

The Food Service Industry: Beliefs Held by Academics

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Those in the academic sector exert a great deal of influence on those they are training to enter the food service industry. One author surveyed educational institutions across the country to ascertain attitudes of teachers toward various segments of the industry.

The food service industry is currently experiencing labor shortages; the problem is anticipated to become more serious in the future. There are many reasons cited including fast and expansive growth, a belief by many potential applicants that there are greater opportunities in other industries and a lack of information about the industry in applicable labor markets. There are really only three basic strategies which, individually or collectively, can be utilized to address this problem:

- reduce turnover and “turnout” rates; retain current staff members in their jobs and in the industry
- increase productivity levels so more work output and/or revenue dollars can be generated with the same or fewer staff.
- attract new staff members into the industry

Academia addresses the first two strategies through research and through the development and delivery of training programs for currently employed management staff. Additionally, many also look to educators for help in increasing the labor market pool.

There has been a proliferation of formal training and education programs which prepare high school and college graduates. There is general consensus that these programs are desirable, that they are effective in providing job candidates qualified for entry-level positions in the industry, and that they maybe the “breeding ground” for new management talent. Teachers in these programs are, therefore, an important “plank” in industry’s platform designed to recruit students with appropriate background knowledge and interest in their operations.

Students enrolled in hospitality education programs rely on instructors for curriculum design and for delivery of formal, in-classroom teaching activities. The experiences and/or perceptions of academics likely influence courses offered and taught, topics discussed, industry ex-

amples provided, field trips taken, guest speakers invited to class, texts selected, and outside reading resources required.

Additionally, teachers can provide a significant informal influence on their students.¹ Academics may, consciously or subconsciously, project their attitudes about the industry as they discuss job opportunities with and counsel students. Teachers can—and do—provide a pervasive influence on students' attitudes toward the food service industry in general and segments within it more specifically.

The informal but influential role of the teacher cannot be taken lightly. Many teachers enjoy this aspect of their career. They frequently serve as mentors to impressionable young people and show genuine concern as students make professional, career, and even personal decisions.

What attitudes do academics hold toward the food service industry? It is probable that a teacher's beliefs—correct or incorrect—affect students' attitudes as classroom and counseling sessions evolve. The purpose of this study is to assess the beliefs held by hospitality academics about the food service industry. This information can be useful to industry strategists as they develop plans to attract graduates to their organizations.

Academics' Beliefs Surveyed

A survey² was developed to analyze academics' beliefs about four segments of the food service industry: lodging, institutional, multi-unit, and single-unit properties. For each segment the analysis addressed factors relating to

- **Marketing, management and operating concerns:** Marketing, operations, fiscal management, innovation, future of the segment
- **Employee-related concerns:** quality of work life, training/education opportunities, career opportunities

A survey, developed after input from faculty members in the School of Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management at Michigan State University, was sent, with a letter of explanation and a postage-paid, return-addressed envelope, to 1850 full-time faculty members in two and four-year hospitality education programs in the United States.³ Of the 329 surveys returned (18 percent), 248 were usable. Respondents represented 144 two-year programs, 104 four-year programs, and 43 graduate programs (See Table 1).

There were 36 teachers representing food service education programs under five years old; 40 represented programs from 6 to 10 years old, and 171 taught at schools which had offered a food service program for more than 10 years.

Those responding were asked to express their degree of agreement with 68 statements on a five point scale (5 means strongly agree; 3 means neutral; 1 means strongly disagree). See Appendix A.

What Does It Mean?

Academics agreed that several statements apply to a similar degree to all segments of the industry:

Table 1
Demographic Description of Survey Respondents

A. Personal Information	Number of Respondents
Sex: Male	180
Female	65
Total	245
Age: less than 25 years old	0
26-35 years old	51
36-45 years old	96
46-55 years old	66
56-65 years old	31
over 65 years old	3
Total	247
B. Full-time Industry Experience (Years)	
5 or fewer years	53
6-10 years	68
more than 10 years	126
Total	247
C. Teaching Experience	
5 or fewer years	62
6-10 years	61
more than 10 years	125
Total	248
D. Highest Degree Earned	
Associate's Degree	26
Bachelor's Degree	41
Master's Degree	123
Doctor's Degree	54
Total	244
E. Area of Academic Concentration (Many cited more than one area)	
Food service	199
Hotel/lodging	98
Travel/tourism	43
Other industry-related areas	94

- All segments need experienced and/or educated managers.
- All industry segments will face significant labor availability problems.
- All segments will have problems maintaining current return on investment levels.

