

## **Culinary Graduates' Career Decisions and Expectations**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study investigates the expectations of career opportunities and career decisions of prospective culinary graduates in the food service industry. The study analyzed data from a sample of 336 college students majoring in culinary arts from three different culinary schools located in the northeastern region of the United States. The results show that the availability of the new labor force for entry and mid-level positions appears to be lower than the growth of student enrollment. Research findings suggest that monetary factors, including salary and benefits, along with advancement opportunities are the major factors influencing culinary graduates' career decisions. The familiarity with career opportunities and willingness to accept job offers were also assessed. Recommendations are offered to bridge the gap between the expectations of culinary graduates and recruiters for improved recruitment results.*

Keywords: Culinary Graduates, Recruitment, Career Decision, Career Expectation

### **INTRODUCTION**

The food service industry is a competitive and growing business in the United States. The continuous expansion of the industry has stimulated the demand for staff who has received professional training and practical expertise relevant to food preparations and service delivery. Various mass media broadcast programs featuring celebrity chefs encourage the general public to explore different cuisines and enjoy the pleasure of food (Pratten, 2003). They have stimulated general enthusiasm about the food service industry and an interest in culinary arts programs in higher education. Based on Peterson's culinary school guide (2007), educational institutions with a focus on culinary arts and food services have grown dramatically since the later 1990's along with a significant increase in student enrollment.

Although the occurrence of these events have supported the concept that the industry should have ample numbers of available personnel for recruitment, especially individuals who have received adequate culinary arts skills training and possessed relevant work experience, research suggests that understaffing is still a significant issue (Poulston, 2008; Gustafson, 2002; Baum, 2002). If the supply of educated individuals with skills and experience has increased, why do food service companies still have difficulties in recruiting culinary graduates? This research is an attempt to identify culinary graduates' perception of their career and factors that may affect their career decisions. The result might assist recruiters in understanding job seekers and lead to improved recruitment efforts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The food service industry creates successful businesses by providing quality services and appetizing cuisines to satisfy customers' needs. To achieve this goal, human resources management (HRM) has played an important role in hiring and sustaining talents to preserve the superior service quality. However, this is not an easy task, as Wong (2004) suggests. Managers need to deal with various internal constraints and industry-specific drivers that influence the availability of personnel needed. Although research suggests that staffing is critical and important to achieve competitive advantage, Rynes, Brown and Colbert (2002) suggest that companies may not have a sufficient understanding of procedures to accomplish staffing tasks. Additionally, companies may have biases in locating talents from different recruitment pools and attracting them to apply and accept job offers. As a result, companies have not utilized their staffing mechanisms optimally to resolve their staffing issues.

Nevertheless, some recruitment pools, such as educational institutions, still remain as priorities and provide the industry with job seekers who are more competitive than others. Educational institutions have provided a systematic process and developed curriculum to assist students in developing skills and accumulating practical experience for their future careers. Among various types of educational institutions, culinary schools have played a significant role to the food service industry. As Raybould and Wilkins (2005) suggest, these programs are targeted to match the industry's need for trained and skilled employees. In addition, they want to make sure that the academic curriculum satisfies educational expectations, as well as industry and students' expectations for skill sets required in the work place of the future.

Since the essence of creating successful businesses in the food service industry is the quality of food and services, it is critical for companies to acquire employees who already possess culinary skills and knowledge and are ready to work in the kitchen without too much training after employment. Yet, the career path for culinary students is even more difficult and challenging than others. Positions in the food service, especially those in the back of the house operations, are known for long hours and difficult schedules, uncomfortable working conditions, and poor pay (Pratten, 2003). Also, the career in the kitchen takes years of time and tremendous efforts to reach the top of the organization by becoming an Executive Chef or a Food and Beverage Director. It is not surprising that some people decide to give up a career in the

commercial kitchen and go to work in a different segment or even a different industry, which offers a better life style and working atmosphere.

This has become a potential problem for recruiters; regardless of the growth of student enrollment and increased opportunities in the industry, companies may be chasing individuals with desired skills and experience endlessly and additional resources may be wasted during the process. McMahon and Quinn (1995) discussed these problems and noted that hospitality management students change their career paths due to inadequate knowledge of the nature of the industry, the lack of employee-organizational fit, and poorly perceived pay and benefits. Several studies (Barron, Maxwell, Broadbridge, & Ogden, 2007; Solnet & Hood, 2008) have directed their focus on hospitality management students and explored their career decisions subsequently. There are, however, limited studies on the culinary students' career decisions and expectations. Therefore, this study poses specific research questions as follows:

1. What are culinary graduates' career decisions?
2. Which industry segments are of interest to culinary graduates?
3. What are culinary graduates' expectations and factors that may affect their career decisions?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research employed a self-administered paper-based questionnaire to collect data that was used to investigate the research questions. Twenty-three measurement items were developed based on a review of the related literature forming the framework for this research and separated into two sections in the questionnaire.

