

outbursts

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spotlight on student workers at the Inn

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Students get 'in' with the Inn crowd

Inn at Virginia Tech provides real-world opportunities

By Hannah Vogel and Jessica Snead

At least 100 students work at the Inn at Virginia Tech and Skelton Conference Center at any given time. Part-time jobs involve banquets, Preston's Restaurant, and the front desk at the Inn, which includes massive conference spaces and 147 hotel rooms and suites.

When Benchmark Hospitality took over the Inn's management in January 2011, a renewed effort began to enlarge its relationship with the Pamplin College of Business. Tom Shaver, the Inn's general manager, worked with Richard Parsons, associate professor and academic program advisor in hospitality and tourism management, to offer field-study opportunities for students.

Though not all of the students are hospitality and tourism majors, the Inn is a popular choice for those needing to fulfill required hours. Typically, first-year and second-year student employees work at the Inn to fulfill a 300-hour work requirement, and many stay on during their junior and senior years for 400 hours of field study.

Six positions in the food and beverage department and six in the rooms department expose students to the nitty-gritty of work as well as training by management staff. Shaver says, "It provides a lot of variety for student



Virginia Tech senior Ashley Laughton (right) meets with Laurie Bond, senior sales manager at the Inn at Virginia Tech and Skelton Conference Center.

experience, allowing them to get a taste of each area of the hotel."

Below is a closer look at three of the students.

At first, **Ashley Laughton** of Roanoke wasn't sure if she could handle a part-time job while attending school. Curious about event planning, she decided to major in hospitality and tourism management with a minor in communications. She got involved in the Hospitality Management Association and is now the group's special events coordinator.

When Laughton heard the Inn was looking for a sales assistant, she pursued and landed the job in April 2013. Despite early misgivings, she found it a good fit because of the Inn's campus location and flexibility in scheduling. She helps with contracts and client events, and she also coordinates Fashions for Evergreens,

the annual tree-decorating competition that brightens the Inn's foyer each winter holiday season.

Laughton appreciates the field-study aspect of the hospitality and tourism program. "It builds experience directly into the course load, and experience is what helps most students get jobs," she says. Her time at the Inn helped her earn an internship this past summer in the events design studio at the Breakers, a prestigious resort in Palm Beach, Florida. Laughton sees herself going into events, sales or marketing after graduation in 2015 but is not certain. She realizes that "in this industry, there are so many places to go and even more ways to get there."

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Debbie Cadenas from Middleburg, Virginia, began working at the Inn in February 2013. As a first-year student at Virginia Tech, she found the perfect opportunity to combine “working” with “networking” as a server.

Her work enables her to meet with potential employers and connect with other people in the hospitality industry, important because of her double major in finance as well as hospitality and tourism management.

Now a sophomore, Cadenas still delights in coming to work. The exposure and opportunities attracted her initially, but it’s the family atmosphere that has kept her there, she says.

What has this real life experience taught her? Customer service, of course, but also people and communication skills. She recalls one learning experience at a large banquet. She observed that when all the servers stayed in sync with each other, the service was of higher quality.

Angela Ryder always thought she’d be a wedding planner. After high school, she worked at the Homestead, a luxury hotel and resort in her hometown of Hot Springs, Virginia. Her interest in weddings didn’t stick, but the hospitality industry grabbed her attention.

During her sophomore year, one of her professors recommended her for an opening. She turned the Inn’s guest-services representative position into her 400-hour field-study requirement.

She then became group services coordinator after noticing the changing needs of the hotel. There, she was the liaison between the Inn’s sales and conference-services staff and the front desk. Ryder worked to break down communication barriers so everyone would be on the same page. Staying after graduation last year wasn’t her original plan, but Ryder chose to start her full-time career at the Inn.

She became guest reservations manager and was recently promoted to front desk manager.

“I knew I would continue to learn new things and would get constant chances to grow if I stayed, which was uncertain if I went somewhere else,” Ryder says. And now she’s on the other side of the field-study equation – she’s the one providing training to four up-and-coming students.



Server and hospitality and tourism management student Cadenas gains on-the-job experience while fulfilling academic requirements. Below, Ryder checks in a Hokie fan.



Getting ‘Inn’ to the numbers...

80
Events per week

100 +
Student employees

555
Meals served each day

55,000
Overnight guests per year

\$3.5 million
Annual wages and benefits

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For information on the Inn at Virginia Tech and Skelton Conference Center or Preston’s Restaurant, call:

540-231-8000 or 877-200-3360

or visit:

<http://www.innatvirginiatech.com/>

■ Tom Shaver, general manager
540-231-0101 ~ tshaver@vt.edu

Outbursts is a publication of Outreach and International Affairs
Guru Ghosh, vice president

Editorial and graphics staff
Andrea Brunais 540-231-4691
Keith Pierce 540-231-7966
Rich Mathieson 540-231-1419
Miriam Rich 540-231-4153
Hannah Vogel 540-231-0113