**Wharton closing the business center where Urban Outfitters, Destination Maternity got their starts**

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Wharton SBDC, one of 18 in the state and a division of the Snider Research Center of Wharton Entrepreneurship, has arguably been the most preeminent, its clients benefiting from the aid of students from one of the most acclaimed business schools in the country.

Long before the city was populated with privately owned incubators for start-ups, Wharton SBDC was the go-to for businesses just getting started, such as Urban Outfitters, Sabre Systems and Mothers Work, now known as Destination Maternity, said David Thornburgh, who ran the center from 1988 to 1994 and is now president and CEO of the Committee of Seventy, a nonprofit advocacy group.

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“A lot of companies owe their success and support and stability to the work we did there,” he said.

For participating Wharton students, helping entrepreneurs develop business and marketing plans, overcome strategic challenges or apply for bank financing was invaluable experience that could not be matched in the classroom.

Yet, in a letter dated July 1 to the state director of Pennsylvania Small Business Development Centers, Karl Ulrich, vice dean of entrepreneurship and innovation at Wharton, said the school has decided to close its SBDC effective July 31.

“Because Penn Wharton Entrepreneurship priorities are not fully aligned with the PA SBDC mission, we would prefer to release our public funding back to the network so that those resources can be deployed at other SBDCs around the Commonwealth, including those that are in or near Philadelphia and are providing excellent support to the local small business community,” Ulrich wrote.

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The SBDCs closest to the University of Pennsylvania are operated at Temple University in North Philadelphia and Widener University in Chester.

Ulrich was not available for comment over the weekend but has agreed to talk to The Inquirer Monday morning about the planned closing of Wharton SBDC.

Word of the decision spread throughout the region’s small business support community over the holiday weekend.

“I’m a little sad,” said Della Clark, president of the Enterprise Center, a West Philadelphia nonprofit founded by Wharton SBDC in 1989 to prepare minorities for entrepreneurship. “We wouldn’t exist today if they didn’t have the vision to open up the Enterprise Center.”

While the end of such a mainstay had an emotional tug for some, it is not entirely surprising.

“Over the years, I’ve noticed the visibility of the Wharton SBDC became less and less,” said Larry Bell, who volunteered as a consultant there while a Wharton MBA student in the late 1980s and helped Thornburgh launch the Enterprise Center, where Bell is now chief financial officer. “They just kind of slowly pulled away.”

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Last fall, the state SBDC moved its lead office from Wharton SBDC’s facility at 38th and Chestnut Streets to Kutztown University, Bell said. “I knew [Wharton SBDC’s closing] wasn’t going to be long after that,” he said, noting that Wharton would have lost funds as a result of that relocation.

In an email to Clark Wednesday that she shared with The Inquirer, Post, the state director, called Wharton SBDC’s closing “not a total surprise to us because ... UPenn made the decision last year to remove themselves from the role of acting as the lead office for the SBA [Small Business Administration] grant funds.”

SBDCs rely on funding support from the SBA and the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, along with their host universities or colleges.

Post could not be reached for comment over the weekend. In the email to Clark, he said “the best solution for ensuring adequate SBDC services remain in your neighborhood is to provide some of the funding from Wharton to Widener SBDC with the expectation that they maintain outreach offices" in West Philadelphia, perhaps at the Enterprise Center.

Clark, who has not yet talked with Post, said she would not likely “be opposed” to housing an SBDC offshoot within the Enterprise Center but does not want any role in operating it. As the Enterprise Center prepares to celebrate turning 30 in November, she said, “we’re [kind of shifting ... from general technical assistance to more of a capital and investment center](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/business/small_business/enterprise-center-grit-live-dick-clark-bandstand-della-clark-20180607.html).” She called the lack of access to capital “the No. 1 disruptor” to small and minority-owned businesses.

“We want to fill that gap more and more,” Clark said. “We don’t want to be the go-to for how to write a business plan.”

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