The first section was developed to identify culinary students' career decisions, including their career plan immediately after graduation and their decision making timeline. Their work experience, current employment status, and food service industry segments of interest for career options were also assessed. Using a five-point Likert-type scale, respondents were asked to specify their familiarity with career opportunities (1 = not at all familiar; 5 = very familiar) and willingness to accept job offers (1 = not at all possible; 5 = very possible) in various food service industry segments, including individual (non-chain) restaurant, hotel/resort, chain restaurant, and institutional food service. In addition, chain restaurant is separated into three categories, including: quick service, casual, and high-end, based on the average check and service content. A brief explanation of differences was included in the questionnaire prior to the familiarity and willingness section for clarifications.

The second section was developed to identify factors that influence culinary students' career decisions and their expected benefits. Eleven career decision factors, related to monetary rewards, work conditions, career advancement, and job requirements, and eight different types of benefits were listed. Respondents were asked to select the most important career decision factor and expected benefit, and the top three career decision factors and expected benefits when

assessing career opportunities in the food service industry. In addition, respondents were asked to give estimates of hourly wage and annual salary for their first position. Demographic items were included at the end of the questionnaire to understand respondents' background information, such as gender and age.

In order to examine content validity, focus groups were formed to test if participants could understand each question without being confused or misled by the wording. Based on participants' responses, items were revised for the final survey.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

Respondents were chosen from three culinary institutions which are located in the northeastern region of the United States. Both School A and B offer a 4-year Bachelor's degree and a 2-year Associate's degree in culinary arts, and they have national operation with campuses located in different regions of the United States. School C only offers a 2-year Associate's degree in culinary arts and is more focused on regional operation.

Instructors at each institution were contacted and agreed to participate in this study, they were also informed about the data collection procedure to maintain the uniformity of the process. Questionnaires were distributed to students during class periods. Prior to this, students were informed that their participation was voluntary, and all information collected would remain anonymous and only be used for academic research purposes. Additionally, a cover letter was attached to the survey which explained the research objective and instructions for completing the survey.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The analysis of data involved two main stages. Descriptive analysis was employed first to explore participants' responses. It was followed by independent samples t-tests to compare the differences between two groups.

## **RESULTS**

Five hundred copies of the questionnaire were distributed to students who were in the last year of their academic program, and 339 copies of the questionnaire were returned for an effective return rate of 67.6%. Among the participants, there were 78 respondents representing the 4-year Bachelor's degree program (4YR) (School A=78) and 261 representing the 2-year Associate's degree program (2YR) (School A=99, School B=118, School C=44) (Table 1). Overall, nearly 60 percent of respondents were male and 54.8 percent of respondents had a position in the food service industry at the time of participation (part-time: 38.6%, full-time: 16.2%). Only 12.7 percent of respondents did not have any work experience in the industry prior

to their college education, and most of the respondents (44.0%) started out from individual (non-chain) restaurants.

Table 1: Respondents Background Overview

|   |                                    | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) |
|---|------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Gender  | Male                               | 52.60%        | 60.92%         | 59.00%             |
|   | Female                             | 46.15%        | 37.55%         | 39.53%             |
| Current employment status                         | Part-time                          | 44.87%        | 36.78%         | 38.64%             |
|   | Full-time                          | 26.92%        | 13.03%         | 16.22%             |
|   | No position                        | 28.21%        | 49.43%         | 44.54%             |
| Work experience before college education          | No experience                      | 16.67%        | 11.49%         | 12.68%             |
|   | Some experience                    | 83.33%        | 88.12%         | 87.02%             |
| First segment worked in the food service industry | Individual restaurants (non-chain) | 33.33%        | 47.13%         | 43.95%             |
|   | Chain restaurants                  | 14.10%        | 18.39%         | 17.40%             |
|   | Hotel/Resort                       | 11.54%        | 5.36%          | 6.78%              |
|   | Other                              | 28.21%        | 20.69%         | 22.42%             |

Table 2 presents the result of the culinary students' career decisions after graduating from their current programs and the decision making timeline. Overall, nearly 39 percent of respondents indicated that they would like to continue their education and 42.2 percent of respondents intended to find a new full-time position. In addition, nearly 13 percent of respondents will remain with their current employers in a full-time position and only 3.5 percent of respondents will continue with a part-time position. In terms of their career decision making timeline, the majority (54%) of respondents made their career decisions during the last year of education, only 23.6 percent of respondents made their career decisions before attending college.

