

BUSINESS MONDAY OCTOBER 9, 2016 7:00 PM

How learning to serve tourists is shifting careers



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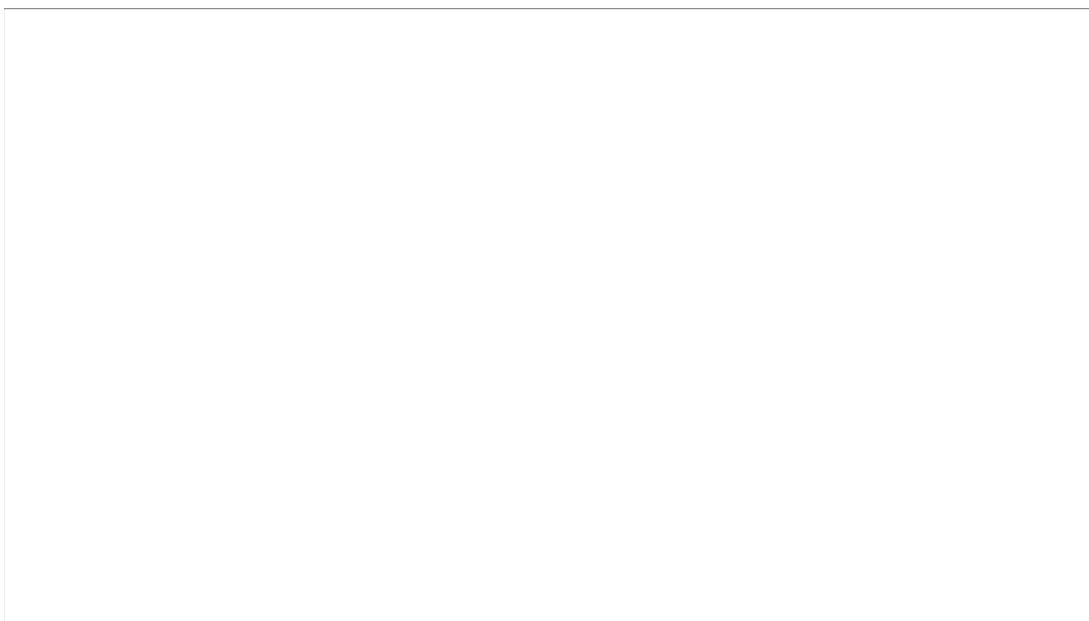
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The tourism industry, South Florida's top employer, was for decades perceived as a low-income job factory, producing hoards of housekeepers, servers and front desk attendants but few senior-track positions.

But in the last 10 years, tourism leaders have led a concerted push to catapult the industry into a producer of middle- and high-income jobs. In South Florida, where the industry has boomed since the recession in 2008, steep competition among new hotels, restaurants and other offerings have also led employers to seek trained, qualified employees for all levels of hospitality positions.

Together, the two factors have created a paradigm shift in how hospitality is taught, the diversity of educational options and the fervor with which students have re-invested in the industry.

ADVERTISING



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WE WANTED PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND THAT HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS AREN'T THE ONLY OPTIONS.

Diann Newman, associate dean for student services in FIU's hospitality and tourism management school

The enhanced programs promise to develop students with a wide range of skills, who will be able to compete in South Florida's cut-throat tourism environment.

Today's students expect to graduate with a career, not a ticket to a low-paying job.

And they have more options than ever. For instance:

- Florida International University's Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management reintroduced its travel and tourism management major two years ago after a 15-year hiatus, in addition to five other hospitality majors.
- Miami-Dade County Public School's Academy of Hospitality and Tourism has grown from offering courses at three high schools to 15 schools across the county.
- Johnson & Wales University's North Miami campus is now the school's second largest, behind its campus in Providence, Rhode Island. It offers South Florida's only baking & pastry arts & food service management major, and career fairs are sold out, with more employers coming every year to hire students predominantly for hospitality positions.
- Broward College's associate's degree in hospitality and tourism management has grown from 30 students in 2010 to about 200 this year, offering broader scheduling options and courses for students who work in the industry and also take classes.
- Miami Dade College also offers the Hospitality Institute, a free Overtown-based tourism training program that prepares students seeking entry-level positions.

