

Literary Club

Budget Paper

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September 29, 2014

COOKS!

With some knowledge of the nature of the audience for this paper, it seems appropriate to start with a definition of a key term. Here is a partial list of Merriam Webster's definition of "cook."

Noun

1. A person who prepares food for eating.
2. A technical or industrial process.

Intransitive Verb

1. To prepare food for eating.
2. To undergo the action of being cooked.
3. To cause to occur or happen
4. To perform, do, or proceed well.

Transitive Verb

1. To concoct or fabricate.
2. To prepare for eating by a heating process.
3. To subject to the action of heat or fire.

The purpose behind this educational review is to explain the name of the FreeStoreFoodBank's "Cincinnati COOKS!" program. This program started 13 years ago to train people who have many barriers to employment and limited job experience for careers in the culinary industry. Most of us know that branding is a sensitive art and fewer of us know how to choose a brand image and name. Our brand name, "Cincinnati COOKS!," with the cooks word all capitals and finished with an exclamation point, captured the noun and verb meaning of what we wanted - which was to train cooks, teach people what it means to have a job, produce food, and prepare them for the action of heat in a kitchen --- and life.

The program started in a rented kitchen across from Taft High School with early support from the Lois and Richard Rosenthal Family Foundation. We had a three person staff – Program Manager, Chef Trainer, and Career Coach. The design was for 10 weeks of basic culinary training, at no cost to the students, that included preparing meals for a FreeStoreFoodBank after-school program called Kids Café'. We organized a small support committee that we called "The Kitchen Cabinet" with people who had a deep desire for success of "Cincinnati COOKS!." Early days were hard with small classes made even smaller when half the students didn't make it past two weeks while the staff was fine tuning the selection process and the training. The Kitchen Cabinet served to help support the harried staff and, if nothing else, put an arm on their shoulder

and remind them of their remarkable results in an unusual startup. Over the first year, the learning curve was extraordinary. The process of locating and screening prospective students was refined to find those who really wanted the training and – most important – those who truly wanted to have a real skill and job. The original classes started sequentially, but were changed to start a new class half way through each 10 week training cycle. This overlap insured that food output for Kids Café’ would be more uniform, and provide an opportunity for the more experienced students to learn leadership skills with the newbies. Our early goals were modest since our student body were people with an average age of about 40, limited job experience or skills, backgrounds that often included spending time as a guest of the State of Ohio, and other bad choices they made or others made for them. The modest expectation was to achieve a graduation rate of 70%, and an employment rate of 50% within a year of graduation. However, the tone of the program was established from the beginning – this is a professional kitchen and every one in it will perform as professionals and be responsible for their performance.

Let me skip the travails and effort of building the program and jump to the status of “Cincinnati COOKS!” now, after 13 years. We have moved into our own, highly professional kitchen with the latest and best equipment, space to train, as well as produce over 1,000 meals per day for Kids Café’. A typical class has 10 students so there are about 20 students in the kitchen or classroom at any point in time. Average age is between 35 and 40 with a range of 18 to 65, and they come to us from all around Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, but with most from the inner city – Over the Rhine, Avondale, Price Hill, Bond Hill, English Woods, etc. The gender mix is about 50/50, more than half do have police records, and very few have marketable job skills.

My first impulse for this paper was to write it from the perspective of a typical student’s experiences over the 10 weeks. However, that effort could not fit into a short, Budget paper. Instead, let me give you three examples of our students and their journeys (only the names have been changed). James was working as a dish washer in a downtown restaurant at night while attending “Cincinnati COOKS!” during the day. One of the key lesson plans deals with knife skills – which knife is for which job, how to use each knife, and how to care for knives. When the restaurant manager discovered James’ knife skills, he promoted him on the spot from dishwasher to the kitchen production line – a promotion from \$8/hr to \$10/hr with potential to reach \$16/hr. At about that time, James and his class were finishing Serve Safe training and were taking the final exam. Serve Safe is a national program administered through each state to elevate the food safety knowledge of culinary workers. The Serve Safe certificate is highly valued in the culinary field and a real asset to those students who can pass the test. The Program Manager noticed that everyone had finished the test, but James was only a third of the way through the multiple choices. James admitted that he had difficulty reading the questions and answers, so the Program Manager read the questions to him – as permitted – and found that James could answer each question without even hearing the multiple choices. Clearly, he had paid attention and knew the material, but had limited reading skills. He also was very worried

about his new job since it involved reading a list of recipe cards for each item on the menu. For the past two weeks, James has been tutored at the end of each day by staff members who are helping him understand the recipe cards and determine if we can get him into a remedial reading course. He graduated last week in Class #132, and now has a genuine career in front of him.

