Community Engagement: Computer Skills for the Homeless

Fannie M. Cox

What does it mean to provide information literacy skills? The number of homeless people is growing regardless of their socio-economic status, age, gender, race, religion, or ethnicity. An Outreach Librarian from a university developed a community partnership to teach computer skills to residents of a homeless shelter. This paper presents the benefits, impacts, and outcomes of these classes for both the residents and librarians.

Introduction

What started out as an opportunity to provide a basic information literacy class morphed into a realization: To teach information literacy skills, one must first possess a basic understanding of computing, also known as keyboarding. For the purposes of this paper, computing will be defined as the ability to use a computer. Computing includes turning on a computer, understanding how the shift key works, and knowing how to use the other control keys (i.e. control, alt, backspace, etc.). Computing also includes knowing how to cut and paste and turn off a computer. As libraries strive to educate people to become lifelong learners, many individuals will need not only access to computers, but also instructions on using a computer. Basic daily activities, such as paying a bill, submitting a prescription, communicating with customer service, and applying for a job, are automated and occur online. Consequently, the digital divide is alive and well.

Community Engagement

Community Engagement at the University of Louisville (U of L) has become vital to the metropolitan university's mission. The University Libraries at U of L participate in the university's Signature Partnership Initiative (SPI), a program administered by the Office of Community Engagement. SPI is the university's "… effort to enhance the quality of life and economic opportunity for residents of Louisville, primarily West Louisville. Its goal is to work with various community partners to improve the educational, health, economic and social status of individuals and families who live in our urban core."[1] The University Libraries Outreach and Reference Librarian, Associate Professor Fannie M. Cox, located on the main campus at Ekstrom Library, serves as the faculty liaison representative on the SPI Committee. Professor Cox's Outreach focus is to develop partnerships off campus to promote Information Literacy (IL) and encourage the development of IL and critical thinking in individuals.

So what is community engagement? Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, and global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.[2] Community engagement is also a method. It is a way of "… doing teaching, learning, and research that involves

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'others' outside academia who have expertise, wisdom, insights and lived experience that equips them to contribute to the quality of our scholarly agendae."[3]

U of L's Office of Community Engagement identified seven characteristics that partnerships, or collaborative relationships, exhibit. These seven characteristics are:

1. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] are tied to an external community partner organization(s).
2. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] focus on a community need or issue.
3. Activities are of mutual benefit to the partner and the university.
4. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] provide opportunities for faculty, staff and students to participate in community-based learning, research or service.
5. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] are usually formalized, and may have a contract or memorandum of agreement to specify the terms of operation.
6. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] may be funded from a variety of sources including university funds. Some partnerships are unfunded and have only in-kind support.
7. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] may impose a fee for service or professional development training provided in support of a public or community organization.[4]

Wayside Christian Mission

Wayside Christian Mission is more than a homeless shelter. It is a 501 (c) (3) that provides several options to Louisville's homeless. Wayside provides emergency shelter to men, women, and children. On a daily basis, Wayside serves three meals. In an email from Wayside's Chief Operation Officer, Nina Moseley, in 2012, Wayside provided lodging for 88,672 men, 33,170 single women, and 19,894 families. Furthermore, Wayside served 514,023 meals and received 32,978 volunteer hours from people.

Wayside also provides several programs to assist residents to improve themselves. These services include:

1. The College and Career Program—secures student housing for students who are homeless
2. Work Out Program—provides housing and savings as clients are employed in community jobs

3. Work Therapy and Work Force Programs—teaches job readiness and employment
4. Sober Living Program—oversees a four to six month twelve-step recovery program;
5. Hospitality Job Training Program—provides housing and hospitality training and community job placement

In addition to the aforementioned outreach programs, Wayside also houses the Carl Nussbaum, Jr. Child Development Center, which provides child care for homeless preschoolers staying in any Louisville area homeless shelter at no charge to parents or the shelter. Moreover, Wayside assists residents with a permanent supportive housing program and Safe Haven, a housing initiative for homeless women who are mentally ill. Finally, the mission owns and maintains a fully-functioning hotel, the Hotel Louisville. Hotel Louisville is open to the public, but Wayside residents operate the facilities.

The Partnership

After being introduced to Rev. Tim Moseley (President and C.E.O) and then to Mark Miller (a social worker at Wayside), we met and talked about the organization's clients who were participants in Wayside's College and Career Program. Specifically, we discussed how they needed a basic computer skills class. Students in this program were scheduled to take the General Education 100 (GE100) college orientation class at the Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC). From several weeks of planning and discussions, a class was designed to meet a wide range of skill levels. From these discussions, Associate Professor Fannie M .Cox, the author of this paper, was made aware of the diversity of educational backgrounds and computing skill levels.