- “Psychic” rewards are few for employees in any segment of the industry.
- Academics are neutral in their beliefs about opportunities for employee input or about the correlation between compensation and job responsibility in any industry segment.

Academics believe that some factors differ from segment to segment. Some of their more important beliefs are reported on a by-segment basis:

Academics believe that vocational opportunities in food and beverage operations in lodging properties are most attractive to their graduates. They believe this segment offers the most competitive wages/salaries, the most attractive fringe benefit packages, and the greatest chance for employee socialization on the job. They also believe these organizations to be the most sophisticated and the most concerned about dining atmosphere. To this end it is believed that the managers’ ego/esteem needs are best met in this segment. On the other hand, lodging operations are believed least likely to relate decisions to the menu and to provide good price/value for the guests.

Institutional food services: Beliefs which academics hold toward institutional food service operations are among the most fascinating learned from this study. They believe that work in this segment is great for employees:

- Academics believe that institutional operations have the lowest entry-level and management turnover rates, and the lowest job stress and burnout levels.
- Working conditions in this segment received the highest rating; these jobs were believed to offer the most reasonable work hours and the highest levels of job security.
- Short term competitive pressures were believed to be lowest.

Interestingly, academics thought, relative to other segments, that employee motivation/morale levels were low. Why would the several positive employee-related factors just noted “translate” to low morale levels? First, the survey indicated the academics’ belief that ego/esteem levels were least likely to be met in the institutional segment. Could it be that these operations are believed to make few challenging demands on staff and, therefore, academics believe that managers and employees look for goal attainment off the job?

Academics do not believe that many of their graduates will enter the institutional segment. They believe institutional food service to have greater problems relating to lack of innovative marketing strategies, failure to adapt to changing markets and lifestyles, and failure to develop new products. This segment also rated last when academics revealed their beliefs about the following:

- setting trends

- promoting the local unit through marketing efforts
- offering courteous service
- providing dining atmosphere
- believing that the “customer is boss”
- providing prompt service
- serving what guests desire
- participating in community relations activities
- believing that service is highest priority
- offering friendly service
- making guests feel special

Academics believe that institutional food services are less likely than other segments to have steady increases in sales for the next five years. Relative to other segments, they did not believe the operations were sophisticated, and they perceived problems with food quality.

Multi-unit food services: Academics believe that multi-unit food services have higher levels of entry-level turnover and management-level burnout and turnover rates than other segments. They believe that job stress is higher, that there is less chance for employee socialization, that managers have fewer opportunities to make decisions, and that employees are least likely to enjoy their jobs in this segment. On the “plus” side of personnel concerns, academics perceive greater levels of available training materials, greater chances for career development and advancement, and greater levels of employee training. From a marketing and operations perspective, academics believe the multi-unit segment to be leading other segments in several areas; it was judged highest relative to the following:

- use of valid marketing research
- practice of innovative marketing
- use of marketing strategies
- provision of good price/value to customers.
- development of new products
- emphasis on prompt service
- emphasis on community relations

Multi-unit operations are perceived by academics to use effective management practices, to enjoy the greatest levels of sales increases, and to apply more contemporary management techniques. These operations are believed to show the greatest levels of productivity increase, to most consistently make operating decisions based upon the menu, and to be the most space efficient.

These capabilities must pay off! Academics believe multi-unit operations to make better use of fiscal management, cash flow, and accounting/control systems than other industry segments. These operations are perceived to be trendsetters; they are judged most likely to capitalize on "high tech" improvements in the industry.

Single-unit food services: Academics believe there are some problems inherent in single-unit operations. For example, this segment is believed to offer the lowest levels of job security, competitive wages/salaries, and fringe benefits. It is thought that training materials are less likely to be developed and that there are fewer chances for career progression. Working conditions are believed to be less enjoyable and work hours are judged to be less reasonable. In spite of these conditions, academics believe morale levels to be high (perhaps because, in this segment, managers and staff are believed able to make more decisions).

