

Home Economics in higher education: Enhancing student learning and promoting responsible student behavior

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Abstract

Numerous challenges exist for Home Economics/Family and Consumer Sciences Departments and their universities. For universities, one challenge is the promotion of responsible social behavior by students, especially in light of the abuse and overconsumption of alcohol so often associated with the new found freedoms on campus. For HE/FCS Departments, high construction costs and maintenance expenses associated with a quantity foods laboratory often result in food service students working at various sites off campus to gain needed experience, leading to lack of consistency in student experience and reduced oversight by faculty. This paper illustrates how HE/FCS food service courses can benefit not only the department and its majors, but also can support and strengthen the university's comprehensive alcohol action plan—ultimately enhancing the educational experience for students university wide.

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Creating opportunities for students to experience learning at various levels within the “real world” is a challenge to higher education units with limited resources. This, we believe, creates an ideal context for Family and Consumer Sciences departments (HE/FCS hereafter). One of the aims of the International Federation for Home Economics is to “Provide opportunities through practice, research and professional sharing that lead to improving the quality of everyday life for individuals, families and households worldwide” (www.ifhe.org/34.html). According to Anderson and Nickols (2001),

...from the very beginning of family and consumer sciences, practitioners and friends of the field have discussed and debated what content should comprise our body of knowledge.... The body of knowledge includes unique concepts that integrate the study of individual, family and community systems throughout the life course in the context of concerns and trends (pp. 14-15).

Higher education has been called upon to foster critical analysis of social issues within its curriculum (Antonaros, Barnhardt, Holsapple, Moronski, & Vergoth, 2008; Taylor, 2008). For universities, one of the challenges is the promotion of responsible social behavior by students, especially with the opportunities for abuse and overconsumption of alcohol. This abusive behaviour, often begun in high school, could expand rapidly with the new found freedoms for the university student and may lead to tragic results on campus (Schaffer, Jeglic, & Stanley, 2008; Spoth, Randall, Trudeau, Shin, & Redmond, 2008). Planning experiences for university students to see directly how their major can impact the well-being

of their peers is sometimes difficult to achieve. In keeping with Boyer's (1990) call for the integration and application of knowledge, Anderson and Nickols (2001) suggested that units of HE/FCS should enjoy a firm foothold on today's campus because the curriculum's strength is the integration and application of knowledge. This paper illustrates how HE/FCS food service courses can benefit not only the department and its majors, but also can support and strengthen the university's comprehensive alcohol action plan—ultimately enhancing the educational experience for students university wide.

A shared mission: The department and university

First, HE/FCS Department couched its mission and vision within that of Bradley University, a private comprehensive university in the mid-western United States. The University's mission included an emphasis on engaging students in learning through teamwork and leadership opportunities, group projects and collaboration with faculty on research and creative production, and a similar call for collaborative involvement by students and faculty with business, cultural, and other entities that provide benefits to the community. The Department's vision statement is to offer

... a local and global focus, empowering graduates to respond to diverse and complex family and consumer issues. It is the department of choice for those studying the interaction of family systems, the relationship between individuals and their environment, and the global influence on well-being and the community (www.bradley.edu/academics/ehs/family/vision.shtml).

It is the Department's aim that graduates will have gained the skills to live out this mission within their chosen careers.

The call for responsible student behavior

Second and tragically, the University suffered two alcohol-related deaths during the 2007-08 academic year. In direct response to these tragedies, as well as other concerns related to alcohol misuse, the President charged a task force to develop a Comprehensive Alcohol Action Plan (Bradley University, 2008). This plan states,

There are two aspects to changing student behavior with regard to alcohol consumption: building a positive community and empowering student leaders. Building a positive community suggests that the University provide opportunities for students to join communities (or social groups) that have a common factor that attracts and maintains student affiliation (p. 4).

One specific part of this plan includes the following,

Late night programming is used, in part, on some campuses as a strategy for changing the campus environment regarding alcohol use and abuse... Late night events are great opportunities for students to interact socially with each other in a safe and alcohol-free atmosphere on campus. The overall goal is to cultivate a more positive campus environment for students (p. 24).

