

WHATCOM



2024 ANNUAL REPORT

**SMALL BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT CENTER**



MAKE WAVES.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

2024 YEAR IN REVIEW

As I reflect on a year of growth and collaboration, I find fuel for optimism. Our community united to recover from the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and historic floods, emerging stronger, more resilient, and with deeper connections. Through collaboration with our stakeholders and outreach partners, our center was able to expand our reach and adapt to the changing needs of our evolving business community.

We served a record number of clients in 2024, and I am proud to work alongside such a dedicated and talented team. Though we will share our economic impact in this

report, the true scope and significance of our work is best reflected through our clients' own words. The client stories showcased here illustrate how we help build the foundation and confidence that fuels sustainable, successful businesses.

We've recently witnessed a surge in curiosity about business ownership. Too often, promising new entrepreneurs see their opportunities stifled by barriers to traditional commercial lending. To address this issue, we worked closely with Whatcom Community Foundation and First Federal Bank to establish a microloan program that is now processing its first applications

IN 2024, WWU SBDC ADVISORS HELPED WHATCOM CLIENTS SECURE 67 CAPITAL INVESTMENTS TOTALING \$7.8 MILLION – DELIVERING AN ROI OF \$25 FOR EVERY \$1 IN LOCAL FUNDING.

in a pilot launch. These relatively small investments can make a big difference to those who need them most, with reverberating impacts on the local economy.

We continue to work with community partners across industries to meet emerging needs with creative approaches. For example, our advisors collaborate with WorkSource to connect clients with workforce support resources and capacity-building grants. We also work with APEX Accelerator and WWU's Small and Local Business Program to connect more small businesses with government contracting opportunities.

Despite economic uncertainty, I am hopeful for our shared future. I see promise and strength in an interconnected small business community that fosters an environment where entrepreneurs can launch, grow, and find long-term stability.

As always, we remain grateful for the ongoing stakeholder support that empowers us to walk beside our clients along their journey through an ever-evolving landscape. ♦

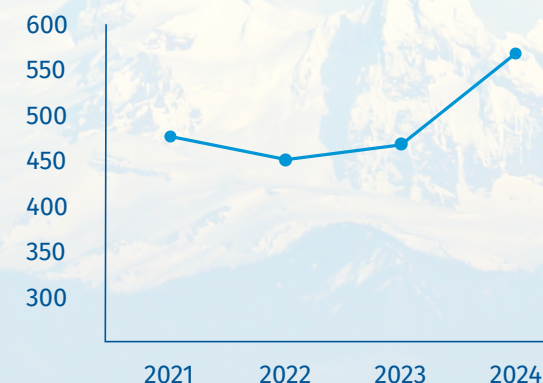
CJ Seitz
Executive Director
WWU SBDC



WHO WE ARE

The WWU Small Business Development Center provides tools, training, and resources to help small businesses grow and succeed. Our team of Certified Business Advisors brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to bolster a supportive economic environment through no-cost, fully confidential, one-on-one advising. As regional subject matter experts, our team serves the Whatcom business community in a strategic advisory and educational role.

Number of Businesses Advised
2021–2024



Client Milestones	2021	2022	2023	2024
New Businesses Started	17	17	31	31
Jobs Created or Retained	526	646	996	404
Annual Revenue	\$291M	\$156M	\$174M	\$206M

STRENGTHENING OUR PRESENCE

RURAL & AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

In 2024, we deepened our commitment to serving rural and agricultural businesses in Whatcom County, recognizing their vital role in our local economy. We prioritized reaching these business owners in their own communities to ensure that they had access to resources necessary to grow and succeed. Building on relationships formed during the 2021 flood recovery efforts, our advisors assisted 198 clients operating in USDA-designated rural zones and participated in key industry events.

We reinforced our outreach efforts by presenting at the Eat Local First Trade Meeting hosted by Sustainable Connections and the Whatcom Farm Expo organized by the Whatcom Conservation District and Whatcom County Public Works. At these events, we engaged with over 800 professionals in the food and agricultural sectors. These gatherings provided opportunities to share our services, make new connections, and further support rural business owners. We look forward to continuing this work in 2025. ♦



“It’s a true joy to support the folks who feed our community. We have an abundance of fresh food in our area—vegetables, livestock, and seafood. I am always amazed at the knowledge farmers have across all of these industries. Combining their deep knowledge with our business expertise helps sustain our local economy, contributes to food security, and helps them continue to do what they love.”