Table 2: Career Decisions and Decision Making Timeline

|   | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) |
|---|---------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Career Decisions                                      |               |                |                    |
| Find a new full-time position                         | 42.31%        | 42.15%         | 42.18%             |
| Continue education                                    | 34.62%        | 40.23%         | 38.94%             |
| Stay with full-time position                          | 3.85%         | 9.58%          | 8.26%              |
| Work for my part-time company in a full-time position | 6.41%         | 4.21%          | 4.72%              |
| Continue with a part-time position                    | 6.41%         | 2.68%          | 3.54%              |
| Decision Making Timeline                              |               |                |                    |
| Before college  | 16.67%        | 23.60%         | 23.60%             |
| During the first year of college education            | 14.10%        | 19.76%         | 19.76%             |
| During the last year of college education             | 69.23%        | 53.98%         | 53.98%             |

When asked further about industry segments of interest for career options (Table 3), respondents ranked individual restaurants as the most attractive segment (56%), while hotel/resort ranked second (46.3%) and self-owned business ranked third (46.3%). Only 16.2 percent of respondents stated that they were interested in working in chain restaurants after graduation.

Table 3: Interested Food Service Industry Segments

|                        | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) |
|------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Individual restaurants | 39.74%        | 60.92%         | 56.05%             |
| Hotel/Resort           | 48.72%        | 56.70%         | 54.87%             |
| Self-owned business    | 41.03%        | 47.89%         | 46.31%             |
| Chain restaurants      | 7.69%         | 18.77%         | 16.22%             |

Respondents were asked to specify their familiarity with career opportunities in different segments (Table 4) based on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: not at all familiar; 5: very familiar). Individual restaurants received the highest average score at 3.63; it was followed by hotel/resort at 3.18 and chain restaurants at 2.74 (casual: 2.77, quick service: 2.74, high-end: 2.72). Among these food service industry segments, 4YR and 2YR respondents demonstrated significant differences except in the individual restaurant segment. Overall, the 4YR respondents showed a higher familiarity with career opportunities in the food service industry than their 2YR counterparts.

Table 4: Familiarity with Career Opportunities in the Food Service Industry

|                                  | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) | t-value |
|----------------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|---------|
| Individual restaurants           | 3.76          | 3.59           | 3.63               | 0.952   |
| Hotel/Resort                     | 3.85          | 2.98           | 3.18               | 4.944*  |
| Chain restaurants (Total)        | 3.19          | 2.61           | 2.74               | 3.188*  |
| Chain restaurant (Casual)        | 3.13          | 2.67           | 2.77               | 2.328*  |
| Chain restaurant (Quick service) | 3.13          | 2.62           | 2.74               | 2.632*  |
| Chain restaurant (High-end)      | 3.31          | 2.54           | 2.72               | 3.770*  |
| Institutional food service       | 2.81          | 2.12           | 2.28               | 3.952*  |

\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed test

In terms of the willingness to accept job offers (Table 5) based on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: not at all possible; 5: very possible). Individual restaurants received the highest average score at 3.92; it was followed by hotel/resort at 3.73 and chain restaurants at 2.42 (high-end: 3.04, casual: 2.33, quick service: 1.89). 4YR and 2YR respondents did not demonstrate significant differences except in the institutional food service segment.

