



Diversity Works

Office of University Partnerships

Minority-Serving Institutions Developing Partnerships, Building Communities

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Bridging the Gap Between Customer Expectation and Employee Service

The Washington State tourism industry employs 143,800 people and generates \$15.2 billion in direct visitor spending and \$1 billion in state and local tax revenue. It is no wonder then that throughout the Yakima Valley—famous for its wine, culinary, and farm-fresh experiences—tourism is a crucial economic development focus. It is also not surprising that when completing an online Comprehensive Needs Assessment survey conducted by the Yakima Valley Visitors and Convention Bureau (YVVCB) in March 2009, tourism-related business owners in Yakima Valley emphasized the need for a university-sponsored tourism training program and employee training in customer service. Heritage University (HU) in Toppenish, Washington, has stepped up to address this important need.



Participants of a train-the-trainer class for the WorldHost Customer Service Program.

With funds from its 2009 Hispanic-Serving Institutions Assisting Communities (HSIAC) program grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, HU, which has several satellite sites including one in Yakima County, established the WorldHost Customer Service program to educate Yakima County business owners and their employees about the importance of customer service to the tourism industry and, consequently, to economic development and community growth. To ensure the successful delivery of the WorldHost training project, HU enlisted the help of several partners: the University of Washington (UW), YVVCB, area chambers of commerce, and the Yakima Nation Economic Development Administration.

Collaborating for Change

UW, led by Professor Marc Miller, played a critical role in project development. On Dr. Miller's recommendation, HU adopted the WorldHost Fundamentals, a customer service and communication training curriculum that focuses on developing an employee's ability to empathize with customers to better meet their needs.

"Customer service is a key element in any business, and WorldHost is easily customizable to fit the needs of many industries, making it a good fit for the Yakima Valley," said Project Director Ricardo Valdez. "It promotes tourism etiquette and customer service skills among Yakima County businesses."

Before the WorldHost training project was launched, YVVCB—which competitively markets the Yakima Valley as a tourist



destination and provides advertising and marketing to area businesses—developed a community survey to help HU identify businesses that would be interested in the training. YVVCB's facility is also a WorldHost training venue. In addition, local chambers of commerce are working closely with HU to promote the training throughout Yakima County through newsletters and advertising, and chamber members are being trained to provide customer service training to local businesses.

HU is located on the Yakama Indian Nation reservation, so the Yakama Nation Economic Development Administration is included in any university-directed economic development activity. Administration staff helped HU recruit businesses for the WorldHost program, and one of their members is providing training to Tribal businesses and to Tribal casino employees.

“Our partners were identified as having a direct association with tourism in our communities. Also, we were cognizant of our local residents and business owners as well as other educational entities that may assist with our efforts,” Valdez said. “Our approach was to form relationships with chambers of commerce and tourism organizations in the Yakima Valley who would then sponsor WorldHost trainings in their communities.”

Customer Service Training

The training is facilitated in English and Spanish by HU business faculty and students and certain community partners who participate in intensive training by WorldHost master trainers. WorldHost training is held onsite at HU and at local businesses in their respective communities. It is an 8-hour curriculum provided in either one full 8-hour day or two 4-hour days. The training focuses on different areas of interpersonal communication, including the three main parts of the communication process—vocal, verbal, and nonverbal—and the importance of each aspect when forming, sending, and receiving messages.

“Many people don't realize that the nonverbal message that is being sent, including body language and facial expressions, are in most cases the most impactful, regardless of the words being said,” said Valdez. “We drive home the fact that because of this, even when you are not speaking or intending to send a message, your body is always telegraphing a message that will be interpreted in either a positive or negative way.”

In addition, WorldHost trainers discuss the skills that accompany effective and empathetic listening—specifically, refocusing the mind on what is being said as a key to providing customer service. In addition, empathetic listening is important to understanding the underlying emotions present in many situations.

