Community Reintegration Program for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

Doctoral Experiential Component | Alyssa L. Burlage, OTD/S

About The Cookery

In addition to being a café-style eatery for the Nashville community, The Cookery has a greater purpose. It is the kitchen, formerly homeless students are trained and equipped in culinary techniques, including certification in a nationally recognized food safety program, in order to prepare them for employment in Nashville’s food industry and related fields.

For the duration of the culinary program, students are also provided with housing, counseling and health services, life-skills preparation, faith-based teachings, and a community of people who soon become family. Once graduates graduate from the program, The Cookery assists them in finding employment and housing opportunities in the local community, and encourages graduates to stay connected with those whom they’ve built relationships with.

Vision & Mission

Our mission is simple: to love well and teach our transitioning and homeless students a new skill-set. We aim to re-establish a sense of identity and purpose, destiny and hope and see them restored to a place where surviving is no longer their daily task, but instead they are living in hope and in community. If we can help break the cycles of hopelessness, bad choices and regrets, while loving and teaching, our students may not only secure jobs but also confidently enter relationships with God and their communities once again.

Identified Needs of Agency

Program Development.
1. Community reintegration and transition services for graduates
2. Employment and life-skills training for independent life maintenance
3. Social, support, and general healthcare services and resources
4. Advocacy.
   1. Establish community contacts and resources for students
   2. Promotional materials to increase awareness and access to services for individuals experiencing homelessness

Clinical Relevance

This project relates directly to occupational therapy (OT) in that it addresses students’ performance skills in relation to independent living, including: sensory perceptual skills, emotional regulation skills, memory skills, access to resources, and social skills, and motor and praxis skills. Additionally, it involves the student’s active participation in occupational roles within their individual educational, work, and social spheres (AOTA, 2008). By assessing students’ current skill level and participation in current or desired occupational roles, this project aims to increase the rate of successful community reintegration for all students post-graduation.

In addition, OT’s role in community mental health and community reintegration is considered one of the profession’s emerging areas of practice. OT practitioners provide services in a variety of community settings, including shelters for individuals who are homeless, while utilizing the recovery model of practice. The recovery model focuses on the long-term nature of recovery and aims to facilitate individuals’ full participation in their desired community activities (AOTA, 2013).

Goals of Experiential Component

- Collaborate with The Cookery and Lambscroft Ministries staff to create an effective Community Reintegration Program (CRP) for its students and ensure the maintenance of independent lifestyles as they re-enter the community following graduation.
- Identify barriers to successful community reintegration and provide students with the necessary life skills and resources related to independent life maintenance.
- Provide The Cookery with relevant methods, research, and assessments to evaluate students upon entry into and exit from the culinary program to determine areas for growth and skill development.
- Create assessment tools for The Cookery to allow them to collect quantitative and qualitative data regarding students’ level of satisfaction while participating in programming in order to create meaningful changes in programming and increase program efficacy.
- Committed to creating meaningful changes to programming and ensure successful reintegration of all students.

Description of Program

The purpose of this program is to:

1. Create an organized, highly individualized, approach to programming.
2. Facilitate student skill development and access to resources.
3. Facilitate independence in the management of necessary life skills.
4. Ensure successful community reintegration upon graduation.
5. Prevent relapse, recidivism, and recurring homelessness.

The program is divided into three stages:

1. Trial Student | First seven days
   - Used to determine “goodness of fit” of student with program
   - No housing provided: student required to arrive on time for all shifts
   - Focus of Stage
     1) Skill Development
       - Social-Emotional skills
         - Including relationships with God, self, and others.
         - Participation in meaningful life activities including: leisure, volunteering, and church.
       - Independent Life skills
         - Related to work, housing, community mobility, healthcare, financial management, and transportation.
     2) Access to Resources
       - Used to address self-identified needs or barriers to successful community reintegration.

2. Current Student | 5-7 months

3. Graduate Student
   - Graduates are allotted thirty (30) days of rent-free housing following graduation to allow for successful transition back into the community.

Outcomes of Program

Seven students graduated from The Cookery’s culinary program during this experiential component. Five graduates found gainful employment within two weeks of graduation and six received their nationally recognized food handling and manager’s ServSafe certification. One graduate found gainful employment within two weeks of graduation and experienced a relapse. All graduates currently reside within The Cookery’s transition Discipleship Housing and are continuing to work with organization staff to secure affordable housing.

Upon completion of the program, graduates were also asked to participate in a survey regarding their experience. This qualitative survey utilized a five point Likert Scale on 12 items divided into four different categories, including: relationships, faith, culinary skills, and community reintegration. High point values (e.g., “5”) indicated a higher level of satisfaction, while low point values (e.g., “1”) indicated a lower level of satisfaction. Scores for each item were averaged across graduates collectively and then for each category individually.

Results indicated that the level of student satisfaction increased across all categories after implementation of the community reintegration program (CRP). Students who had access to the CRP prior to graduation self-reported a satisfaction score with programming that was on average 10% greater than their peers who did not have access to programming. Perhaps most importantly, the items related to level of preparation for reentry into the community was the category that was most affected by community reintegration programming. Graduate perception of their readiness for reentry into the community increased by 15% when compared to those who did not have access to the CRP.

Results suggest that the creation of an organized and highly individualized approach to community reintegration has the potential to increase graduates’ success when re-entering the community. However, due to the nature of programming and time constraints of the experiential component, results were based on a small sample size (n=7) and no student received full CRP services from start to finish. The Cookery intends to continue the graduate feedback forms with future students so that they may make further meaningful changes to programming and ensure successful reintegration of all students.

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the unconditional support of The Cookery, Lambscroft Ministries, and its affiliates. Special thanks to Dr. Sabrina Salvant, my faculty mentor, Danae Felsch, my expert mentor, Brett and Mariar Swayne, the owners, business administrators, and spiritual leaders at The Cookery, and The Cookery staff for their guidance throughout this process. Lastly, I would like to thank the many men I had the privilege of meeting and befriending in The Cookery’s culinary program, who equally served as my mentors during this project and welcomed me into their family with open arms. References attached.