Table 5: Willingness to Accept Job Offers in the Food Service Industry

|                                  | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) | t-value |
|----------------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|---------|
| Individual restaurants           | 3.77          | 3.96           | 3.92               | -1.092  |
| Hotel/Resort                     | 3.77          | 3.71           | 3.73               | 0.326   |
| Chain restaurants (Total)        | 2.30          | 2.46           | 2.42               | -0.961  |
| Chain restaurant (High-end)      | 2.85          | 3.10           | 3.04               | -1.218  |
| Chain restaurant (Casual)        | 2.19          | 2.37           | 2.33               | -0.946  |
| Chain restaurant (Quick service) | 1.87          | 1.90           | 1.89               | -0.147  |
| Institutional food service       | 2.73          | 2.26           | 2.37               | 2.510*  |

\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed test

Respondents were asked about the most important factor that would affect their career decisions (Table 6). Among 11 factors, in general, salary (23.3%) was selected as the most important factor when considering career opportunities in the food service industry, which was followed by advancement opportunities (13.3%) and creativity (10.9%). When asked to select the top three important factors that would affect their career decisions, salary (62.2%) and advancement opportunities (32.2%) still ranked first and second by respondents. Instead of creativity, benefits (30.4%) were ranked third among others (Table 7).

Table 6: Most Important Factor Affecting Career Decisions

|                             | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) |
|-----------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Salary                      | 21.79%        | 23.75%         | 23.30%             |
| Advancement opportunities   | 12.82%        | 13.41%         | 13.27%             |
| Creativity                  | 11.54%        | 10.73%         | 10.91%             |
| Balanced work-life          | 11.54%        | 8.43%          | 9.14%              |
| Benefits                    | 12.82%        | 7.66%          | 8.85%              |
| Co-workers                  | 5.13%         | 4.21%          | 4.42%              |
| Location                    | 1.28%         | 4.98%          | 4.13%              |
| Professional responsibility | 1.28%         | 3.83%          | 3.24%              |
| Flexible hours and schedule | 2.56%         | 3.07%          | 2.95%              |
| Regular hours               | 0.00%         | 1.92%          | 1.47%              |
| Reputation                  | 2.56%         | 0.38%          | 0.88%              |

Table 7: Top Three Important Factors Affecting Career Decisions

|                             | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) |
|-----------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Salary                      | 64.10%        | 61.69%         | 62.24%             |
| Advancement opportunities   | 33.33%        | 31.80%         | 32.15%             |
| Benefits                    | 48.72%        | 24.90%         | 30.38%             |
| Creativity                  | 23.08%        | 28.35%         | 27.14%             |
| Balanced work-life          | 25.64%        | 19.16%         | 20.65%             |
| Co-workers                  | 15.38%        | 15.71%         | 15.63%             |
| Flexible hours and schedule | 14.10%        | 15.33%         | 15.04%             |
| Location                    | 5.13%         | 16.86%         | 14.16%             |
| Professional responsibility | 6.41%         | 12.26%         | 10.91%             |
| Regular hours               | 7.60%         | 11.11%         | 10.32%             |
| Reputation                  | 2.56%         | 4.98%          | 4.42%              |

Respondents were also asked to select expected benefits from their first position (Table 8). In general, a medical package (53.1%) was viewed as the most important benefit expected from the first position that would affect career decisions. Paid vacation (7.1%) and life insurance (6.8%) ranked second and third among others. As to the ranking of the top three expected benefits, a medical package (73.5%) was ranked first. It was followed by a dental plan (45.7%) and paid vacation (38.3%) (Table 9).

Table 8: Most Important Benefit Expected from the First Position

|                              | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) |
|------------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Medical package              | 58.97%        | 51.34%         | 53.10%             |
| Paid vacation                | 7.69%         | 6.90%          | 7.08%              |
| Life insurance               | 6.41%         | 6.90%          | 6.78%              |
| Retirement compensation plan | 2.56%         | 4.21%          | 3.83%              |
| Bonus                        | 0.00%         | 3.45%          | 2.65%              |
| Children education fund      | 0.00%         | 2.30%          | 1.77%              |
| Dental plan                  | 1.28%         | 1.53%          | 1.47%              |

Table 9: Top Three Important Benefits Expected from the First Position

|                              | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) |
|------------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Medical package              | 76.92%        | 72.41%         | 73.45%             |
| Dental plan                  | 44.87%        | 45.98%         | 45.72%             |
| Paid vacation                | 39.74%        | 37.93%         | 38.35%             |
| Life insurance               | 23.08%        | 25.67%         | 25.07%             |
| Bonus                        | 12.82%        | 19.54%         | 17.99%             |
| Retirement compensation plan | 19.23%        | 17.24%         | 17.70%             |
| Children education fund      | 6.41%         | 5.36%          | 5.60%              |



In terms of the expected pay, respondents estimated the hourly wage of approximately \$15 per hour and an annual salary of approximately \$42,000 (Table 10). No significant difference was found in the expected pay between two groups.

