

Community Policing Brings Positive Change to Campus



Sergeant Robert Herzog and his four-legged partner, Remi.

It's not accurate to say there's a new sheriff in town as Mike Bicking has been WCU's director of Public Safety and chief of Police for 27 years. But he's the driving force behind a dramatic new shift change toward proactive community policing. This initiative impacts Public Safety at every level, from the way that parking services and residence hall security officers do their jobs to the way that Bicking does his.

"Community policing is a philosophical and organizational change," says Bicking. "We seek to be guardians rather than enforcers."

A new mission statement spells out the department's goals, which include: *We fulfill [our] mission by joining in a partnership with our community. We are committed to being campus guardians, and to serve our community by treating all with respect, compassion and fairness.*

Public Safety has a good track record of serving the needs of the University and keeping the campus community safe. But Bicking is the first to take an unflinching look at the past and illustrate how things are now being improved.

"We used to have officers patrolling campus in squad cars and they seldom got out to talk to people," he says. "Now officers are on foot, on bikes, and even officers assigned to cars are told to park on a regular basis and walk around. That's how you get to know people and get to know what's going on."

"These days, students often stop in, asking if a certain officer is on duty," he adds. "This officer might have helped them in the past, or simply built rapport. Now, students feel comfortable seeking us out with an issue because they already know one of our officers."

Campus partnerships also have been strengthened. In the past, if an officer saw a broken door or other safety-related facilities issue, he or she would simply notify the Facilities department. Now, the repair process is tracked closely and officers are empowered to go directly to their counterparts in Facilities for status checks.

"Our relationships with Facilities and Residence Life were the areas that needed the most improvement," notes Bicking. "At times, over the years, it was kind of like when you don't see eye to eye

with your siblings. But now, we are all working together to make the campus experience safer and more enjoyable for our students.”

Captain William Morris, associate director of Police Operations, has been instrumental in facilitating trainings for every member of the department. “We are training our officers not just in protecting and enforcing the laws but also in open communication and fair and impartial policing,” says Morris. “We provide our officers with discretion when interacting with individuals who require our services.”

It comes down to a lot of little things that all add up, in terms of how you approach a situation and the individuals involved,” he adds. “For example, every officer presents his or her business card at the end of an interaction. If it was a stressful situation, students may not remember the name of the officer they were dealing with. But now, they know how to get back in touch if they need to.”

Community policing also means informal opportunities for students to get to know the members of Public Safety, including Breakfast with the Chief events and brown bag lunches. And if things don’t go the way the community expects it should, a new Public Safety Campus Review Board will investigate.

Bicking conceived of and launched the review board, even though he knew it could initially be a hard sell in his department. “Let’s face it, who among us enjoys being reviewed and audited? But I knew this kind of review process was important,” he says. “The board is made up of a cross-section of students, faculty, staff and members of the local community.”

In addition, a commendation/complaint form (wcupa.edu/dps/forms/feedback/) was added to the Public Safety home page. “It’s been all commendations so far,” he says, with a wide smile. And while Bicking has always had an open door policy, he is promoting that fact widely these days. At a recent speech to the WCU Managers Community, he stressed that anyone on campus can come meet with him about any public safety concern that they have.

Although the presentation went well, even Bicking would acknowledge that he had lost the crowd when two of his officers stepped into the room. Sergeant Robert Herzog and his four-legged partner, Remi, proved to be the real rock stars that morning. They are yet another key ingredient to community policing at WCU.

Learn more about Public Safety and its programs and services at wcupa.edu/dps/.