In March 2010, the first class began and it had twenty-four students. Now in its fifth iteration, the duration of class meetings has increased from sixty minutes to ninety minutes. The number of weeks has doubled from four to eight. Students taking this class were taught internet basics and beginning word processing. Students were required also to open an email account and to create a resume to apply for employment online.

Developing an external partnership to promote IL and critical thinking requires discussion and asking several questions such as:

1. Is the community partner a good fit for the type of service/classes to be offered/provided?

2. What is the mission of the organization?
3. Does the organization provide educational services?
4. Are these services outsourced, or are they provided in-house?
5. Could the class or program you want to provide fit within the scope of the library's mission and/or your institution's mission?
6. Is there a cost involved?
7. What is that cost? Is it time? Is it your time and/or the time of your fellow librarians?
8. Does the Wayside partnership meet the university's criteria for a partnership?

Upon reviewing the seven characteristics from the Office of Community Engagement, it was determined that the Wayside partnership met four of the criteria.

Characteristics not met by the Wayside partnership were:

1. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] are usually formalized, and may have a contract or memorandum of agreement to specify the terms of operation.
2. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] may be funded from a variety of sources including university funds. Some partnerships are unfunded and have only in-kind support.
3. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] may impose a fee for service or professional development training provided in support of a public or community organization.[5]

The overarching goal of SPI is to "…enhance the quality of life for residents in West Louisville by improving the overall educational attainment levels to equal those of metropolitan Louisville in general, through the integration of the goals and objectives listed here."[6]

Why the Homeless? Who Are the Homeless?

Partnering with a homeless shelter was mutually beneficial because *Wayside's College and Career program provided an opportunity for U of L's Outreach Program to fulfill the University's Community Engagement mission and to contribute to the educational, social, and potential economic progress of Wayside residents participating in the College and Career Program. Furthermore, the partnership* did meet four of the seven characteristics from the Office of Community Engagement. Those four criteria were:

1. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] are tied to an external community partner organization(s).
2. [Partnerships or collaborative relationships] focus on a community need or issue.
3. Activities are of mutual benefit to the partner and the university.
4. Provides opportunities for faculty, staff and students to participate in community-based learning, research or service.

The computing knowledge of the clients represented a very broad range of skill and educational levels. For example, several clients in the class were returning to school after being out for several years. A few clients had college degrees and wanted to update their skills. Others were preparing to enroll in college classes for the first time. Some clients wanted to learn how to use the computer for the first time. Finally, some were working to complete their GED. From the initial meetings, Professor Cox learned that homeless people came from many different paths. The National Coalition for the Homeless says that the two leading causes for homelessness are a shortage of affordable housing and poverty.[7] Other factors they also say cause homelessness are:
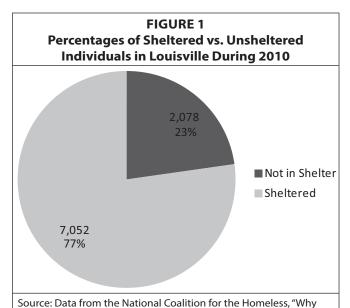
- foreclosure
- lack of a "Universal Livable Income"

TABLE 1 2009-2010 Comparison of Homeless Populations in Louisville				
Household with children	Sheltered	Unsheltered	**Total for 2010**	Total for 2009
Number of households	448	(unknown)	**448**	520
Number of persons	1,323		**1,323**	1,522
House without Children	Sheltered	Unsheltered	**Total for 2010**	Total for 2009
Number of households	5,729	2,078	**7,807**	7,826
Number of persons	5,729	2,078	**7,807**	7,826
Total	**7,052**	**2,078**	**9,130**	9,348
Source: Data from the National Coalition for the Homeless, "Why Are People Homeless?" (2009).				

- eroding work opportunities
- decline in public assistance
- lack of affordable health care
- domestic violence
- mental illness
- addiction disorders

In Louisville, the Coalition counted 9,130 home- less people. The census includes people who were in homeless shelters, on the street, or those who received services from homeless providers. The census cov- ers the period from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010. The Coalition homeless count is more inclusive that the homeless count used by the US Dept. of Hous- ing. HUD counts only the people who stay in shelters.

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), the school district serving Louisville, reported that, for 2008-2009, 8,582 students were homeless. The number of homeless students in JCPS rose 50% since 2004. As the homeless rate of children increases, it impacts one of the city's economic goals, "…to build an educated workforce for the 21st century."[8] While these numbers represent a local instance, they could also represent a national perspective as the homeless students of today possibly become non-traditional adult students of tomorrow.