Table 10: Expected Hourly Wage/Annual Salary

|               | 4YR<br>(n=78) | 2YR<br>(n=261) | Overall<br>(n=339) | t-value |
|---------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|---------|
| Hourly wage   | \$15.04       | \$14.50        | \$14.59            | 0.669   |
| Annual Salary | \$39250.00    | \$43320.18     | \$42045.18         | -1.178  |

\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed test

## DISCUSSION

Based on this study’s findings, at the end of a 2-year program only 42.2% of culinary graduates will be available to the industry as a new labor force for entry and mid-level positions. The availability will not be improved significantly after students finish a 4-year program because only 42.3% of culinary graduates will be available to the industry as a new labor force. The research findings also suggest that nearly 13 percent of culinary graduates would remain with their current employers and nearly 4 percent of them would continue with a part-time position. Although culinary students who decided to continue their education will enter the industry at some point, and those who chose to stay with their current employers will be prepared and seek a higher-level position later in their careers, the research findings suggest that the availability of the new labor force for entry and mid-level positions will not be as much as the growth of the student enrollment. This result corresponds to various studies and reports that industry recruiters have encountered difficulties hiring enough people to work in the kitchen.

Because most of the respondents have work experience in individual restaurants, it is not surprising that this industry segment ranked first in the industry segments of interest for career considerations, the familiarity with career opportunities, and the willingness to accept job offers. It is also not surprising that the 4YR group has a better familiarity with career opportunities than their 2YR counterparts, since it may relate to more years in school and work experience. However, their responses also suggest that they are not very clear about work conditions and career advancement opportunities in other industry segments. In addition, the willingness to accept job offers is not significantly different between two groups. It is possible that culinary graduates have not fully utilized available resources, such as career center on campus, to explore career opportunities in other industry segments, and they are still uncertain which industry segment they would enter after graduation.

As to factors that impact students’ career decisions, monetary factors, including salary and benefits, along with advancement opportunities are the top three important factors. When further examining expected benefits, a medical package and dental plan stand out the most among other types of benefits. Considering current economy and employment market, it is

understandable that culinary graduates are concerned about their future and would like to have a better and secured life style. However, in terms of culinary graduates' expectations about annual salary and hourly wage, the research findings suggest that they are not consistent with current levels in the industry.

Although culinary schools have prepared students with adequate skills and knowledge to develop a career in the food service industry, there still exists a gap between culinary graduates' career expectations and the reality. Such gaps may turn job seekers away from entering the labor market or continuing in the industry for higher positions. Since respondents in this study suggest they are interested in entering the food service industry, despite their familiarity and willingness to accept job offers indicate the level of uncertainty is still high, several managerial implications are suggested in an effort to create improved recruitment efforts and ultimately enhance the recruitment results in the food service industry.

Industry recruiters should actively reach out to culinary students and provide current and realistic information about work conditions, career advancement opportunities, and job rewards (including salary and benefits) in the industry. Several considerable options, including career fairs, internship opportunities, work site tours or guest speaker opportunities in classes, should be adapted to familiarize students with career issues they would encounter when considering career opportunities in the food service industry. In addition, the research findings suggest that the reputation of food service companies was not deemed as a major factor impacting culinary graduate students' career decision, yet the reputation and the brand image of a company are often associated with important factors identified by respondents in this study. Therefore, recruiters should enhance the presentation of their companies at different occasions, such as career fairs, and construct an attractive image to capture culinary graduates' attention. It is hoped that once students are exposed to various kinds of current information, they may reconsider their expectations and be more realistic when deciding which segment to enter and plan their career accordingly.

## **LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Although the research findings yield some insights on culinary graduates' career decisions and expectations, some limitations must be noted. First of all, this study only selected three culinary institutions located in the northeastern part of the United States. This study only provides a glance on the potential development of future labor force and concerns of the growth. In addition, the sample size representing the 4-year Bachelor's degree is relatively smaller than the 2-year Associate's degree. The comparison may not fully portray the real difference between the two groups.

Therefore, future research should address these limitations by incorporating more culinary institutions and students in the United States to follow up with a more accurate identification of culinary graduates' career decisions and expectations. In the meantime, future

studies should consider examining the utilization of career-related resources on campus that students may use. This would assist in assessing the effects of realistic information on the level of familiarity of career opportunities and willingness to accept job offers in various industry segments. These studies would assist recruiters by enhancing their understanding about job seekers and may improve the efficiency of recruitment in the future.

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