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Perceptions toward the Value of Higher Education for Hotel Professionals in Las Vegas: A Case Study

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PERCEPTIONS TOWARD THE VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR HOTEL
PROFESSIONALS IN LAS VEGAS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study concerns a qualitative investigation of the views toward higher education and its importance to hospitality career success among hotel professionals in the Las Vegas, Nevada area. Existing literature supported the premise that education may be important to professional career success in several different ways, and that values concerning education may be passed from one person to another via social learning. However, the relevant theories had not previously been evaluated within the context of the hospitality industry. Professionals in reporting relationships at two Las Vegas hotels were interviewed to determine perceptions about higher education, the sources of those perceptions, and whether or not there are any similarities in views between individuals in a reporting relationship. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify prevalent patterns, and the data revealed support for the proposition that values may in fact be passed from leaders to followers through social interactions. Other conclusions included popularly perceived characteristics and limitations of the utility of higher education for hospitality professionals.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A sincere and earnest debate exists within the hospitality industry, between its practitioners and its academics, as to whether formal higher education is really necessary for career success. Academics, unsurprisingly, usually argue that college degrees are critically important to career success in the professional field, much in the same way that lawyers and doctors are virtually worthless without the formal education upon which their professional licenses are predicated. Many industry practitioners, however, believe that hospitality is a discipline best reserved to field learning; this view asserts that the only thing truly necessary to becoming an expert in hospitality is work experience (Alves, 2011). Additionally, there is substantial evidence in existing literature to suggest that the values of such industry practitioners can be expected to transcend the walls of executive offices and permeate down the organizational chain into the hearts and minds of their followers as well.

This research involved a qualitative case study of two hotels in the Las Vegas area to explore the relationships (if any) in the subjective perceptions of the value of hospitality education between (1) top managers, (2) middle managers, and (3) aspiring professionals who are relying on these values in making career development decisions. Reasonable grounds exist for suspicion that a ‘recycling of values’ might be ongoing, wherein will-be leaders achieve success within the structure of values established by the leaders that preceded them and then go on to perpetuate those same values in their own leadership careers.

There is substantial discord between academics and industry practitioners in hospitality over whether formal hospitality education programs are effective in preparing students for future industry careers. Hospitality education has existed for nearly a century in the United States, and

yet schools and universities still struggle in many ways to find common ground with the industry over what is needed and how best to deliver it. Industry firms argue that many hospitality education programs are either outdated, too entrenched in theory to be practically relevant, or lacking in the right kinds of curriculum to breed emotionally intelligent graduates. Hospitality schools contend that the lessons learned in their programs are timeless, that students get as much practical experience as they do theoretical underpinning, and that emotional intelligence is a foundation upon which most college coursework is based. This dissent threatens the relevance of hospitality education programs into the future.

Several socio-economic theories have attempted to explain the precise role that higher education plays (or should play) in the context of employment decisions. Human capital theory holds that higher education is necessary to provide individuals with the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to do sophisticated jobs in the modern ‘information age’ (Becker, 1975). Credentialist theory, on the other hand, suggests that degrees are merely a way of segmenting social strata and creating monopolies for certain individuals over certain occupational domains (Brown, 2001). A third view, Job market signaling theory, suggests that higher education is used instead like a marketing tool, and a means of communicating certain desirable qualifications to employers so that they can reduce the degree of uncertainty present when making hiring decisions (Spence, 1973). A final approach, filtering theory, posits that higher education simply functions to screen applicants so that employers can make an informed estimate of employee potential productivity based upon the extent of their success in higher education (Arrow, 1973). Although the mechanics may differ, all of these theories concur that higher education serves a valid purpose as a factor in employment decisions.

An underlying tenet of this research is that values, such as those concerning higher education, can be (and often are) learned within a social context. Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals in group environments are likely to adopt the values of those with whom they identify in the group, and specifically those values that are expected to yield the highest degree of personal benefit (Bandura, 1969). Given the power hierarchy present in typical business organizations, this theory provides an explanation of how and why employees might tend to mirror the values of their managers as they relate to higher education.

With this concept in mind, we can see a potential pattern whereby values that give rise to success for certain individuals might help to mold the perspectives of those individuals concerning whether higher education is essential or even important in the hospitality industry. These individuals go on to become managers themselves, and we see, consequently, that this cycle might continue. Generation after generation of professionals are influenced by the values of their predecessors, and then go on to perpetuate those values themselves, ad infinitum.

Problem Statement

The problem that this study seeks to resolve is that far too little is known about the ways in which beliefs and values held by managers can transcend into the mental frames of followers. Theoretical research in sociology suggests that such influence is possible, and in light of the power dynamic in such a relationship, even probable. Given the dichotomy of opinions surrounding the value of hospitality education, this problem is too significant to ignore, so this study sought to reveal the extent of connection in opinions of the value of higher education between managers and followers.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the connection in perceptions of the value of education between top managers, middle managers, and aspiring professionals. Evidence of the suspected relationships supported the existence of a ‘recycling of values’ as it relates to higher education. This study helped to clarify this matter, and to further the body of knowledge in the fields of higher education and career development in hospitality.

CHAPTER TWO

The foundations of this study concern a complex web of academic research that has spanned many decades and multiple disciplines. Schools of education, psychology, organizational behavior, business and hospitality, and even economics have contributed significantly to an understanding of the factors that motivate decisions to pursue higher education, whether such decisions will affect career experiences, and whether perceptions concerning the value of higher education can be expected to change as a result of career experiences (or lack thereof). This chapter will examine the specific dynamics of higher education in hospitality (including conflicting perceptions of the value therein), competing theories about the general value of higher education to career success, and finally, a sound theory describing how individuals might adopt their own values as they pertain to higher education.

What is Hospitality Education?

As a first step in developing context for this study, it is important to understand specifically what higher education in *hospitality* is, and why the controversy over its value (which inspired this research) exists in the first place. Hospitality education is a body of curriculum and academic programs designed to prepare students for professional careers in the various aspects of the hospitality industry which, at its broadest, may be stretched to include hotels, airlines, restaurants, cruise lines, theme parks, destination management companies, tourism bureaus (both public and private), and any other businesses that are hospitality and tourism oriented (Millar, Zhenxing, & Moreo, 2010). The industry, in the past, has been more broadly broken down into five specific areas: food service, lodging, recreation, travel, and convention and meetings (Riegel & Dallas, 1999).

Hospitality education has been a common offering at schools throughout the United States since its inception in the 1920s with the Cornell University Hotel School. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (2015), the U.S. hospitality and tourism industries generated more than \$1.4B USD in revenue in 2014, accounting for approximately 8% of the nation's GDP. Future projections anticipate steady growth of roughly 3% per year for at least the next ten years. However, in spite of these impressive numbers, there are barely 1,000 hospitality schools domestically to support education in this industry (Riegel & Dallas, 1999).

Hospitality education is typically designed in the paradigm of competency-based education (CBE), which has been around for more than three decades (Hauf, 1980). The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative defines a competency as “a combination of skills, abilities, and knowledge needed to perform a specific task” (United States Department of Education, 2002, p. 1). Competency-based education has been applied to a diverse range of fields including teaching (Theeb, Muhaidat, & Al-Zboon, 2014), medicine (Cunningham, Kates, & Blauth, 2014), business (Jackson & Chapman, 2012), and engineering (Bish, Newton, Browning, O'Connor, & Anibaldi, 2014).

The specific competencies needed for hospitality careers may vary based upon the specific segment of the industry into which a professional heads. For example, culinary skills may be minimally relevant in a limited service hotel or airline setting. However, restaurants and catering companies would likely find these types of skills much more useful.

There are some fundamental business skills that are versatile enough to find application in almost any industry setting. Management strategy, finance and accounting, legal considerations, and human resources are all skill sets that are universally relevant in any business

setting (hospitality or otherwise). As such, these types of curriculum typically comprise the foundational core (required) coursework for hospitality majors at almost any U.S. university.

The classes themselves are not dissimilar to those of a business major's undergraduate work, but with a gearing toward the particulars of the hospitality industry. To take just one example, students in both business and hospitality will take accounting classes of some variety, and therein they will all almost certainly learn the fundamentals of debits and credits, balance sheets, and income statements. However, hospitality students will likely learn about specific industry operating ratios such as RevPAR and ADR in order to focus the relevance of their knowledge to their industry choice.

Core curriculum aside, however, many elective courses within hospitality programs are geared toward the specifics of various industry segments, which create a narrow tailoring of skill sets for a particular career path. In many hospitality programs, for example, electives are offered that explore areas such as sales, meetings and conventions, cruise line management, theme parks, and other specialty areas. These courses are typically designed to be taken in the latter half of a student's undergraduate career when he or she has begun (hopefully) to identify a career choice (Hayward, 2007).

Despite efforts from education program designers to meet the needs of the giant hospitality and tourism industry, it has not escaped criticism from various stakeholders (Marinakou & Giousmpasoglu, 2015; Matic & Agušaj, 2012). The following sections discuss several common criticisms of the efficacy of such programs.

Irrelevance through Obsolescence

One of the most prominent complaints is an obsolescence of training, due to the exponential pace at which technologies, laws, products, markets, and other variables in the

industry are changing (Goodman & Sprague, 1991; Kang, Wu, & Gould, 2005). Some industry professionals assert that what hospitality students are learning in their degree programs is outdated to the point of irrelevance by the time graduation comes, rendering the entire pursuit little more than an exercise in futility.

Hospitality administrators have something to say in response to this allegation, though. Schools around the world recognize the need for the development of timeless social skill sets such as professionalism (attire, punctuality, ethics, etc.), presentations (oral, written, etc.), persuasive sales and marketing communication tactics (media, proposals, etc.), networking and interviewing, and more. As just one example, at the University of Nevada (UNLV) Las Vegas William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration, undergraduate students will, throughout their coursework, draft resumes and cover letters, attend industry events, participate in a mock job interview with university career services specialists, cooperate with fellow students on countless projects and presentations, and complete a minimum of 1,000 work experience hours honing their social skills (William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration, 2014). These requirements of hospitality majors are not uncommon, as educators have realized the importance of such concepts.

However, even the most prestigious hospitality programs cannot hope to teach students all that they'll ever need to know, nor can they expect to clairvoyantly predict changes in products, customers, laws, technologies, and other variables. Therefore, instead of focusing on 'what to learn', many schools focus on developing an understanding of 'how to learn' skills, so that students embark on their career paths with the ability to adapt and improve as their unique circumstances may require (Hodge, Wright, Barraket, Scott, Melville, & Richardson, 2011).

For example, much of hospitality undergraduate formal education is geared toward developing skill sets necessary to *begin* a career in the industry, with either a line-level, or---for the occasional fortunate student---line-supervisory-level career opportunity in mind. One may ask, then: how do these programs prepare hospitality undergraduate students for an eventual position in senior management? The answer, succinctly, is that they don't. Sure, there are graduate programs designed with these skill sets in mind, but for many students, graduate school may be either unfeasible or unappealing (Enz, Renaghan, Geller, & Geller, 1993). Yet, the reality is that the time and resources available in undergraduate programs don't allow for exposition into the infinite scaffolding of career possibilities for each student. Instead, universities focus on ensuring that hospitality students are able to unendingly improve upon their own skill sets after college and into their careers, so that graduates can prepare themselves for the career paths that lie ahead, and avoid career ceilings caused by lack of qualifications.

Consider, for example, a college graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Management. Shortly after conferral, this graduate lands a position as a front desk agent at a hotel in Las Vegas. As time passes, he finds himself steadily climbing the ranks of the company, from a supervisor, to a manager, to a director, and eventually to executive leadership. At this point in his career, he is expected to possess skill sets such as corporate governance, shareholder relations, legal oversight, brand management, etc. These skill sets look nothing like the curriculum that comprised his undergraduate degree, which included property management systems, basic accounting principles, wine tasting, and the way an air conditioner works.

However, all is not lost for our graduate, because although his alma mater did not provide him with the 'fish' that he needs, they taught him 'how to fish', as the popular saying goes. Through his experience in school, he became an expert at learning. He realized long ago as a

manager that although he did not know how to manage a department budget, if he watched how other successful managers were doing it, and if he adopted the best practices he observed, he could match their success. Likewise, he discovers when he becomes a director that although he didn't understand a thing about unions, if he consulted human resource compliance officers, and followed good advice from the company's legal team, he could survive a labor relations board investigation. Later, as a corporate officer, although he is clueless as to how to structure an initial public offering, he knows that if he asks the right questions, pays close attention to financial advisors and SEC regulators, and in doing so acquires the skills that are necessary to accomplish the task, he can self-teach to the extent necessary to take on new responsibility.

As such, academicians would assert that formal higher education has a role to play in developing a solid foundation of 'learning how to learn' for students during school, such that when they graduate, they possess the means to continue to educate themselves as the nature of their career paths may require, in order to reach their highest potential.

Removed from Reality

A second type of complaint from industry practitioners is that hospitality education programs lack relevance, not due to obsolescence of content, but instead due to the idea that the traditional classroom learning environment is simply too far removed from the real business world to be of any practical benefit (Jayawardena, 2001). In research evaluating the effectiveness of management programs, frequent criticisms included too much quantitative analysis focus, and insufficient attention to communication skills, management skills, ethics, entrepreneurialism, and other areas (Porter & McKibbin, 1988). Other industry experts assert that what practitioners need most for careers in management (and are not getting from schools) are 1) qualifications, 2) experience, 3) management ability, 4) adaptability, and 5) sociability (Jayawardena, 2000).

Justified or not, the perception among many in the industry is that hospitality education is too deeply entrenched in illusory theory, and insufficiently grounded in what is actually happening on the floor in hotels, restaurants, and other hospitality businesses.

To illustrate this point of view, let us imagine a hospitality program graduate assuming his first leadership role in the industry. Now, if our graduate received a typical hospitality education, then he likely took a course on leadership and management at some point in his studies. This course probably taught him about Mintzberg's (1971) management roles, Herzberg's (1987) two factor theory, Drucker's (1975) management by objectives, Blake and Mouton's (1978) managerial grid, and even Weber's (1978) musings on bureaucratic organizational behavior. However, our graduate is now faced with a concerning yet valid question: of what value (if any) is the rote memorization of all of these academic theories to his success in actually performing the roles of a manager? Some would argue that the answer is: none whatsoever. The reality is that academicians, irrespective of discipline, have a notorious reputation for the development and publication of abstract theoretical concepts that are of equally dismal interest and utility to practitioners; and the hospitality industry is no exception. Right now, there are literally hundreds of hospitality researchers competing for publication in dozens of academic journals tailored specifically to hospitality studies. Yet, virtually none of the industry practitioners for whom such research is (arguably) intended can be found reading any of it. With this in mind, it shouldn't be any surprise that a job applicant who underwent four years of indoctrination into such perceivably trivial knowledge is given no less credibility than one who did not.

Most hospitality programs include courses at some level that incorporate curriculum in many of the areas cited by critics as deficient, such as management, ethics/law, communication,

and others; whether the curriculum contained therein is practical in nature is another story. However, it is worthy of note that many schools have reached out to initiate helpful dialogue with industry partners on these points, in order to help guide the strategy for program curriculum. Accordingly, some have taken cues from industry training best practices, and these skill sets are prioritized through careful course design with projects, role play scenarios, and even work experience/internships as requirements for graduation (Armstrong, 2003), in order to emphasize some of the attributes that have been identified as needed most.

