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Making a Difference

University of Dayton

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Making a Difference

How can a food pantry serve more clients while dealing with limited resources and volunteers? Three University of Dayton students studied operations at the Choice Food Pantry at Catholic Social Services of the Miami Valley during their senior year to provide solutions.
Operations and supply management majors Erin Mohney, Lauren O’Connor and Daniel Wolfe applied theories they learned in class to the real challenges facing the pantry — which serves nearly 16,000 people in the Dayton region every year; almost a third of them for the first time.

“They came out with some really useful results,” said Chief Executive Officer Laura Roesch. “There's a success here in terms of strengthening our operations. There's also a success in exposing students to a nonprofit environment and a ministry that serves people.”

The food pantry already has made a series of changes recommended by the students. They moved shelves to improve the flow and added extra shopping carts to cut down on waiting times.

The pantry also implemented color-coded tracking slips, which indicate whether someone will be shopping for fresh produce only, or groceries and fresh produce.

“It's a better process for the client because it's quicker for them, and it's also a clear indication to the volunteer what they're here for,” Roesch said.

The students, who graduated in May, focused on ideas that would not add extra cost for the pantry, Mohney said.

“We wanted the solutions we recommended to be easy to understand and easy to implement,” she said.

The project was part of an experiential learning program and competition for operations and supply seniors. Students typically work with a local company to solve a real business problem, but the nonprofit offered them “all the challenges of any major for-profit — plus more,” said Steve Hall, director of the Center for Project Excellence and advisor to the team. “This project was both challenging and personally rewarding for the students.”

The team won first place among 14 groups. They say it was a meaningful experience and a good fit for the University's Catholic and Marianist mission.

“This gave me an opportunity to apply my operations knowledge and see what a difference it could make,” said O’Connor, who began working at Ace Hardware headquarters after graduation.

Added Wolfe: “People in Dayton should realize how many people are hungry in this city. It was surprising to see a line already out the door when we arrived at 7 a.m., rain or snow.”

The Catholic Social Services Choice Food Pantry is located at 922 West Riverview Avenue. It is open 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. Monday to Friday. More information is available at cssmv.org/services/food-pantry.

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