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AT YOUR SERVICE

UD’s ever-evolving hospitality program helps drive the state’s economy

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This is what it’s like to be a college student in the University of Delaware’s hospitality program:

Wake up at 5 a.m. to check in with the hotel restaurant, to see if you need to stop in before your 8 a.m. class.

Start the day on a housekeeping shift, and end as the night manager on duty, where it’s your job to tell the 6-foot-6-inch gentleman in room 207 to quiet things down.

Develop new strategies for vitally important social media platforms – the most important way most potential customers will learn about the hotel – while realizing everything about them may change before you graduate.

Juggle classwork and internships and a part-time job on Main Street with what remains of a social life. Meet Bill Marriott when he comes to campus to lecture. Deal with 40 conference attendees who walk into the dining room at closing time and all want separate checks.

Gain far more experience than your peers – a semester abroad, a summer at Disney, an internship at the Ritz – and graduate after four years with a job waiting for you.

And if that job is not inside the hospitality industry – well, that’s just because you have options.

The department of Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management inside Lerner College at the University of Delaware has an impressive 92 percent job placement rate before graduation, but high-end retail operations, auto dealers, and health-care companies are snatching a growing number of hospitality students up.

As businesses in Delaware and around the country are realizing, hospitality is not just an industry. It’s an approach to business that makes a dramatic impact on the bottom line. And as such, after 25 years, UD’s hospitality program has evolved into a vital community partner, a respected industry researcher and a promising economic driver for Delaware’s future.

Changing Industry

The Courtyard Marriott Newark at the University of Delaware opened 10 years ago as a “working laboratory” where students could get hands-on experience with the latest in hospitality technology – experimental amenities like massage chairs, a plasma television for videoconferencing and a Roomba Discovery SE Robotic Vacuum keeping things clean on opening day.

“And then the industry went through a tremendous economic downturn in 2007-2009,” said Bill Sullivan, managing director of the hotel since it opened.

Everything became more competitive, and the industry was forced to change faster than expected. Some experiments in the “working laboratory” worked and others didn’t. Bedding improved. Food service concept changed completely. Wi-Fi bandwidth increased twenty-fold. Ideas that once seemed like game-changers, like high-quality videoconferencing, had little effect on the bottom-line, while meters that scolded guests when they were in the shower too long never got off the drawing board.

“And the students have seen that happen,” Sullivan said.
a promising economic driver for Delaware

In many cases, they’ve made it happen. Student projects were responsible for a green initiative at the hotel and a VIP program for parents. But the students have also witnessed a major generational shift, from guests who looked like their parents to guests who look more like their peers.

“The hospitality industry was driven by the baby boomers and their wants and needs,” said Dr. Sheryl F. Kline, chair of the Department of Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management. “Now the focus is on what the millennials want to buy. The millennials have very different needs, and the hotels are playing catch up.”

Younger guests expect free Wi-Fi. They expect lobbies to be “third spaces” where they can eat, work and socialize. And they’re more likely to provide feedback through a TripAdvisor review than in a guest survey from Marriott – so much so that Sullivan expects aggregated online comments will soon become the primary internal quality metric used throughout the hotel industry.

Student experience

Ted Hosmer knew he wanted to go into the hotel business long before college. “You go and visit a hotel and stay in it and you get that feeling when you walk in,” Hosmer said. “It’s exciting and there’s so much going on and people walking around. I love that feel.”

He got that feel while working at the hotel and at Vita Nova, the university’s student-run restaurant, picking up shifts far beyond what the program required. (The stories about waking up at 5 a.m. and hushing guests in the middle of the night are his – as are a couple of New Year’s Eve tales that won’t be repeated here.)

And now, only a few years after graduation, Hosmer is an executive overseeing sales teams at two Marriott hotels in the Wilmington area.

Hosmer is exactly the kind of graduate that the industry needs.

“We feel very good about the program at the University of Delaware – “we” being Marriott – because it does give these young people an opportunity to experience and then demonstrate leadership,” said Steve Bauman, vice president of Global Learning Deployment at Marriott International. “There’s more focus on critical thinking. There’s more focus on the aspects of finance, revenue management, for instance. What does it take to have the right mix of guests at a hotel? How many covers do you have to push out in a restaurant?”

“What is it going to take to win in the marketplace?”

Those qualities have served alumni well – they tend to start at a higher level than their peers and move up quickly, Kline said. They have also served the city of Newark, where a symbiotic relationship has developed between the program and the hotels and restaurants on Main Street: businesses need motivated employees, and college students need jobs.

“We are very proud to say that most of the restaurants on Newark’s Main Street are either managed or owned by an alumn of UD or of our program,” Kline said. “Taverna Restaurant, Embassy Suites, the Hampton Inn all have alums on their management teams. Kline said Kildare’s has a manager who’s still a student. Bob Ashby’s two sons went through the program before adding Cantwell’s Tavern to a restaurant group that includes McGlynn’s Pub and The Deer Park Tavern. I Don’t Give a Fork, the popular Newark food truck, was started by a Lerner College grad.

