

IMPACT

IST alumna's startup brings technology to the underserved

The Community Services IT Initiative refurbishes donated equipment and delivers "pop-up" labs for community organizations



Melissa "Missy" Scott earned her degree in information technology from Penn State World Campus in 2019. During her time as a student, she advanced her startup, Community Services IT Initiative (CSITI), through which she refurbishes donated

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JULY 31, 2019 By Jessica Hallman

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — Before Melissa “Missy” Scott earned her [degree in information technology from Penn State World Campus](#) this year, she worked as a low-income housing leasing agent in State College.

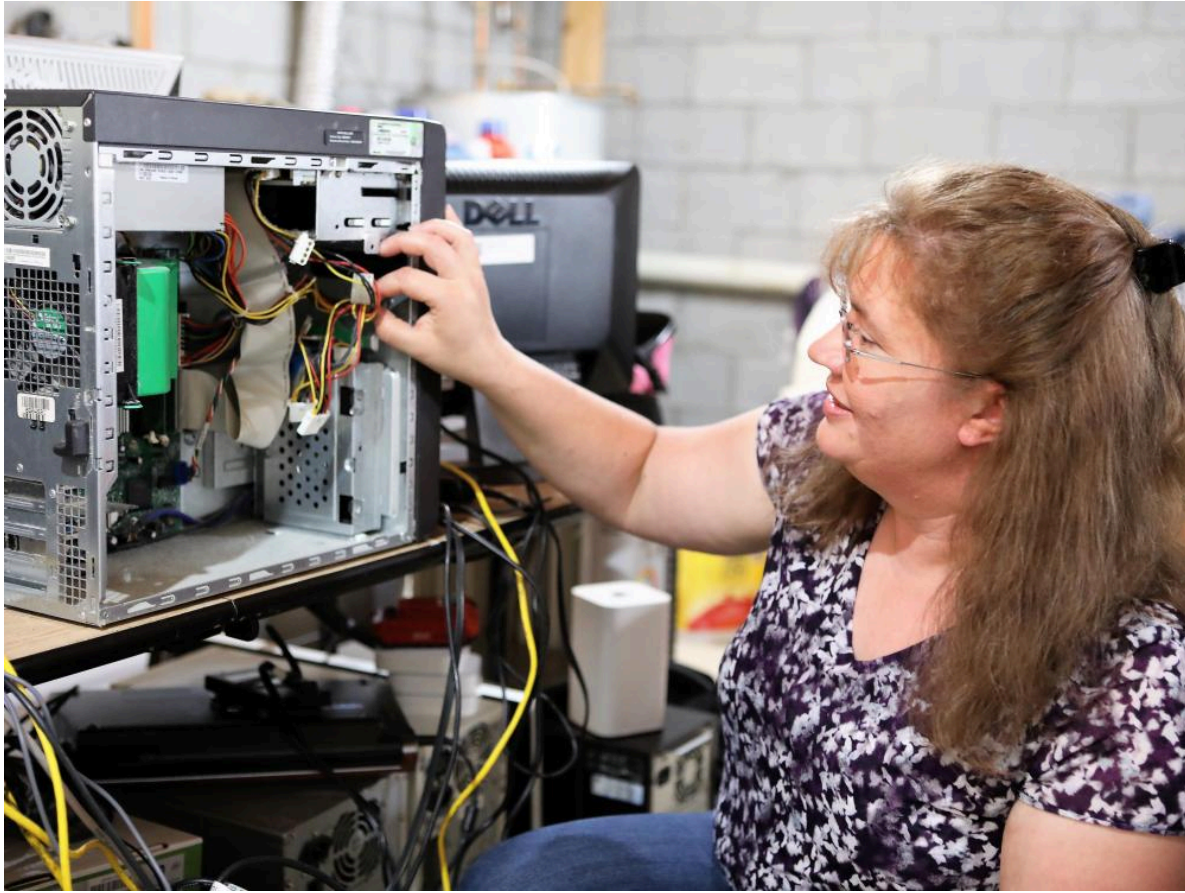
In November 2018, a resident approached her and asked for help to determine if she had paid her rent. Scott encouraged her to check her online account and see if the check cleared. The resident said she would — but she needed to wait for her daughter to get home with her school-issued laptop, and for her neighbor to get home so she could access his Wi-Fi.

“The wheels started turning,” said Scott. “I had an idea to use technology to provide access to people who need it.”

It was there that the idea for the [Community Services IT Initiative](#) (CSITI) was born.

Scott, a self-proclaimed “Miss Fix-It,” has had a passion for dismantling machines and rebuilding them since a young age. Now, she is turning that passion into a business opportunity.

The concept of CSITI (pronounced “c-city”) is to accept donations of used computer equipment — such as laptops, routers, keyboards and mouse pads — from local businesses and individuals. Then, after refurbishing the machines, Scott creates pop-up computer labs that provide IT support to organizations that assist with underserved populations in Centre County.



