

NEWS RELEASE

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SBTDC at Western Carolina University Announces New Data Visualization Internship Program with Homeward Bound WNC

Partnership between SBTDC and WCU Faculty in Computer Information Systems Program leads to paid internship opportunities with local non-profit

(Cullowhee, NC) The Small Business and Technology Development Center (SBTDC) at Western Carolina University (WCU) is proud to announce a new partnership between University faculty, students and small to midsize business clients in Western North Carolina. For more than 15 years the SBTDC at WCU has worked with faculty members to connect business clients with student engagement projects around topics including strategic management, entrepreneurship, hospitality and tourism, digital marketing, human resources, and more. Most recently, SBTDC Business Counselor Ashley McFarland developed a new partnership involving data visualization through the Computer Information Systems program in the WCU College of Business.

In the pilot course during the Spring 2020 semester, McFarland worked closely with Dr. Dan Clapper to organize a student team project for his advanced CIS370 course titled Data for Visual Storytelling. Throughout the course students used Tableau, an industry-leading business intelligence and analytics platform that helps businesses better visualize their data.

Dr. Clapper selected two students from his class and McFarland connected them with leadership team members from SBTDC client Homeward Bound WNC, a local non-profit serving people experiencing homelessness. For eight weeks, the student team collaborated with Leigh Hackney, Homeward Bound Programs Administrator, to tackle three primary research questions developed by their staff. The students worked with de-identified raw data sets and ultimately developed sophisticated customizable charts and graphics that could be used interactively to tell a clear visual story about what the data revealed. "I love their enthusiasm!" said Hackney. "The data I shared with them was cumbersome and they were able to pull out the data relevant to the questions I asked and put together a comprehensive report. The student team was receptive to feedback and made appropriate changes to increase the value of the project. We will be able to use the information to inform donors, board members, and the community."

For the students on the team, this was an exciting opportunity to work on a real world project directly with a client in their region. "The Homeward Bound project was a great opportunity to

help a local organization and at the same time show the students that skills they learn in the classroom can be applied to help with real world problems,” said Clapper.

And for one student, the relationship will evolve into a paid internship opportunity. Dr. Clapper, McFarland, and Hackney have partnered to develop an annual paid internship program beginning this fall 2020. Each spring students will work together on a team project for Homeward Bound and one or more students will then be offered paid fall internships with the 501c3 organization. “I’m very excited to see our collaboration turn into opportunities for our students to gain professional experience and assist companies in areas where they need it most,” shared McFarland. “I love connecting with enthusiastic faculty members like Dr. Clapper and developing programs and project-based learning opportunities for WCU students that will advance their business education while also helping North Carolina’s small businesses with real-life projects and issues.”

SBTDC at WCU Regional Center Director Sandra Dennison added that “the SBTDC at WCU is committed to providing knowledge, education, and other supportive resources that enable existing small and mid-sized businesses, emerging entrepreneurs, students, and local/state leaders to innovate and succeed.”

The SBTDC is North Carolina’s leading resource for growing and developing businesses. Since 1984, the SBTDC has helped over 125,000 North Carolina business owners and prospective entrepreneurs make better decisions – often leading to increased revenue and employment. The SBTDC has 16 regional offices across North Carolina. Each office is supported by a local state university and staffed by specially trained professionals – most with prior business ownership or executive experience. The SBTDC is a business advisory service of the University of North Carolina System, administered statewide by NC State University and operated in partnership with the US Small Business Administration. For more information about the SBTDC at WCU visit sbtcd.org/offices/wcu.

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