“Giving business owners and their employees the tools to effectively resolve a problem when it arises is one of the goals of our program,” explained Valdez. “They can decide how best to handle it and then proceed to defuse and collaborate with the customer to find a solution. We believe that focusing on how interaction between customer and service professional takes place is where we can make the biggest impact.”

WorldHost participants take part in the following seminars:

- Welcome to the Yakima Valley!
- Working Towards “Wow”—Creating Aesthetic Value.
- How Effective Is Your Communication?
- The Power of Listening.
- Tourism—It's Everybody's Business!
- Now It's Up to You!

By educating the businesses in effective ways to treat customers and visitors, HU and its partners work to generate repeat business both from community members and visitors to boost economic development. The customer service training goes a long way in bridging a gap between the care customers expect and the service they are receiving.

Certified to Serve

At the conclusion of the training, participants earn a certificate of completion and become certified SuperHosts. However, Valdez notes a sense of unity among businesses is also emerging. Neighboring businesses can reach out to one another because they share their WorldHost certified designation, which is resulting in consistency, idea sharing, and civic engagement within the communities.

“We are able to present these workshops anywhere that there is an overhead projector and room for 15 people. We have presented in hotel conference rooms, college classrooms, and library basements. The training is an incredibly adaptable program both in content and physical delivery,” said Valdez. “The first training was held in May 2010 at the Yakima Convention Center. Ledgestone Hotel participated and sent maintenance, housekeeping, and front desk staff. As of May 2011, we have delivered WorldHost training to over 254 Yakima Valley employees and individuals. A majority of these participants say that the training has had a positive impact, including reinforcing the importance of making a good first impression. We teach them that first impressions are formed within the first 3 to 5 seconds of an encounter, and that it can take up to 18 subsequent encounters for a negative first impression to be changed. We encourage them to keep an open mind and realize that all potential customers deserve to be treated with the same level of respect and care no matter their appearance.”

To further expand the WorldHost project, HU is working with YVVCB, area chambers of commerce, and UW to offer several countywide tourism summits each year. At these gatherings, community leaders, mayors, city managers, tourism stakeholders, and residents will learn about the importance of tourism, consistency among communities, and partnerships that may be leveraged among the surrounding cities.

For more information, contact Ricardo Valdez, Heritage University HSIAC Project Director, at 509-865-8674 or e-mail valdez_r@heritage.edu.

Revitalization Effort Promotes Economic Development in Historic Downtown District

Holly Springs, Mississippi's historic downtown is being revitalized, and a team of key entities is making it happen. Rust College, the city of Holly Springs, the Holly Springs Main Street Association, the Holly Springs Chamber of Commerce, Marshall County Board of Supervisors, the Holly Springs Tourism Association, the Holly Springs Garden Club, the Holly Springs Rotary Club, local banks, and individual business owners are all collaborating to facilitate the Holly Springs Main Street Association (HSMSA) revitalization initiative. Rust College used its Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) grant funds to combine the resources of the Rust College Community Development Corporation and its partners to facilitate this initiative. In addition, it sought to establish a vision for the community that would guide future decisionmaking and resource allocation, develop an economic development strategy, and build a stronger community.

Planning for Change

The genesis of this revitalization effort is rooted in a series of community development discussions between Clencie L. Cotton, executive director of the Rust College Community Development Corporation, and Tim Liddy, chairman of the Holly Springs Historical Preservation Committee. Both men concluded that students at Rust College and community residents needed additional service and retail shopping options.

“As a result of these discussions, it became clear that by combining the assets of Rust College and the city of Holly Springs, we could develop an economic development strategy to capture more of the dollars that were ‘leaking’ from the community and build a stronger community,” said Cotton. “This resulted in the HSMSA initiative to target the revitalization of historic downtown Holly Springs.”

