Engaging the Homeless through Technology and Information Literacy

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Abstract

The University of Louisville (U of L) Libraries' outreach mission is to encourage the development of information literacy (IL) and critical thinking in individuals. In March 2010, a community engagement partnership began between Ekstrom Library and the Wayside Christian Mission for the libraries to provide a basic computer skills class to its clients (referred to as students), many of whom had never used a computer. Now in its fourth iteration, the class named Wayside 100 provides students an opportunity to develop skills that may assist them with increasing their educational level, succeeding in college, as well as overcoming homelessness.

Since 2003–2004, the Signature Partnership Initiative (SPI) at U of L is one of several efforts from the Office of Community Engagement whose goal is "to enhance the quality of life and economic opportunity for residents of West Louisville. The SPI goals are to work with various community partners to improve the educational, health, [and] economic and social status of individuals and families who live in our urban core." (Jenkins 2009) At the U of L, each school and department is represented by a faculty liaison who reports back to their school and department colleagues. While several community engagement partnerships exist, this article will focus on a partnership that began in March 2010, between the U of L's Ekstrom Library and the Wayside Christian Mission Homeless Shelter.

Using the SPI's goals and objectives as the basis for this partnership, this article will discuss the class's importance, in addition its impact on librarians, U of L, and the Wayside Christian Mission and its students. Many have never used a computer at all. Without basic computer skills, there is little chance that many of these students will have any possibility of increasing their educational level, succeeding in college, or overcoming homelessness.

The overarching goal of SPI is to enhance quality of life for residents in West Louisville by improving the overall educational attainment levels to equal those of metropolitan Louisville in general. Through collaboration with various state and federal agencies, schools, colleges, universities, private and public companies, not-for-profits, foundations, and professional associations to form a community partnership, members of the U of L university community collaborations can integrate the SPI's four primary goals and objectives for collaborating (Jenkins 2009). The goals are as follows:

Education

- Raise reading, math, and science skills to grade level

- Raise the percentage of residents with a high school diploma to that of the community's average

- Raise the percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree to that of the community's average

Health

- Reduce infant mortality

- Increase life expectancy

- Reduce chronic illnesses (such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and mental health) through early identification and treatment

Economic Development

- Raise the employment level of residents located in the target area

- Raise the per capita income of households located in the target area

- Increase business creation and expansion in the target area

- Increase business entrepreneurship by target area residents

Social and Human Services

- Reduce substance abuse

- Reduce youth violence

- Provide safe quality environments for dependent individuals, including the elderly and disabled

The Wayside Christian Mission

Wayside Christian Mission, is a homeless shelter that is more than just a place that provides people nightly shelter. A beacon of hope in the Louisville community since it was incorporated as a 501c (3) in 1957, it provides several programs and facilities to homeless people needing assistance any day and time (Wayside Christian Mission 2011). The programs and types of facilities that Wayside provides are as follows:

- Educational Classes (onsite GED and computer classes and literacy)

- Discipleship Program/Job Training (kitchen, auto mechanics, print shop, and retail)

- Recovery Program (six months to one year residential recovery program for the homeless at no charge)

- Safe Haven for mentally ill homeless women (ten beds)

- Dining Hall (three hot meals daily all year round, in addition to early breakfast and late supper for workers)

- Chapel (seats ninety-one for services nightly in shelters, in addition to Sunday morning and evening services in Chapel)

- Carl Nussbaum Jr. Child Development Center (serves homeless preschoolers staying in any Louisville-area homeless shelter at no charge to parents nor the shelter)

- Two thrift stores (located at 9125 Galene Drive and 4930 Poplar Level Road)

- Men's Emergency Shelter (331 beds)

- Men's Day Shelter (accommodates up to seventy-five anytime Monday thru Sunday)

- Men's Permanent Supportive Housing (housing for disabled homeless men—thirty private apartments)

- Family Emergency Shelter (fifty beds)

- Women's Permanent Supportive Housing (six apartments)

- Single Women's Emergency Shelter (106 beds)

- Single Women's Transitional Shelter (ten beds)

- Single Women's Halfway Houses (eleven spaces for women)

- Women's Day Shelter (accommodates up to forty anytime Monday through Sunday)

One Librarian's Introduction to the Homeless Community

After an introduction of Wayside's President and CEO Pastor Tim Moseley, by Wayside's volunteer Art Gallery Curator Mrs. Elmer Lucille Allen, to Ekstrom's Outreach and Reference Librarian Fannie M. Cox, a brief conversation began about the possibility of the libraries providing a computer skills class for Wayside homeless students who will be participating in their College and Career program. Many Wayside

students will attend Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC) to take a General Education 100 (GE 100) orientation class. Reverend Moseley's description of these students was that they were from different backgrounds. Many of them had not been in school for several years and were preparing to take college courses. Others had college degrees, but needed to refresh their skills. Finally, there were also those who wanted to develop computer skills for the first time. When looking at why people are homeless, the National Coalition for the Homeless references a shortage of affordable rental housing and poverty as the two leading causes for the increase in homelessness. (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009) They also cited other factors why more people are becoming homeless:

- Underemployment

- Foreclosure

- Poverty

- Eroding work opportunities

- Decline in public assistance

- Housing

- Lack of affordable healthcare

- Domestic violence

- Mental illness

- Addiction disorders

Librarian Cox met with Rev. Moseley and Mark Miller, the Single Women's Shelter and Family Shelter Case Manager, to discuss the computing needs of the students. It was decided that five objectives would be focused on in the computing skills class: how to 1) use Microsoft Word, 2) open an e-mail, 3) create a resume, 4) apply for a job online, and 5) and evaluate information. A pre-test was also administered to ascertain their skill levels and a post-test was given at the end of class to assess their learning outcomes.

In March 2010, twenty-four Wayside adult students walked into Ekstrom Library for the first Wayside 100 computer skills class. The Wayside 100 class began as a four-week basic computer class that included course objectives, outcomes, in addition to pre-tests and post-tests. The pre-test revealed that several students were very knowledgeable about using a personal computer and used it often. Other students in did not know how to type or even turn on a computer. Just like any adult education class, it was found that students have various skill levels. With the assistance from

Ekstrom Library's Diversity Residency Librarian, Toccara Porter, and Mark Miller, Wayside's students were introduced to the university's environment.

Now in its fourth iteration, the Wayside 100 class time has increased from sixty minutes to ninety minutes, and the number of weeks has doubled from four to eight weeks. Through this class, students learn the basics of the Internet; beginning word processing skills; and how to open an e-mail account, create a resume, apply online for employment, and evaluate information. The utilization of these skills is becoming more common in day-to-day activities. Adult learners in "any transition program helping students prepare for postsecondary training or academic careers is at the same time helping student's transition into the workplace of the [twenty-first] century." (Salas-Isnardi 2010)

What Skills Does It Take to Function in the Twenty-first Century?

So the question becomes, what skills does it take to not only function but succeed in the twenty-first century? For instance, computer skills represent one facet of a larger paradigm in a framework of skill sets needed to succeed in today's society. In today's multi-dimensional and complex universe, students from all walks of life, socio-economic backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and/or religions must master and understand a variety of skills and literacies to survive in our global economy.

For adult learners, Salas-Isnardi (2010) defines twenty-first century skills as the "combination of skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a variety of settings in the new century, including the workplace and the postsecondary institution. The twenty-first century skills include a host of new and important literacies as well as cross-disciplinary abilities, soft skills, and life-long learning skills," such as . . .

- **Economic and Financial Literacy:** The ability to make financial decisions appropriate for one's family and personal situation in different stages of life. The ability to understand how financial decisions can impact an individual or a community.

- **Multicultural Literacy:** The ability to understand different ways of "seeing the world" across different cultures and to integrate and promote the understanding of different groups.

- **Technological Literacy:** The ability to understand appropriate technologies and to select the appropriate technology for the task.

- **Health Literacy:** The ability to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed in order to make appropriate health decisions.

- **Visual Literacy:** The ability to interpret, evaluate, and convey information that is available through images.

- **Scientific Literacy:** The ability to understand and describe natural phenomena or science issues affecting the community/nation. The ability to understand articles about science in popular media.

Similarly to Salas-Isnardi's skillset is the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), a national organization founded by the business community, educational leaders, and national policymakers. The Commonwealth of Kentucky joined P21. P21 advocates twenty-first century readiness for every student. P21's framework represents the multiple abilities necessary to succeed in the twenty-first century. Based upon a "holistic" approach, the student outcomes are a "blending of specific skills, content knowledge, expertise, and literacies" (Overview: Framework for 21st Century Learning). These outcomes are combined with a system of support to foster academic achievement.

The four categories P21 Student Outcomes are as follows:

1) Life and Career Skills
    a. Flexibility and adaptability
    b. Initiative and self-direction
    c. Social and cross-cultural skills
    d. Productivity and accountability
    e. Leadership and responsibility

2) Learning and Innovation Skills—4 Cs
    a. Critical thinking
    b. Communication
    c. Collaboration
    d. Creativity

3) Information, Media, and Technology Skills
    a. Information literacy
    b. Media literacy
    c. Information, communications, and technology (ICT) literacy

4) Core Subjects and 21st Century Themes
    I. Core subjects
        a. English
        b. Reading or language arts
        c. World languages
        d. Arts
        e. Mathematics
        f. Economics
        g. Science
        h. Geography
        i. History
        j. Government

    k. Civics
II. 21st Century Themes
    a. Global awareness
    b. Financial, economic, business, and entrepreneurial literacy
    c. Civic literacy
    d. Health literacy
    e. Environmental literacy