FIGURE 1
Percentages of Sheltered vs. Unsheltered Individuals in Louisville During 2010

2,078
23%

■ Not in Shelter
■ Sheltered

7,052
77%

Source: Data from the National Coalition for the Homeless, "Why Are People Homeless?" (2009).

Impacts and Outcomes

In reference to the Outreach and Reference Librarian meeting community engagement criteria, both the Wayside residents and the librarians at U of L have benefitted mutually from the activities of this partner- ship. The benefits for the Wayside students included:

1. *Introduction to Keyboarding*
   - Students who had never turned on a comput- er before were introduced to typing and the functionality of the keys on the keyboard.
   - Students who were not familiar to word pro- cessing were introduced to word processing.
   - Students who were familiar with word pro- cessing were able to use their word process- ing and keyboarding skills to pursue higher- paying positions.

2. *Created and Updated Resumes*
   - Students who did not have a typed resume were introduced to creating a resume as part of their word processing practice.
   - Students gained confidence to apply for and secure employment online.
   - Students were granted face-to-face interviews.

3. *Ability to Transition*
   - Students returned to school to further their education.
   - Transitioned from Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC) to the University of Louisville (U of L).

4. *Confidence*
   - With increased confidence and knowledge, students made computer purchases for the first time.
   - Students created email accounts to corre- spond with potential employers and family members.

In addition to benefitting students, U of L librar- ians have also benefitted from participating in the community outreach program. Librarians benefitted in the following ways:

1. *Opportunities for Librarians to Teach Information Literacy Skills*
   - Developing a class for a culturally-diverse group with a broad range of challenges (i.e. homelessness, drug rehabilitation, unemploy- ment, etc.) is never complete. It requires the in- structor to be flexible, tolerant, and confident to adapt to the needs of the student.

2. *Faculty Networking*
- Talking with other faculty members about this project initiated other collaborations, such as:

The U of L Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences faculty created the Resilient Families Project. Forty-five undergraduate students assisted in a program designed specifically to emphasize resilience, improved communications, and child- management skills in homeless parents and children.

The U of L School of Business Entrepreneurial program has selected the Hotel Louisville as a consulting site for a senior business school class.

3. *Research Opportunities*
- Librarians can make presentations at professional meetings, publish in scholarly journals, and pursue grant opportunities.

4. *Recruitment to the University of Louisville*
- Students overcame challenges (i.e. homelessness, drug rehabilitation, unemployment, poverty, etc.) and transfer to the university to continue their pursuit of education and lifelong learning.

Conclusion

In summary, the initial goal of the course was to teach basic information literacy skills. From the first class, it became obvious that, for many of the students, basic computer skills were needed as a foundation before information literacy skills could be taught. The class was modified many times to meet the students where they were. So, near the end of class, and after many of the students had acquired a basic understanding of how to use the computer, information literacy skills were introduced.

The instructor also had to endure a learning curve. Developing a class for and teaching non-traditional adult students required a different set of teaching skills. Feedback and assistance from Wayside's tech-savvy social worker, Mark Miller was very helpful. Miller attended the Wayside 100 classes along with the residents. After each class, or when the course ended, Miller and Cox would discuss the outcomes and revise the course content to better fit the information needs of the residents. At U of L, an important aspect of IL is how to critically evaluate information. His feedback was instrumental in developing practi-

cal examples using students' life experiences to introduce the concepts associated with the critical evaluation of information and/or resources (i.e. quality, currency, authority, relevance, objectivity, coverage, and corroboration).

This partnership has been beneficial to both the university and Wayside Christian Mission. They both understand the importance of community partnerships. It has been an excellent community agency that not only supports the community, but also supports the university community in ways that will never be fully realized. Without basic computer and IL skills, the possibility of these students succeeding in college and overcoming their personal challenges is very limited. The ultimate goal of this class is to provide skills to students to increase their chances of success academically and in life. One student has already begun the transition from community college to attend U of L to complete a bachelor's degree, thereby adding to the diversity of the U of L environment.

Notes

1. Susan Jenkins, "Signature Partnership," *University of Louisville's Office of Community Engagement*, last modified June 1, 2012, http://louisville.edu/communityengagement/signature-partnership.
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3. Dr. Barbara Holland, "Community Engaged Scholarship: Your Teaching, Research and Service "Reconsidered","(workshop, Get Engaged in our Campus Dialogue on Community Engagement, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, October 12, 2012).
4. Susan Jenkins, "Characteristics of Community Engagement Partnerships," *University of Louisville's Office of Community Engagement,* last modified February 20, 2012, http://louisville.edu/communityengagement/community-engagement-partnerships.
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8. Valerie Salley and Fran Ellers, "Where do You Live? Lou-

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