A multi-faceted approach for preventing and treating campus alcohol concerns has been recommended (DeJong & Langford, 2002; Johannessen, Glider, Collins, Hueston & DeJong, 2001) and involves multiple levels of influence (e.g., individual factors, group processes, institutional and community factors, and public policy). Although a week-end intervention program is not new (Narayan, Steele-Johnson, Delgado & Cole, 2007; Siegal & Cole, 2003), including an academic department in intervention is a new approach to a perennial problem for colleges and universities. As a result of this call for action and the supporting empirical evidence in the literature, the HE/FCS Department found itself ideally prepared to serve the University and its students.

Initiating a partnership: The department, the university, and corporate food service

Students in the HE/FCS Department, with the exception of those majoring in retail merchandising, enroll in food service courses. However, because of construction and maintenance expense, the department does not have a quantity foods laboratory. Unfortunately in the past, students enrolled in food service courses worked in various sites off campus to gain needed food service experience. This resulted in lack of consistency in student experience, and reduced oversight by HE/FCS faculty.

Food services at Bradley are contracted to Eurest Dining Services, a subsidiary of the international Compass Group PLC, headquartered in London. Within this corporation, over 360,000 food service professionals are employed worldwide in more than 90 countries throughout Continental and Eastern Europe, North and South America, South Africa and Asia as well as the United Kingdom. Eurest Dining Services is the corporate dining leader and provides food services to most of the Fortune 500 companies in the United States. Currently, Eurest Dining Services has a 63 year continuous contract for food services at Bradley University. This is the longest continuous education division contract in the food service industry in the United States. During each academic year, a minimum of 5000 people per day are served in the six food service operations on the Bradley University campus.

In order to promote positive, non-alcoholic environments conducive to social interactions for week-end late nights on campus, the University converted a former cafeteria into a coffee house type of setting. The challenge for Eurest was how to have students “buy in” to this situation. The HE/FCS Department was approached by the Director of Eurest Dining Services at Bradley, inviting oversight of this new facility. Clearly, the creation of this new on-campus late night food service operation supported the HE/FCS mission, “providing opportunity through practice, research about student preferences, and professional sharing” (Bradley University Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2008) with other departments and units on campus, leading to improved quality of life for students. Collaboration in projects to assist learning is supported by numerous studies (Henry, 2004; Zlotkowski, 1998). Henry suggests that collaborations have several benefits including the opportunity to build beneficial partnerships. Requirements in two courses, Food Service Systems, and Management in Food Service, were added as a result of this initiative, and students were exposed to the process of developing a food service system—an actual operation developed and implemented by students for students. The potential for Eurest Dining Services to see the HE/FCS

Department as an integral part of their operation on Bradley's campus, in addition to the role played by the late night food service operation as part of the campus-wide plan to mitigate alcohol abuse, could provide essential future-proofing for the HE/FCS Department (IFHE, 2008).

Implementing a late-night food service operation

As students learned about food service systems, the planning and development of this late night foodservice in a university residence hall began to evolve. This process began with the identification of inputs and the branding of the facility. Students enrolled in Food Service Systems, began by naming the food service facility to complement the adjacent student lounge. A contest was held to name a facility that would attract students as a fun place to "hang out." Each student submitted possible names for the facility along with a corresponding logo and uniform suggestion. The Eurest Dining Services staff selected the winning name and rewarded the students by providing credit at the university bookstore for each winning student entry. The name selected was *Lydia's Late Night*. Lydia Moss Bradley was the founder of this private university. After the University President approved the name, a picture of the founder was placed in the new food service operation. HE/FCS students developed a logo to coordinate with the name and suggested uniforms consisting of black t-shirts with the logo *Lydia's* with a moon and stars on the front. A glowing *Late Night* and numerous glowing stars were printed on the back of the t-shirts. Staff will wear black baseball caps with *Lydia's* and stars glowing on the front of the cap.