Taking UNLV as an example once more, undergraduate students participate in the operation of a restaurant that is open to the public, onsite at the college campus (William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration, 2015). Students are responsible for all aspects of the operation from food production to front-of-house management, in order to expose them to the reality of industry practice. These same UNLV students are also required to take a meetings and events class wherein they work with real event planners and take on contracts with real clients to plan, budget, coordinate, and execute real events, teaching them the practical logistics of working in such a capacity (Barrett, 1996). These initiatives are designed specifically to promote real-world, practical skill development, and prepare students for the realities of their future careers.

EQ, not IQ

A third and final criticism of hospitality education has been that while hospitality programs have been producing intelligent graduates, they are quite simply the “wrong kind” of intelligent for the industry. Traditional notions of intelligence were more or less monopolized by the idea of IQ, or intelligence quotient. This concept came from German psychologist William Stern (1949) as a means of quantifying human intelligence. The tests involved to measure IQ,

which are based on Stern's principles, are analytical in nature, and involve the evaluation of how quickly a subject can interpret factual information (e.g. numbers) and draw conclusions to solve problems. IQ was widely embraced within the scientific community and has been incorporated into studies involving mortality (Barnes, Beaver, & Boutwell, 2013), social status (Deary, Whalley, and Starr, 2009), mental illness (Chiang, Tsai, Cheung, Brown, & Li, 2014), and other areas. It is still used today by some entities as a means of measuring candidate potential for jobs (Aydin, Leblebici, Arslan, Kilic, & Oktem, 2005). However, it is the opinion of many hospitality practitioners that IQ is the wrong metric for measuring the potential of hospitality job candidates, because it ignores entirely the domains of emotions and feelings, and the capacity for empathy (Gines, 2015). Enter social and emotional intelligence.

Social intelligence is a relatively newer concept, and has been defined as “the ability to possess (a) social awareness, or what we sense about others, and (b) social facility, or what we do with that information” (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 7). According to Goleman, social intelligence is exhibited when we “receive signals from others, accurately decode this information, and use it to interact in an effective manner” (Goleman, 1998). Social intelligence skills have been distinguished from “interpersonal intelligence” and “practical intelligence” in that social intelligence entails a mastery of the social skills necessary to “manage personal relationships effectively.” (Cha, Cichy, & Seung Hyun, 2009, p. 19).

Emotional intelligence has been categorized by some researchers as a type of social intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). It has been defined as “the set of abilities enabling a person to generate, recognize, express, understand, and evaluate their own and others' emotions in order to guide thinking and action to successfully cope with environmental demands and pressures” (Goleman, 1995). It has been more generally summarized as a set of abilities whereby

a person understands, regulates, uses, and manages his or her emotions. The idea of emotional intelligence as a metric that can vary from person to person gave rise to the acronym EQ, for empathy quotient. An emphasis on EQ and the idea of emotional intelligence over traditional notions of intelligence (IQ) in more recent research was borne out of the unconventional idea that it is fallacious to think of intelligence and emotions as two separate and distinct phenomena. Instead, pioneering researchers of these topics argued that the two should be viewed as co-existent dimensions of the same consciousness (Cherniss, 2000). Di Francesco (1998) proposed that the human being is a “unitary reference of experiences”, and that intelligence and emotions are both products of those experiences in the same fashion. However, some hospitality professionals argue that it is EQ, rather than IQ, which is more important to this unique industry, because of the importance of interactions between people to the success of hospitality businesses (Prentice & King, 2011).

Social and emotional intelligence are critically important to hospitality professional career success in two related but distinct ways. First, the core product of most hospitality companies is the service experience from the perspective of the customer. With that in mind, it is critical that hospitality professionals possess the capacity to understand the perceptions, thoughts, and emotions of their guests in an accurate way, and respond in ways that are promotive of positive experiences for customers.

An example will serve to illustrate. Of all the positions in a typical full-service, large-scale hotel (such as those found on the Las Vegas Strip), dexterity of emotional and social intelligence is probably most needed in the role of a hotel manager. In most of these properties, the hotel manager is responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the entire establishment, from rooms to food and beverage to ancillary offerings such as spas, casinos, and

entertainment. When there is a problem with a guest's experience, and they request (or occasionally, demand) to speak with someone in charge, the hotel manager is called. In a sense, this position also represents the 'face' of the hotel property (or even the company) as it is rare that guest issues are escalated beyond the authority of the hotel manager. As the saying goes, "the buck stops here". Therefore, the men and women who serve in these positions across the hospitality industry are constantly challenged with situations requiring careful social and emotional tact, so as to rectify negative impressions and resolve issues in the eyes of customers.

A common situation warranting hotel manager involvement might be a guest requesting to speak with such a manager after being told upon arrival that they are being 'walked' to another property because the hotel with which they originally booked oversold its room inventory. This is a difficult situation, as it is understandable that guests would be upset after learning that the hotel with which they previously entered into an agreement refused to honor its obligations to provide accommodations. Tensions are escalated by the fact that hotels are in the business of providing basic, physiological needs (i.e. shelter) and so it seems much more egregious that a hotel would deny a customer such needs, than, say, if an electronics store were to refuse to sell a customer a television. Irritation can also be magnified by the fact that many guests arrive to check in at the end of a long and stressful day of travelling.

Let us imagine a hotel manager in just such a situation. If our hotel manager is socially and emotionally intelligent, then he understands the emotions of his guests, and can empathize with the perspective of a frustrated customer. Certainly, from the hotel's perspective, overselling is a very common and accepted business practice in the interest of maximizing revenues. Additionally, the 'fine print' of a hotel reservation almost always includes the disclaimer that the hotel reserves the right to refuse accommodation under just these circumstances. However, if he

is competent, then the hotel manager knows that while these arguments may be meritorious, they will fall on deaf ears with an irate customer who is being denied a place to sleep. Instead, if he is talented our manager will rely on his tool kit of social and emotional skills to manipulate the outcome in the hotel's favor. A warm handshake and a smile may serve to break the ice and de-escalate tensions. Active listening can go a long way toward conveying respect. Showing attention and concern with facial expressions, eye contact, and body language can create the impression that he cares and has the guest's best interests at heart. Speaking with a tone of authority may be necessary to ensure that the guest knows they are dealing with the person in charge. Finally, the hotel manager may choose to size the magnitude of the grievance up against an arsenal of compensatory options at his disposal, in order to remedy the situation in the eyes of his customer, but all the while being mindful of his fiscal responsibility to the hotel and his duty to not 'give away the house'. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it serves to illustrate how social and emotional intelligence are vital to the interactions between employees and customers in order to maintain positive customer experiences and promote business prosperity.

There is also a second context in which social and emotional intelligence are important to the hospitality industry. Although hospitality businesses are uniquely dependent upon emotional and social intelligence in order to effectively deliver their service products (as discussed above), they are also, at their core, organizations consisting of people working together. In this sense, emotional and social intelligence have been identified in previous research as vital to career success for hospitality professionals (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Most positions within the operations of hotels, casinos, restaurants, cruises, airlines, and other aspects of hospitality and tourism rely on a team environment, with interdependence between employees at the heart of successful service delivery (El-Said, 2014).

Consider, for example, a busy restaurant. In order for a restaurant to maximize volume and profitability, members of the team must be able to work and communicate effectively with one another. They must be able to trust one another. Hosts and hostesses must seat tables in a manner that is efficient for the restaurant, but also equitable and fair for the servers working the floor, as this has a direct effect on their earnings. Servers must communicate orders accurately and expeditiously to culinary staff so as to keep the cooking line moving in an efficient manner; failing to do so notoriously leads to frustration and hostility in these environments (Johns & Menzel, 1999). Likewise, bussers must vigilantly support servers to clear tables and communicate statuses to the host staff so that seating can occur as quickly and efficiently as possible. Other personnel in areas such as stewarding, custodial, and even marketing have equally interdependent roles in promoting the overall success of the operation. In light of this dynamic, it is critical that restaurant professionals possess the emotional and social intelligence necessary to foster constructive relationships with each other. This is not unlike any other business environment, but it is arguably exaggerated in an industry where service (and not a tangible product) is the primary consumable.

Similarly, leaders must possess a mastery of emotional and social intelligence necessary to earn the respect and support of subordinates. Understanding how to be adaptable with approaches based on the particulars of individual followers, how to motivate followers to achieve desired business outcomes, and how to effectively correct behavior through coaching, mentoring, and even discipline without provoking feelings of antagonism are crucial skills for any hospitality leader, and they all stem from the precepts of emotional and social intelligence (Cooper & Sawaf, 1997). The need for these skills is only magnified as leaders climb the rungs of a corporate ladder through supervisor, manager, director, and executive roles. Eventually, the

weight of one's authority and the degree of political influence call for nothing short of emotional and social mastery (Chopra & Kanji, 2010). It is the production of precisely these skills that many industry practitioners perceive formal hospitality education programs to be lacking.

To this, many hospitality programs would likely counter that social interaction is emphasized in almost every aspect of a student's studies. Admittedly, many hospitality programs appear to prioritize technical skill sets over social and emotional intelligence. Relying again on UNLV as an example, the undergraduate program there is filled with required coursework such as: three accounting and finance classes; five classes in food & beverage logistics (purchasing, cost control, sanitation, service operations, and quantity production); two classes in law; and one class in hospitality facilities management (covering, mainly, systems operations and maintenance).

To be fair, there are a few required classes that cover leadership and organizational behavior theories, but the majority of coursework favors technical skills over social skills (William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration, n.d.). However, digging a bit more deeply into the content, one finds evidence of opportunity for developing social dexterity nearly everywhere. In almost every one of the above-mentioned classes, students are assigned some type of project or presentation, and many of these assignments require group collaboration. These tasks promote the development of communication skills, collaboration, healthy conflict resolution, and the general ability to understand and relate to different personalities. For these reasons, academe would defend that emotional intelligence is an overarching theme throughout the entirety of every student's academic career.

In Context

Academicians and industry practitioners perceive the efficacy of hospitality education very differently. However, as the old adage goes, ‘perception is nine-tenths of reality’. Regardless of whether colleges and universities are in fact doing a sufficiently good job of preparing hospitality majors for their careers, the reality is that some in industry positions with power to influence those very same careers don’t see it that way, and this not only frustrates the ambitions of aspiring professionals, but it also has the potential to reshape value perceptions of those very same professionals as they pertain to their education.

Socio-Economic Views on Higher Education as a Factor in Employment Decisions

Economists, sociologists, and behavioral psychologists have spent the better part of the last century trying to answer such questions as why humans pursue higher education, whether higher education actually better prepares human beings for the range of professional opportunities within their respective disciplines, and how (if at all) education affects hiring decisions. As can be expected from such a wide variety of perspectives, there are several competing---and in some ways incompatible---theories that underpin this research.

Human Capital Theory (HCT)

One relevant theory is human capital theory (HCT). HCT was first proposed and published by Gary Becker (1975). In HCT, Becker essentially posited that businesses make employment decisions based upon optimizing productivity, and consequently, people will tend to invest in maximizing their own potential productivity (i.e. ‘human capital’) to the extent that the benefits of such investments exceed the costs. The idea that in this new ‘information age’ a greater degree of technical proficiency in different disciplines is needed to compete effectively is frequently cited as evidence of HCT (van der Merwe, 2010).

First, Becker explained that a person's worth, in terms of economic value to a business, is determined by their potential productivity. Therefore, employers look to make recruitment decisions based upon optimizing productivity, and compensation scales (salaries, etc.) are typically based upon a grading of perceived potential productivity. People who are perceived to have the potential to be more productive are offered more pay, while the opposite is true for those who are perceived to have a lesser potential productivity. This is true within any given organizational level, and when comparing levels themselves; managers are typically paid more than line-level employees, and managers with better perceived productivity than their fellow managers may also be paid more, because of their perceived superiority.

Becker then considered this idea in light of the fact that graduates of higher education typically are paid more than their uneducated counterparts, and inferred that graduates of higher education are perceived by employers to have higher potential for productivity. Ergo, Becker theorized that, ignoring all other factors, individuals who pursue higher education do so in the interest of increasing their perceived potential productivity (thus optimizing their own human capital) with the expectation that such an investment will yield an increase in compensation in the workplace that will more than offset the costs of the higher education (Becker, 1975).

Since its inception, the merits of HCT have been tested in a variety of different contexts. In a study evaluating the importance of education and experience for venture capital firm professionals, researchers found that such qualities were positively associated with the number of initial public offerings generated by the firms for which professionals worked (Dimov & Shepherd, 2005). Another study evaluating HCT against national GDP found that investments in education are positively correlated with national economic growth and development (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). HCT has been applied in different labor markets around the world,

including South Africa (van der Merwe, 2010), Australia (Preston, 1997), China (Law, 2010), Great Britain (Stevens, 1999), and the United States (Cortes, 2002). Specifically in hospitality, the idea of HCT has been applied in such contexts as compensation for hotel managers (Barros & Santos, 2009), barriers to career growth for African Americans (Worsley & Stone, 2011), and others. Generally, results supported HCT's relevance as one explanation for the purpose of higher education.

Credentialist Theory (CT)

A competing theory to that of HCT, as it pertains to the dynamics of education as a factor in employment decisions, is the credentialist theory (CT). Credentialism has its roots in the Weberian idea of social stratification through educational credentialing. Weber (1978) posited that "the elaboration of diplomas from universities, business and engineering colleges, and the universal clamor for the creation of further education certificates" (p. 1000) had the effect of limiting the candidate pool for certain jobs to members of the elite social class of degree holders, and thereby serves to stratify the labor market based on credentials.

In serving this socio-economic function, CT was summarized by Daniel Brown to have the following propositions: First, the primary function of credentialing is not to denote technical expertise in a given discipline. Rather, it serves a "cultural and exclusionary" purpose that stratifies the labor market based upon degree thresholds (as opposed to years of schooling) (Brown, 2001, p. 20). Second, credentialing creates a positional power in the degree holder, such that the formal authority derived by virtue of possessing a degree precludes all those *without* such authority from questioning the integrity of the skills purported to be possessed by the degree holder. Third, credentials are monopolized by degree holders to exclude all those who do not possess such credentials, and credentials are also used by employers as measures of the

trustworthiness of candidates who are being considered for positions with considerable amounts of discretionary power. Finally, credential “inflation”, in which a flood of credentials are awarded at the top of a credentialing hierarchy (e.g. an increase in the number of bachelors or masters degrees awarded in a given discipline) may result in further differentiation and expansion of educational credentials (e.g. the creation of doctoral or specialist degree programs) and/or intervention by regulatory agencies to rebalance labor markets (e.g. reducing the number of students admitted to certain programs) (Brown, 2001, p. 20).

CT therefore turns not on what knowledge and skills are necessary to *do* the job, as HCT would suggest. Rather, it turns on what credentials are needed to *get* the job. Unlike HCT, CT purports that human beings are motivated to pursue higher education not for the benefit of increased productivity, but for the purpose of breaching the lines in occupational strata created by credentialing schemes. According to CT, prospective employees are concerned with getting the degree so that they are not excluded from the pool of eligible candidates for reasons of culture fit and trustworthiness, as opposed to a genuine ability to do the job (Brown, 2001).

