

New SBDC director aims to help fuel entrepreneurs' 'spark'

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<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/24376/new-sbdc-director-aims-to-help-fuel-entrepreneurs-spark/>

Colleen Merrill can't help but wonder what groundbreaking, market-shaking business ideas are incubating in the heads of University of Wisconsin Oshkosh students.

The state's third largest University now boasts 13,500 students. And many with hopes of building future, ground-up enterprises are capitalizing on their high-impact College of Business educations. Still others boast experience and creativity nurtured in an array of campus disciplines – education helping hatch great ideas for products and services Merrill believes could be game-changers in Wisconsin's (or maybe even the national and international) marketplace.

"They've got the spark," Merrill said, seated at a meeting table within the [UW Oshkosh Small Business Development Center](#) (SBDC) director's office she occupied just three days earlier.

Merrill, who completed her undergraduate and MBA degrees at UW Oshkosh, has recently taken the lead as director of the SBDC. The organization is within UW Oshkosh's fleet of offices strategically created to help support, sustain and enhance the community's, the region's and the state's budding and long-standing small, large and family-owned enterprises. The SBDC specifically channels UW Oshkosh knowledge, talent and resources to provide "free management counseling services to companies with up to 500 employees."

The SBDC, established in 1980, also contains the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation (CEI), "an initiative aimed at providing a wide range of educational programs and services for high-growth entrepreneurs and assistance to them in seeking grant and equity financing." The CEI leverages the expertise and research capabilities of UW Oshkosh faculty, staff and students within the College of Business.

While UW Oshkosh is her proud alma mater, it also holds a place on Merrill's professional resume. She said she will leverage the market research experience she honed at UW Oshkosh's Business Success Center, where, for more than two and a half years, she helped develop and direct surveys that gauged everything from the confidence and readiness of New North manufacturers to expand to the political attitudes of northeastern Wisconsinites.

"I'm going to still be out there counseling businesses and finding what needs are," she said.

Merrill is also no stranger to small business ownership and management. Her family has roots and deep experience in mechanical contracting, and she currently co-owns and operates an area rental properties management business. Having that essential, in-the-trenches understanding of the challenges and needs of small business is integral to her role at the SBDC, she said.

Beyond the day to day business counseling work she and her SBDC colleagues will offer, Merrill said

one of her biggest priorities will be helping UW Oshkosh student and regional entrepreneurs lock the support they need to fortify business plans, launch startup endeavors and give birth to full-fledged companies.

“Maybe we simply find them a business mentor,” she said.

“What I’m excited about is our students – they have such entrepreneurial ideas, and the marketplace is really different out there these days,” Merrill said, hoping to grow the number of investment opportunities, and event contests, that help fuel the entrepreneurialism emanating from campus.

The SBDC is housed in Sage Hall, UW Oshkosh’s newest academic center, a state-of-the-art and Gold LEED certified home to the College of Business and many departments of the College of Letters and Science.

During FY 2012, the SBDC provided no-cost consulting to 200 small business owners and entrepreneurs, delivering over 332 counseling sessions. Through this assistance, SBDC consultants supported 8 business starts and more than \$3 million in capital formation for small businesses in the region. In addition to one-on-one consulting, the UW Oshkosh SBDC also delivered over 363 hours of training to 54 program attendees.

The SBDC is funded in part through a Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Small Business Administration. Through long-term consulting and training programs, the SBDC assists small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs with accessing capital, new product development, market research, business planning and more.

Merrill said she is eager to strengthen the many collaborations the SBDC, through UW Oshkosh, has developed over the organization’s lifetime.

The SBDC serves and works alongside businesses and organizations, including chambers of commerce and economic development agencies, in seven counties, including Green Lake, Fond du Lac, Marquette, Outagamie, Sheboygan, Waushara and Winnebago.

“Collaboration is key,” Merrill said. “We do much better – there’s more synergy – when we come together. I think the goal is to grow Wisconsin.”

Learn more:

- [UW Oshkosh Small Business Development Center](#)
- [Women Magazine profile – “Colleen Merrill: Embracing Opportunities” \(March 2012\)](#)