Eurest Dining Services assisted with the menu planning process by providing a basic skeleton menu. HE/FCS students identified food items that would coordinate with the different types of activities occurring in the adjacent student lounge such as tacos, nachos, churros, and other similar food items for a Hispanic culture evening. This assignment was followed by each team of two students developing the specific menu suggestions from the list submitted by the rest of the class. Each team of students learned to cost their menu items and evaluate vendor sources. Next, each team staffed *Lydia's Late Night* for the selected weekend of co-managing with Eurest Dining staff by scheduling their classmates for two hours of laboratory experience. The required laboratory experience for each student varied each week.

Additional needs for staff in this late night food service operation included an orientation and training sessions for staff. HE/FCS students identified training needs for the class; these included sanitation, equipment utilization, procedural training, food production training, service training, and opening and closing of the operation. Students who had not completed a Food Service Managers Sanitation Certification recognized by the State of Illinois Department of Public Health were required to complete the online training and successfully pass the state examination before the first laboratory experience in the food service operation. Very few of the students had experience with using food service equipment. Required laboratory experiences focused on how to use and clean all food service equipment were added. Each student learned Eurest Dining Services facilities' policies, procedures, and food production processes. Food Service Systems Course participated in an orientation to *Lydia's Late Night* food service and subsequent training on serving customers. During the fall semester in the *Lydia's Late Night* food service operation, all students had at least one early laboratory experience—opening a food service operation—and one late laboratory experience—closing a

food service operation. Throughout the fall semester, students compiled a personal evaluation journal, comparing and contrasting the student operation, *Lydia's Late Night*, to textbook information in food service systems.

During the spring semester, students in the Management of Food Service course will continue to utilize the student food service operation, *Lydia's Late Night*, to apply food service system concepts related to management, marketing, financial management, inventory management, service, and system outputs. Throughout this guided, applied experience, students in these courses will collaborate with Eurest Dining Services, University Student Activities, Residential Living staff, Multicultural Student Services staff, peers across campus, and with a variety of University departments and other administrative units.

HE/FCS students who work in *Lydia's Late Night* will have experienced creating a place that promotes the well-being of their peers through the provision of a non-alcoholic alternative to on and off campus drinking—a fun place. This has provided the department with a quantity foods laboratory that will be maintained and upgraded by a worldwide food service company and will not require departmental resources. Overall, this plan provides a curriculum initiative to support the important foundation, knowledge and skills for the foods, nutrition and dietetics students in food service, and also creates a laboratory for students to promote responsible social behavior on campus. According to Anderson and Nickols (2001), "...school and work create transition points for individuals as they develop" (p. 16). The initiative described in this paper shows how courses within a curriculum can provide students with expected knowledge in every food service course, but also can expose students to the many layers of opportunities within an eco-system consisting of a university's priorities, a department's curriculum requirements, and the intersection of the heart of HE/FCS: the individual's well-being and community vitality (Anderson & Nickols).

Summary

The new late night food service operation serves all university students nine weekends each semester. HE/FCS students divided into two-student teams to plan a designated three night laboratory experiences with associated menus. Students were involved in the programming, and in developing theme-based foods to reflect the activities planned by Student Activities, Residential Living, or the Multicultural Student Services. These programs included cultural nights, popular student nights with bands, game nights, craft nights, movie nights, live comedian entertainment nights, and special celebrations such as homecoming, parents' weekend, Halloween, and holiday celebration weekends.

This collaboration provides an enhanced academic experience, as well as opportunity for HE/FCS students to impact their campus community and enhance the well-being of individual students on their campus. In addition, students who complete these courses will see the HE/FCS four dimensions or areas of practice (i.e., academic discipline, every day living, curriculum area, and societal arena to influence and develop policy (IFHE, 2008)) promoting university policy, departmental curriculum goals, and student well-being. In sum, the development of this new campus late night food service operation a) supported the FCS mission, and solved a problem of providing a quantity food service laboratory for students—without any departmental expenditure; b) supported the university mission regarding the

multifaceted development of students to enable them to become leaders, innovators, and productive members of society by requiring teamwork and leadership through group projects and collaboration with faculty on research and creative production; and c) created a unique response to the University's comprehensive alcohol action plan.

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