The P21 Systems of Support are necessary for a comprehensive framework and must be in place when a school, school district, or state adopts P21. In order for the P21 framework to be comprehensive, five support systems were identified that support and ensure student learning and the development of the aforementioned skills. These support systems are . . .

a. 21st Century Standards
b. Assessments of the 21st Century Skills
c. 21st Century Curriculum and Instruction
d. 21st Century Professional Development
e. 21st Century Learning Environments

Together, these skills and support systems provide what Partnership for 21st Century Skills and its membership believe are necessary for students to become "more engaged in the learning process and graduate better prepared to thrive in today's global economy" (Framework for 21st Century Learning 2013).

However, as Wayside strives to fulfill their mission to "give a hand up" through its transitional College and Career Program (2010), the number of homeless adult learners seeking transitional education from this program type has the potential to increase due to the growing number the number of pre-kindergarten to twelve grade students, at least in Kentucky. As this generation of learners becomes adults, many may lack the basic Life and Career skills mentioned by P21 and may seek out adult transitional programs similar to Wayside's program as one pathway to developing and learning skills to overcome homelessness.

Since 2004, the number of homeless children reported by Jefferson County Public School (JCPS) rose 50 percent. For the period of 2008–2009, 8,582 pre-K– to twelfth-grade students in that school district, which serves Louisville, were reported homeless. For the period of 2009–2010, JCPS reported 11 percent (10,555) students were known to be homeless (Metropolitan Housing Coalition 2011). JCPS also reported on proficient levels for reading and math. The third grade reading score of homeless students lagged behind the scores of non-homeless third grades students, or 37 percent homeless compared to 67 percent of all third graders. The proficient level for math at the eleventh grade is 15 percent for the homeless compared to 42 percent for all eleventh graders (Salley and Ellers 2013).

Conclusion

When looking at what various people and organizations say about what skill sets are necessary for people to succeed, programs such as Wayside 100 are only scratching the surface in meeting the needs of the homeless. For the year 2010, Wayside provided lodging and meals to members of the Louisville community (Wayside Christian Mission 2011):

- Lodging for 132,000 men

- Lodging for 14,419 single women

- Lodging for 11,927 families

- Meals for 513,649 individuals

- A donation of 27,464.50 volunteer hours

In a broader sense, these numbers could cause one to pause at the potential number of individuals who might need these types of helpful programs to learn and develop the multi-dimensional abilities to function in the twenty-first century.

Impact/Outcomes

The impact and outcomes of this partnership has been beneficial to both Wayside and the U of L. This partnership is unique because it places the university's libraries in the position to work with some of the most vulnerable and unskilled students in Louisville and to aid them in their pursuit of education and lifelong learning.

What have these classes meant to the Wayside 100 students?

- Many were introduced to typing.

- Many were introduced to word processing and Microsoft Word.

- Several began creating a resume for the first time.

- A few students updated their resumes.

- Several opened e-mail accounts for the first time.

- Several practiced applying for a job online.

- A couple students applied for jobs and received interviews.

- One lady received a significant promotion—prior to this class she had never used a computer or had an e-mail account.

What has this partnership meant to the Wayside Christian Mission and the University?

- The libraries and supplemental classes supported the tuition-free General Education classes at the Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC).

- Faculty networking with the U of L's Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences led the way to the creation of 1) the Resilient Families Project, and 2) a parent-child reading lab as part of a service-learning project.

- The Paul-Elder critical thinking framework was infused into the Recovery classes.

- Assessment instruments, known as i-Clickers, were incorporated into several classes.

- Faculty from the College of Business School Entrepreneurial Faculty started a networking practicum project for students to develop operational business plans for coffee shop and gift shop.

What has this partnership meant to the University Libraries?

- Provided opportunities for the librarians to teach information literacy skills

- Allowed for networking with other university faculty to foster collaborative opportunities

- Opened opportunities to develop new skills for working with adult learners

- Created research opportunities

- Furthered university recruitment

Classes like these provide opportunities for the libraries to teach Information Literacy skills to a culturally diverse group of non-traditional adult students who have multiple challenges such as homelessness, drug rehabilitation, unemployment, etc. These skills contribute to their ability to think critically and develop life skills. These classes also allow librarians to enhance their teaching skills for adult learners. Opportunities for scholarly research with diverse populations are also available. As a recruitment tool, these classes provide skills to increase the student's chances of academic success and continued college attendance. As these students continue to attend school, it is likely that they will attend U of L in the future to complete their bachelor's degree, thus adding to the population and diversity of the U of L environment.

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