—Asche Rider, Certified Business Advisor



“Meeting Liliana has been a great experience because she has helped me a lot to grow my business. She has connected me to the Bellingham School District and helped me with the grant application of \$10,000 for the refrigerator truck to expand my business for next year. Thanks to Liliana I increased my tomato sales by 75%.”

—Anibal Hernandez, Owner, Primavera Farm

15 CLIENTS RECEIVED FUNDING TO PURCHASE CAPACITY-BUILDING EQUIPMENT THROUGH THE NORTHWEST CONNECT BUSINESS ACCELERATOR PROGRAM.

“Small businesses create jobs in the Pacific Northwest, and Small Business Development Centers like the one at Western Washington University help them grow and keep the economy moving.”

—Rep. Rick Larsen (WA-02)



THE BUSINESSES WE ADVISED IN 2024 COLLECTIVELY EMPLOY MORE THAN 1,735 PEOPLE.



“The SBDC is an incredible resource for small business owners like us. They’ve helped us grow from a breakeven idea to a thriving business that employs 15 local people. Every time we have a goal—growing the business, getting grant support, or buying a building—the experts at the SBDC have tangible steps to help us get there.”

—Jeff Shaw, Owner, Bellingham BJJ

“Eric Grimstead at the SBDC has been an invaluable resource for my business as I have undergone significant growth over the last four years. I am in the process of expanding more and considering a purchase of a building and Eric has been instrumental in helping with regards to business advice, financial projections, assistance with applying for loans, and more. I couldn’t imagine taking these steps into growth without the help of the SBDC. Thank you immensely!”

—Dr. Sarah Paxson, Owner Green Mountain Physical Therapy



NAVIGATING GROWTH

COMPASSIONATE CARE AT NW GASTROENTEROLOGY & ENDOSCOPY

By: Allijah Motika

How do you stay competitive in a medical field dominated by large corporations while keeping patient care at the forefront of your practice? This is the dilemma that the owners of Northwest Gastroenterology work to solve every day. In 1983 Northwest Gastroenterology opened as a fully independent, physician-owned and operated practice. They believed that the best way to serve the Bellingham community was with a physician-ownership model that kept comprehensive and

compassionate patient care at the core of their approach. Fast forward to 2025 and they continue to grow in their mission to serve Whatcom County and the surrounding areas.

One of the physicians behind the success of Northwest Gastroenterology is Dr. Benjamin Siemanowski, a gastroenterologist who has lived in Bellingham since 2007. Dr. Siemanowski was drawn to Northwest Gastroenterology's independent model and has been working there since 2015. "The independent, physician-ownership

model makes Northwest Gastroenterology a special place" says Dr. Siemanowski.

"It reflects in the care that we can provide because the physicians have a vested interest in the success of the business. This helps us be better doctors for our patients." While this approach has significant benefits, it also requires outside assistance.

In 2019, Northwest Gastroenterology had started to outgrow their location, and this became a tipping point for a great deal of change. While the physicians are experts in their field, many of them are not experts in business, so they turned to the Small Business Development Center and Senior Certified Business Advisor Eric Grimstead for support. With Eric's help they developed a plan to grow their business, the first step: Find a larger location for their practice.

"When going into a project like this, everybody makes assumptions about what is possible," Dr. Siemanowski says. "Having Eric's experience was so helpful. He worked on projections and numbers for what it would take for success. And that gave us encouragement because his numbers matched our assumptions." After considering all the factors, they were able to complete their move in 2022 and are now located in the Barkley area on Woburn Street.

The move has significantly improved their business and the satisfaction they have in their work. They were able to expand

"The SBDC is not too good to be true, it's true that it's that good."



Dr. Benjamin Siemanowski

their practice from six to 10 physicians and roughly 100 total employees. They are now able to serve more patients and have significantly decreased the wait time for new visits. Dr. Siemanowski views it as a huge victory. "We can see more patients and take better care of the community," he says. "You can really feel the impact in the office...It used to be a three month wait for non-urgent new patient visits, now it's only two to three weeks. We're thrilled at how much better we can help people."

