

Award Title

Building a Bridge Between Town & Gown

Awards Categories

Off-Campus, Commuter, Non-traditional, Graduate, Professional and related

Executive Summary

The office of Off-Campus Student Services was started at the University at Buffalo in September of 2008. Up until that time, responsibility for serving students who lived off campus was spread across a number of offices and with few exceptions, activities were more often the result of reacting to an external force as opposed to planned and intentional. The Division of Student Affairs at the University at Buffalo has individual units, but also has a number of cross-functional teams, to address broader issues. The Off-Campus Students team was assembled to include representatives from Judicial Affairs, University Police, Community Engagement, and Victims Assistance from within Student Affairs as well as the office of Community Relations from the division of External Affairs. With input from this team, the Office of Off-Campus Student Services engaged its stakeholders in a Strategic Planning process to assess the current state of affairs and to establish a shared vision for the future. These stakeholders included students, university faculty and staff who live in the neighborhood surrounding the campus, neighborhood residents and block clubs, business owners, city officials and local community group leaders. A SWOT Analysis was performed and five overarching strategic goals were identified to include: • Increasing Safety • Improving Housing Conditions • Educating Students on Citizenship and Community Engagement • Supporting the Business District • Building Community

Several initiatives were established to address each of these goals. Since the time the office was formed, assaults have fallen, open container sanctions have increased, complaints for residents have decreased, and internal inspections by government inspectors have increased.

Award Description

The University at Buffalo has been situated in the northeast corner of Buffalo, NY for over 100 years. Surrounded by the University Heights neighborhood, the University has been an integral part of the community since that time. For the last fifty years, the enrollment at the university has grown significantly, resulting in the creation of a second campus a few miles north in the town of Amherst. Concurrently, like NY State as a whole, the city of Buffalo has experienced significant loss of population, jobs and industry. Single family and two family homes around the campus that were vacated by permanent residents were seen as excellent investments by others. These homes were marketed to students as cheap alternatives to living on campus. They also offered greater levels of autonomy than what is available in the residence halls.

Many students who had rented apartments in the neighborhood surrounding the campus were not particularly well versed in real estate and signed leases that were not ideal. Others were not very

experienced in basic home repair and maintenance. These problems, along with the fact that some landlords, who do not live in or at least near their investment properties, do not show the same level of care and maintenance of these properties began to manifest itself in a slow deterioration of the appearance of the housing stock. This deterioration exacerbated the turnover of homes from owner occupied to rental, creating somewhat of a downward spiral in housing values.

Along with the declining rate of owner-occupied housing there was an increase in crimes of opportunity. Burglaries and larcenies became more prevalent, as the new residents were not always as aware of basic precautions for preserving their property or their persons. The combination of computers and other electronic equipment along with unlocked doors and windows resulted in a number of losses.

Other quality of life issues increased over time as well. Many students who moved into the neighborhood seeking more autonomy found that the lifestyle that increased autonomy allowed often conflicted with the lifestyle that their surrounding neighbors wished to have. Lawn maintenance, trash storage and removal, loud noise and not infrequently public urination had become issues that the neighbors began to associate with college students.

In order to help meet the needs of the students living in the neighborhood, and to act as a good neighbor to the surrounding area, the University at Buffalo established the office of Off-Campus Student Relations. This office was tasked with coordinating issues relating to students who were living off-campus, with special attention paid to those living in close proximity to campus.

The office began a process of strategic planning, engaging all stakeholders in assessing the current state of affairs in the neighborhood, and to look to the future at opportunities and threats. It engaged students, faculty/staff living in the neighborhood, other neighbors through block clubs and community organizations, businesses and governmental bodies. It then identified a number of strategic initiatives that were designed to address five overarching strategic goals:

• Increasing Safety • Improving Housing Conditions • Educating Students on Citizenship and Community Engagement • Improving the Business District • Building Community

Some of those initiatives include:

• Establishing a database to collect information on problems in the neighborhood, along with a means whereby neighbors can make the University aware of problems that may involve University students <https://www.student-affairs.buffalo.edu/offcampus/concerns.php>

• Operation Doorhanger – using volunteers from block clubs, students and faculty/staff, the university delivers bags filled with educational and safety information to over 2,700 households throughout the neighborhood. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIS2XPRnh7M>

• Block Party & Safety Fair – in order to increase the interaction between students and neighbors in a non-threatening environment, the University began a tradition of holding a block party for the surrounding neighborhood held over Labor Day weekend. With a free barbecue, live music,

along with a “fair” where local businesses and community groups table to represent their offerings, the event brings an opportunity for all to interact and build community.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljf1qE9n48Y>

- Burn demonstration – At the close of the Block Party, a fire safety demonstration is conducted to educate students about the dangers of fire and the importance of checking smoke detectors.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPI1eg42Ukk&feature=player_embedded

- WTF Campaign - An overall marketing campaign geared to help educate students about citizenship and being good neighbors. In addition to the video below, the campaign included posters on busses and on giveaway coasters with the message WTF*? (Where’s the Fairness) along with messages about recycling, noise, parties and public urination.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPLZHirztzI&feature=related>

- University Savings Card – in order to promote businesses that are near the campus, we implemented a University Savings card program and distributed the cards to students and neighbors surrounding the campus. <http://www.student-affairs.buffalo.edu/offcampus/savings.php>

- Moving Off-Campus Fair - In order to better educate students who are considering a move off-campus, this event educates students about leases, local ordinances, and safety issues.

<http://buffalouniversityheights.blogspot.com/2010/03/ubs-moving-off-campus-fair.html>

- Midnight Movie Madness – Partnering with a local theater, the University programming as an alternative to local house parties.

<http://buffalouniversityheights.blogspot.com/2010/01/midnight-movie-madness-at-amherst.html>

- Community Clean Ups – Students, faculty and staff volunteer regularly in efforts to clean up the neighborhood. This is an example of an “Alternative Spring Break” that focused on the campus neighborhood.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29xLXEfXU_I&feature=player_embedded

- Joint Police Patrols – in order to raise the visibility of the law enforcement community, and to address issues on Main Street, a memorandum of understanding was developed between the Buffalo Police, the Transit Police and the University Police for a joint patrol during Fall and late Spring weekends.

http://www.wivb.com/dpp/news/local/Student_safety_in_University_Heights_20090827

Assessment Data Annual Report (Software will not support columns)

Sept. 2008- May 4th 2009 Alcohol-3 Assault-3

Burglary-1

Drugs-1

Hazing-5

Noise/Party-104

Safety- 11

Homicide – 1

May 4th 2009- May 4th 2010

Alcohol- 10

Assault- 2

Burglary-4

Drugs- 3

Hazing- 1

Noise/Party- 58

Safety- 1

Homicide - 0