The increase in education is in line with a ballooning number of tourism offerings.





Graduation ceremony for the Hospitality Institute at MDC

Charles Trainor Jr. - Miami Herald

In the last year alone, Miami-Dade County has added more than 2,200 new hotel rooms, a crop of new restaurants have opened and six new airlines have started service to Miami International Airport. That growth is expected to continue with the completion of major projects such as the Brightline express rail service to Orlando and the Miami WorldCenter development in downtown Miami.

According to the most recent report from the U.S. Travel Association, the travel industry is the sixth-largest employer in the United States, responsible for employing more than 7.5 million Americans in 2014. About a third of those employees start with a bachelor's degree and 53 percent go on to earn a middle-class salary or higher. The report collected data by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics beginning in 1979, tracking 5,000 American workers with annual or biannual interviews through 2010.

THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY IS THE SIXTH-LARGEST EMPLOYER IN THE UNITED STATES.

In Miami-Dade, where tourism was once the leading economic driver, civic leaders have made a united effort to diversify the economy. That push, and a shifting economy, have brought leisure and hospitality to 17 percent of the county's gross domestic product, according to a 2014 report, the most recent available. That puts it behind real estate, trade and retail sales.

When it comes to jobs, tourism is in the No. 6 position, with about 9 percent of the county's non-farm jobs, or about 136,000 positions, according to federal Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Beacon Council, the county's official economic development agency. The industry had the second-highest year-over-year growth of any local industry (other than construction) in June 2016, the most recent month for which data are available.

In Broward, about 14 percent of the non-agricultural jobs are in leisure and hospitality, according to the BLS. That's up about 3.6 percent year-over-year.

The numbers add up to this: Tourism jobs are key to South Florida's prosperity. So it should be no surprise that at even the still-crucial entry-level positions, expectations have changed.

Housekeepers, servers and front desk attendants are expected to come in with some level of training. The mentality is no longer that *anyone* can get a low-income tourism position, said Youcheng Wang, associate dean of academic affairs and research at the University of Central Florida's Rosen College of Hospitality Management.

"Nowadays, the hospitality industry is getting really advanced. You need business professionals who know how to run a business," Wang said. "It's because of competition that you have to do a much better job. You have to really provide the value to the customer."

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COMPLETING THINGS IN LIFE, IT'S BEEN HARD FOR ME. THIS IS THE BEST FEELING IN THE WORLD.

Johnny Collins, 23, a student in Miami Dade College's Hospitality Institute 10-week culinary course

That thinking inspired the creation of the Hospitality Institute, which brings in workers from underprivileged neighborhoods and gives them basic hospitality training. The program offers a four-day basic skills training course, several four-week hospitality certification trainings and a 10-week basic culinary skills course.

Nearly 3,000 students have graduated from the program since it was launched in 2008. About 70 percent of those who go through the certification and culinary trainings go on to get jobs, many of them at local cruise lines, Marriott, Hilton and the Loews Miami Beach. About 35 percent of students who take the introductory four-day class get employed, according to Laura Drosdowech, the institute's project manager.

In late September, 20 students in the program's basic culinary skills 10-week course were two days away from graduation. Inside a dim culinary training room at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus, most said the class had reawakened ambitions and made employment attainable.

For some, the course was the first thing they'd ever seen through to the end.

"Completing things in life, it's been hard for me," said 23-year-old Johnny Collins on that rainy September afternoon. "This is the best feeling in the world."

