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3-2-2021

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Culinary Graduates and Sustainable Career Development:

A Competency Framework

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HOSP 6900 Hospitality Capstone

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March 2, 2021

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Abstract

Attending culinary school and acquiring skills for success is the ultimate dream of many people as they embark on a career they have dreamt of since childhood. Most people who become chefs have an innate sense that they love to cook from a young age and take many years to find their way into a culinary program to pursue their dreams. Some people have culinary experience that sets them apart from peers because they have worked for many years in the industry in entry level positions and seek formal training and a degree so they can rise in the field (Audant, 2019). Therefore, students plunge into the field with a positive attitude and energy that propels them through school and the goal of completion. Career challenges post-graduation and the expectations of graduates for career advancement options, salary ranges, benefits and hour requirements are a realistic concern.

Educational institutions must prepare students for the challenges they will face in the field and the expectations of their employers. Educators must continue to identify and address issues and competencies expected in culinary graduates to meet those expectations and provide pathways, and decision-making skills that will lead to productive sustainable careers that provide living wages, benefits, career advancement and job satisfaction long term. This paper will examine the competencies that employers most desire in culinary graduates and clarify how students can best utilize resources in career planning and acquire knowledge that will provide pathways and insight to sustainable careers.

Keywords Culinary Arts Education, Career Paths, Competencies

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Introduction

Students complete a professional culinary degree and head out into the job market drawing on experiences obtained at school, internships and previous job experience in the food service industry. Often, graduates continue to work for their current employers after graduation, not being able to articulate their specific range of competencies beyond technical skills and are actually mismatched with the job they are doing. It is imperative that students can not only identify and articulate their skill and competencies, but are prepared to demonstrate to employers that they possess them. Graduates must be able to identify how they learned specific competencies and skills while drawing on experiences from work and school (Weston et al., 2020). Research findings have suggested culinary graduates stay with their current employers 13% of the time in the same position and salary after graduation. Salary, benefits and advancement being top priority for career decisions (Yen et al., 2013), but finding a job that is enjoyable and secure with a good working environment also being of significant importance (Richardson, 2009).

The hospitality industry is a complex environment and immediate success or results are not the norm. In addition to technical skills, language, customer service, management and people skills are required to work in a multi-cultural and often diverse workplace (Muller et al., 2009). Industry leaders are looking for graduates with specific skills including IT knowledge, English language proficiency, cultural sensitivity training, collaboration skills, ability to handle data and work independently and as a team all the while being personable and having good verbal communication skills (Weston et al., 2019).

Literature reviews identify desirable qualities in culinary graduates and what qualities in graduates are missing that would present more opportunity for career advancement. To enhance

opportunities for graduates' educational institutions must better prepare students for the

workplace with a competency model identifying desired skills to further close the perceived gap

between industry employers' expectations and graduate skill sets. They must also assist graduates

with making improved career decisions by teaching skills to fully utilize resources for

recruitment and sustainable career development.

Literature Review

The skill sets that employers are looking for in culinary graduates, and the skills that

graduates on average possess can be superior if career integration occurs with workforce

opportunity while acquiring a formal education ultimately enhancing student success. Survey

data gathered from current culinary students and graduates implies positive correlations of

students working in the field while attending culinary school (Mesch, 2012). Stackable career

credentials or training using education and work experience will help reduce the gap between

what employers are demanding from culinary graduates and expectation of students.

"Community colleges can assure that students successfully find entry-level work as well as

sustained career growth" (Audant, 2015, p. 308). Lack of defined guidelines create difficulties

for graduates to determine if their skills meet industry expectations. Identification of the most

desired skills in graduates will assist in developing a career development model to successfully

guide culinary professional graduates (Birdir & Pearson, 2000). The reality of working situations

of commercial kitchens is they are often stressful and psychologically and physically demanding.

Chefs' must possess a range of skills and professionalism to transform their passions into a

career. In addition, the investment in education must result in meaningful pathways for growth.

Obtaining specific competencies has a large impact on success and career sustainability

(Suhairom et al., 2019). After graduation students expect to be prepared for a career in the

culinary industry. The expectations of industry leaders are that graduates are well prepared in areas of problem solving, customer service management, teamwork and people skills, but identify that a gap exists in expectation and reality of graduate employees (Muller et al., 2008).

