

What is it they say? “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day.
Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.”

A little practical learning goes a long way toward understanding something in a useful and sustaining way, whether your career is fishing or in hospitality (which, it can be argued, sometimes overlap).

Two tourism, conventions and event management (TCEM) professors have taken this to heart. Associate professor Linda Brothers and assistant professor Amanda Cecil arrange for their students to work with campus and outside entities to stage events as part of their event-planning course experience and education.

Each semester, they partner students with one major national convention in town — this past fall it was the FFA (Future Farmers of America) national convention. They’ve also worked with the FDIC in the past and an international learning conference.

“My students did a variety of tasks like registration, room monitor, meet and greet, etc.,” says Cecil. “This was after we identified areas where our students could put knowledge into practice.”

Cecil will first lecture about the registration process so her class understands its purpose and structure, but says it’s an entirely different matter when they have the actual experience.

“They have to do customer service, organizational planning, understand how the money is coming in — a lot more than they realize,” she says. “This ‘real time’ doing and reacting is an invaluable complement to what we’re doing in the classroom.”

The students really enjoy being out in the field as well — despite being a little out of their comfort zones. “They’re always surprised at how much more difficult the operations are in real life — the movies make it look so glamorous,” says Cecil with a chuckle.

In reality, the hours are much longer and there are many, many of the less glamorous jobs to do, such as unpacking boxes, stuffing thousands of little bags or organizing speaker ribbons.

“When you walk into a beautifully appointed event, it’s hard to realize just how much elbow grease went into making it look that way,” says Cecil. “But they find out.”

PETM faculty members are the first to concede it’s a real advantage having a campus so close to a large convention center — this is unheard of in most university settings. Also, with many nonprofit associations and

corporations based in Indianapolis, there’s no shortage of opportunities for partnerships.

“People come looking for us because our program is well-respected and our students have a reputation for being good workers, as well as knowledgeable and polite,” says Cecil.

That’s not to say the students are merely a kind of “free labor” pool for the organizations which request their help.

Linda Brothers is careful to point out that any time they agree to partner with an outside organization, it’s because the project in question clearly meets the objectives of the particular course — and lines up with the school schedule. For example, a lot of things happen over Labor Day weekend, but the students have not been in school long enough for them to meaningfully participate.

Each semester, that can change. “It depends on the number of students and the particular curriculum of that semester,” Brothers says.

Recently a section worked with the Spirit and Place festival. Another section did a mix of events which involved Gleaners Food Bank’s Harvest Moon Gala. Some worked the IUPUI campaign kickoff, and others worked with a bridal fair at IUPUI sponsored by *Your Wedding Magazine*.

The latter was booked into the campus center and the students assisted as volunteers. “They put themselves in the shoes of an event volunteer,” says Brothers. “If they can understand what another event volunteer coordinator did to train them, make them comfortable, show them what to do, and thank them — then when they’re in charge, they’ll be better able to recruit, retain, train and appreciate.”

Participants write reflective papers at the end, summing up the total of what they learned through the experience and detailing the future impact it will have on them as hospitality professionals.

“They often explain how they can now see through the eyes of a volunteer,” says Brothers. “Was there a place to store valuables? Was there a food break? Would they ever volunteer for that organization again? They come into the experience having no idea of what it’s all about, and they come away with a whole new perspective.”

Which brings to mind that other thing people say: “If you want to understand someone, you need to walk a mile in their shoes.”

— *Lynnell Nixon-Knight*