Single-unit operators are, in many respects, judged to be good marketers. They most offer what the guests want: Food is judged to be of the highest quality and service is judged to be a high priority and the most friendly. (Guests are believed to "feel the most special" and to "be the boss" in this segment). This segment is also believed to promote more local unit marketing efforts.

Operating problems include academics' beliefs that single-unit managers are less efficient and less likely to use contemporary management techniques than managers in other segments. Space is believed to be least effectively used. Productivity increases are judged to be less, and this segment is thought least likely to use extensive accounting/control systems. Marketing research, cleanliness, cash flow, and fiscal management problems are perceived to be greater in this segment. Single-unit operators were also judged to face the greatest challenges of short-term competition.

Putting It All Together

While somewhat over-simplified, academics have several beliefs about the relationship between employee concerns and "management sophistication" (referring to marketing, management, and operating factors) in each segment.

- Single-unit operators are rated low in factors relating to employees and are perceived utilizing less sophisticated management practices. Institutional operations are rated high in factors relating to employees but are perceived utilizing less sophisticated management practices.
- Lodging operations are rated high in factors relating to employees and are perceived utilizing sophisticated management practices.
- Multi-unit operations are rated low in factors relating to employees but are perceived utilizing sophisticated management practices.

Industry representatives desiring to improve recruitment efforts at academic institutions should understand what academics believe about their segment of the industry. If some beliefs are, in fact, true, an

increased awareness of potential employee and marketing/management/operational problems may yield solutions to correct these problems within existing operations.

If academic beliefs are incorrect, an educational program to educate academics about management and employee opportunities in the segment may be in order. These efforts may begin with the proper emphasis during field trips, class presentations, and conversations with academics. Educational efforts can continue with appropriate articles and reports in the many trade magazines read jointly by practitioners and educators. Educational programs designed and coordinated by applicable professional associations may also be in order. There is a need for industry personnel to understand the academic point of view. This is important to develop strategies to help assure that each segment obtains a fair share of graduates ready and able to make contributions to the industry which drives academics and their educational programs.

Appendix A Beliefs of Academics About Four Segments of the Food Service Industry

Statement	Segment Cited For	
	Most Agreement	Least Agreement
1. Segment will steadily increase sales for next 5 years	Multi-unit	Institutional
2. Segment characterized as "trend-setter"	Multi-unit	Institutional
3. Segment needs experienced managers	Academics believe this about managers equally for all segments.	
4. Segment experiences high management turnover	Multi-unit	Institutional
5. Segment has high levels of job stress	Multi-unit	Institutional
6. Segment's employees have high morale levels	Single-unit	Institutional
7. Tasks are organized into meaningful jobs	Academics hold a neutral belief about this factor for all segments	
8. "Psychic" rewards are provided	Academics generally believe this is not true for all segments.	
9. Segment develops effective training materials	Multi-unit	Single-unit
10. Managers' ego needs are satisfied in this segment	Lodging/food and beverage	Institutional
11. Segment applies contemporary management techniques	Multi-unit	Single-unit
12. Segment needs educated managers	Academics believe this is equally true for all segments.	
13. Segment will show greatest productivity increase	Multi-unit	Single-unit
14. Segment emphasizes new product development	Multi-unit	Institutional

Appendix A (continued)