Melissa "Missy" Scott, a 2019 Penn State alumna, examines the inside of a computer tower in her Community Services IT Initiative (CSITI) workshop. The concept of CSITI is to refurbish donated computer equipment to utilize in pop-up computer labs that provide IT support to organizations that assist with underserved populations in Centre County. **Credit: Jessica Hallman / Penn State. Creative Commons**

COLLAPSE –

She has gathered a group of community partners, including Schlow Library and the Office of Community Engagement, to aid with equipment donations and collections. She plans to configure the pop-up labs for use by local organizations, such as the Centre County Office of Aging, homeless agencies and low-income housing organizations.

“If you put three steps between a fragile individual and a goal, it likely won’t happen,” said Scott. “For example, many resources and services for homeless individuals can be found online. You’re asking a homeless person to find a public computer, secure transportation and then get help navigating the sites. They’ll often walk away.”

CSITI takes a different approach, she said.

“Through CSITI, we bring the technology to them,” Scott explained. “We eliminate two of those steps and put that goal within reach.”

Bridging the digital divide

According to the [Pew Research Center](#), more than 4 in 10 adults in low-income households don’t have home broadband services or a traditional computer. Likewise, nearly a third of rural Americans don’t have a broadband internet connection at home.



“How wide is the [digital] divide? It depends on the view from where you’re standing. When you start looking, the divide is huge.”

Missy Scott, 2019 Penn State World Campus alumna who earned a degree in information technology

This “digital divide,” or gap between the demographics and regions that have ready access to computers and the internet and those who don’t, is what motivates Scott in her work.

“How wide is the divide? It depends on the view from where you’re standing,” she said. “When you start looking, the divide is huge.”

This is something Scott has seen in her own life.

“The rural areas of Clarion County, where I grew up, will have a different set of needs and challenges related to their connectivity, versus Centre County,” she said.

Scott is taking that concept to northwestern Pennsylvania in September, where Hand in Hand Christian Counseling LLC in Venango County will serve as the prototype site for CSITI. In CSITI’s first equipment collection drive, Scott obtained 30 machines. By the time she’s done refurbishing them, she’ll have 15 workstations. The counseling center’s social workers and clients will utilize them in a beta test.

When the final model returns to Centre County in late fall, Scott said that “the most immediate impact for local organizations is that it will help them to serve their clients. Many case workers are using their personal laptops to work with clients instead of having workstations readily available for them to access resources.”

Scott aims to help these organizations better serve the populations they work with.

"CSITI helps the fragile populations they serve, and builds greater awareness that the digital divide exists," she said. "Many electronics also gain a second life and stay out of the landfill."

As Scott works to get her pop-up computer labs off the ground, she also organizes a Tech Talk Series as a way to teach underserved populations the basics of computers and internet safety. She recently held a series for a 55-and-older community in State College, helping to introduce residents to computers and the best ways to utilize them.

"I hope to have these talks with other organizations," she said. "They would be great for senior centers, community outreach organizations, and others that assist individuals with mental disabilities."

The Penn State connection

Scott's time at Penn State began long before she enrolled in an online program with the College of Information Sciences and Technology (IST). She earned her first Penn State degree in animal bioscience in 1996, but when the beef market flipped and milk prices tanked in the 2000s, Scott was motivated to further her education and to pursue her passion for technology.

She enrolled in her new degree program through Penn State World Campus in 2013. As an adult learner with a full-time job and a family, the College of IST's internship requirement presented a unique challenge.

"I couldn't just take a 10-week leave from my job with a family to support," she said.



“If you have a passion, but pursuing it scares you, it’s a sign you need to do it. I once read a post that said, ‘Know your worth and stop giving people discounts.’ That’s what gave me the push to go ahead – the realization that both the project and I were worthy of the challenge.”

Missy Scott, *founder of the Community Services IT Initiative*

Through the connections she made with CSITI’s community partners, Scott was introduced to Mike Flickinger, CEO of Greybeard Technologies in Bellefonte. Flickinger had heard about Scott’s endeavor and wanted to support it. He offered her an internship with his company that would allow her to gain real-world business skills while also advancing CSITI.

“Mike and I would meet once a week to go over business concepts and system designs,” said Scott. “He pushed me throughout the process and made sure I kept my focus.”

Then, the following semester, Scott enrolled in an enterprise integration class with a group project assignment to integrate different programs for a real-world business. Scott asked the professor if he would allow her to use CSITI for the project. After all, she said, CSITI needed to collect demographics, collect inventory and track application usage.

“The professor allowed it,” Scott said. “He wanted to see what the group would come up with.”

So Scott, along with four fellow classmates, set out to build a massive theoretical model for CSITI.

“This was the end game of my internship,” she said. “We had to do the stakeholder presentation. It made me justify everything I’d done up to that point.”

After Scott graduated, Flickinger offered her a postgraduate internship to build her startup. She also earned a position as an IT technician with Greybeard to provide IT support for local schools.

While connections she built along the way have helped Scott to strengthen her project, she knows that she found success through hard work and determination.

“If you have a passion, but pursuing it scares you, it’s a sign you need to do it,” she said. “I once read a post that said, ‘Know your worth and stop giving people discounts.’ That’s what gave me the push to go ahead – the realization that both the project and I were worthy of the challenge.”

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