When asked what he'd tell other businesses that might be considering working with the SBDC, Dr. Siemanowski said, simply, "Stop thinking about it and meet with them. The SBDC is not too good to be true, it's true that it's that good." Northwest Gastroenterology plans to continue working with the SBDC although they don't intend to make any big waves in the near future. Their main goal, for now, is to go through a period of "normalcy" and continue to provide great care for the local community. As a recipient of the Bellingham Herald's Cascades Best 2024 Award, it appears they're doing just that. ♦



PARTNERING TO EXPAND OPPORTUNITIES

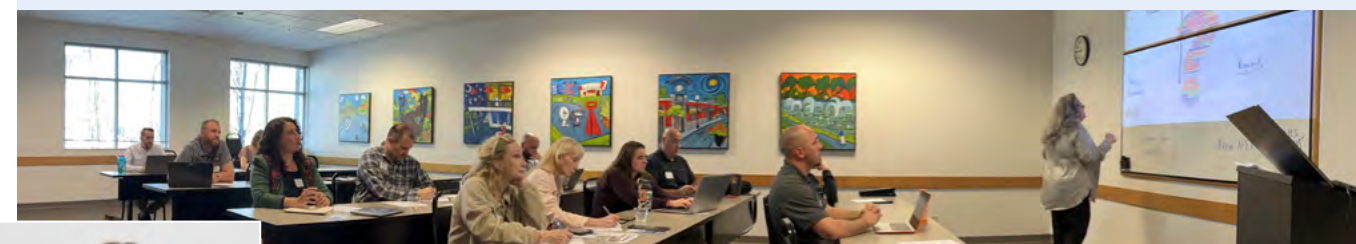
SMALL AND LOCAL BUSINESSES

Western Washington University recognizes the ongoing importance of working with small and local businesses to supply goods and services to the University. In 2023, with support from the WWU SBDC, Western launched the Small and Local Business Program to advance this goal. Through targeted outreach and

a streamlined vendor onboarding process, the program has seen steady growth throughout 2024 and now includes over 30 vendors. We're grateful for the opportunity to partner with Western on this initiative and are excited to continue working together to connect even more small and local businesses with contracting opportunities. ♦

APEX Government Contracting Workshop Series

Since 2023, we've partnered with APEX Accelerator by hosting monthly drop-in clinics at the WWU SBDC office for those seeking technical assistance with government contracting. In 2024, we expanded our partnership by cohosting a six-part workshop series. Collaborating with Economic Alliance Snohomish County and Economic Development Alliance Skagit County, the series offered 25 Whatcom County participants hands-on experience and practical guidance on how to conduct industry-specific market research.



"I'm thankful for the collaboration between Washington APEX Accelerator and WWU's SBDC team. Workshop participants not only gained essential market research skills to identify and pursue state and local government contracts, but they also made valuable connections with other business leaders in Whatcom County. APEX is committed to offering more workshops and events in partnership with WWU SBDC to support economic growth and opportunities for small businesses in our region."

—Cara Buckingham, Center Manager & Advisor, Washington APEX Accelerator

"THE SBDC IS THE MOST VITAL RESOURCE THAT SUPPORTS MY SMALL BUSINESS GROWING AND SURVIVING IN THIS LARGE INDUSTRY MARKET. I COULD NOT BE IN BUSINESS WITHOUT THE SBDC."

—KIRSTIN CURTIS, OWNER
MT. SHUKSAN FAMILY MEDICINE

"The City of Bellingham proudly supports the outstanding work of Western Washington University's Small Business Development Center because it plays a pivotal role in providing valuable resources and guidance at no cost to help our business owners start, sustain and grow their businesses."

—Kim Lund, Mayor
City of Bellingham



"Sherri Daymon is incredibly helpful and provides me with the tools I need to accurately predict cash flow which helps me with my process of making decisions. She has been a key part of my business' growth and sustainability. The business would absolutely not be where it is today without Sherri's assistance and the tools that she has provided for us."

—Mike Randol, Owner, The Lost Co.



"The SBDC has worked with the Lost Co. in times of exponential growth and also during great hardship. Understanding cash flow and debt management are critical for any business' long-term survival."

—Sherri Daymon
Certified Business Advisor

WWU SBDC Clients Complete T.H.R.I.V.E. Program

Congratulations to the five Whatcom County business owners (all SBDC clients) that completed the 2024 SBA T.H.R.I.V.E program. This program provides entrepreneurship education and training for small but fast-growing businesses. This intensive program only admits 25 participants per year through a competitive application and interview process, reflecting the high caliber of our local small business owners.



From left to right: Erika Millage, Mike Randol, Dave Donnelly, Katherine Garrah, & Jeff Shaw

ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

COACHING FOR SUCCESS AT ZAZEN SALON SPA

By: Allijah Motika

In 2020, Derrick Watson had the chance to purchase a local salon and was excited for the opportunity. As a longtime athletics coach and successful entrepreneur, he knew that he had the experience and drive to grow Zazen Salon Spa to bring it into its next phase. After taking some time to get to know the business, Watson wanted an outside perspective to ensure that he was on the right path.