Like HCT, CT has been put to the test in various contexts. A study of educational dynamics in 18 different countries showed that credentials are related to higher pay and rewards for workers, though not for reasons of increased productivity (van der Werfhorst, 2011). A second study in the United States showed how the traditional effects of CT was successfully overcome by the Teach for America program when the federal government subsidized education and teaching to recruit primary and secondary school teachers from non-teaching disciplines (Maier, 2012). CT has been studied around the world, including America (Montez, Hummer, & Hayward, 2012), the Middle East and North Africa (Salehi-isfahani, 2012), Slovenia (Dezelan, Fink Hafner, & Melink, 2014), Israel (Lerner & Menahen, 2003), and the Ivory Coast (van der

Gaag & Vijverberg, 1989). In hospitality, credentialing has only been explored in limited contexts for nutrition professionals (Carr, Boudreaux, Conklin, & Johnson, 2003). Through these repeated trials, CT has maintained its legitimacy as one viable explanation for the purpose of higher education.

Job Market Signaling Theory (JMST)

One of the earliest theories concerning the recruitment strategy for employers and employees is that of job market signaling theory (JMST), first developed by economist Michael Spence (1973). JMST holds that when employers are recruiting, they are essentially making investment decisions in an environment of uncertainty. Spence concurred with HCT to the extent that potential job candidates are generally evaluated based on their perceived potential productivity (and, ignoring other factors, the candidate with the highest potential productivity should be chosen over alternatives). However, with JMST, Spence focused on the fact that employers can only speculate on the potential productivity of each individual candidate, based upon the available information. In other words, employers can make educated guesses about the prospective value (measured in productivity) of a candidate, but an employer can never know with absolute certainty the actual productivity until *after* the candidate is hired and begins to perform. Therefore, hiring decisions are based exclusively on the information available to employers at the time such decisions are made.

Spence analogized hiring decisions to a “lottery” of sorts, but one in which the gamblers (i.e. the employers) have a degree of evidence with which to make an informed decision (Spence, 1973, p. 356). JMST goes on to posit that this evidence is provided by prospective employees in the form of “signals” that are used to convey messages. Within this realm of signals, Spence distinguishes those that are immutable and unchangeable from those that are mutable and subject

to change at the discretion of the signaler. Examples of immutable signals include such traits as race and gender (*generally* thought of as being unchangeable). Even age, while ever-changing through time, is *not* changeable at the discretion of the subject, and is therefore considered immutable. However, education is an example of a mutable signal, something that can be changed if the signaler should so choose.

Spence described the costs of changing these signals as *signaling costs*, and in the example of education, these would be defined as tuition and other costs associated with the earning of a college degree. Similarly to the cost-benefit analysis of HCT described *supra*, Spence reasoned that signalers will naturally compare the benefits of such signals (quantified by differences in expected compensation) with signaling costs in deciding whether or not such pursuits are worthwhile. For example, if available data suggest that the difference in salary for college degree holders is more than sufficient to offset the cost of a college degree, then it should be expected that such investments will be made.

Likewise, employers learn from these repeated interactions as well. As statistical data is aggregated on the correlation between certain signals and productivity, employers can bolster their own confidence in making employment decisions. For example, if data suggest that college graduates tend to be more productive on average than those without a college education, then employers can interpret the education ‘signal’ as an indicia of higher potential productivity. Therefore, both employer and employee develop strategies based on this exchange of information to maximize their respective returns.

JMST has been investigated in many different contexts. One study assessed the way that education alters employer behavior and found that wages increased when education was present as a marketing element (Kübler, Müller, & Normann, 2008). Another work evaluated the

signaling power of the GED in various job markets as compared with other possible credentials and found that a GED increases earnings for high school dropouts by between 10 and 20 percent (Tyler, Murnane, & Willett, 2000). JMST has been tested in numerous career fields, such as software developers (Orman, 2008), economists (Coles, Cawley, Levine, Niederle, Roth, & Siegfried, 2010), new business entrepreneurs (Backes-Gellner & Arndt, 2007), and even equity analysts (De Franco & Zhou, 2011). The integrity of JMST has also been compared and contrasted with that of HCT in several different studies (Arcidiacono, Bayer, & Hizmo, 2010; Frazis, 2002; Hopkins, 2012; Kjelland, 2008). Throughout, JMST has shown promise as yet another alternative explanation for the purpose of higher education.

Filtering Theory (FT)

A final competing theory within the purview of employment dynamics is that of filtering theory (FT). First proposed by Arrow (1973), FT was introduced as at once an interpretation of *and* a distinction from HCT. First, Arrow noted a dichotomy in views about the way in which higher education brings about higher perceived potential productivity. While classical HCT proponents argue that enhanced productivity is derived from the acquisition of advanced cognitive skills in school, critics argue that instead higher education serves to develop *socialization* skills such as group work, attendance and punctuality, time management, and the tracking and completion of assigned tasks (this bears some resemblance to the IQ vs. EQ debate discussed *supra*). However, Arrow struck an accord in pointing out that whether higher education promotes advanced cognitive skills or greater socialization skills, both imply an end state that yields higher productivity for the end users, employers.

Contrary to the view that the function of higher education is to better equip individuals for their future occupations, FT instead asserts that higher education serves as a screen to help

employers distinguish between the relative potential productivity of individuals. FT is compatible with JMST insofar as it concurs that employers are making speculative decisions about the productivity of employees in an uncertain environment, and that in addition to the ‘signals’ being sent by prospective employees, employers also have in their armament the available statistical data that translate those signals into meaningful conclusions. However, FT argues that higher education’s segmentation of candidate groups allow employers to infer certain potential productivity abilities for each category, thereby ‘filtering’ the candidate pool based on these criteria.

FT holds that there are three relevant characteristics to each college-educated applicant---record before college, probability of success in college, and end productivity---and these three characteristics are assumed to be correlated, but not perfectly so, and not in every individual. In this sense, higher education serves to filter these candidates twice.

The first filter occurs in the admission of students *to* college, based on secondary school performance and enrollment criteria. Students with commendable records coming out of high school are assumed to have a high level of potential productivity, and are thus admitted into college. Those without sufficiently high metrics are filtered out.

The second filter occurs in the eventual thinning of enrolled populations *during* college, as students struggle with their performance, drop out of school for personal or financial reasons, or otherwise fail to make it to the finish line (graduation). Over time, those who lack the necessary qualities for success in college will fall short, while those with all the necessary skills and abilities will reveal themselves at graduation time.

Therefore, given the assumption of a relationship between these factors, higher education institutions do the trial work of testing the relationship between the first two characteristics.

Employers typically are only privy to whether or not an individual is college-educated, but given this ‘filtering’ function that institutions of higher education serve, employers needn’t have any additional information. A level of potential productivity can be inferred upon each individual applicant, based upon whether they ‘made the cut’ before and during college.

FT has been the subject of research in various different contexts. A study in Taiyuan, China evaluated the effects of FT on the motivations of Chinese workers to pursue higher education and found that many Chinese pursue higher education on the basis of better perceived productivity in the workplace (Wang & Morgan, 2009). Another investigation looked at the effect that the quality of reputation that different schools across Europe and Japan have largely affected the perceived productivity of graduates of those schools (Murdoch, 2002). These examples aside, FT has been applied and tested in an array of different geographical contexts including Chile (Contreras, Sepulveda, & Bustos, 2010), China (Li, Ding, & Morgan, 2008), Great Britain (Brown & Sessions, 2006), and the Philippines and Thailand (Yamauchi, 2005). It has also been evaluated in comparison to other noted theories such as CT (Bills, 2003) and JMST (Kübler *et. al.*, 2008). FT has remained a legitimate explanation for the purpose of higher education.

Comparison Table of Socio-Economic Theories on Higher Education

In order to assist the reader in understanding and distinguishing each of the theories discussed *supra*, the following table is provided:

Table 1

Comparison of Socio-Economic Theories on Higher Education

Theory	Main Premise
Human capital theory (HCT)	Higher education is necessary to provide needed knowledge, skills, and abilities, without which employees could not <i>do</i> jobs.
Credentialist theory (CT)	Higher education stratifies the labor market such that anyone degrees hold monopolies over certain markets, and uneducated employees are unable to <i>get</i> jobs, notwithstanding ability.
Job market signaling theory (JMST)	Higher education serves as a marketing tool for degree holders to more effectively ‘sell’ themselves to employers.
Filtering theory (FT)	Higher education serves as a measurement tool with which employers can make estimated predictions about the potential productivity of degree holders.

In Context

Regardless of whether one agrees with the premises of HCT, CT, JMST, or FT, or any combination thereof, one underlying constant is that higher education is a factor worthy of consideration in employment decisions for both employers and employees, notwithstanding the motives for such consideration. Regardless of the theory a company may choose to embrace in strategizing hiring, and irrespective of the theory to which a professional may subscribe in developing himself or herself, it is inarguable that higher education plays a role in these dynamics.

How Values Are Derived in the Individual

Now that the socio-economic views of education as a factor for hiring have been explained, it is important to understand the particulars concerning the way in which individuals *derive* their values that inform career development and employment decisions. Values have been defined in prior research as “enduring beliefs that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of

existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). Values have also been described more simply as “ideal principles that the members of a community refer to in order to base their judgment, and decide which course of action to adopt” (Fayolle, Basso, & Legrain, 2008, p. 217).

Social Learning Theory (SLT)

The concept of Social Learning Theory (SLT) was first developed by psychologist Albert Bandura (1969). SLT essentially posits that human beings learn from one another through social interactions, through observation, memorization, and imitation. Bandura proposed that the learning of many social skills begins with watching social interactions, either as a party to or as a witness thereof. The learner in this sense is referred to as an “observer”, and the individual being observed is often referred to as the “model”. The first step in this process then, naturally, is for the observer to observe social phenomena involving the model.

The next step in the mechanics of social learning involves evaluation. Assuming basic rationality, humans will observe social interactions, and then measure the utility of the behaviors, beliefs, or values (referred to hereinafter as “attributes”) they observe, based---primarily---on the consequences of those attributes. Therefore, if a particular attribute leads to a perceived positive consequence (e.g. a smile is observed to promote kindness), such an attribute would naturally be perceived as valuable. Conversely, if an attribute leads to a perceived negative consequence (e.g. a frown is observed to promote hostility), such an attribute would be perceived as relatively less valuable. Once evaluation concludes, the next step in the learning process involves memorization. Those attributes which are deemed valuable are committed to memory, as the observer hopes to recreate the positive consequences in future interactions. Likewise, attributes

deemed less valuable (due to promoting negative consequences) are memorized to the extent necessary to avoid those attributes in the future (i.e. “I will remember *not* to do that.”).

The final step in the SLT sequence is referred to as “imitation”. As the name would suggest, this is the point at which the observer adopts and attempts to repeat the attributes that are deemed to be valuable, in hopes of yielding similar benefits to those observed previously.

One of the key elements of SLT is the external environment within which an individual observes a model, and the circumstances present at the time of the observation. Additionally, the characteristics of the model can determine whether or not observation---and subsequent learning---will occur. Individuals are prone to observe and learn from those that they ‘identify’ with; in other words, we look to those whom we either find similarities with (whether they be physical, psychosocial, or otherwise), or to those to whom we ascribe value (those whom we respect, admire, and/or aspire to imitate) in order to learn. Finally, the observer himself or herself is yet another variable, and one that should not be ignored in this process. An observer’s cognition and self-efficacy---or the extent to which one is confident in his or her ability and desires to successfully perform the subject behavior---also play a significant role in the learning process. Therefore, even if an observer observes an attribute *and* evaluates it to be of high personal utility, if the observer is unwilling and/or unable (whether actually or perceptibly) to imitate the attribute, this will obviously affect the degree to which such attributes are actually adopted.

It is important to note that the final step in each SLT sequence, imitation, also functions as the first step (observation) in an entirely new SLT sequence. Therefore, when a particular attribute is repeated based on perceived value, the new consequences are evaluated and compared to those of the first observation. If they are consistent, then this interaction reinforces perceptions about the value of the attribute in question. However, if the new consequences are

dissimilar to those observed in the original sequence, then this may weaken or even destroy the perceived value of the attribute by the observer (Kahn & Cangemi, 1979). In line with this idea, it is equally important to realize that confirmation bias indeed plays a role shaping future perceptions, such that observers are more inclined to interpret new observational evidence in favor of pre-existing beliefs about the utility of attributes (Jones, 2008).

Since its inception, SLT has been assessed in a plethora of different contextual phenomena. One study looked at the trend of digital media piracy among college students and found that peer learning has a significant effect on tendencies to engage in pirating (Higgins & Makin, 2004). Another study used a Fortune 500 company to assess the extent that market orientation permeated the hierarchy of leadership, and found strong evidence for social learning between leaders and followers (Lam, Kraus, & Ahearne, 2010). Other contexts of SLT research include alcohol consumption (Aliaskarov & Bakiev, 2014), ethical dilemmas (Hanna, Crittenden, & Crittenden, 2013), career development decision making (Datti, 2009), criminal behavior (Maskaly & Donner, 2015), interpersonal relationship health (Johnson & Bradbury, 2015), adolescent domestic violence (Giordano, Kaufman, Manning, & Longmore, 2015), parenting strategies (Woolgar, Bengo, & Scott, 2013), and most relevantly, various formal education environments (Denham, Bassett, Zinsser, & Wyatt, 2014; Hill, Song, & West, 2009; Light, 2011). Specific to the hospitality industry, it has also been utilized in such areas as nutrition education (Diker, Cunningham-Sabo, Bachman, Stacey, Walters, & Wells, 2013), internationalization (Reihien & Apel, 2007), and restaurant menu engineering (Cai, Chen, & Fang, 2009). SLT has withstood decades of rigorous testing and remains today a robust theory within the field of human learning research.

In Context

Now that we understand that individuals in group environments are likely to adopt the attributes of those with whom they identify, and specifically those attributes that are expected to yield the highest degree of personal benefit, it is not a far leap, given the hierarchy of authority and control in typical businesses, to see why the values of aspiring professionals might tend to resemble those of their managers. If a given work environment is replete with managers who value higher education, who are college-educated themselves, who credit their own career success---at least to some extent---to such education, and who actively seek out educated professionals to fill openings on their teams, then it should not be surprising to see that such values are adopted by followers. However, the opposite is also true; an environment of managers who have achieved career success despite a lack of education, and who consequently don't value higher education as a significant variable to such success, might be destined to produce like-minded followers.

Theories Applied: A Model of Recycling Values

The preceding sections established 1) the particular characteristics of hospitality education, including a number of controversies concerning its efficacy; 2) the different ways that individuals might value education as a factor in career success, and; 3) the way in which such values might be transferred from one person to another in a social context. In applying this pre-existing work to the context of this research, this study proposed the 'recycling of values' model:

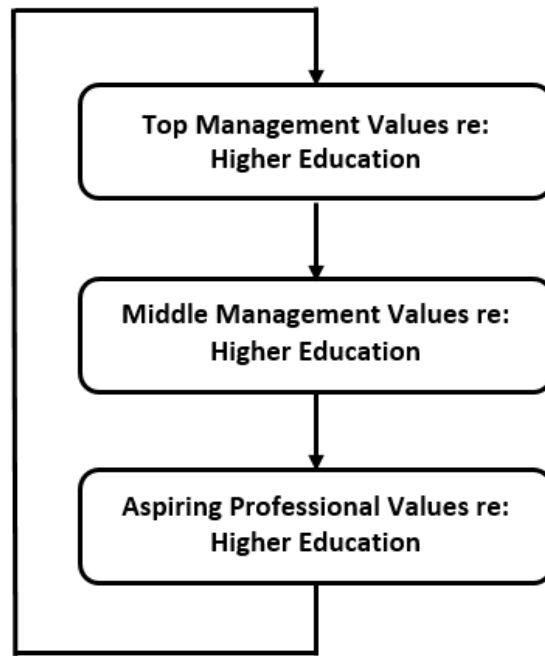


Figure 1. Recycling of values model.