Methodology

A qualitative review of survey data across studies is used to create a competency model which addresses the question of what employers are looking for in culinary graduates and how culinary graduates can best advocate and direct their own careers. Aspects of culinary specific technical competency, professional qualities of leadership and social intelligence (communication, teamwork and decision or judgement skills), and motivation from an employer perspective will be included in the model. Furthermore, graduates must be prepared for industry challenges and improve job search behaviors. Qualitative respondent information from student/graduate perspective surveys will identify familiarity with career opportunity pathways and career recruitment resources as well as a willingness to accept certain job positions within the food service industry (Yen et al., 2013). Additional data has been obtained from research questionnaires completed by culinary school graduate students and designed to investigate and collect data on graduates' decisions post-graduation and expected benefits from industry employers (Werbel, 2000), (Yen et al., 2013).

Findings

According the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011) a formal education in culinary is a prerequisite to gainful employment for chefs, head cooks and supervisory positions. The gap between what is being learned in the classroom and actual needs in the workplace is of concern to both educators and employers. Skill sets desired by employers include many competencies beyond the technical skills. Muller (2008) qualitative survey data formulated questions to

evaluate criteria and perceptions of stakeholders (culinary students and graduates, and industry

employers). Questionnaires to students/graduates evaluated satisfaction of training including

relevant technical skills, communication skill areas of problem solving/critical thinking, writing,

speaking, computer and teamwork. Sample consisted of culinary students' half-way through a

two-year culinary program and recent graduates of two-year programs. A second survey was

developed to measure the satisfaction of graduate skills as they entered the workforce.

Employers rated satisfaction levels of graduate competencies in multiple areas such as

communication skills, comprehension, technical skills, productivity, problem solving/critical

thinking and teamwork skills.

The study revealed overall positive satisfaction of industry practitioners with traditional

technical skills, productivity, and time management of graduates. Dissatisfaction levels were

recorded for communication and understanding of production methods systems, problem

solving/critical thinking areas. The culture of the culinary world does not encourage questions

and has led to reduced communications to endemic proportions. Chefs' assuming understanding

of production methods when often careful communication and planning has not been carried out.

"While experienced cooks know that the right way to prepare a dish is the way the company or

chef wants it done, culinary graduates might not understand this issue" (Muller et al., 2009, p.

175). Graduates might have the technical skills or basic knowledge to complete the task, but not

understand the technique or preparation methods of a specific establishment which presents a

challenge for both graduate and industry chef. To address the problem, implemented new hire

training in application areas of communication, comprehension and time management would

benefit both parties to improve problem solving and critical thinking areas and assure that

graduates are aware of the value and importance of these skills. Antun and Salazar (2005) found

that "cognitive abilities have also been linked to career success in regards to skill attainment. That is, individuals who have more highly developed cognitive abilities will learn the required skills sooner and will identify the congruence between the skills they possess and the required job knowledge by their position" (p. 81).

Students and graduates surveyed reported low satisfaction (students) and high dissatisfaction (graduates) in computer skills and speaking skills learned in programs. Professional communication strategies with language pedagogy embedded in curriculum is indicated as suggestive solution to bridge gap for educational outcomes and industry expectation. Communication strategies that include training with a recognition of the importance of not only problem solving and critical thinking skills, but also the categories of speaking and written communication (Muller et al., 2009).

Six competency constructs identified (Suhairom, 2019) in qualitative research data and document analysis techniques in a Malaysian culinary setting were used in developing a sustainable career development competency model. A sampling of expert professionals from the hotel industry and culinary educational institutions participated in interviews to obtain data for comparison analysis. The nine participants selected on basis of their culinary background and a "behavioral event interview" (BEI) method was used to extract desired competencies in culinary graduates. This is a theory grounded in uncovering behavioral competencies (Dillon & Taylor, 2015). Technical competency, non-technical competency, personal quality, physical state, self-concept and motives were the competencies identified as having the most impact on individuals' careers.

Technical competency

Technical competency must be present for superior work performance in combination with being an all-around individual with a strong foundation of cooking skills. According to Suhairom (2015) "employees with strong technical competencies are able to perform their job well" (p. 207). Technical competencies being referred to as skills desired in job applicants with knowledge of use of specific tools, equipment and procedures.

Non-technical competency

Emotional, social and cognitive intelligence combined with professionalism, moral ethics, leadership, management and entrepreneurship skills.

Personal quality

Professionals agreed that the most important competencies to possess for success in the field are conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, extrovert and emotional stability.

Physical state

Long working hours require physical fitness which plays an important role in the competent chef's ability to continue performing under the high pressure of kitchen operations.

Self-concept

Individual's positive attitude and values toward the profession.

Motives

Factors driving individuals to perform better include sense of worth, achievement motivation (target, vision and passion) and relationship management skills.

This competency model could serve as a reference for industry training and educational programs to improve career paths or mapping by specifically targeting these competencies which have been identified as required in the industry from every graduate.