When he found the WWU Small Business Development Center he didn't quite know what to expect. He says what he received was "priceless." After signing up for the SBDC's services, Watson was paired with Certified Business Advisor Asche Rider. Together they started to discuss a couple of key points that Watson hoped to implement at Zazen: an improved business culture and an updated employee compensation plan that reflected his core business strategy.

From his experience as a sports coach and owner of a youth football academy, Watson Athletics LLC, Watson was confident that he could build a collaborative on-the-field culture but had less experience cultivating it in the workplace. He wanted the employees to view each other not just as coworkers, but as teammates, and build

a workplace that brought out the best in them and simultaneously strengthened the business. Rider shared various books and resources that gave him valuable perspective on building organizational culture. With this knowledge, Watson held open conversations with his team about how to improve their operations and customer connections.

If you've been to a salon or spa, you know that the business is only as good as its relationships. Most customers go to a salon for the stylist, not just for the business name on the front door. With this in mind, Watson wanted to encourage his stylists to create long-lasting relationships with their clients. "I wanted to incentivize relationship building," he says. "How can we change to be more customer-oriented and create metrics of customer satisfaction?" Catering to "the recurring customer" has led to increased customer satisfaction and a greater sense of trust and collaboration within the Zazen team.

"What makes Derrick so exciting to work with is his thoughtfulness and curiosity," says Rider. "He comes to every meeting with great ideas, and we work together to bring those ideas to life." As Zazen moves forward,

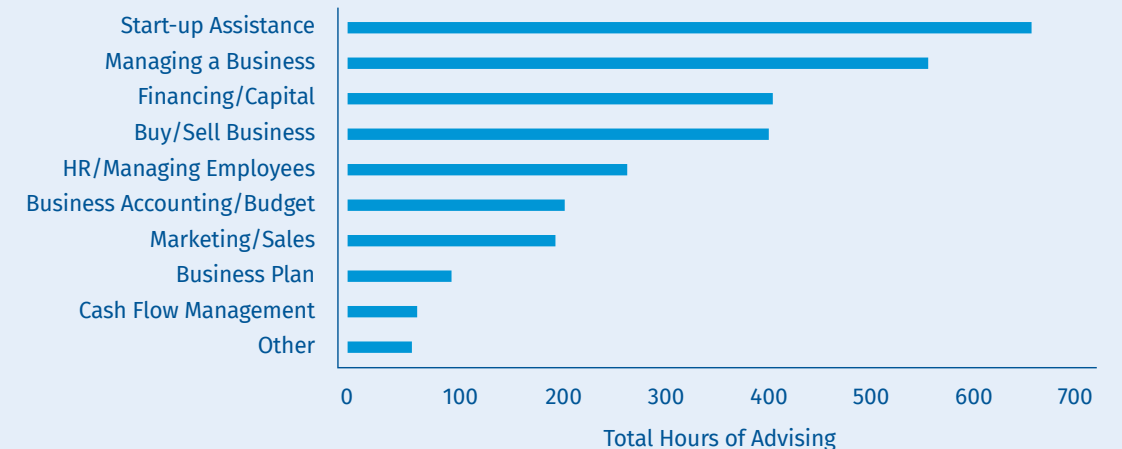


Derrick Watson

Watson intends to continue working with Rider and the WWU SBDC. "Asche has done so much for us it's hard to describe," says Watson. "She has been a part of every single part of our business. She's awesome

and a true lifeline for us." From the football field to the salon front desk and every prospective business venture, Watson knows that the SBDC is there as his coach for future success. ♦

2024 Advising Topics



TURNING INSIGHT INTO ACTION

GROWTH, RESILIENCE, & NEW HORIZONS

“Early in 2023, our business closed for almost a month due to some water damage. This closure caused financial strains and the community had been led to believe that we were closed. Liliana Deck guided us on talking to the community about our temporary closure and what to do once we reopened.

Liliana visited our business and guided us on how to organize the store to give the customer a better experience. These small changes have boosted our confidence.

We feel that the changes we have made to the store with Liliana’s guidance have increased the number of sales, especially this time of year when we are usually extremely slow. We have sold several wedding dresses in the last two months, which has not happened before. Liliana gave us confidence.”