It stands to reason from the supporting literature reviewed *supra* that there may be a connection between the higher education values of top management, middle management, and ultimately, the higher education values learned and adopted by aspiring professionals of these organizations through experience. Because some aspiring professionals will eventually go on to be tomorrow's top management, there is reason to suspect that this procession might perpetuate what the author will refer to as a 'recycling of values' as top managers succeed one another through the passing of the proverbial torch over time.

A hypothetical example serves to demonstrate this potential phenomenon. As discussed earlier, SLT serves an important purpose for addressing the question of the source of the values of top managers. If values are derived from observation and experience, then it would stand to

reason that top managers derive their own values from the experiences that they endured in their own careers leading up to their capacities as top managers.

The subject of this study is, of course, values as they pertain to the importance of higher education, so let us imagine for this hypothetical an aspiring hospitality professional with dreams of becoming a leader in the hospitality industry someday. Our professional might have any level of higher education or none at all, but let us say for the purposes of this thought experiment that he holds a Bachelors Degree in Hospitality Management. Our professional might, at first, find himself working for a hotel company in an entry-level role such as Front Desk Agent in order gain necessary experience.

After six months or so, he decides to express interest in a supervisory position with his company. He consults with his direct supervisor, the Front Desk Manager (a middle manager in this organization) and is told that “college doesn’t teach skills necessary for supervisory positions”, but that he should have at least one year of experience as an agent before applying. Our professional waits until he has met the experience requirement, applies, and is promoted. He finds himself using some of the knowledge and skills that he learned in school, but he concludes that most of the tasks he is required to perform, he could have learned and mastered with or without his degree.

After a few more years, he decides to set his sights on an upper-management role. He thinks he might need a graduate degree in order to be considered, but checks the job description and finds no mention of a formal education requirement. He also researches the profiles of some of the company executives that he dreams of being someday, and finds that few if any of them have any college education to speak of. Finally, he approaches the general manager of his hotel, who is himself a college dropout, and is told that “all that theoretical mumbo jumbo isn’t going

to help you run a hotel”. According to this successful GM, all our professional needs to do is “work hard”. He takes the advice, forgoes additional education and instead focuses on his industry experience. He is rewarded with several promotions until he himself is eventually sitting in the general manager’s office of that very same hotel.

Based on SLT, it would be unsurprising to learn that our professional has developed, through the course of his experiences, a belief that higher education is not necessary to success in the hospitality industry. After all, he had a degree, but it wasn’t necessary for any of the professional capacities he held along his own career path. Not only he, but also most of the people that he worked for in his early career, lacked a college degree. He did just fine, and so did they. To top it all off, the then-general manager of the hotel, someone he respected very much, told him education was a waste of time. He was right; just look at how things turned out. Our professional now sits in the captain’s chair of the ship, but in terms of his views toward education, he is indistinguishable from his predecessor.

The next link in this chain of values comes when our professional---now general manager---begins shaping and molding the values of the people that now work for him...using the values that he learned through his own personal experiences. Employees who work for our professional’s hotel learn of the circumstances of his success. This next generation of professionals are now applying for *their* next promotions, and discovering what it does (and does not) take to be successful in this organization. Some of these employees are even scheduling appointments to see our professional so that they can ask him questions about career development, just as our professional once did with his predecessor a generation earlier. One can imagine what he might tell them about the importance of higher education.

Soon, the cycle completes itself, and the employees of our professional's hotel are the general managers of *their own* hotels, proliferating *their* values, and developing the *next* generation of will-be top managers. And so on.

Obviously, there are a number of variables in such a hypothetical that one might play with, but the fact remains that there is considerable evidence in the research to suggest that a relationship between the values of top management, middle management, and aspiring professionals might exist such that this 'recycling of values' is worth investigating.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study included:

1. What are the perceptions regarding the value of higher education to career success among
a) top management, b) middle management, and c) aspiring professionals?
2. From what are perceptions regarding the value of higher education derived among a) top management, b) middle management, and c) aspiring professionals?
3. Are there any similarities between the perceptions regarding the value of higher education to career success among top management, middle management, and aspiring professionals?

CHAPTER THREE

This research entailed a qualitative investigation of two hospitality properties in Las Vegas, NV to compare perceptions regarding the importance of higher education to career success between top management, middle management, and line-level employees. Data was collected via in-person interviews, and thematic analysis was used to analyze results.

Sample

This case study included in-depth interviews at two hotels in the Las Vegas valley area. The two properties both operated under a common hotel brand, and this helped to mitigate the risk of differing corporate culture and/or brand influences confounding results. They were both similarly-sized in terms of guestroom count, with approximately 550 rooms each. However, they were substantially different in many other ways which provided a uniform standard against which to compare differences in results. As a condition of participation, the two hotels insisted on confidentiality with respect to their identities, but permission was granted to disclose general details as to the size and features of the properties. Hereinafter, we refer to these two properties as Property #1 and Property #2.

Property #1

Property #1 is located less than one half-mile from the Las Vegas Strip, and could be described as a city center hotel. Meeting space is just over 20,000 square feet spread across 24 meeting rooms of varying sizes. In terms of quality, the hotel is rated 4-diamond by AAA, and ADR is approximately \$150. With regard to food and beverage, Property #1 hosts a steakhouse, an American restaurant, a sandwich café, and a buffet with continental breakfast. In terms of additional amenities, the hotel offers a swimming pool, room service, and a complimentary 24-hour fitness center. The property is owned by a real estate investment company and operated

under contract by a separate management company. The brand flag that the hotel flies is franchised, but the brand neither owns nor operates the property.

Property #2

Property #2 is located in a more remote and secluded area of the Las Vegas valley, approximately ten miles from the Strip. It would be appropriately described as a golf resort. Property #2 has much larger meeting space with about 100,000 square feet throughout 65 meeting rooms. With respect to quality, Property #2 is also a AAA 4-diamond hotel, but it also includes a spa within the property that itself holds a AAA 4-diamond designation. ADR at Property #2 is a bit higher at approximately \$200. Property #2 hosts a much wider variety of food and beverage options, including one Italian, one Japanese, one Mediterranean and three American restaurants; an Irish pub; a Spanish Tapas outlet; a buffet; and a coffee shop. The resort also boasts a great range of additional amenities, matching the room service, pool, and fitness center of Property #1, and adding to it the spa, volleyball and bocce ball facilities, horseshoe pit, a full 18-hole golf course, and an attached (yet distinct) casino. Property #2 is owned and operated by a different hotel company from Property #1, but like Property #1, the hotel operates under a franchise agreement, and the brand that the hotel carries does not own or operate the property.

One final relevant characteristic is that of position on the subject of higher education. Each property has its own unique strategy in job specifications, which vary by level, position, and department. However, both properties do offer tuition reimbursement programs for their employees. Property #1 offers \$1,000 per calendar year for tuition only, available to all full-time employees with more than one year of service. Property #2 offers \$1,500 per calendar year for

tuition and books, available to all full- and part-time employees with at least six months of service.

Study Design

The case study methodology was chosen for this research for several reasons. Case studies have been utilized in a wide range of research throughout the different fields of the hospitality industry (Sherman, 2007). Case studies are particularly well-suited for research which is exploratory in nature, and in which generalizability is not a paramount objective.

Merriam (2002) defined case studies as “specific, complex, functioning things” (p. 172). She described the case study concept as a “bounded system”, a single entity consisting of some specific set of fixed parameters (p. 178). Because of this singular nature, generalizability of results should not be a realistic expectation of case studies. However, given the exploratory nature of this study (it is, insofar as the author is aware, the first of its kind), the aim of this work was not so much to generate concrete conclusions about the value of higher education to hospitality professionals everywhere as it was to make the first step into unexplored area of research. Researchers have learned that the value of research is relative to the needs of the reading audience, and consequently, even a single case study can prove invaluable to the right readers (Erickson, 1986). This study was an effort to embrace that philosophy, and therefore, the case study design is quite suitable.

Further, Lundberg and Young (2005) identify advantages of case studies, among other things, to be that (1) case studies allow for flexible data collection, (2) case studies allow for complex concepts to be considered and evaluated, (3) case studies can be useful for generating hypotheses in exploratory research (rather than testing them in confirmatory work), and (4) case

studies are generally less expensive than other alternatives. Given the goals and parameters of this study, these advantages nicely fit what was set out to be accomplished here.

Once data is collected from a case study, the analysis and reporting of results is in the form of a narrative write-up not unlike other methods of qualitative research. Therein, authors describe the takeaways of the study's findings, and compare cases as appropriate to contextualize conclusions (Stake, 2000).

Data Collection

Data collection for this study consisted of interviews with seven individuals at each of the sample properties which best address the constructs of the model. Because the subject matter of this study concerned concepts as complex and amorphous as values and social learning, flexible dialogue guided by well-structured interview questions was a well-chosen strategy.

Recall that the study model (*supra*) identifies the three levels of hierarchy within the sample properties to be investigated: top management, middle management, and aspiring professionals. Additionally, research questions #1 and #2 articulate that at each of these three levels, the goal of this investigation will be to understand a) perceptions toward the value of higher education, and b) the source of those perceptions.

The first level of the model to be addressed was that of top management values regarding higher education. The top manager (GM, Head of Operations, etc.) at each of the two sample properties served as the subjects for this portion of the investigation.

The second construct to be addressed was that of middle management values regarding higher education. For this piece of the investigation, three middle managers within each of the two sample properties (i.e. directors, department heads, etc.) were the focus. These individuals had a direct reporting relationship to the top managers interviewed for the purposes of the first

construct. However, it is important to note that the middle managers were not aware, at the time of the interview, that top management had previously been interviewed, and as such, results from top management should not have biased responses from middle managers.

Finally, the last construct to be addressed concerns the perceptions of aspiring professionals within each of these two sample properties. For this final piece of the puzzle, we were most concerned with the observations of line-level supervisors and managers who were aspiring for career growth and development. To accomplish this, one such individual was selected from each of the departments from which middle managers were interviewed. As with the middle managers, aspiring professionals interviewed were not aware, at the time of the interviews, that top or middle management had previously been interviewed, so no bias was anticipated therefrom.

All persons interviewed volunteered freely, and participation was in no way pressured nor incentivized. In order to maintain a comfortable environment for interviewees, all interviews were conducted onsite at the sample properties, in places and at times dictated by either the interviewees or the host properties. Informed consent was obtained in writing from each interviewee and strict confidentiality of data was maintained at all times. The UNLV Institutional Review Board determined this study to be exempt from formal review procedures (see Appendix A).

Interviews for this investigation were of the responsive type. Responsive interviews, in contrast to rigid exchanges, consist of a flexible dialogue that allows the questions and the answers to flow in the form of a conversation, where 1) both interviewer and interviewee can ask for and give clarification as necessary; and 2) follow-up questions and/or commentary are permitted to flow naturally from the discourse of the discussion. One of the distinguishing

characteristics of responsive interviewing is a focus on continuity, where both parties move from topic to topic in an orderly and logical fashion. Other interviews may jump abruptly from one talking point to another as the rigid questionnaire utilized may dictate. Responsive interviewing allows for the researcher to guide the conversation in a manner and speed that is comfortable and that allows for the most effective data gathering (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Recording responses through fervent note-taking during a conversation can sometimes be distracting and/or disconcerting for the interviewee, as it breaks from the normal discourse of a typical conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Therefore, the interviewer requested permission from each subject to audio record the interview sessions, so that data could be captured accurately and in a manner that did not diminish the quality of the dialogue. Not all subjects granted such permission, and declinations were honored; in such cases, the researcher defaulted to note-taking. Notwithstanding audio recording permission, the researcher still took basic notes during all interviews, as this is a recommended practice for effectively documenting important points and researcher thoughts.

Guiding Questions

Although responsive interviews are intended to be organic, and to flow freely from the evolution of the dialogue, such interviews still require an outline of guiding questions in order to help the researcher keep the interview organized and on point. Appendix B to this study includes the guiding question outline for this study's interviews.

The first part of the guiding question outline (Part 1) consists of only one inquiry: "Have you completed any higher education?" This question was intended to establish a baseline of perspective with which to understand each participant's subsequent responses. The importance of understanding one's experience with higher education in interpreting one's opinions on the value

of higher education needs no further explanation. Although this question is closed-ended, follow-up questions to an affirmative answer sometimes inquired as to degrees (if any), number of years, number of years ago, fields of study, etc.

The second part of the guiding question outline (Part 2) addresses the first research question: specifically, what each interviewee's perceptions of the value of higher education are. Generally, this portion of each interview began with an open-ended question to this effect: "In your opinion, is higher education important to career success in the hospitality industry?" This allowed the interviewee to formulate and articulate thoughts without any cueing or manipulation. Once the interviewee had a chance to share their initial responses, the interviewer continued with five follow-up questions. The first four of these follow-up questions prompted the interviewee to reflect on whether higher education in fact plays a role that would support any of the four socio-economic theories discussed in the literature review, each question pertaining to a different theory. For example, the first follow-up question "Does higher education provide skills needed to perform jobs in the hospitality industry?" spoke to the HCT theory that education provides needed skills, without which workers could not perform jobs. Finally, the interviewer asked a 'catch-all' conclusory question intended to capture any thoughts or responses that might not have fit neatly into the structural framework of the pre-existing theories: "Are there any other roles that you believe higher education plays in the dynamic of career success not discussed so far?" This ensures that no valuable data are left out of the collection process.

The third and final part of the guiding question outline (Part 3) addresses the second research question: understanding the source of the perceptions discussed in the first part. Part 2 will also begin with an open-ended question directed at the desired information: "From what or whom do you think you learned or acquired these perceptions?" After each interviewee had an

opportunity to think and answer this question without any prompts, the interviewer continued with several follow-up questions designed to provoke deeper reflection from the subject. Each question is specifically tailored to a different potential source of the perceptions in question. For example, the first follow-up question was: “Have any experiences that you’ve had influenced your views on this topic?” The next two questions were similar inquiries, except with respect to people and companies/organizations instead of experiences. These questions are supported by SLT discussed *supra* and targeted the source(s) of perceptions about higher education. Finally, as with Part 2, Part 3 ended with a catch-all question intended to allow the interviewee a last opportunity to share any thoughts that might not conform to the other specific questions: “Are there any other factors that have influenced your views on this topic?”

Once again, it is important to remember that although this outline, on its face, prescribes a rigid sequence of parts and items, the style of responsive interviewing was adaptable dialogue. Therefore, although the researcher made sure, in the interest of thoroughness, to cover all points addressed in the outline, changes and adaptations were frequently made, such as questions posed in a different order, or with a different phrasing or explanation as necessary to facilitate natural and comfortable discussion with each subject. The guiding question outline was pilot tested by the author with three uninvolved hospitality industry colleagues. Minor modifications were made to questions word choice to optimize clarity of the concepts at issue, but the general structure proved adequate and thus remained largely unchanged.

However, although the dialogue of these discussions varied, certain thresholds of ethical research were not crossed. Out of respect and consideration for the privacy of subjects, no personally identifiable data of any kind was collected at any time during the data collection process. Additionally, the questions asked of interviewees were limited to those disclosed in the

guiding question outline and those follow-up questions reasonably necessary to clarify responses thereto.

