on enhancing external partnerships, said Dale Carpenter, dean of WCU's College of Education and Allied Professions. "One of the core values of the college is active, collaborative engagement with our core communities," he said. "The consulting initiative fulfills our mission to be an engaged university and provides students with an authentic and worthwhile experience while at the same time providing a valuable service to the region. The University of North Carolina system grant is helping to extend a proven program in the western region."

The UNC system funding also will be used to develop a consulting guide to assist other UNC institutions in implementing similar programs and to make consulting available to students who are completing their end-of-degree internship. For more information, contact Germain at 828-227-3959 or mgermain@wcu.edu.