–Norma Suarez, Owner
Sueño Bridal



“Great advice, guidance, and a shoulder to lean on! Provided me with different perspectives on budgeting my team’s labor, assessing COGS %, and how to better understand my P&L and balance sheet reports to evaluate business health. After the few months working with the SBDC I have much more confidence going into the new year in respects to budgeting ahead, assessing number data, and reading reports to then take action on the correct aspect in my business.”

–Travis Unema, Owner, Brio Cleaners

“I love helping clients understand how their data not only tells the story of where their business has been, but how the data can help inform what is on the horizon. A business owner is more prepared to face the future when they learn the principles of financial and operational forecasting.”

–Sherri Daymon
Certified Business Advisor

“I really appreciate the service that the SBDC provided to me and my wife and aided in the acquisition of our dream business. Thank you so much Eric for the advice, projections and input to our process and the continued contact.”

–Dillon Quintana, Owner
Fairhaven Runners & Walkers



“Dillon was fantastic to work with. He was quick to respond to all of my questions to help prepare financial projections in support of the loan request to fund the business acquisition. He and his wife had reasonable and clearly articulated goals as to how they would run the business after a successful acquisition.”

–Eric Grimstead
Senior Certified Business Advisor



IN 2024, OUR ADVISORS ASSISTED 57 CLIENTS IN THE PROCESS OF BUYING OR SELLING A BUSINESS.

“We love working with Asche and the SBDC. Not only is she helping us in my current business but she is helping us look at purchasing another one. I believe we would have overpaid and would be upside down if it wasn’t for her. So grateful.”

–Brandon Morris, Owner
Morris Floors & Interiors

SHAPING STRONGER FUTURES

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP & PROGRESS

“Dedicated to fostering the success of small businesses across Whatcom and Kitsap counties, the WWU SBDC provides a vital resource to the communities Western serves. Their efforts to provide individualized, one-on-one business advising to new entrepreneurs and business owners continues to reinforce Western’s mission to serve the people of the state of Washington.

In 2024, the WWU SBDC team cultivated long-lasting relationships with complimentary partners to bring together support services in our area. These collaborations have helped to build trust with, and provide resources for, previously underserved communities. This team has demonstrated their capacity for adaptation, driven by their dedication to meeting the evolving needs of our local small businesses. WWU is proud of our longstanding partnership with the SBDC to build resilience in our community and drive sustainable economic growth in our region.”

–Sabah Randhawa, President
Western Washington University



“As a former small business owner, I know the challenges involved. The SBDC team brings essential technical expertise as well as invaluable insights and humanity to their work. For industrious entrepreneurs, especially those furthest from opportunity, that means having a true partner in your success. And for local communities, it means greater resilience because the small business community has a coach with a great track record.”

–Mauri Ingram, President & CEO
Whatcom Community Foundation

“The Port of Bellingham considers the SBDC one of the most important tools in our economic development toolbox.

Our partnership has worked for hundreds of people and companies as they look to do business in Whatcom County.

My wife and I have personal knowledge, having used them to transition her business and work out strategies. There is no better organization to bring a sense of calm and unparalleled expertise to a growing or transitioning company. This is an investment we gladly make every year.”



–Ken Bell
Dist. 2 Commissioner
Port of Bellingham

IN 2024, 31 OF OUR CLIENTS STARTED OR PURCHASED A BUSINESS.

Leadership in Innovation: Dr. Liliana Deck Receives President’s Exceptional Effort Award

In May 2024, SBDC Community Business Development Director and Certified Business Advisor Dr. Liliana Deck received the President’s Exceptional Effort Award from Western Washington University. These awards are presented to employees who have demonstrated an exceptional effort in support of one or more of the three core themes of WWU’s strategic plan. Dr. Deck was recognized for her efforts to develop and test innovative methods to reach and serve small business owners who were unfamiliar with the SBDC. These efforts broadened our client portfolio to better reflect the Whatcom small business community and helped foster a sense of belonging among new entrepreneurs.



“The SBDC has been core to the upstart of my business and adjusting my strategy as obstacles and unexpected situations arise. Having this resource at the ready has helped ease a ton of stress and answer questions I didn’t even know I had. There’s a lot of unknowns with opening a business, especially for the first time, and I so appreciate having someone to turn to with questions rather than blindly trying to find my way through the process.”

–Lindsey McGuirk, Owner
Weeding Between the Vines

THANK YOU TO OUR 2024 FUNDERS



PORT OF BELLINGHAM
Washington State



WWU SBDC

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