Data Analysis

Once all data was collected, thematic analysis was employed to analyze patterns in the data, and to identify any relationships between the various tiers of the model. Thematic analysis has been described as “a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within a data set” (Prayag & Ryan, 2011, p. 126). For this research, a popular strategy for thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clark (2006) was employed. The strategy consists of six steps: 1) the researcher familiarizes himself or herself with the data; 2) initial codes are generated based upon pattern observations; 3) broader themes are identified from the initial coding schema; 4) themes are audited for fit within the entire web of data, in order to generate a thematic ‘map’; 5) the themes that survive scrutiny in the preceding step are named and clearly defined; and 6) a clear and concise report with “vivid and compelling examples” is generated based on the findings (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 87). Given the complexity of the data set for this study, the high degree of careful analysis and revalidation of patterns in this thematic analysis process was quite appropriate.

For this study, common responses were aggregated in a spreadsheet for the purposes of understanding relative frequencies. This helped the author to visualize data trends. Then, such common responses were evaluated at each career level (top management, middle management, and aspiring professionals) to determine fit across the entirety of the data, and whether there were any trends found at a particular level but not at others. Finally, the trends that survived the scrutiny of this analysis were identified, labelled, and defined. This process was used both for the

data pertaining to the values of higher education, and for the data pertaining to the *source of* values of higher education.

Finally, in order to assess the results for the third and final research questions (concerning the existence of a recycling of values), response data was compared across each of the respective reporting chains to identify similarities and differences. For example, as will be discussed *infra*, at Property #1 Carl reports to Doug and Doug reports to Bill. Therefore, responses were compared between Bill, Doug, and Carl to determine that extent to which values of higher education between these three respondents are similar and different. This process was completed for all six reporting chains evaluated in the study.

As for the reporting function of this analysis, the following chapter explains all of the themes discovered in this study. It begins by recounting initial data gathering interview by interview for each respondent. Then, it discloses themes relevant to the research questions of this study (i.e. pertaining to values of higher education and sources of such values). Finally, it discusses other tangential themes that are also worthy of recognition.

CHAPTER FOUR

All interviews for this study were collected in July 2015. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the individuals interviewed during the course of this study, as well as the properties for which they worked, fictional names are used throughout the following narrative.

Data Collection: Property #1

Top Management - Director of Operations (*Bill*)

I met with Bill in his office at the hotel. He was a middle-aged caucasian man, of average build and height. He dressed in a checker-plaid collared shirt with a sport coat, but no tie. His office, naturally, was in the “executive offices” area of the hotel, but it was surprisingly simple. Upon introducing ourselves, I learned that Bill had an accomplished dossier of serving in top leadership roles for several properties before this one. Bill was then serving as the Director of Operations for Property #1, and as such all operational areas reported to him. Although his position carried much power, he did not offend by superiority.

I began by asking Bill about his educational background. He explained that many years ago he had earned a Bachelors Degree in Business at Fairleigh Dickinson University. He shared this with enthusiasm, and added that he has for many years held a position on the school’s Board of Advisors. This in some sense foreshadowed his thoughts on the subject of our interview.

When asked if education is important to career success, Bill answered in the affirmative without hesitation. As for providing necessary skills, Bill agreed that at all levels of careers in hospitality, there are skills needed which education can (and does) provide. As for separating job applicants, Bill conceded that at higher levels of management, this can sometimes occur. Although he admitted that he thought it to be nonsensical, he informed me that finance managers in his company require a degree by company policy, but other positions---even more senior ones,

such as Bill's---do not. However, he added that at "line-supervisory levels," education did not segregate applicants in the same way, as employers tend to look at the prospects of developing an employee within their own culture. As for superior marketing power, Bill agreed that education is a strong marketing tool for job applicants. Finally as for education as a measure of potential, Bill also agreed that this is a relevant factor. He added that if a candidate has started but not finished a college degree, he is often inclined to question why. When offered the opportunity to add other thoughts, Bill noted that his experience with college-educated employees has been two-fold: 1) they tend to be more creative than their less-educated counterparts, and 2) they tend to be more versatile, such that they can be cross-trained more quickly and more easily if business needs should require.

In asking Bill about the possible sources of his perceptions, he explained that his family was probably the biggest catalyst to his higher education decisions. Bill's father held a PhD in chemistry and worked his entire life in the pharmaceutical industry. As such, he received a lot of "pressure" to pursue college after high school (though there was no indication in Bill's use of this word that the pressure was negative, or that he resented this in any way). His mother, on the other hand had no college education whatsoever, but her thoughts as to whether she would have preferred it otherwise were not a subject of discussion in his family growing up; she simply joined Bill's father in encouraging higher education. Bill had a sister, and she too had graduated college, earning an MBA. After discovering this, I asked Bill if there was any "pressure" from his parents to pursue graduate school after his Bachelors (as his sister evidently had), but he replied there was none. Bill didn't believe that graduate school would have made much of a difference in his career success either. Aside from his family, Bill could not think of any other

people, experiences, or organizations which had a significant impact on his higher education choices.

Middle Management - Director of Catering and Convention Services (*Tim*)

Tim was also a middle-aged caucasian man, but taller and a bit heftier than Bill. He wore an open-collared shirt, but no jacket. I was surprised that his office was larger, and featured more windows, than Bill's. Tim was Bill's Director of Catering and Convention Services, and through a brief introduction I came to learn that Bill and Tim had worked together throughout most of their respective careers, Tim following Bill as he moved from one property to another. However, through signals of body language and demeanor, I got the distinct impression that Tim was less enthusiastic about my research topic. This impression was corroborated as I began my questioning.

Tim had no formal higher education, up until very recently. He graduated high school years ago and immediately afterward enrolled in trade school with Boeing Aviation for aircraft mechanics. Through career twists and turns, he ended up in the hospitality industry, and had at the time of our interview worked for nearly 20 years in food and beverage, catering, and conventions, serving at the director level for several properties alongside Bill. However, Tim had recently hit what he described as a "wall" in his career progress. He desired to continue moving up, but his lack of education was holding him back from being considered for promotions, both within the organization for which he worked at the time, and with others. As a result, Tim recently (2 years prior) enrolled with Western Governors University in pursuit of his Bachelors Degree in Finance. In telling me this story, I could sense that Tim resented being held back at this point in his career and having to return to school to get around this obstacle.

Thus, when asked about the importance of higher education to career success in hospitality, Tim explained that all the way up to director-level capacities, education is of little consequence. When he is hiring, he explained that it typically does not affect his decisions regarding candidates. However, Tim conceded that above director-level aspirations, education is necessary due to the changing job requirements in many organizations (now requiring degrees as never before). With respect to my questions on the role of education in providing skills, segregating applicants, and marketing applicants, Tim answered in the same way: little to no relevance below director-level, but quite relevant above. When I asked Tim about the role of education as a measure of candidate potential, he conceded that this can be the case in some operational areas, but in others, not at all. He cited “the kitchen,” wherein experience is paramount, and education is of very little importance. On the role of higher education more generally, Tim did add that he had observed college-educated employers to have better literacy skills, and better grounding in psychology, particularly as it pertains to the dynamics of empathy in social work environments.

Moving on to the source of Tim’s perception regarding higher education, Tim cited, first and foremost, his own firsthand experience in the industry over 30 years. He gave a telling example, when he was laid off by a company early on in his career after his position was eliminated. Tim explained that it was difficult to re-enter the industry without higher education, but at that time he was working at a supervisory/managerial level, so it was not quite as challenging then as it might be for him today were he in the same situation. Tim explained that no one in his family was college educated; he, his parents, and his only brother all stopped at a high school education. I asked Tim about his relationship with Bill, and whether that may have influenced his perceptions, but he replied that he and Bill operated more as friends than as

supervisor and direct report; he did not think of Bill as any kind of mentor, nor did Bill act in such a way. Tim explained that he began cooking at the age of 15 as a part-time job, and that this culinary experience was what ultimately began his career in hospitality that would span nearly 30 years. Only in the prior five years or so had Tim seen an unprecedented push for college degrees in executive level positions. Having pursued several opportunities for promotion into executive roles, and having fallen short, Tim admits that his views have changed recently, and that this has inspired his decision to go to school and earn his degree. Tim was, at the time of our interview, about halfway through his four-year degree with Western Governors, so before we concluded, I felt compelled to ask him whether he thought that his coursework was just a matter of ticking a box, or that he was actually learning something valuable and/or necessary for the roles to which he aspired. Tim replied that he felt confident he could “manage” in an executive position without college, but he did admit, to my surprise, that he was learning a lot---specifically in the field of financial reporting and analysis---that he expected would be of much use when he finally does move up.

Middle Management - Front Office Manager (*Doug*)

Doug was a tall, lanky Caucasian man who couldn’t have been older than 35 years of age. He wore khakis and a button-up shirt, but no tie. I met him in his office, which would have perhaps been better used as a utility closet; it was tucked away behind the hotel’s front desk, and was barely big enough to hold Doug’s modest desk and a chair for me. Nonetheless, Doug welcomed me warmly and seemed eager to help me with my study. Doug oversaw all front office operations for the property and reported directly to Bill.

I inquired about Doug’s education, and he explained that he earned a Bachelors Degree in Political Science in 2007 from the University of Oregon. He talked of his degree with something

of a satirically self-deprecating tone, acknowledging a humor about the disparity between his major and what he was doing for a living at the time of our interview. I asked him if there was a story to that, and he explained that it took him just long enough for him to graduate with his degree in political science to realize that he didn't want *anything to do* with political science. He ended up taking a job a decade or so ago in hospitality, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I then asked Doug about his thoughts on the importance of higher education to hospitality career success. His feelings were mixed, to say the least. He conceded that his experience with college taught him a lot in the way of general life lessons, such as self-responsibility. He also explained that the socialization and teamwork skills in the college environment help with collaboration in the industry. He also mentioned that while he was in college, he participated on a school debate team and was a member of the Future Business Leaders of America. He said these extracurricular activities taught him a lot as well. However, he countered his own points by adding that college students tend to incur tremendous debts to learn these skills, that much of what is taught in colleges is trivial and irrelevant 'book knowledge', and that most of what an entry-level hospitality professional needs to be successful can be (and is) taught on-the-job. Doug conceded that some skills, such as Microsoft Excel proficiency, can be useful, but he also added that he found many college graduates as a result to be too analytical...to the extent of being dysfunctional. Doug did agree with the idea that degrees can segregate applicants. After bringing up Cornell as a very well-known hospitality school, he told me a story about a Cornell alumna colleague with whom he worked at the very same property, and how she practically "wrote her own ticket" to upper-management. She was promoted years prior into corporate leadership over other equally or better-qualified candidates, and Doug believed her degree was primarily responsible. Doug also agreed that college degrees allow holders to more effectively market

themselves, and he concurred that a college degree can be interpreted as one indicator of a job applicant's potential, although he noted that when he hires he does not eliminate anyone from an applicant pool based on education credentials (or lack thereof) alone. Sharing his final thoughts, Doug summarized that there was indeed some value to higher education, but that more industry exposure and connection to actual practice was needed in order to improve the relevance of such undertakings.

I then asked Doug about the factors that may have shaped his perceptions of higher education. He immediately jumped to a story about a former boss for whom he worked at another hotel, named Sal. Sal was the general manager of the property at the time and Doug was Sal's Front Office Manager. Sal became something of a mentor to Doug, and Doug believed Sal to be an immensely talented leader. Despite his talents, Sal was held back from promotional opportunities beyond the single property-level, and Sal attributed this to his lack of formal higher education. As a result, Sal emphasized to Doug the importance of acquiring such education so that Doug's career did not share the same fate. I picked up a sense of sincere respect and gratitude for Sal's advice. Doug didn't have much to say about his parents, as they were apparently neutral on the issue of education. However, he did make a point to tell me about his sister, who had earned multiple degrees, including a graduate degree in Psychology. He explained that she had been rejected for many job opportunities in business due to a perceived over-qualification, and so this dissuaded Doug from pursuing any additional education beyond his Bachelors. As far as organizational influence, Doug explained that some of his college tuition was paid by an employer for whom he was working at the time of his studies, and that he was grateful for the assistance. He wasn't sure that this assistance said anything to him about the

importance of education to his own career success, but he did acknowledge that it is a great way for companies to show that they care about their employees' interests and aspirations.

Middle Management - Food & Beverage Outlets Manager (*Linda*)

My final interview with middle management at Property #1 was with Linda, manager of all food and beverage outlets, which included a coffee shop, buffet, and fine dining restaurant. Linda reported directly to Bill. She was a short, fit lady in her forties. Unlike her male counterparts, she wore a black pants suit that presented a bit more formally than the property's ambience might suggest. I met with Linda in the coffee shop at her request. We sat at a small table in a corner, more or less out of view and earshot of guests and other employees.

Linda began her career in the industry decades prior with bartending and cocktail waitressing, but when she moved into more professional roles, such as human resources coordinator and line staff supervisor, she realized the need for higher education. About five years prior to our interview, and under the advice of a supervisor, Linda enrolled at College of Southern Nevada (CSN) where she earned certificates in human resources management and basic computer systems (Microsoft Office applications). Although she had earned no formal degrees, Linda spoke of her certifications with great pride and accomplishment, with the enthusiasm of someone who had just been hooded a doctor.

Unsurprisingly, Linda answered my questions about the importance of higher education to industry success with a resounding "yes!" She cited her decision to attend CSN as one of the greatest choices she made in her career. As for skills imparted by education, Linda explained that she uses the skills she learned in her computer applications classes every single day at her workstations in the hotel, and that without this knowledge, she could not generate or analyze basic reports needed for her operations. As for segregating the "haves" and "have nots" of

education, Linda agreed with this theory, and commented that for her, education is important even when hiring for line-level positions. As for education as a marketing tool, Linda agreed as well, explaining that education significantly boosts one's perceived value on a resume and on professional networking websites such as LinkedIn. Finally, as for education as a measure of candidate potential, Linda explained that for her, education shows not only intelligence, but also drive and dedication. She was, by a wide margin, the most outspoken supporter of education I had interviewed so far.

Moving to the sources of Linda's opinions on the matter, she explained that she was born and raised in Las Vegas, but that her family had no opinion on higher education. Instead, she described herself as "self-driven." She went to work right out of high school, and throughout her career had moved around quite a bit. When she was working at one point as a human resource clerical professional, it was her director who encouraged her to go to school, and advised her on which classes to take. She explained that this was a turning point for her. She also commented that although she herself was never in a position to take advantage of tuition reimbursement programs offered by the companies for which she worked while she was in school, she believed that these programs are extremely beneficial and necessary to promote proper development of employees.

Aspiring Professionals - Catering Manager (*Tina*)

Tina was a shorter African American woman of approximately 25 years of age. She wore a tight pencil skirt and a colorful blouse, with a radio constantly blaring transmissions on her hip. She agreed to go 'offline' from her radio just long enough to sit down with me in one of the property's meeting room foyers. There were no meetings in session in this particular area of the

hotel at the time, so we had the space to ourselves. Tina handles all catering functions in the hotel and reports directly to Tim.

I asked Tina about the extent of her previous education. She explained that she had not attended any college prior to the interview. Tina had entered the industry in banquets as a server with another property, and eventually worked her way into a banquet captain's position. Shortly afterward, she was hired by Tim to handle catering functions in the hotel.

