

Partnering with a Homeless Shelter to Provide Authentic Community Involvement

Edna Ross and Fannie M. Cox

Abstract

Hotel Louisville is owned and operated by Wayside Christian Mission and is staffed by screened and vetted Wayside resident clients. This unique situation, along with the University of Louisville (UofL) partnership, positions both as national exemplars for authentic community involvement with higher education. The purpose of this article is to describe the Hotel Louisville/UofL partnership, discuss the positive impact of UofL's collaboration with Hotel Louisville, and to highlight some of the dramatic successes.

Background

Wayside Christian Mission is the Louisville, Kentucky area's largest homeless shelter and has served the Louisville area since 1957. At any given time, Wayside is home to upwards of six hundred fifty men, women, and children. Wayside provides approximately 2,500 meals to those in need daily.

In addition, Wayside Christian Mission also is the only homeless shelter in the nation that owns, maintains, and runs a fully functioning hotel—Hotel Louisville. Residents of Hotel Louisville are screened and vetted before being allowed to move into it from Wayside's emergency shelter. Many of these residents are involved in learning hospitality skills and on-the-job training for the hospitality industry. Hotel Louisville is open to the public, but run by Wayside shelter clients. This unique situation, along with the UofL partnership, positions both Wayside and UofL as national exemplars for authentic community involvement with higher education. Instead of merely providing "three hots and a cot," Wayside strives to provide concrete attainable ways for their homeless clients to improve their lives.

University of Louisville Partnership

Wayside Christian Mission and UofL have partnered to help the homeless for decades. However, Wayside's purchase of a former Holiday Inn in downtown Louisville significantly expanded the boundaries of existing partnerships. "Using Critical Thinking to Foster Student Learning and Community Engagement" is the university's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) created for its reaccreditation initiative for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation. Titled "Ideas to Action (i2a)", UofL's QEP is focused on enhancing undergraduate education through critical thinking and community engagement. Wayside's collaboration with UofL's i2a initiative is focused on helping meet the challenges inherent in employing homeless

clients to operate a full-service hotel, and to help all clients lead better lives through better thinking.

In May 2011, Wayside’s CEO Tim Moseley first envisioned the partnership between Wayside and UofL’s i2a when he attended UofL’s critical thinking conference—the i2a Institute on Critical Thinking. Pastor Moseley realized that the development and honing of critical thinking skills in the homeless population at Wayside/Hotel Louisville would literally change their lives. According to Pastor Moseley, “Irrational thinking leads to irrational behavior. Many of the women and men in our care are with us because of poor decisions based upon faulty reasoning. By teaching our resident clients how to think rationally and logically, we can enhance their future prospects for happier, more productive lives. . . .” (Tim Moseley, CEO Wayside Christian Mission in discussion with Edna Ross, May 2011).

During the 2011–2012 academic year, five UofL undergraduate units and more than forty undergraduate students were involved with i2a-related activities at Hotel Louisville. In addition, the i2a specialist for critical thinking consulted intensively with the Wayside staff to incorporate the Paul Elder framework of critical thinking into the development of customized critical thinking tools for use in hotel/hospitality training, addiction recovery sessions, conflict resolution sessions, and other activities.

Benefits of the Partnership to UofL

The benefit to UofL from partnering with Wayside Christian Mission/Hotel Louisville includes:

- Impacting the well-being of individuals in the community
- Enhancing the learning experience of UofL students
- Providing teaching and research opportunities for UofL faculty.

Positive Impact on the Well-Being of Individuals in the Community

The collaboration with UofL has been a game changer for many of the families at Hotel Louisville and has the potential to make a strong positive impact on the community. Several families have reported that the UofL i2a collaborations have changed their outlook on life. Specific examples include the following:

The Resilient Families Project (RFP), developed and run by Drs. Barbara Burns and Lora Haynes of the UofL Psychology Department, provides educational experiences to strengthen families and promote resilience and wellness for children and parents living at Wayside Christian Mission’s Hotel Louisville or at the Wayside Christian Mission’s Emergency Homeless Shelter. The REP includes the Resilient Parent Program, the

Resilient Family Program, and the Resilient Child/Adolescent Program. The twenty-six week program required participants to meet weekly and all parents with children were mandated by the Wayside management to take part in the program. Because of the constant influx of new homeless families and the departure of others from the shelter, approximately 20 percent of the families were involved in the program for the entire twenty-six-week duration (Barbara Burns, e-mail message to Edna Ross, January, 29, 2013). Fifty parents graduated on April 26, 2012, from the program and many of these parents have committed to staying in the program as facilitators for the next session.

The following are quotes from participants in the Resilient Family Project programs.

“The most important thing I have learned is that I don’t have to spank, yell, or shake my kids to get them to do what’s right or correct them when they are wrong.”

