



W&J Strengthens Ties with Community

Background: In 1997, The Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled that Washington & Jefferson College qualified as a purely public charity and was exempt from local taxes. The ruling set a national precedent for courts weighing challenges to tax exemption non-profits. Had the decision gone the other way, the door would have been wide open for municipalities to tax their local colleges, hospitals and museums. At that time, Dr. Brian Mitchell was the president of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania and led the fight to keep private colleges tax exempt. A few years later, Dr. Mitchell became the president of W&J and was faced with challenge of mending relations between the college and community. Through effective PR outreach and strategic communications, relations between the college and community were renewed over time and a new era of effective collaboration was born.

Objectives:

- Open lines of communication and opportunities for renewed and productive dialogue between the college and community.
- Establish improved relations between the college and community leadership.

Strategies:

- Host monthly “Coffee with the College” sessions to provide a forum for community members and college officials to discuss problems and create solutions.
- Open and expand community hours for campus resources.
- Leverage community outreach programs and state funding secured through the college.
- Enhance media relations efforts to raise awareness of outreach efforts and position improvements and progress in a positive light.

Results:

- Monthly open dialogue sessions were welcomed by the community and well attended.
- The college and community worked together to coordinate W&J Homecoming and the city’s “Fall Festival” for a united, community-wide event.
- Opportunities were identified to leverage part of a Howard Hughes Medical Institute grant to help community outreach programs in science education.
- All campus resources open to the community were expanded and new opportunities for welcoming community members onto campus were enhanced, including community availability for the new football field, track, science education facility, and fine arts offerings.
- Dr. Mitchell was positioned as a leader in college and community relations in national and local media outlets, including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Observer-Reporter* and more.
- Over time, the case of W&J and the City of Washington became a national example for how colleges and communities can overcome the challenges of strained relations to work together and become collaborative partners with mutually beneficial goals.