I asked Tina about the importance of higher education to industry success, and she stated that she thought it was quite important. Her impression was that if one wished to work at a director level or above, a degree is almost always necessary. To the extent that skills acquisition is concerned, Tina speculated that there would be much she could learn in college to meet the needs of the career to which she aspired. Regarding segregation of applicants by college education, she explained that she didn't feel as if her *lack* of education had in any way disadvantaged her in prior interviews or job opportunities. However, she did concede that this might be an issue for her in the future if she doesn't go to school. Tina agreed that education can be a powerful marketing tool for degree holders, and she also acknowledged that it can be a legitimate factor for employers in estimating candidate potential. She told me a story about a cousin of hers who failed to complete a degree after she started, and apparently Tina's cousin regrets her decision not to finish because it reflects poorly on her in interviews.

I then inquired as to the sources of Tina's perceptions concerning higher education. Tina explained that her parents were both uneducated, and worked blue collar jobs throughout their lives. However, they wanted more for Tina, and have always encouraged her to go to school. Tina planned to go to school right after high school, but she got pregnant, and so the time and expense to pursue a degree were not things she could spare then. However, she declared to me,

as if with intent to vindicate herself in some way, that she plans to go to school “soon” now that her son is a bit older. I asked her if she had any idea when, or for what. She told me that she intended to begin in the next year or so; she was unsure as to what she would study, although she cited business or hospitality as possible majors, to complement her career field. When I asked about colleagues who might have influenced her decision, she replied that neither Tim nor any other supervisors she’d had ever really talked with her about going to school, but that she “knew on her own” that it would be important for her. Finally, when I asked Tina about company support for education, I learned that she was unaware of her employer’s tuition reimbursement program (this was a flag to me that she had not put a great deal of thought into school as of that time), but she did state that if she were eligible for any such assistance, she would certainly be grateful for it. She explained that she believed her company valued education.

Aspiring Professionals - Front Office Supervisor (*Carl*)

My next interview at Property #1 was with Carl, a Middle Eastern male in his mid-thirties. Carl was dressed in company uniform, which consisted of a grey suit and brown tie. Carl was a quiet-spoken man whose eyes and smile betrayed that he was genuinely interested in helping me with my study. Carl was the Front Office Supervisor for the hotel, reporting directly to Doug. We met in Doug’s office as Carl did not have an office of his own in which to host me.

Two years ago, Carl attended CSN for business for about a year’s time. However, in this time, Carl and his wife had a baby, and Carl made the difficult decision to drop out of school so that his wife could stay enrolled in her own education program. He noted that he was happy to do it for his wife, but that he knew this sacrifice would affect his career path (he elaborated more about this later in the dialogue). Carl would have liked to return and finish his degree, but he was unsure if he would ever be able to do it, given his family obligations.

When I asked Carl about the importance of higher education, he explained that college is not necessarily needed in the “lower ranks” of hospitality enterprises. He cited as examples the Front Office agents who report to him, and who are well-trained within the company and perfectly able to do their jobs with or without college education. However, Carl did speculate that at some point, higher education would likely prove necessary in order to function in the upper echelons of management. With respect to skills, Carl conceded that some might be teachable. However, he articulated that the psychological skills necessary to handle guest issues, such as empathy, are a matter of “morale,” and are not something that can be taught. In Carl’s view, this is learned during childhood, and thus not subject matter for colleges and universities. When I brought up the possibility of segregation between those with degrees and those without, Carl jumped at this talking point in a most passionately frustrated way. He told me that this is “absolutely” the case in the industry, and that it is “not fair.” To my surprise, Carl brought up the very same Cornell-graduate individual about whom Doug told me in his interview. Carl concurred with Doug that the Cornell alumna’s success could be attributed to her degree. However, Carl added in a resentful tone she didn’t deserve the opportunities she was handed. According to Carl, she lacked social skills and an ability to relate to her coworkers and subordinates. Carl further noted that he had several years more experience than she, and I could tell from this unprompted comment that he envied her success. I continued and asked Carl about the market weight of a college degree. He agreed that it was important for candidates, but again commented that it wasn’t fair because even if he is more qualified than someone with an education, in Carl’s opinion hiring managers tend to “choose education first.” Expectedly, Carl also acknowledged the reality that education may serve as a measure of candidate potential, but

he again expressed that this is a mistake because education should not be assumed to imply superior qualification.

I then moved to the sources of Carl's perceptions about higher education. Carl immediately brought up his family, and specifically his father. Carl's dad was college educated, but it was never pushed on Carl as a mandatory thing. Carl explained that he was permitted to make his own decisions. He was taught by his father that education is not the only way to succeed, and that much in life has to do with knowing the "right people" and being in the "right place at the right time." As far as experiences are concerned, Carl told me about an assistant manager position for which he had recently applied, but for which he was passed up. Carl stated that the reason he was given was that the chosen candidate had more management experience, but Carl was not shy to tell me that he suspected other reasons, including his lack of a degree. Carl couldn't recall any colleagues or supervisors that influenced his views. He did mention Dale Carnegie as something of a mentor; Carl had read Carnegie's books and had attempted to follow his teachings, although Carnegie was not necessarily pointed on the topic of higher education one way or the other. Finally, Carl expressed that he did not feel that company tuition reimbursement programs have a significant impact on the value of higher education; according to Carl, job qualifications and hiring/promotion standards say a lot more about a company's values.

Aspiring Professionals - Food & Beverage Supervisor (*Jack*)

My final interview with aspiring professionals at Property #1 was with Jack, Food & Beverage Supervisor. Like Carl, Jack was dressed in his uniform, which was a similar suit and tie combination. Jack was a younger man than anyone I had interviewed previously...early twenties at best. He was visibly eager for our interview, and I could tell that this kind of dialogue

was new for him. I met with him in the coffee shop, at the same table where I sat with his direct supervisor, Linda, previously.

Jack had no college degree to speak of, but two years prior to our interview, he was enrolled at Sonoma State University, where he pursued a variety of different majors, including communications, aviation, and international business, before ultimately dropping out. Jack left school to move to Vegas and try his hand in hospitality.

Jack stated that he believes higher education to be important to career success in hospitality. He explained that the skills learned may not be necessary, but if one majors in hospitality specifically, then the curriculum can only help to understand the business. In terms of segregation of applicants by education, Jack noted that he hadn't seen this much at his level, though he speculated that it may very well be the case in higher levels of management. With respect to education as a marketing tool, Jack commented that completing a degree shows commitment and work ethic, which is definitely valuable for getting hired. As for the education as a measure of candidate potential, Jack echoed his earlier thoughts, explaining that degrees may not necessarily be a reliable indicator of intelligence, but that they are certainly a reflection of the holder's dedication and resolve to finish what he or she starts. Finally, Jack added that higher education can be an excellent resource, not just for acquiring knowledge, skills, and abilities, but for meeting contacts in one's own industry for the purpose of facilitating career moves.

I then moved my questioning to the sources of Jack's perceptions toward higher education. Jack cited several people in his life who were instrumental in pushing him to go to school, despite the fact that he never finished. His parents, grandparents, soccer coach...not all went to college themselves, but all emphasized how important it was, and all encouraged him to

go. However, insofar as industry colleagues or supervisors are concerned, Jack could not think of anyone who had impressed upon him an opinion about higher education one way or another. This was surprising to me given how enthusiastic his boss Linda has been about it. Jack commented, as far as his own career experiences, that he felt that his lack of a degree had neither helped nor hurt him so far. He acknowledged that it would be much more helpful for him in the future as he tried to climb his company's corporate ladder, but at the time of our interview he did not find it pressing enough an issue to warrant returning to school right away. Finally, Jack did not feel as if tuition reimbursement programs said a lot about a company's values concerning education, but he did share that if he were eligible for such benefits, he would certainly take advantage of them.

Data Collection: Property #2

Top Management - General Manager (*Matt*)

Matt was the General Manager for his property, overseeing all operations within. He was an older white man, close to sixty by his looks. He was a few inches taller than me, and huskier too. He wore a black suit with an open-collared dress shirt. I met with him in his office, which was comparatively bigger and better-appointed than that of the Operations Director at Property #1. He greeted me with a firm handshake, and invited me to sit down, but his demeanor and responses were all business.

Matt earned a Bachelors Degree in Architecture through the Catholic University of America in 1992. He originated from the east coast, and after college began working for an architectural firm part-time. However, his interests quickly changed and he ended up moving west. Matt explained to me that he comes from what he called a "gaming family." Both his father

and his grandfather were casino operators, and so Matt found his way into the hospitality industry almost as a matter of inheritance.

On the question of whether higher education is important in the hospitality industry, Matt remarked that education can be helpful, but is by no means a requirement. He did, however, qualify that in some fields---finance, as an example---education may be necessary to acquire and to competently perform jobs. He also mentioned that an education in marketing strategy may be helpful for marketing professionals. When asked about education's role in segregating job applicants, Matt responded that there are a lot of great job candidates that don't have degrees, so he doesn't divide applicants in this way. However, he added that for positions in upper-management, and in certain fields (he again mentioned finance), it may be difficult to justify hiring someone without a degree over other candidates with degrees. Remembering that Bill had advised me that degrees are required for finance professionals in *his* company, I felt it a prudent question to ask Matt if the same was the case in his organization; he confirmed that it was. In subsequent dialogue, he elaborated that the policy is most likely intended to mitigate risk of negligence or fraud (he mentioned the infamous Enron scandal as precedent). As for the role of education as a marketing tool, Matt articulated that it is one factor in evaluating the attractiveness of a candidate, but he added that experience is often of equal or even greater importance in the overall perspective. Finally, as for whether education serves as a measure of candidate potential, Matt agreed that this is a legitimate phenomenon, but not because education implies a higher level of intelligence. Instead, he believes it is because education shows an ability to both set goals and accomplish them; in other words, commitment and dedication.

When asked about the sources of his perceptions toward higher education, Matt immediately turned to his father. Although Matt's dad was not educated himself, Matt explained

that as far as his dad was concerned, college was not a choice for Matt. On follow-up, I asked Matt if his father was disappointed that he didn't put his architecture degree to use. He replied that his father was simply happy to see him finish school, and didn't have any preferences as to how Matt would use his educations and skills. Lastly, I inquired about the companies for which Matt had worked in his career, and whether or not they had shaped his perceptions. Matt explained he had worked for 10 years with the company by which he was employed at the time of our interview, and that his company values, above all else, a person's ability "to do a job," irrespective of the education that may or may not be necessary to bring about such a result. This is why Matt and his team make no preference on education. What they value is performance.

Middle Management - Vice President of Finance (Al)

Al was a slender, middle-aged white man with a tailored brown suit and an open-collared dress shirt. He met with me at the hotel's coffee shop. We sat at a small table outside of the actual store, cleverly designed by the aesthetics to feel outdoors, though in fact just positioned along the heavily-trafficked thoroughfare between the hotel lobby and the casino. Al happened to share the surname of a notorious American mobster infamously known for financial illegalities, and I couldn't resist the urge to joke with him about it. I suspected he had weathered such playful puns countless times before in his life, but I had hoped he would indulge me with a laugh. He did, and he jovially commented that there was no actual relation between him and the American criminal icon. He joshed that if there was anything awry about his financial oversight, "the regulators haven't found it yet."

Al, like Matt, is from the east coast. He earned a Bachelors in Business Administration from the State University (SUNY) of New York at Fredonia, with a concentration in Marketing. Afterward, he moved out west and wound up in the hotel/casino industry. He developed a knack

for finance, and to bolster his skill sets, he took a few online accounting classes through the business schools at UNLV and the University of Nevada Reno. Finally, more recently (approximately five years preceding the interview), he enrolled in an online MBA program at the University of California Long Beach. However, Al's job and family required a significant amount of his time, and he was forced to drop out of the MBA prematurely. I asked if he planned to return, and he stated that he did not think so. I got the impression that he didn't feel as if it was much of a sacrifice.

I asked about Al's thoughts on education and its importance to career success in hospitality. Al believed that education can indeed be very helpful. However, at this point in our interview, he made a very interesting and heretofore unheard point. Al explained that education is only helpful if the individual student puts forth effort during his or her studies. He articulated that some students put a lot of time, attention, and hard work into their college education. Others, conversely, simply "go through the motions" and do the absolute minimum necessary to pass classes and graduate, consequently reaping the minimum reward in terms of knowledge and skills. Therefore, Al believes that a degree can be very beneficial to career success, but the extent of its benefit depends on the degree of effort exerted in attaining that degree. Al agrees that college can impart many helpful skills; not only those related to one's major and coursework, but also general life skills like time management and responsibility. As far as segregation of applicants is concerned, Al replied that barring positions (like his own) where degrees are required as a matter of company policy, he has hired many employees without degrees who perform commendably on the job, so this is not a theory to which he personally subscribes. With respect to degrees as a marketing tool, however, Al did admit that for certain senior positions for which degrees are "preferred" but not required, it can be "hard to speak to someone with a four-

year degree” when there are candidates in the pool with equivalent experience *and* college education. Al elaborated that although company policy may not prohibit hiring candidates without degrees for certain positions, he still must be able to justify a choice over alternatives to his superiors, and if a poorly chosen candidate fails to perform, he ultimately would be accountable. Al also raised an interesting point that standards for hiring can be different in different parts of the country. He opined that there is a big distinction between east coast and west coast businesses on this matter. Having worked on both sides of the country, Al explained that on the east coast it is much harder to get a job without a degree, because---according to his observations---the candidate field is much more competitive and the bar is much higher in terms of performance. Al described the west coast working culture as more “laid back” and relaxed on policies and standards. Finally, as to college’s function as a measure of candidate potential, Al denied any merit to this theory, citing again his point from earlier that the quality of education is determined by the degree of effort put in by the student, and is not apparent from the award of a degree by itself.

Moving to the sources of Al’s values on the subject of education, he explained that he is a first generation Italian American, the son of parents who had only mid-elementary levels of education at best. However, like his boss Matt, Al’s parents strongly impressed upon him the importance of going to school, and this was the primary factor that propelled him through his Bachelors degree. Before coming out west to Las Vegas, however, Al worked in a marketing position for Foxwoods Resort Casino in Connecticut, and during this time he acquired a mentor in the General Manager of the casino. Apparently, the GM there shared a quote with Al that changed his perceptions about his life. He shared the quote with me: “Lives are like corks in a stream.” Al explained that this was meant to underscore the chance nature by which different

paths are taken, and the lack of control that each of us has over our individual eventualities.

Upon further questioning about this, Al admitted that he believed there to be many more variables affecting what we each will ultimately achieve than those over which we have control.

I asked Al if he thought personal relationships (“who you know”) was a significant factor, and he enthusiastically agreed. Finally, Al did not have much to say with respect to the effects of company tuition reimbursement programs or scholarships on employee views, but he did concede such programs are a great way to develop the skills and loyalty of a company’s workers.

Middle Management - Director of Operations (*Tony*)

For the remainder of my interviews at Property #2, the hotel’s executive assistant managed to secure me a private conference room on the first floor in order to expedite the process. My next interview was with Tony, Director of Operations for the hotel. Although Tony carried the same title as that of Bill at Property #1, Tony was middle management at Property #2, overseeing all front office, bell services, and valet operations, and reporting directly to Matt. He dressed very well, with a full three-piece suit, dress shirt with cuffs and cufflinks, and tie. He was a younger man of maybe mid-thirties, but he carried himself with the confidence of someone who had spent a lifetime in his job.

In 2005, Tony completed a year toward a business degree online with the University of Phoenix. He dropped out thereafter, explaining that he felt the curriculum was “too basic” to support his then career position in hotel management. He always planned to return to the program, but commented that at the time of the interview (ten years after dropping out) he didn’t think he would ever return. He admitted that he regrets not finishing.

