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News

Be Their Guest

October 8, 2010



The Hotel at Kirkwood Center, located at Kirkwood Community College, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, opened its doors to the public last week. The upscale hotel has 71 rooms, including six deluxe suites, a gourmet restaurant and plentiful conference space. A professional staff manages the hotel, but the college's 300 hospitality and culinary arts students assist in the process, getting hands-on experience in every position from housekeeper and waiter to front desk manager and line chef.

Away from the modern-looking lobby and white-tablecloth dining room, the hotel also has its fair share of traditional learning spaces. There are two culinary labs, a bakery lab, a 100-seat auditorium, five classrooms and a computer lab. The hotel is such an upgrade from the college's older hospitality and culinary facilities, which did not include a hotel at all, that many of the program's students couldn't believe their eyes when they saw it.

"It was an absolute shock when we first toured the facility last semester," said Andrew Irwin, a 26-year-old culinary arts student who enrolled last year before knowing that a new facility was under construction. "When we looked at the new kitchens, our jaws hit the floor. It's like nothing we'd ever expected. I mean, this is a real restaurant, not just something we set up in the common area in a building on campus. Like last semester, we used to sell food we'd prepared to students outside the campus café. But this, this is unbelievable."

Kirkwood is on the leading edge of community colleges upgrading their hospitality and culinary programs to attract new students and compete with similar programs at four-year and proprietary institutions. Officials there and elsewhere have suggested Kirkwood may be one of the first community colleges in the country to own and operate a fully functioning training hotel on its campus. Hocking College, a two-year institution in Nelsonville, Ohio, which **owns and operates its own hotel**, is believed by most to be the very first.

Typically training hotels are the cornerstone of established programs at four-year institutions such as Cornell University's School of Hotel Management, which helps staff the **Statler Hotel**; Michigan State University's School of Hospitality Business, which assists the **Kellogg Hotel & Conference Center**; and the University of Houston's Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management, which manages a **Hilton property** of its own.

"As far as we know from our consumer base, they seem to be unique in the two-year market," said Elizabeth Johnson, senior marketing manager at the **American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute**, an association that publishes textbooks and offers academic certification to programs in the field. "Several community colleges have working, functioning restaurants. But it's a lot easier to do that than run a complete hotel."

Whether it is the influence of cooking shows like *Top Chef* or dedicated outlets like the Food Network and the Travel Channel, careers in these fields are especially popular at present. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that the hospitality industry employs more than 12 million people, or nearly 9 percent of the country's workforce. It anticipates that this number will grow by at least 15 percent in the next decade.

With all of this potential growth in the marketplace, Kirkwood officials are high on the "learning-by-doing" model their new hotel provides and believe experience there will help set their students apart from the crowd, ideally preparing them for management positions. They are



Photo: Kirkwood Community College
The lobby at the new hotel.

also excited about the potential for their graduates to boost the local economy, as about 90 percent of the program's graduates stay in the Cedar Rapids area.

Mary Jane German, chair of the hospitality arts department, noted that before the opening of the new facility, most of the courses were taught lecture-style with accompanying culinary labs to practice cooking or hospitality role-playing exercises to walk through how to deal with hotel guests. Students would then take on internships at local restaurants and hotels for a real-world experience before graduating.

"Now, we have a clinical component to our studies, similar to the health-care model," German said. "They'll work next to employees at our hotel after having gotten the book smarts and then apply it right there. All students will work shifts at the front desk, as a valet, as a bell captain, as housekeeping and laundry staff. It's the real deal."

Kirkwood students will still be required to complete an internship at a hotel or restaurant other than the one on campus, to ensure that they've really stepped outside of the comfort zone of the college campus. Still, the additional training step on campus is helpful in identifying students who can succeed, program officials argue.

"I'm convinced you either have it or you don't," said Lee Belfield, general manager of the new hotel. "You've got to spend time with a customer and not just talking about it in the classroom. I look at this as a manager in development program on steroids."

As for making such a big financial risk in tough economic times, Belfield and German were optimistic. Kirkwood's hotel was not built using tax dollars. The hotel's construction was funded with \$31 million in revenue bonds, which will be repaid as guests stay at the hotel. Tuition for the programs remains the same, with a full 15-credit-hour semester costing \$1,770.

Kirkwood is not alone among community colleges upgrading their hospitality and culinary programs or introducing new ones altogether to keep up with growing demand. Miami Dade College, one of the largest two-year institutions in the country, is planning to open the [Miami Culinary Institute](#), which will house a full-service restaurant, next year.

But don't think that every community college with a hospitality or culinary program is convinced they need their own training hotel or restaurant. Some colleges that have upgraded their programs recently have explicitly made the decision not to do so.

For instance, take Scott Community College, in Bettendorf, Iowa, which opened its \$2.3 million [Culinary Arts and Hospitality Management Center](#) earlier this month. Instead of having a fully functioning hotel and restaurant, the facility has a test dining room and mock-ups of an individual hotel room and a hotel lobby in which students can role play in a more realistic environment. Though there is brand new kitchen and classroom space for culinary labs — students used to do this kind of lab work in extra space provided by local restaurants — students in the program are still required to do all of their hands-on service learning in the field at area hotels and restaurants.

"We're not trying to be in competition with local restaurants and the like," said Brad Scott, chair of the culinary arts and hospitality management department. "If I started taking dollars away from the local restaurants, I don't think I'd get the kind of support I've gotten in the past for my program. I mean, don't cut off your nose to spite your face."

Accordingly, Scott added that he prefers programs in which culinary and hospitality students do all of their post-lab training work far from the comforts of campus.

"I'm partial," Scott said. "I wasn't a great student and just didn't do well in the classroom environment. If you tell me something and show me something, I'll get it. That's the type of students we have here, hands-on learners. I'd match any of our students with a culinary school student any day of the week. There are some things you just can't teach in the lab environment. You need to get in the weeds. You need to be somewhere night after night to get good. The high urgency of a real restaurant helps you learn how to produce a quality product."

— **David Moltz**

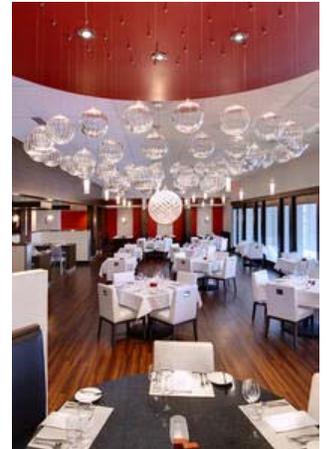


Photo: Kirkwood Community College
The dining room at the new hotel's restaurant.



Photo: Scott Community College
Students cooking in the college's new kitchen.