A questionnaire was sent to a leader group of 12 nominated by the Research Chefs'
Association (Birdir & Pearson, 2000). Responses from the group were used to develop a
questionnaire sent by Research Chefs' Association to selected participants with expertise in the
culinary and culinary education fields (a modified Delphi study). The area of the research
applicable to building the competency model is identified as, "management focused research
chef", or a chef who represents his/her employer and carries out the goals and objectives of
his/her organization. Respondents rated competencies on a 5-point Likert rating scale.
Knowledge, skill, behavioral and ability statements were rated to find top six competencies
desired by employers. According to Figure 1, the top six competencies where above 4.0 on the
Likert scale and ranged with ability to work with customers as extremely important to skilled at
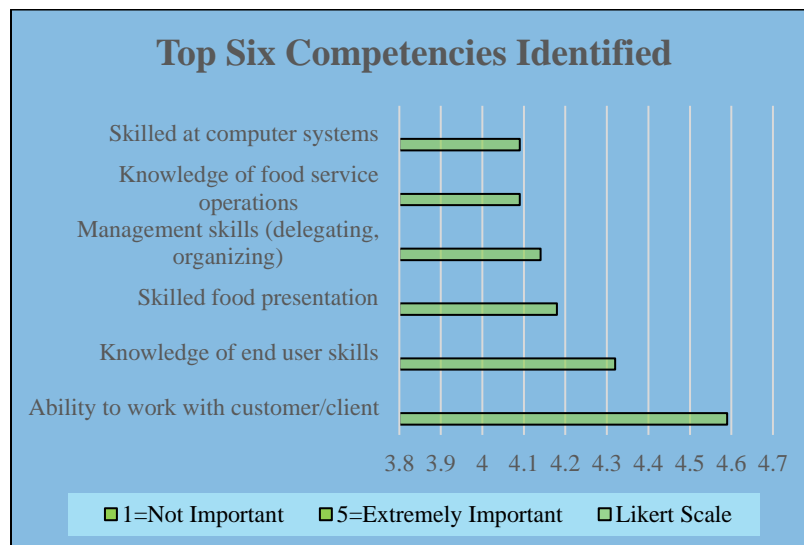computer systems being very important.

Figure 1

5=extremely important, 4=very important, 3=important, 2=slightly important, 1=not important.

Competencies identified above can be used to define today's needs for specific
competencies desired in graduates entering culinary occupations. Educational programs have the

ability to enhance the development of these skills in graduates by integrating training programs specifically targeted to these areas.

Educators refinement of programs to satisfy market needs, and clarifying student competencies desired in graduates would effectively prepare students for making better career choices and plans for specific career pathways (Weston et al., 2019). Survey data was gathered around the research question, "What competencies are desirable in food science students for the initial roles they undertake after graduation?" Core questions were rated using Likert scale (referenced above). The focus of information gathered is on the Sensory Technologist graduate role, (one of 14 industry roles identified). A balanced set of competencies included computer skills, collaboration skills, critical thinking skills, English proficiency, data handling skills, the ability to work in multicultural workplace, personable, teamwork and verbal communication skills. Desirable competencies where outlined in a dimensional model. Desired attributes include positivity, appreciation for the wider world or embracing value of processes, and ways of working in the industry using data, numbers, and communication skills (working with information). Additional capabilities of problem solving, identifying and overcoming challenges in the workplace, maintaining synergy with others, creativity and motivation to seek new opportunities are included in dimensional model (Weston et al, 2019).
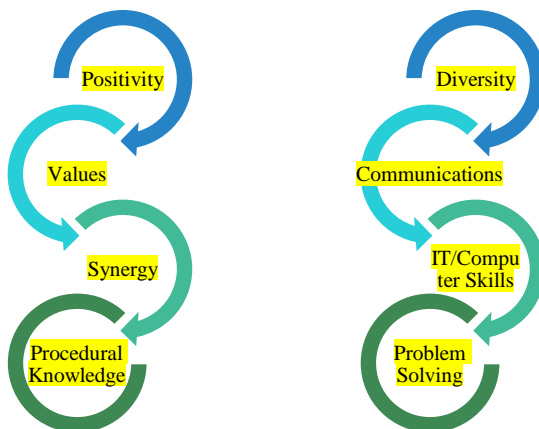
Dimensional Model for Graduates