In Tony’s view, higher education is important to career success as a “supplement.” As he explained, a successful industry professional has to have a “heart” for hospitality, and no amount

of higher education can compensate for a lack thereof. However, provided that heart is not lacking, higher education can be a great addition. Tony believes that higher education can provide skills that are helpful for industry professionals, but all skills that are minimally necessary can be learned on the job. Likewise, Tony doesn't believe that education segregates applicants; he stated that the human factor of being able to work with people is much more important than education. As for the marketing element, Tony does believe that degrees can be a valuable marketing tool, but he reiterated that they are just one factor among many that determine a candidate's attractiveness. Finally, Tony believes that college can be some indication of an individual's potential, but he pointed out that many very famous entrepreneurs (he cited Sheldon Adelson and Mark Zuckerberg) achieved enormous success without college.

Moving to the sources of Tony's views, I began by asking Tony if there were any influential people in Tony's life that influenced his career development choices. As I had come to expect from interviewees by now, Tony immediately brought up his parents. Tony grew up in New York City. His father was a U.S. marine, and a semi-professional Muay Thai kickboxer; he travelled a lot for competitions, and as a result was not around for much of Tony's life. Tony's mother was a career businesswoman who also had little time for Tony. Consequently, Tony grew up more or less "on the streets." However, despite the lack of a strong family backing, Tony made his way out west to Las Vegas and began working for Property #2 in his younger years. It was then that a very influential figure---his boss, Joel Vogelsing---entered Tony's life. Tony explained that Joel taught him how to manage and how to lead. Joel also coached Tony that a college degree "is not everything." He gave Tony an opportunity to work hard, and promoted him several times as he demonstrated continued success. After Joel retired, Tony took over his role and continued to move up from there. Tony talked about Joel with an obvious reverence and

admiration; he attributed most of his success to Joel's guidance. People aside, Tony stated that his own career path has been evidence for him of the fact that school is not altogether necessary. He cited an instance where he applied for and was offered a job with a very prestigious hotel back east in New York City. He turned down the opportunity for personal reasons, but just the offer was an indication to Tony that he was capable of great things without college. Finally, Tony commented that he is proud to work for a company that actively supports and promotes higher education (he referenced the property's tuition reimbursement program). Although he maintained that it was not a necessity, Tony conceded that these types of programs can be a great way to motivate and develop employees.

Middle Management - Vice President of Marketing (*Kristen*)

The final member of middle management with whom I met was Kristen, Vice President of Marketing. Kristen was a surprisingly young lady for her title; no older than 30 to be sure. She wore a conservative, black pants suit with minimal jewelry. She introduced herself, and expressed an almost obligatory interest in my study topic. I got the impression from the frequency with which she checked her wristwatch and phone that there were other, more pressing things awaiting her.

Kristen graduated from the University of Arizona with a Bachelor of Arts degree. She majored in Journalism, and minored in Business, Spanish, *and* Communications. Upon hearing this, my facial expression must have betrayed an intrigue at the eclectic combination, because Kristen quickly added that she wasn't quite certain what she wanted to do while in college, so she decided to make the most of all of her interests. She further added that after college she found her way into the hospitality industry, and has been building her career therein ever since.

When I asked Kristen about the importance of higher education to career success, she expressed that higher education can provide a good base for aspiring professionals, but similar to Tony, she qualified her first thought by adding that it was not the “end all, be all” of success, and that on-the-job training provides most, if not all, of the essentials. Furthering this point, when I asked Kristen about higher education’s role in providing necessary skills, she answered that this was unequivocally not the case. On the point of degrees segregating applicants, however, Kristen acknowledged that this can in fact happen when certain job descriptions either require or strongly prefer degree holders. However, Kristen commented that although this is the reality of hiring in today’s hospitality industry, that doesn’t necessarily mean that it is the best practice. On the marketing point, Kristen also agreed that degrees can serve this function, though experience is another highly relevant factor in judging candidates. Finally, on the point of degrees as a measure of candidate potential, Kristen agreed that this can be the case, but she added that much would depend on the quality of the institution from which a degree was earned. She explained that a candidate who earned a degree from Harvard or Yale would naturally be looked upon with greater favor than one who earned a similar degree, but from a community college.

Moving to the sources of Kristen’s perceptions about higher education, Kristen first explained that both of her parents placed higher education in very high regard. After Kristen graduated with her four-year degree, she admitted that her parents pushed her to go on to graduate school, but she declined to do so as she wanted to grow her career instead. Kristen also mentioned a former manager from years ago, Barry Phillips, whom she respected very much. She explained that Barry was a very talented manager, but that he was passed up for promotional opportunities several times due to a lack of college. It was evident from Kristen’s tone and body language that she found this to be unfair, but she cited this as even further reinforcement for her

own decision to go to college. Finally, Kristen agreed that company policies supporting higher education are very helpful for morale and beneficial for development, but she did not think they did much to communicate a sense of importance; instead, job requirements and hiring criteria do this in a much more pronounced way.

Aspiring Professionals - Financial Controller (*Vince*)

My next interview was with Vince, Financial Controller for the property. Vince was a tall, white man of average build, probably in his mid-forties. He dressed in simple slacks and a button-up shirt with no tie. Vince looked disheveled compared to the other individuals I had met at Property #2 so far. His shirt was wrinkled, and he generally did not look well put-together. However, what Vince lacked in aesthetics, he made up for in personality. Vince greeted me warmly with a big smile and sat down to begin. As Financial Controller, Vince reported directly to Al.

Vince spent most of his career without college education, but due to recent changes in job requirements, Vince attended UNLV and graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Accounting three years prior to our interview. Vince only pursued his degree to maintain his compliance with these changing requirements, so he has no plans to pursue graduate school. I inquired further, and Vince clarified that his position as controller (which he had at that time held for several years) was not in jeopardy due to his lack of education. Instead, he earned his degree because he wanted to ensure that he had the best chances of growth in his career, within the company for which he worked at the time or elsewhere.

Vince believes that education is important, but only in certain areas and at certain levels. Vince explained that he----like many of his colleagues---grew up in New York City. When he was younger, he used to work as a host for nightclubs back east. For this type of job, Vince

commented that a degree would never be required. However, in contrast, for what Vince does now---working in financial management---degrees are almost always either preferred or mandated. As far as skills are concerned, Vince again articulated that the answer is dependent on the details. He did not think that college is absolutely necessary for imparting skills in many areas, but he did distinguish that some professionals---accountants, for example---need to acquire knowledge of the rules of their disciplines. Regarding higher education's function in segregating applicants, Vince replied that this is generally not the case in the hospitality industry. However, interestingly he echoed his boss Al's thoughts about the difference between east coast and west coast hiring standards. He speculated that it would be much harder for him to work in his field without a degree in the eastern United States. On the subject of higher education as a marketing tool, Vince agreed that this can be a relevant phenomenon in any recruiting environment, but again, it may be more or less relevant depending on the specific job. Finally, Vince did not think that college degrees are an accurate predictor of candidate potential. Citing himself as an example, Vince explained that he was just as productive before earning his degree as he was afterward.

When I asked about the sources of Vince's perceptions about higher education, he deferred to his own experience in the industry as a guide. He stated that both of his parents were college-educated, and that they did encourage him to go to school, but that he made his own decision not to attend right after high school, and that he doesn't regret that now. He reiterated that he only attended UNLV when he did because he realized the growing trend in the industry to require degrees for finance professionals. Finally, Vince opined that tuition reimbursement programs are a great benefit for employees, and a great way for companies to show that they care

about their people, but that they don't necessarily communicate that such college education will be preferred and/or required for career development.

Aspiring Professionals - Guest Service Manager (*Lindsay*)

Lindsay was my next interviewee. She was a young woman of mid-twenties. She was tall and thin, and wore a very simple skirt and blouse. She introduced herself warmly, and I got the subtle impression that she was relieved that her appointment with me had pulled her away from whatever she was doing immediately prior. Lindsay was a Guest Service Manager and handled all day-to-day operations at the hotel's front office. She reported directly to Tony.

Lindsay was also a graduate of UNLV. In 2009, she finished a Bachelors in Hospitality Management at the Harrah Hotel College. I was eager to speak with her about her impressions, as she was the only subject I had interviewed so far with a formal *hospitality* degree. However, as I would come to find, her opinions were anything but positive.

Lindsay believes that higher education can be important to career success at higher levels of industry leadership. However, for line-level and line-level management types of positions (including the one which Lindsay herself held at the time of the interview), she described college as being "disappointingly irrelevant." Lindsay explained that she thought her time spent in college was largely a waste, at least insofar as her career path had unfolded up to the point of our discussion. When I asked Lindsay about college providing needed skills, she replied that some skills learned in school can be helpful, but all of these can be learned in the industry through hard work and thoughtful observation. As far as education segregating job applicants is concerned, Lindsay adamantly objected to this notion. She based her position on the fact that she didn't feel her degree has helped her in her career progress at all so far. I asked why she felt this way, and she explained that she has been passed over for some opportunities in favor of candidates with

less education and more experience, and even in the cases where she was promoted or hired, her education was apparently not among reasons cited by her superiors for their decisions. With respect to education as a marketing tool, Lindsay also rejected this idea. She stated that experience is *always* held in higher priority to college. Finally, as to the extent to which education is a measure of individual potential, Lindsay remarked that this may be true for applicants to higher-level positions, but as for line-level roles, this is not a legitimate perception.

I then moved to the sources of Lindsay's thoughts on the issue. First, she admitted that the pressure to go to school came primarily from her parents, who were both educated themselves and emphasized its importance throughout Lindsay's childhood. Aside from her own experiences discussed *supra*, Lindsay could think of no other people or events that materially shaped her views on the subject. I closed by asking her about the extent to which company culture or the promotion of education had influenced her views. Her response was that her company has taken no position on and made no mention of education to the extent that she is aware, and so if anything, she felt that the lack of attention to education spoke volumes against its value.

Aspiring Professionals - Director of Marketing (Kevin)

My final interview was with Kevin, Director of Marketing for Property #2. Kevin reported directly to Kristen. He was a tall, husky white man in his mid-thirties. He wore khakis, a checker plaid dress shirt with no tie, and a casual sport coat with suede elbows. Kevin greeted me warmly and sat down for our conversation.

Kevin had a diverse background in higher education. He was originally from Pennsylvania, and he began his college career with a year of general education at Penn State University. Then, after he decided to relocate to Las Vegas, he did two more years of general

education and business curriculum with UNLV. Finally, most recently Kevin had enrolled with the University of Phoenix online, and at the time of the interview he was slated to graduate in the Fall of 2015 (about 6 months hence) with a Bachelors Degree in Marketing.

Kevin believed that education is important, but only for career advancement purposes, and not for the acquisition of substantive knowledge, skills, or abilities. As such, Kevin did not think that college has a legitimate role to play in providing needed skills, but he *did* believe strongly that the segregation of job applicants based on degree possession is a real factor and one to be taken seriously. For Kevin, education serves a purpose in checking a box on a recruiting application to avoid being screened out, and not much more. Accordingly, Kevin agreed that college degrees can be very effective marketing tools for applicants who possess them.

Interestingly, he also added impromptu that, having lived on both sides of the United States like some of his colleagues, he's seen a greater emphasis on degrees in the east, due to increased competition and higher standards. Finally, Kevin rejected the idea that higher education serves as a measure of candidate potential. He reasoned that extensive experience may imply a very high potential productivity for an individual, even in the absence of a college degree.

Moving to the sources of Kevin's views on higher education, Kevin explained that his parents strongly encouraged him to go to college right after high school, but after his first year at Penn, he went against their wishes and moved out west to Las Vegas. After Kevin returned to school at UNLV, he encountered a severe life crisis when his girlfriend at the time was killed in a car accident, and this led him to drop out a second time. All things considered, however, Kevin had no regrets about the decisions that he made and the path that he travelled. Kevin did acknowledge, however, that there were occasions where he applied for jobs and was denied even the opportunity to interview; although a lack of education was never overtly cited as a reason for

rejection, Kevin suspected this might have been the case, which was what ultimately led him to enroll at the University of Phoenix. Finally, Kevin echoed Lindsay's sentiments about the company for which they both work, specifically that education is not a strongly-emphasized issue. However, he did say that work ethic and commitment *were* common topics of discussion, and that this has maintained a strong company culture that looks to what an employee can deliver and not the circumstances by which they acquired the ability to deliver it.

Summaries of Higher Education Values by Career Level

In order to facilitate the recognition of patterns related to the values of higher education, the following are summaries of such values within each career level: top management, middle management, and aspiring professionals.

Top Management

Bill and Matt agreed on a few key points. First, education is generally important, although the specific program may matter less than the universal rigors of college education and the benefits derived by graduates therefrom. Some of the benefits cited by both was increased goal focus and level of creativity. Both managers also agreed that education can provide needed skills, although Matt did not believe this is the case for all levels and all areas. Neither gentleman agreed with the idea that education segregates job applicants between those with and without degrees, although both conceded that this may be more of a relevant factor for upper-management positions. The two agreed on the matter of education being an effective marketing tool for job applicants, though Matt asserted that experience is much more important. Finally, the two both agreed to some extent that education can be a measure of potential productivity.

Middle Management

Among the middle management pool, opinions were much more diverse. On the matter of whether education is important generally, Tony and Linda were the only respondents to answer with an unqualified “yes”, and Tim was the only respondent to definitively answer “no”. The rest of the subjects agreed that education was important, but with some reservations. Al believed education can be important, but added that much is dependent upon the level of effort put forth by each individual student. Kristen agreed that it is important, but added that it is not the only factor to career success. Doug also agreed with its importance, but argued that there are many disadvantages as well, such as student debt and the relevance of a lot of “book knowledge”.

With respect to education providing needed skills, Linda and Al both agreed with this point, though again, Al qualified that it was up to the student to actually acquire those skills. Doug and Tony agreed with each other that education can be a helpful supplement to skill sets, but that other human skills are needed as a foundation as well. Kristen and Tim disagreed with this notion altogether, although Tim acknowledged that it may be a more relevant factor in upper-management.

Regarding the credentialist theory of job applicant segregation, Tony disagreed that this has any merit. Tim also disagreed, though again he conceded that for higher levels of management it may in fact be legitimate. On the other hand, Al, Kristen, Doug and Linda all agreed that this can be a challenge for managers moving up. Al explained that in some companies, jobs may require a degree by company policy, and Doug expressed that ivy league schools such as the Cornell Hotel College clearly divide applicants.

With respect to the marketing element, all six respondents agreed, in some fashion or another, that education is an effective marketing tool for college graduates. Al went so far as to say that it's tough to even consider someone without it for certain positions. Tony agreed, but added that he still looks for "heart" in interviews as priority over a degree.

Finally, concerning education as a measure of applicant potential, Linda agreed wholeheartedly. On the other hand, Al, Tony, Doug and Kristen all agreed as well, but with a qualification that there are other factors at play. For Al, Doug, and Tony, a degree does not indicate the level of effort or performance (grades) that might be a better measurement criteria than simply judging based on a degree by itself. For Kristen, it was more about the quality of the *school* that the applicant attended. Only Tim disagreed, stating that in some operational areas (he cited the kitchen), education can be perceived in the opposite light.

Aspiring Professionals

With respect to the up and coming professionals of this industry, they all generally agreed that education was at least in some way important to career success. Lindsay, Carl, Kevin, and Tina all agreed that education is important for career advancement. Jack opined that education is important to develop the needed work ethic. Vince agreed that education may be important at some levels and in some fields (e.g. finance), but he also added that in others it is largely irrelevant (e.g. line-level nightclub operations).