Statement	Segment Cited For	
	Most Agreement	Least Agreement
15. Segment uses externally developed training resources	Institutional	Single-unit
16. Segment emphasizes career development for employees	Multi-unit	Single-unit
17. Segment strives to adapt to technological changes	Multi-unit	Single-unit
18. Segment emphasizes courteous service	Lodging/food and beverage	Institutional
19. Segment typically provides good working conditions	Institutional	Single-unit
20. Segment bases operating decisions on the menu	Multi-unit	Lodging/food and beverage
21. Segment makes sufficient use of space	Multi-unit	Single-unit
22. Segment will face significant labor availability problems	Academics believe this to be equally true for all segments.	
23. Segment is concerned with dining atmosphere	Lodging/food and beverage	Institutional
24. Segment holds the basic belief that "the customer is boss"	Single-unit	Institutional
25. Segment offers opportunity for employee input	Academics hold a neutral belief about this factor for all segments	
26. Operations in this segment are sophisticated	Lodging/food and beverage	Institutional
27. Segment conducts valid marketing research	Multi-unit	Single-unit
28. Segment uses excellent fiscal management procedures	Multi-unit	Single-unit
29. Segment emphasizes prompt service	Multi-unit	Institutional
30. Segment offers opportunities for career advancement	Multi-unit	Single-unit
31. Segment provides good price/value	Multi-unit	Lodging/food and beverage
32. Segment emphasizes community relations	Multi-unit	Institutional
33. Segment offers on-going employee training programs	Multi-unit	Single-unit
34. Segment measures cost effectiveness of training	Multi-unit	Single-unit
35. Segment considers service the highest priority	Single-unit	Institutional
36. Segment will experience difficulty maintaining current return on investment rate	Academics believe this to be about equally true for all segments	
37. Segment is characterized by extensive accounting controls	Multi-unit	Single-unit
38. Segment practices innovative marketing	Multi-unit	Institutional

Appendix A (continued)

Statement	Segment Cited For	
	Most Agreement	Least Agreement
39. Segment will attract future graduates of my school	Lodging/food and beverage	Institutional
40. Segment leads the industry in the use of marketing strategies	Multi-unit	Institutional
41. Segment is characterized by good cash flow	Multi-unit	Single-unit
42. Segment offers competitive wage/salary rates	Lodging/food and beverage	Single-unit
43. Segment emphasizes food quality	Single-unit	Institutional
44. Segment is increasing product sales for off-site consumption	Multi-unit	Lodging/food and beverage
45. Segment experiences significant manager "burnout"	Multi-unit	Institutional
46. Segment offers opportunities for employee socialization	Lodging/food and beverage	Multi-unit
47. Segment experiences a significant number of mergers/buyouts/reorganizations	Multi-unit	Institutional
48. Segment is characterized by efficient management	Multi-unit	Single-unit
49. Segment requires only reasonable number of work hours	Institutional	Single-unit
50. Segment emphasizes friendly service	Single-unit	Institutional
51. Operations in this segment are conveniently located	Multi-unit	Institutional
52. Segment allows managers to make independent decisions	Single-unit	Multi-unit
53. Segment makes extensive use of high tech equipment	Multi-unit	Single-unit
54. Efficient work flow is important in this segment	Multi-unit	Single-unit
55. Segment emphasizes cleanliness	Multi-unit	Single-unit
56. Segment experiences high entry-level turnover rate	Multi-unit	Institutional
57. Segment will be faced with significant short-term competition	Single-unit	Institutional
58. Segment serves what the guests want	Single-unit	Institutional
59. Segment strives to adapt to market/lifestyle changes	Multi-unit	Institutional
60. Segment promotes local unit marketing	Single-unit	Institutional
61. Segment makes guests feel special	Single-unit	Institutional
62. Segment offers competitive fringe benefits ("perks") to employees	Lodging/food and beverage	Single-unit

Appendix A (continued)

Statement	Segment Cited For	
	Most Agreement	Least Agreement
63. Segment offers a high level of job security	Institutional	Single-unit
64. Segment correlates compensation with responsibility	Academics hold a neutral belief about this factor for all segments	
65. Employees in this segment enjoy their jobs	Lodging/food and beverage	Multi-unit
66. Segment will experience significant long-term competition	Multi-unit	Institutional

References

¹See, for example, K. Feldman, and T. Newcomb, *The Impact of College on Students*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Company, 1973), pp. 252-253, and other generic references for discussions about the role that teachers play in career selection choices of students. Additionally, in a 1987 survey which polled 475 students majoring in hotel, restaurant and institutional management at Michigan State University, approximately 55 percent indicated that faculty input was either important or very important to their decision about selection of a company for which to work after graduation.

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³Faculty members sent the survey were those listed in *1986-87 Directory of Hospitality Educators*, (East Lansing, MI: Educational Institute of American Hotel and Motel Association, 1986).