Stackable credentials or linear advancement for gainful employment and the alignment of educational training with career path has become part of best practices for community colleges throughout the United States. Educators aim to provide meaningful support for students while in the process of degree completion by a reducing the gap in employer expectations of skills and students experience. Progressively advancing skills while in school will better prepare students for workforce advancement in high-demand careers. Working while in school will accelerate entrance to job market opportunities when students achieve credentials (Audant, 2015). Data used in the model is collected from Dynamic Outcome Tracking Systems (DOTS), a database monitoring students and generating tracking reports on skills gained (credentials earned), internships, job development activities and demographic information. Data was also collected from students about internships as employees, and job seeking behaviors. Students earning an associate's degree in culinary arts at Kingsborough Community College (CUNY) must complete and internship or required 120 hours of work-based learning. The internships provide foundations for entering the workforce, but advancement from entry level positions even with a degree will only occur when the job training catches up with academic skill. Integrated instruction in math workforce training programs were recognized as a relevant solution for closing gap of expectations of employers because it was concluded that employees who understand basic ratios, fractions and percentages are better able to perform kitchen operations. Work based training shows a serious commitment on both the part of employer and student, allows degree programs to be involved in industry relationships and students to develop skills and experience while in school. Internships allow employers to be more involved in integral training of graduates at the beginning of their careers.

Post graduate familiarity with career opportunity pathways and career recruitment

resources as well as a willingness to accept certain job positions within the food service industry

are factors that determine career decisions. Independent restaurants ranked first in familiarity

with students as a career opportunity because they have worked there while in school and are

willing to accept jobs there. Career advancement opportunities and monetary factors including

salary and benefits ranked as top three influencing factors impacting graduate decisions. Job

search behaviors and use of career services on campus are inadequate with only half of available

career services on campus known by students. Surveyed students identified career fairs as most

utilized resource on campus, but that current and realistic information was not offered such as

job rewards (salary and benefits), advancement opportunities and information about the work

conditions. Career counseling, job list or career bulletins, resume and career workshops were

underutilized and respondents indicated internet searches and networking with industry people as

their primary resources for job searches (Yen et al., 2013).

Limitations

Similarities and differences in perceptions of culinary graduates and industry employers'

satisfaction of skill set knowledge will vary based on collection of data methods, size of culinary

programs, and survey subject samples. There is no universal scoring or mapping system to

measure responses so they can have varying similarities and differences of perceptions hindering

or limiting studies. These limitations can exist because similarities and differences in perceptions

vary based on researcher and participant bias and the interpretation of responses. Participant

relationships with interviewer could also influence responses (Mesch, 2012).

High performance chefs selected for survey demanded superior performance in graduates

so a more diverse sample would be advantageous for future studies. Research discussed on job

search behaviors was based on a sample from three culinary schools in the northeastern United States and did not differentiate results from bachelor's degree and associate's degree graduates, providing only a glance at overall graduate perceptions (Suhairom et al., 2019).

Implications

A more desired and balanced skillset for graduates would include strong technical competency, non-technical competency (customer service, communication) skills, personal commitment, physical and mental alertness, self-confidence and a willingness to complete jobs with motivation. Graduates need to have the ability to work in a multicultural workplace, be personable and work well on a team. Why is this skillset "more desired and balanced," especially in today's setting? "Interviews with high performers chefs in identifying competencies associated to superior work performance, competencies that differentiate high and how performers" (Suhairom et al., p. 218). Achieving the above skillsets would better prepare students for meeting industry demands.

Educators relationships with industry employers and having a greater emphasis on work-based learning could better align students' college experience and work experience. Culinary faculty relationships with foodservice industry professionals can assist in the alignment of students technical and soft skills with current job openings. The value of job experience while in school cannot be underestimated as a necessary component for building skill set of graduates.

Conclusion

Survey data proposes conclusive evidence that gaps exist in several key areas between employer expectations of graduates and graduates' skills as well as graduates' expectations of their culinary careers after graduation. A balanced set of competencies included computer skills, collaboration skills, critical thinking skills, English proficiency, data handling skills, the ability to

work in multicultural workplace, personable, teamwork and verbal communication skills. In addition, technical competency, non-technical competency, personal quality, physical state, self-concept and motives were the competencies identified as having the most impact on individuals' careers. The competency model could be referenced by educators to update curriculums and assist in providing targeted competency outcomes for students through coursework, internships and on-the-job training (OJT). This process would solidify commitment and relationships between graduates and employers and reduce skill set gap. Strengthening these relationships would show a more serious commitment on the part of employers in taking part in the training and development of culinary graduates. Culinary students proved to have strong technical skills but the areas of problem solving, communications, computer skills and management (delegating and organizing), skills are weaker. More intensive new hire training in application areas of communication, comprehension and time management could benefit graduates' ability to communicate with industry chefs and improve overall performance satisfaction as well as graduate motivation.

        Students are underutilizing career services upon graduation and would benefit from a greater knowledge and understanding of the benefits available to them. Resume writing and career workshops could greatly enhance their job search skills and career pathways. Career counseling is available not only to students, but alumni of the majority of institutions.

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