"The students and teachers from the University of Louisville are very positive, influential, helpful, kind-hearted, and encouraging!"

"The Resilient Families Program has been a big help to me. My son was removed from my custody two years ago. Now I am getting him back. All that Barbara Burns and Lora Haynes have taught me has been a big help. I have learned better ways of disciplining my child and showing him love. Thanks again! I learn every time we meet!"

Wayside 100 is a computer literacy course taught by UofL librarian and Associate Professor Fannie Cox. The course has graduated over seventy Wayside/Hotel Louisville residents. In this class, participants were taught internet basics, keyboarding skills, introduced to word processing, opening and using e-mail accounts, how to create a resume, and familiarizing the clients with online job application processes. The class provides students an opportunity to develop computer skills that may assist them with increasing their educational level, succeeding in college, as well as overcoming homelessness. Many of these residents report that Professor Cox’s class has given them the confidence to complete their GED. Many have enrolled and started taking classes at Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC). At least one graduate from Wayside 100 has started the transfer process from JCTC to UofL.

Impact and Outcomes of the Wayside 100 Students:

- A few were introduced to typing
- A few were introduced to word processing and Microsoft Word
- A few begin working on a resumes for the first time

- Several updated their resumes
- Several opened e-mail accounts for the first time
- Practice applying for a job online
- A couple applied for jobs and were called in for interviews
- One lady became the manager of Hotel Louisville
- Another student also became a manager
- Several have gone back to school
- Several have purchased computers

What has this partnership meant to the university libraries?

- Opportunities for the librarians to teach information literacy skills
- Faculty networking
- Research opportunities
- Opportunity to work with adult learners
- University recruitment

Enhancing the Learning Experience of UofL Students

UofL undergraduate students who have been involved in a Wayside/UofL collaborative effort have reported very positive experiences. Dr. Bruce Kemelgor's business consulting students created a business plan for Hotel Louisville that included suggestions for increasing revenue, improving the quality of customer service, and improving operational efficiencies. When asked what they gained from the experience, the students reported the following:

- This project gave them real world hands-on experience.
- This project enabled them to poll real customers as to their likes, dislikes, and comments.
- As their project involved a real operating business, they were able to pose as "secret shoppers" and spend a night as hotel guests

- This project gave them an opportunity to learn more about the hospitality/tourism industry.

Providing Teaching and Research Opportunities for UofL Faculty

Drs. Burns and Haynes provided real-world applications of developmental psychology theories and principles to more than forty-five of their undergraduate students as a consequence of their collaboration with Wayside/Hotel Louisville. These professors also received funding from the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences as well as i2a funding. Presentations at professional meetings, publications in psychology journals, and further grant proposal activity also will also from their work at Wayside/Hotel Louisville.

Conclusion

The Wayside Christian Mission/University of Louisville partnership provides a national model for authentic community engagement. Not all Wayside clients remain at Wayside long enough to take advantage of the programs and services offered. However, enough remain so that a significant number of lives are being changed for the better. Wayside/Hotel Louisville clients are completing GEDs, applying for and receiving Pell grants to attend Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC), and some are in the process of obtaining information on how to transfer from JCTC to the UofL. Though a successful social endeavor, Wayside's Hotel Louisville has faced many challenges. Among them are:

- Gaining acceptance of a homeless shelter in a downtown business district of a large city
- Learning how to run a hotel and conduct banquets in a brief time period.
- Maintaining a reasonable separation between clients and paying hotel customers
- Creating training and job opportunities for clients with little or no job experience
- Training homeless clients in customer service skills for the hotel and future employment
- Generating enough revenue to operate and maintain a large and complex facility

Homeless clients stay free of charge at Hotel Louisville while active in Wayside programming. Currently, all of the hotel utilities and a portion of the hotel staffing and program expenses are paid with Hotel Louisville's social enterprise operations (hotel room rental, banquet space rental, catering service, coffee shop, snack shop, and café). Remaining expenses are covered by donations and grants.

Efforts such as the Resilient Families Project were designed to help break the poverty/bad parenting cycle characteristic of this population. Mothers and fathers are learning to become better parents. In addition, the Wayside 100 class provides students an opportunity to develop computer skills that may assist them with increasing their educational level, succeeding in college, as well as obtaining gainful employment. The emphasis on critical thinking in both the client and student populations may help diminish commonly held stereotypes of the homeless in UofL students, and also create a realistic expectation of personal efficacy and competency in the homeless clients.

References

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Fannie M. Cox, MLS, MPA, joined the University of Louisville (UofL) libraries faculty in January 1999 as the Coordinator of Electronic Resources–Technical Services in the Ekstrom Library. In her current position of outreach and reference librarian for the UofL Belknap campus, she is responsible for engaging community organizations to develop partnerships promoting information literacy.

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