Other students shared similar sentiments. For a single mother of two, the class was a worthy sacrifice to make while splitting time between family, education and a job. Another single mother said the class was proof that a learning disability didn't need to hold her back; she is now

preparing to open a seafood restaurant. A former Haitian radio host took up the course to revisit an old passion. And one Marine veteran said culinary training was his road out of unemployment.

Growing opportunities

In recent years, nearly every tourism education program in South Florida has shifted its approach.

The updated curricula have redefined what a hospitality education can provide and energized individual programs beyond the school system.

Take Miami travel agent Olga Ramudo, president and CEO of Express Travel, who is developing a travel agent education program to combat a local shortage of trained agents.

“Not everybody is four-year college material,” Ramudo said. “And it’s a great career. Even though the perception is that travel agents are dying — we are growing.” Travel agencies accounted for \$148 billion in U.S. travel sales in 2015, with about a quarter of Americans using a travel agent to book a vacation.

The program, still in the early stages, is being designed as a certificate course aimed at training students in reservation systems, booking and customer service.

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Youcheng Wang, associate dean of academic affairs and research at the University of Central Florida's Rosen College of Hospitality Management

At the same time, more established programs have devised competitive course loads for students.

FIU has proposed adding more STEM offerings (in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields) within its hospitality school, for training in areas such as food science, data analytics and global hospitality management, said Diann Newman, associate dean for student services in the hospitality and tourism management school. She said the program expects to implement the new offerings in two to three years.

“We wanted people to understand that hotels and restaurants aren’t the only options,” Newman said. But traditional hospitality offerings are still important: The school has been hosting the South Beach Food and Wine Festival, which brings renown chefs from around the world for a five-day showcase, for nearly two decades. Proceeds from the festival benefit the Chaplin school.

ABOUT 80 PERCENT OF THE STUDENTS WHO COMPLETE A HOSPITALITY INTERNSHIP AT FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY GET A JOB OUT OF IT.

FIU also offers degrees in beverage management, culinary management, event management, hotel/lodging management and restaurant/food service management, plus the new travel and tourism management degree. The degree was collapsed about 15 years ago because of a lack of demand, but it has been reintroduced recently for students who want a more broad understanding of the industry. Students take classes such as tour production and distribution and sustainable tourism practices. The students in all hospitality majors are also required to do an internship, with 80 percent of major internships resulting in a job.

At the high school level, Miami Dade Schools hosts the National Academy Foundation, a network of career-themed academies that prepare high school students for post-graduate careers. The Academy of Hospitality and Tourism has been in South Florida for nearly 30 years, but it has recently gone through a massive expansion (it's now in 20 schools in Miami Dade and Broward, from three), adding entrepreneurship, social media and revenue management courses to help students gain a more diverse skill set before entering college or the workforce. Students take traditional introductory tourism courses, as well as marketing and technology classes tied to the field. They are required to complete an internship.

The public school program, which started at Miami Springs Senior High School in 1987, has been so popular it has spawned an alumni networking group 600 strong that works to educate students about the diverse opportunities available in the tourism field.

Many graduates have gone on to successful careers in the industry.

Loews Miami Beach senior sales manager Roseline Bien-Aime graduated from the hospitality academy at Miami Beach Senior High in 2001 and has stayed at the Loews, where she interned during high school, for 16 years. Her first job was as a pool attendant.

Another program graduate, Luckson Pierre, now leads technical services at Miami Seaquarium, handling audio for shows. He started out in a customer service position following his high school graduation in 1999. Pierre also is the marketing chair of the hospitality academy's alumni group and often talks to students and parents who have misconceptions about the field.

"A person like me who is working as an audio engineer, when I tell them what I do they get shocked," Pierre said. Students and parents don't often expect that career to fall under the umbrella of tourism, he said.

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Luckson Pierre, now leads technical services at Miami Seaquarium

But the message seems to be getting across to prospective students. Broward County now also has five high schools with hospitality and tourism academies, with more planned, said Rick Kron, program manager of hospitality and tourism management at Broward College. The college also is developing agreements with four-year universities to create a bridge for students who complete its two-year associate program and want to continue their education.