One of the key decisions in realizing this goal was for HSMSA to apply to the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA), the State's economic development coordinator, for designation as a Mississippi Main Street community. Such a designation means that HSMSA would pursue downtown revitalization



Awards reception to honor project volunteers and participants of the Holly Springs Main Street Partnership Initiative.

pursuant to the national historic preservation Main Street model, thereby making it eligible to receive MDA assistance. Rust College and the city of Holly Springs filed a joint application with MDA. In the application, the city of Holly Springs agreed to provide staff, offices, and administrative support for the HSMSA revitalization initiative, and Rust College agreed to pay the MDA membership fee for HSMSA until it could do so on its own.

Upon being designated a Main Street community, HSMSA was awarded a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission to conduct a week-long planning charrette, guided by a resource team of individuals with expertise in architecture, planning, economic development, and community branding. At the charrette, Rust College, the city of Holly Springs, and various partners developed a master plan for the revitalization of the downtown district. Specific tasks were identified and team members were assigned to one of four Main Street committees: organization, design, promotion, or economic restructuring.

“Through our planning and visioning efforts, we identified a list of outcomes that we would like to see,” said Cotton. These included the following:

- Reorganizing parking and street alignment/directions around the downtown square.
- Mitigating truck traffic on the Court House Square.
- Expanding the downtown commercial district.
- Capturing the potential of Spring Hollow Park.
- Creating new lodging in the historic downtown.
- Making North Memphis Street a boulevard.
- Capturing the development opportunities of the historic Mississippi Industrial College site.
- Capturing the development opportunities of the Depot District.
- Renovating the historic electric power-generating building into a visitors' center for tourists.
- Conducting traffic studies to evaluate traffic flow as it relates to downtown shopping.
- Landscaping the downtown square using strategically placed planters, flower pots, and seasonal flowers and shrubs.
- Upgrading the traditional African-American business district.
- Establishing a signature cultural event from July to October celebrating Hill Country Blues to attract community residents and visitors to downtown Holly Springs for increased shopping, entertainment, and fellowship.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Office of University Partnerships
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Washington, DC 20410-3000

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Investing in Community

Rust College faculty and students serve as members of the four Main Street committees, and students serve as interns and volunteers with the college's partner organizations. The college's mass communication division provides public relations and marketing assistance to the project, and its students operate the sound and recording equipment for events and concerts. The business division provides assistance to entrepreneurs and vendors who provide food and other items to attendees at the cultural events and concerts.

"This project has allowed Rust College faculty, staff, and students to utilize their skills and talents to assist communities in undertaking job creation and community and economic development activities that benefit low- and moderate-income persons," said Cotton. "We are currently pursuing most of the objectives identified in the planning and visioning charrette and working with the city of Holly Springs to amend and upgrade its Comprehensive Plan to include the vision for the city developed through the charrette in order to support the

requests for funding that will be required to pursue further revitalization."

As a result of the planning charrette and through the collaboration among Rust College and its partners, a master plan for the revitalization of historic downtown Holly Springs has been developed. HSMSA has devised work plans for each element of the master plan and is currently pursuing their implementation. The community is becoming more aware of the project's goals and objectives and is actively supporting the effort by volunteering their time, participating in project activities, and becoming members of the association. Once the revitalization is complete, shopping will be increased, the downtown area will serve as an entertainment hub for the city of Holly Springs and surrounding communities, and more local income will be spent in the city.

For more information, contact Clencie L. Cotton, Director, Rust College Community Development Corporation at 662-252-4590 or e-mail clencie.cotton@gmail.com

HUD's Office of University Partnerships (OUP) provides grants to institutions of higher education to assist them and their partners with the implementation of a broad range of community development activities, including neighborhood revitalization, housing, and economic development. This newsletter, *Diversity Works*, highlights the efforts of grantees in OUP's Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions Assisting Communities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian Institutions Assisting Communities grant programs and includes a variety of interesting projects, compelling grantee profiles, and other valuable resources for minority-serving institutions.