And hospitality alumni David Lasus recently opened the 54th location of his Insomnia Cookies in Newark. “It doesn’t get any better than that,” Kline said. “And he sells a ton of cookies at three in the morning.”

Hospital hospitality

Shawn R. Smith, one of Kline’s former students from her classes at Widener University, was named vice president of patient experience at Christiana Hospital in late 2013, after 12 years in the hospitality industry, including a stint at Caesars in Atlantic City.

“A lot of people ask me, is hospitality health care?” Smith said. “And if you ask me, health care is the pinnacle of hospitality. That belief led Smith to reach out to Lerner College and develop the partnership that became the Patient Experience Academy, a 10-week course where front-of-house hospital employees learn the fundamentals of hospitality from experts at the school – and earn college credit while doing so.

“They have valet parking, we have valet parking,” Sullivan said. “They have food service, we have food service. They make beds, we make beds. They clean toilets; we clean toilets. Cut to the chase, and there’s a lot of similarity.”

“What’s the difference?” Kline asked. “You want to be in a hotel, you don’t want to be in a hospital. Everything else is the same.”

Also the same: The questions on the guest survey after a patient’s stay, which focus as much on hospitality as they do on medical care – How were you greeted? How was the food? And in the wake of all the changes that came with the Affordable Care Act, those patient satisfaction surveys can now directly affect the Medicare reimbursement a hospital receives.

There’s financial incentive for hospitals to be in the hospitality business, though Smith says the goals of the “Christiana Care Way” go beyond that, toward creating a consistently good experience for patients and their families throughout their stay.

“It’s the right thing to do,” Smith said. “This program helped everyone understand we’re here to help a patient and to do whatever we need to do to make sure they stay comfortable.”

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Economic driver

Christiana Hospital is not the only Delaware institution that has turned to Lerner College for insight into how hospitality can help drive economic development.

Last year, the college’s Center for Applied Business and Economic Research (CABER) produced a study of the economic contributions of the 2014 Firefly Music Festival in Dover at the request of the Delaware Tourism Office, Dover International Speedway and Red Frog Events. The final report, widely-quoted by local newspapers and politicians, found that the Festival added more than $68 million in spending for goods and services throughout the economy, supported the equivalent of 579 full-time jobs and increased local, state and federal taxes by nearly $10 million.

Those numbers have helped put festivals on the front-burner for Delaware economic development, while keeping local businesses aware of opportunities that might arise during papal visits and political conventions in Philadelphia.

Delaware State Tourism Director Linda Parkowski said findings from CABER carry significant weight in local circles, not only because they come from an in-state university, but because the research is done by both economists and hospitality professionals.

“For many years, tourism has not been looked at as a tangible industry – you can’t wrap your head around it because there are so many facets to it,” Parkowski said. “But when you can put numbers to it, it gains a different kind of respect.”

Other research from the hospitality program has studied hotel water-usage rates, room cleanliness and the fact that guests like the idea of staying at “green” hotels – but won’t pay extra for them. And research has identified sports-related tourism – particularly high school and college tournaments – as an area of great potential for Delaware, leading to the creation of the Delaware Sports Commission, with partners in Lerner College’s sports management program.

One outgrowth of that commission, the “Slam Dunk to the Beach” basketball tournament at Cape Henlopen High School, added more than $1 million to the local economy over three days last December, Parkowski said.

“We have a location in Delaware that’s second to none,” said Sullivan who wears another hat as the board chair of the Great Wilmington Convention & Visitors Bureau. “We’re trying to get heads in beds. They’re trying to get a national softball tournament.”

Marriott commitment

The relationship between Marriott and the University of Delaware remains strong, 10 years after the hotel opened. The school just received a new $559,000 commitment from The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation that it will use to build a state-of-the-art classroom inside the hotel, bringing the theory and practice of the industry ever closer together.

Meanwhile, Marriot continues to see the University of Delaware as a fertile recruiting ground, with more than 15 percent of the program’s alumni employed with Marriott International. Still, they see increasing competition for those students.

“Retail, rental cars, Nordstrom, Macy’s ... what they’re discovering is that, in general, these young people are given not only a solid foundation in business thinking and business metrics – in finance, accounting, marketing and so on – but they come with an outward persona, the ability to want to engage with people and influence people,” Bauman said. “They make great health care workers and managers. A lot of these people do go into the health care industry.”

And for a young graduate like Hosmer, what was once a clear career path to a general manager position is now complicated by the number of opportunities he sees before him – and the diversity of experience that allows him to step into any of a number of positions.

“I guess the good news is that you can take so many roads to get to the same place,” Hosmer said. “It’s always adjusting because of technology and everything. My job right now didn’t exist four years ago. That whole GM thing, while it’s still there, is a little more flexible in my mind. Maybe I’ll just see where things take me.”