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Lexington College is a hospitality- management school on the fast track – with a couple of twists

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Twenty-five years ago, women’s colleges in the United States were

closing. Yet in 1977, five female students began taking courses in a three-room apartment in a West Loop neighborhood of Chicago. The rest is history. Today, Lexington College – the only hospitality college in the nation open exclusively to women – boasts 56 students and seeks to soon offer a bachelor's degree in hospitality management.

The school is one of hospitality education's best-kept secrets. Yet Lexington is ready to make its mark on the world with a philosophy that emphasizes service above all else while exalting the role of women in American society. Lexington College is further distinguished from the vast majority of hospitality programs because it's inspired by the social teachings of the Catholic Church. Specifically, the college entrusts its doctrinal and spiritual formation to Opus Dei, a personal prelature of the Catholic Church based in Rome.

Kristie Ranieri obtained her associate-of-applied-science degree in hospitality management from Lexington in 1995, and today is chef and co-owner of Chive Catering, a successful high-end catering business. When asked if Lexington's status as an all-women's college influenced her decision to enroll there, Ranieri says that's a given. "It really did bring a new perspective in terms of women's role in the hospitality industry," she says. "Coming from an all-female school really helped me to feel confident."

To Ranieri, it was important to find a hospitality program that mirrored her own moral standards. "They definitely instill that," she says, "and I think that's through the religious background that they have there. I'm not a religious person, but Lexington's dedication to ethics was outstanding. When I went into the

real world, it was good to have a solid background.”

Developing the whole person

Lexington College’s curriculum fosters the development of the whole person through a balanced general-education program. At the same time, it offers a core curriculum in hospitality management and business. The three concentrations offered – culinary arts, event planning and hotel management – as well as the elective choices in the curriculum are intended to give students transferable skills, career specialization within the hospitality industry, and the option for future careers in business management and administration.

Indeed, says Susan E. Mangels, Lexington’s president, the college’s philosophy embraces training in several areas of hospitality to empower women to contribute their

unique attributes to their work and better prepare them for professional growth. “What we work at is educating the whole person,” Mangels says.

Mangels, who earned her graduate degree in education from Harvard, says that Lexington’s educational environment nurtures the particular strengths of women to help them excel. “It’s not so much that women can’t get ahead,” explains Mangels of the philosophy behind an all-women school. “There’s not a radical feminist feel to the place at all. But we want to educate women as women.”

In keeping with Catholic doctrine, Lexington College stresses service to others. “It’s taking what’s particular about women, and trying to grow those strengths, accentuating the relational things, accentuating the multi-tasking things. We tell students

that your work is a service, how you do your work, if it's done well, if it's done on time, that's a service to the people you work with, too," Mangels continues. "Teamwork consistently has been the highest comment we've gotten back from surveying employers. People who don't understand will see service as subservient, but the best leaders see themselves as helping the people around them."

Growing while maintaining its culture

Now in its 26th year, Lexington College is poised for growth. Located in a fashionable building in Chicago's bustling West Loop area, enrollment in 2002, at 52 students, was up 28% over the previous year. The student-to-teacher ratio remains about 8 to 1. The student body is diverse, embracing all racial and socioeconomic strata. Though a

Catholic college, Lexington accepts students of all faiths.

“We’ve always had a wide variety of people who work here, as well as students who attend, which is, I think, a really positive thing,” Mangels says. “We stress the social teachings of the Catholic Church, the value of the family, the dignity of the person, the social-justice issues, and I think those things make sense with people who are in a people business. What [students] see is the experience, and the experience is really positive, and some of them do have a faith or they pray in the chapel, whether they’re Catholic or not, and they see the value of that.”

Last summer, Lexington College received approval from the Illinois Board of Higher Education to grant a bachelor’s-degree program this year, and has applied for accreditation of the new degree program by the

Higher Learning Commission. The bachelor's-degree program is one goal of the college's five-year plan, which also sees student enrollment top out at about 200.

Meanwhile, Lexington will maintain its unique culture, Mangels says, which means hiring the right people to lead students. "You don't work in a small women's college because of the lucrative perks," she says of the dedication of instructors. Mangels praises Linda Rosner, C.E.C., a Chicago-area chef who joined Lexington last August as the school's chef-instructor. "What's good about Linda and why she's well-suited to this place is that she's got a degree in psychology, so she's got her basic liberal-arts degree, but she's a certified executive chef."

Rosner for her part, says the Lexington experience is very different from what she assumed.

“Most of the schools in Chicago are producing cooks, whereas we are producing a well-rounded individual who could perhaps work the front desk, manage the human-resources department, manage the event-planning department or catering – any real department in a hotel,” Rosner says.

Over the holidays, when Rosner’s catering company, Pastaroz, was scheduled to execute an annual Christmas party, her usual workers were unavailable. So she employed two students “outstanding in everything” to help her pull off the event. In fact, Rosner says that a bond has developed between her and her students that she didn’t expect. “We get along great.”

For more information on Lexington College, call (312) 226-6294 or visit www.lexingtoncollege.edu .

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