Another recent graduate, Duwane, was very diligent but obviously highly stressed. Near the end of the 10 weeks, someone in his extended family cut off his court ordered monitoring ankle bracelet – called a “box” on the street, and tossed him from their apartment. He spent the last two weeks of “COOKS!” living in an abandoned building in Over the Rhine while working with his parole officer about the missing box, and never missed a day at “COOKS.” I pulled Duwane aside after his graduation to talk frankly about his situation, and found him to be an articulate, open individual fully cognizant that his future was in his own hands. The key lesson for many grads is that their background can either be an obstacle or a stepping stone for the future – the choice is theirs. With help, he now has an apartment of his own (having an address is critical to getting a job), and is going through the job interview process.

Anita was homeless when she came to the FreeStoreFoodBank Customer Care Center on Liberty Street looking for food for her family. Food is often the initial focus for people needing help, and the FreeStoreFoodBank uses groceries as a tool to help people in need move to self-sufficiency. The counselor discovered that Anita and her three children were living in her car in Mt. Airy Forest having escaped their abusing husband and father. First step was to find her a place to stay in an abused women’s shelter, and then help Anita find a source of income. As with many young mothers, she had no marketable job skills although she loved to cook and care for her family. Next step was to enroll her in “Cincinnati COOKS!” where she was an extraordinary student. Not only did she have perfect attendance, but showed real culinary aptitude and leadership with her fellow students. After graduation, Anita became the head cook at the shelter and also works part time with a catering company. She and her family have their own apartment now, and her kids are thriving.

As you would expect, the results of the program have been tracked carefully over the 13 years. We have graduated 1,131 students, produced well over 1 million meals for kids, started an advanced culinary program called “Second Course,” and a catering program that is growing rapidly. Compared to our initial goal of 70%, the graduation rate is 90%. Remember that we would have been satisfied with 50% of grads having jobs? Actually, 80% have jobs within six months of graduation, and 90% within a year. Obviously, we blew by our initial goals thanks to the extraordinary strength and courage of the staff. The staff has grown to six full time people, and the program is thriving even though the original three have retired or moved on to another job in the last two years. One of the points of pride is that three of the current staff are graduates of the program. Also, there is an endowment funded by the family of one of those on the original cabinet that provides for a scholarship to the Cincinnati State Culinary School for one

student each year. The Kitchen Cabinet has moved away from routine involvement, but expanded to include a number of restaurateurs to provide more strategic support and general guidance for future growth. Many grads are now in positions of responsibility as a chef in a restaurant, a manager of an area of service, or operating their own small business. They are now reaching back to hire new grads for their operations. Also, some have left the culinary field, but are gainfully employed in something else.

At the end of the ten weeks, a formal graduation ceremony occurs with a lovely lunch available for those who attend – mostly friends and family of the grads. If anyone is interested in attending a graduation, let me know and I will provide the appropriate details. Each grad is expected to say something, and their remarks are often very insightful and sometimes emotional. Men and women in their 50's may point out their mother or father in the audience and, in emotional terms, say that this is the first time in their lives that they have given mom or dad a reason to be proud of them. The grads are uniform in their love and respect for the staff. The background of the students does not include people in authority who had high expectations of them, demanded that they do their job in the right way, but worked with them until they got it right. As MC of most graduations, I try to summarize for each class the common themes that I hear from their remarks. Every class is different, but three common themes are their pride in having a marketable and verifiable skill, their pride in having completed something for ten weeks, and their pride of being able to give back to the community by producing meals to help children. The only time, I have corrected them is when they say that “Cincinnati COOKS!” changed their lives. All of us involved are dedicated to helping them on their journey and celebrate their success – but only each person can change their own life. These good people have overcome obstacles beyond the personal experience of most in this room, and are moving on to be productive and happy citizens. As I tell them in the lingo of the street – “Only you can change you.”

“Cincinnati COOKS!”? Yes it is and does!

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9/29/14