In the last six years, Broward College has added night and weekend schedules for working students. Nearly all courses are now available every semester for a quicker path to graduation. About 75 to 80 percent of program graduates go on to continue their education at a four-year institution.

Making graduation attainable to a wider swath of the population remains a central focus of the Overtown-based Hospitality Institute, which is in the final changes of a major expansion plan that will bring its popular tourism training program to new sectors of the community.

By November, the institute plans to bring its program to Miami Dade College's Homestead campus, where management has identified a need for no-cost job readiness courses. Next year, and pending final approval from the county, the Culmer Community Action Center in Overtown will be renovated to create a hands-on tourism education center with a mock hotel; the Overtown Performing Arts Center will get a commercial kitchen for the culinary students. Also in the works: a summer program focused on acquainting at-risk students with the travel industry, and expanding outreach into Liberty City.

“Miami has grown fast, it's grown quickly and we have to all remember that,” said Julie Grimes, the program's founder and managing partner of the Hilton Bentley Hotel on Miami Beach. “I've seen so many folks delighted to have been able to learn how they can connect into these great opportunities and how it has inspired them to reach for their potential.”

Jobs with prospects

Of the 20 students in the Hospitality Institute's summer culinary program, more than half planned to continue their education at Miami Dade College. The rest expected to have jobs.

But on the morning of Sept. 28, inside the small Teatro Prometeo auditorium at the college's Wolfson Campus, the focus was on the first hurdle: Graduating, many for the first time.

ABOUT 70 PERCENT OF STUDENTS WHO GO THROUGH THE CERTIFICATION AND CULINARY TRAININGS AT MIAMI DADE COLLEGE'S HOSPITALITY INSTITUTE GO ON TO GET JOBS. ABOUT 35 PERCENT OF STUDENTS WHO TAKE THE INTRODUCTORY FOUR-DAY CLASS GET EMPLOYED.

The ceremony included addresses from local tourism industry leaders (Wendy Kallergis, president of the Greater Miami & the Beaches Hotel Association, told the students she would ensure they got jobs) and campus president Rick Soria. But the emotional speeches by the students themselves were the highlight.

U.S. Marine veteran Luis Antonio Juarez said he never expected much from the class, just an interesting course to occupy his time while he struggled with unemployment. He thanked his coaches, Chef Steven Sabatino and training consultant Frank Ferrara, for not giving up on him when he wanted to quit. He thanked his classmates.

"We not only became friends, we became a family," Juarez said. "It really has made a difference and an impact in our lives and that makes me believe that this program does work. I've seen some of these people come a long way in just 10 weeks."

For many, that journey was one to self acceptance.

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THIS EXPERIENCE HAS SHATTERED THE CHAINS AND ALLOWED MY DORMANT DREAMS TO BE RESURRECTED.

Signona Joseph, 36, a student in Miami Dade College's Hospitality Institute 10-week culinary course

The high point came from student Signona Joseph, who detailed 19 years of unhappiness as a hospital front desk attendant. Joseph, 36, ran away from home after high school, lived on her own since and was fired from her job six months ago.

With nothing left to lose, she took a chance on an old passion: cooking.

“I have heard people say that God works in mysterious ways, and it’s true,” Joseph said. “This class has been a blessing to me. It came at the right moment in my life. I was able to liberate my soul from the trauma of my past through cooking.”

Her teachers gave her free bus passes and encouraged her to explore the city. She went to the beach and got wet in the rain, she said. She was able to giggle again.

“This experience has shattered the chains and allowed my dormant dreams to be resurrected,” Joseph said. “I have gratitude in my heart for all the people that invested in me; and I just wanted them to know their investment is not in vain. I am convinced, the best is yet to come within me.”

She’s already taking that next step: a job as a prep cook.



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