

STATEN ISLAND BUSINESS TRENDS

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OCTOBER 2014 – BUSINESS TRENDS 5

Wagner partners with Port Richmond community

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Business Trends

Wagner College has always wanted to be more than a teaching institution. It has aimed to be a community partner in Port Richmond, an innovator for new programs and processes, a training ground for students before entering the workforce and a support system for local businesses.

In 2008, Wagner expanded its involvement with the community when it helped establish the Port Richmond Partnership, a group that helps connect its educators, administrators and students with local non-profits, schools and businesses. Originally, it focused on four initiatives - education, economic development, health and immigration - with a fifth - arts and culture - added recently. Through the Partnership, Wagner commits resources, classes, professors and students to the Port Richmond community.

In five years, the Partnership has aligned the Wagner community with Port Richmond partners, allowing entire departments at Wagner to work with specific organizations in Staten Island - partnerships that have allowed, for example, the Education Department to do concrete work around arts and community

please see WAGNER, page 5

Wagner partners with community

WAGNER

Continued from page 1

building.

"We found that Port Richmond was an area of high need, that's constantly been in flux, and it's also a community that has a lot of promise," said Samantha Siegel, the director of the Center for Leadership and Community Engagement at Wagner. "Even though we were seeing a decline around Staten Island economically, new businesses were starting to form in Port Richmond, which was a surprise to us."

The college's Plan for the Practical Liberal Arts guides the CLCE, helping it to build on its already established community engagement. Wagner also integrated the Port Richmond Partnership within its curriculum so all students are a part of it, Siegel said. At one point or another, almost every student will be involved with the Partnership, and, in fact, 60 percent of the college's first-year students will have some sort of experience with it, even though it is not a requirement.

"That is amazing, because it means the model is working for Wagner," Siegel said.

Wagner has aligned its resources in a long-term, ongoing way with "anchor institutions," those that will not go away because they are so integral to the health and well being of the community, Siegel said. The Partnership used to have 18 organizations working with them, but now there are about 30.

"If you align with the resources they have in a very neighborhood way, you will have terrific results," Siegel said.

In addition to general community improvement such as trash pickup and beautification, Wagner connects its students with small businesses in the area to help paint, clean windows and set up displays. It also places interns at the businesses, with the goal of attaining long-term, sustainable results that last just a student's semester or academic year.

This year, Wagner is piloting a

business success program where two faculty members, one in psychology and one in business, are working with local restaurateur Maria Morales to help her re-envision her business and marketing plan at her Los Potrillos eatery, while also helping her grow the business and be successful. Siegel said that's the role the CLCE plays, acting as the bridge between the Wagner faculty and community partners.

"It's very important to Wagner that, to the best of our ability, the work we're doing in the community benefits our students, our staff and our community partners," Siegel said. "This is our neighborhood; this is where we live. Economic development of a struggling community is always a challenge, and making sure we're doing it in an ethical way that's beneficial to the community has been very hard for Wagner."

When Wagner initially engaged in the economic development aspect of the Partnership, it worked with business owners, but found there was a greater need. The college has placed interns at the Northfield Local Development Corp. and the Staten Island Economic Development Corp., and is working on many other projects as well.

But beyond just helping with business plans and financial guidance, Siegel said, Wagner wants to partner with local businesses in different ways. One thing the CLCE consistently heard when it was doing outreach was that simply utilizing the local business community for services would be helpful. Since then, Wagner has moved some of its clothing and branding printing

over to local businesses such as Staten Island Embroidery. It is also working on a project called "My Neighborhood, My Time."

please see WAGNER, page 21

OCTOBER 2014 – BUSINESS TRENDS 21

Wagner partners

WAGNER

Continued from page 5

Arlette Cepeda, the CLCE's coordinator for community partnerships, has been working with laundromats to install art to beautify their business. Cepeda, an artist by trade, has also done pop-up galleries along Port Richmond Avenue.

"We have been trying to find a way to partner that's unique, that's not just creating business plans, that's not just trying to help through marketing plans, but is unique," Siegel said.

Wagner has been integrating the arts and culture initiative of the Port Richmond Partnership with the economic development initiative because, Siegel said, the development of one directly benefits the other, and now, it's hard to separate the two.

The key to everything Wagner

does in regard to partnerships is to get its students, faculty and staff on the same calendar as the local community. It's hard because of the school's academic calendar, Siegel said, but it's something it has continued to improve.

"We want our students to have deep, meaningful relationships with our partners so they're both learning from each other. That's guided our economic development initiative...and it's really led to our really good, healthy place now," Siegel said. "How do we take what our students are learning and apply them in a practical way? It's very important that our students know they're not just part of the Wagner community."

"We don't do community engagement work here at Wagner because it's easy. We are constantly working to be better. And the center is working to help bridge that gap."