With respect to education providing needed skills, Jack and Tina agreed that there are skills provided by education which are critical to career success at different levels. Vince again explained that this would depend on the career field. Carl, Kevin, and Lindsay all agreed that some of it can be taught, but that ultimately there is little if anything that cannot alternatively be obtained through on-the-job training.

Credentialist theory resonated strongly with Carl and Kevin. They both agreed that this segregation of applicants can significantly hold a person back. Jack and Vince also agreed with the idea to an extent, but stated that other factors still play a role, such as company culture and other candidate attributes. Lindsay and Tina did not believe that this is a legitimate factor at all.

As for education as a marketing tool, Tina, Kevin, Jack, and Carl all agreed that education powerfully influences hiring decisions, although Carl added that this isn't necessarily a fair evaluation. Vince was less in accord with this idea, explaining that employers realize skills can be acquired in many ways. Lindsay completely disagreed with this notion, stating that experience is always looked at first and foremost.

Finally, Tina, Jack, Lindsay, and Carl all agreed to some extent that education is used as a measure of potential applicant productivity. Lindsay added that this is only the case for higher-level positions, and not for line-level roles. Carl stated that people tend to place more trust in the abilities of someone who is college-educated, although again, he did not believe that this trust was justified. Conversely, both Vince and Kevin disagreed with this idea, stating that employers are more interested in meeting people and understanding all of the attributes that make up an applicant.

Summaries of the Sources of Higher Education Values by Career Level

In order to facilitate the recognition of patterns related to the sources of values of higher education, the following are summaries of such sources within each career level: top management, middle management, and aspiring professionals.

Top Management

The education choices of both Bill and Matt were heavily influenced by the opinions of their parents. Bill cited his mom, dad, and sister as persuasive influences on his decision to go to

school, and Matt likewise referenced his father as being very insistent on college. However, neither gentleman felt that the values of their company had any significant effect on employee perceptions of the value of education. In fact, Matt went so far as to say that his company is more concerned with ability to perform than whether or not employees went to college.

Middle Management

There were a multitude of factors cited by the members of middle management interviewed as influential in shaping their respective perceptions about the value of higher education. Generally, family, role models, and personal experience were the most significant.

The most common theme among these interviewees was the relationships with a role model at one point or another in their lives that helped to influence their views. Al, Tony, Kristen, Linda, and Doug cited prior supervisors for whom they each had worked in the past, and either the opinions or the first-hand experiences of whom which had shaped their perceptions of higher education. Some of these role model relationships resulted in positive views about the value of education; others did not. It is interesting, however, that none of the role models cited were the top managers to whom these individuals reported at the time of this study.

All but two respondents in this category referenced family as a major factor. Al, Tony, and Kristen all explained that their parents, and their views on education, were largely responsible for the education choices that they each made. Doug did not mention his parents, but he did discuss his sister, whose experience with her own education was an example to Doug of what to expect.

Tony, Linda, and Tim also referred to what they described as their own personal industry experience in shaping their views on education. Rather than a specific person or event, they explained that over many years in the industry they developed a sense of what is most (and least)

important for career success. It is worth noting that Tony and Linda had also cited other factors, including family and/or role models as contributing to their perceptions. However, for Tim, his own experience was his primary reference point. It is probably logical to infer that what Tim cited as his “personal experience” is as much the product of people and events as any of the other influences cited by his contemporaries. The difference with Tim, presumably, is that there apparently were no people or events so remarkable in Tim’s life that he could remember at the time of our interview, or that he felt deserved special recognition in his response.

Tony, Kristen, Doug, and Linda all agreed that company programs for education sponsorship (such as tuition reimbursement) were important employee benefits, and that they were great for morale. However, generally, they all stopped short of actually saying that these kinds of programs influence employee perceptions about the importance of education. Rather, they felt that these types of programs were more effective at communicating that a company cares about its employees in general.

Aspiring Professionals

Among the aspiring industry professionals interviewed in this study, trends in the factors that influenced perceptions about the value of higher education also emerged. Family was again a popular answer, as were first hand experiences.

The influence of family was unanimously cited as a factor in education choices and views. Tina and Jack talked about their parents as being uneducated but wanting more for them. Carl and Vince both came from educated families, but while Vince’s parents pushed him to go to school, Carl’s dad taught him that there are alternatives to college, and encouraged him to make his own decisions. Kevin’s parents pushed him to go to school, but he decided against it at first. Lindsay followed her parent’s advice, but now resents it.

Another common theme was unique individual experiences that shaped views on education. Kevin cited several jobs for which he applied but was rejected. Vince opined that employers in his past had commonly been looking for a four-year degree. Carl discussed a specific instance where he applied for a management position but was passed over for someone with more management experience. Not all of these experiences obviously are *promotive* of education, but they are nonetheless influential upon the perceptions of education, both good and bad.

Similar to the members of middle management interviewed, the aspiring professionals did not observe a significant relationship between company programs *in support of* education, and employees' views concerning *the importance of* education. First, Tina and Lindsay had no knowledge of their company's tuition reimbursement programs, or their company's positions on the importance of education in general, so they couldn't comment on the impact that such factors might have on employees; however, their lack of awareness of their company's values might be interpreted itself as evidence relevant to the subject. Carl, Jack, and Vince all acknowledged that their companies provide some offerings for education, but like many of their superiors, they remarked that these programs are better at showing appreciation for employees than they are at communicating the value of college education.

Similarities and Differences in Values between Leaders and Followers

In order to facilitate the recognition of similarities and differences in values of higher education between leaders and followers, the following summaries are comparisons of views for each of the six reporting chains evaluated by this study.

Bill, Tim, and Tina

Bill and Tina seemed to have very similar views on the subject of education. Bill and Tina both felt that education is important in many ways, including skills acquisition, applicant segregation, marketing superiority, and measurement of applicant potential. However, by contrast, neither Bill nor Tina appeared to have many similarities with Tim, as Tim only felt that education may be important as a marketing tool, and for separating applicants at higher-level management positions.

Bill, Doug, and Carl

Bill, Doug, and Carl appeared to agree generally that education is important at some level. Bill felt that education is critical at all levels, whereas Carl made a distinction between line-level roles (not as important) and high-level positions (more important). All three agreed that employers will segregate applicants based upon education, and that education as a marketing tool can effectively tip the scales in hiring decisions, although neither Doug nor Carl seemed to believe that either of these are fair practices. Finally, all three believed that employers consider education in speculating about employee productivity, although again, Doug and Carl seemed more opposed to this practice than Bill as well.

Bill, Linda, and Jack

Bill, Linda, and Jack also seemed to be very generally aligned in their views. All three believed education to be important, and all three acknowledged the relevance of each of the four theories investigated in this study: education provides needed skills, segregates applicants, serves as a powerful marketing tool, and is perceived as a measure of potential productivity. Jack and Bill seemed to be slightly less enthusiastic than Linda about the applicant segregation element, explaining that education is certainly one element that divides candidates, but not the only one.

Matt, Al, and Vince

There are some key distinctions between the views of Matt, Al, and Vince on the subject of higher education. Matt believed education to be important for providing needed skills, and he also recognized its value as a measurement of applicant potential. However, he did not believe strongly that education segregates applicants, or that it bears significant weight as a marketing tool. Al, by contrast, believed that the importance of education can range from paramount to trivial, and its importance is determined by the degree of effort exerted by the student in school. Like Matt, Al did not recognize that education segregates applicants, but *unlike* Matt, he believed education to be a very effective marketing tool. Finally, Vince's views did not perfectly align with Matt or Al. He believed education can be important in some career fields, but not in others. He acknowledges that education can serve to segregate applicants, but he did not believe it to be a particularly powerful marketing force, nor a reliable measure of candidate potential.

Matt, Tony, and Lindsay

At first, all three of these individuals appear to agree that education is important, but underneath the surface it would seem that they have much more in common with respect to the ways in which they *limit* this belief. Matt, Tony, and Lindsay believed that education can be helpful to an extent, but also that it is by no means necessary. Likewise, all three also felt that education does not serve to segregate applicants in job pools and does not more effectively market applicants. The final theory is a point of distinction between Matt, who believed that education can be an accurate measure of candidate potential, and Tony and Lindsay, who did not.

Matt, Kristen, and Kevin

With respect to views on education, Kristen and Kevin seemed to have quite a bit more in common with each other than either did with Matt. First, like Matt, both Kristen and Kevin

agreed that education generally is important. However, *unlike* Matt, they both felt that education does not provide skills which cannot otherwise be learned on the job. Likewise, they both agreed with each other (and disagreed with Matt) that the segregation of applicants by education can be a significant threat to upward mobility for the uneducated. Finally, they both agreed that education can be a powerful marketing tool, and that it can be interpreted as a measure of candidate potential (again, unlike Matt).

Other Themes

Aside from the themes relevant to the research questions of this study discussed *supra*, there were a few other themes observed in the data that were prevalent enough to warrant mention.

Quality Matters

One of the points raised by several interviewees was that the value of education is highly dependent on the *circumstances* of education. For example, Al was very adamant throughout our interview that education is dependent on the amount of effort exerted by the student *during* their studies; they get out what they put in. Al explained that education might be a more accurate predictor of success if employers looked at grade performance and not just the attainment of a degree. Alternatively, Kristen opined that education's value depends not necessarily on the quality of the student, but instead on the quality of the *school*, citing Yale and Harvard as clearly superior institutions to community college. Similarly, both Doug and Carl remarked that more job opportunities are made available to graduates of elite institutions, referencing their former work colleague from Cornell.

East Coast Versus West Coast

Another common theme in the data was a distinction between the hiring and performance standards of eastern versus western United States. Al, Vince, and Kevin were all from the east coast, and they all independently volunteered the opinion that standards in the east were significantly higher, such that degrees are required---either formally by way of company policy or practically due to the level of competition---in fields and positions in which they are not in the west. To be fair, it is worth acknowledging that Vince does in fact work for and report to Al, so the similarity between these two might have been less coincidence and more a tendency on Al's part---intentional or not---to hire like-minded people. However, Kevin, on the other hand, works in a different department and has no reporting relationship with Al or Vince, so there may be at least some merit to this perspective.

Tuition Reimbursement Good for Morale But Not Value Communication

Many respondents shared opinions about the effects of company values expressed through programs such as tuition reimbursement, but, as discussed earlier, they weren't the effects that SLT might have predicted. Tony, Kristen, Linda, Kevin, and Vince all shared, in one form or another, the view that tuition reimbursement programs were excellent ways to develop employees and/or to improve the morale or apparent good will of the sponsoring company. However, these respondents and several others simultaneously denied that such programs have much if any effect on the perceived importance of education in the eyes of employees. Whether employers don't communicate clearly enough the reasons behind these kinds of benefits, or whether employees simply don't read deeply into the motivations of their employers, the cause of this apparent disconnect is unknown, but the data suggests that it exists nonetheless.

Education Valuable at Higher Levels But Not Below

Perhaps the most common theme throughout the entirety of the research was the qualifying of answers to questions about the importance of education to account for career level. Reviewing the data, nearly every single interviewee, at one point or another, made a caveat that education may be important, but that it was more important (or, in the extreme, *only* important) at *higher levels* of career progress. Lindsay and Tim both speculated that education can provide needed skills for director-level roles and above. Bill and Tina both asserted that education can segregate candidates more at these levels. Al and Kevin both expressed that they felt education is more relevant as a marketing tool for upper-management. Through these interviews, it became abundantly clear that there is a perception in the industry that education matters less at lower levels than it does at higher levels.

‘Book Knowledge’ Doesn’t Help

Yet another theme that emerged from the data was that of a concern about the fit between what is taught in school and what is needed in the industry. Doug, Carl, and Tony all alluded, some in different ways than others, to the idea that there are mismatches between these two. Doug and Carl spoke to the idea that some of the necessary skills for hospitality operations are not taught in colleges and universities, leaving a gap that must be filled by the employer through training when hiring graduates. Doug used the term “book knowledge” to describe the kind of teachings that have little or no practical value in the workplace, and this seems to support the concern of irrelevance discussed in this study’s literature review. Tony, however, emphasized the need for “heart” in the industry, and the fact that this was not something commonly taught in colleges. Just as “book knowledge” rings of concern over irrelevance, Tony’s “heart” concept

speaks very strongly to the concern that schools are focusing too much on analytical, and not enough on emotional, intelligence.

Education Is A Way But Not the Only Way

A final theme that was replete throughout the data in this study was the idea that education can be *one way* for industry professionals to achieve their goals, but that it is not the *only way*. Matt, Kristen, Kevin, Vince, Jack, and Lindsay all assumed this position in one sense or another. Kristen, Kevin, and Lindsay stated that all of the skills necessary to being a hospitality industry professional can be acquired through other means, such as on-the-job training. Others also believed that candidates can market themselves and communicate their worth through other variables, such as extensive work experience. This perspective doesn't necessarily undermine the importance of education, but rather, it simply suggests that higher education doesn't have a monopoly over employment market leverage, and that there is more than one way to succeed in the hospitality industry.

CHAPTER FIVE

This study employed a qualitative methodology to investigate the values of higher education, and the causes thereof, among hospitality professionals. The following sections explore the results of this investigation, first with respect to the research questions proposed, then to the ancillary themes observed in the study data.

Research Question #1

In evaluating the data from this study, themes emerged from the opinions shared by interviewees with respect to the importance of higher education, and the four underpinning socio-economic theories were generally supported.

First, HCT was identified as a legitimate factor---to at least some extent---among both members of top management, four of the six members of middle management, and all of the aspiring professionals interviewed. Although some would argue that needed skills can be acquired elsewhere (e.g. through on-the-job training), almost all respondents conceded that education is *a* way to acquire them. Those that dissented cited people skills and a “heart” for hospitality as the kinds of needed skills that cannot be learned in school.

Neither of the two top managers interviewed agreed with CT, but four of the six middle managers *and* four of the six aspiring professionals agreed to some extent that this can be a factor. Those in agreement typically felt that this can be a significant obstacle to upward mobility, at least for higher-level positions if not at all levels. The disparity between the perceptions of top management and other levels may be indicative of a disconnect between actual hiring strategies and the perceptions thereof.

JMST earned the widest consensus among the three levels. Both top managers, *all* middle managers, and all but two aspiring professionals acknowledged that a college degree can help to

successfully market an industry professional, though many qualified that education is but one of many factors evaluated. The two outliers asserted that experience is what counts, not education.

Finally, with respect to FT, both top managers, five out of six middle managers, and four out of six aspiring professionals agreed that college degrees are viewed in some way as a measure of applicant potential. Some qualified by adding that this effect is limited to higher-level positions. Those that dissented argued that other factors, such as experience, are used in place of education. For a simpler visual representation, the table below illustrates the extent to which each theory was recognized the different career levels.

Table 2

Higher Education Values by Career Level and Socio-Economic Theory

Career Level	General	HCT	CT	JMST	FT
Top Management	Important for general benefits of experience	Can provide skills, but not necessary for all areas	Only segregates applicants at higher levels	Important as marketing tool, but so is experience	Can be a useful measure of potential productivity
Middle Management	Important, but with drawbacks (cost, relevance)	Can provide skills, but not necessary for all areas	Can segregate applicants for manager level and above	Very important as a marketing tool	Can be a measure of productivity, but other factors exist
Aspiring Professionals	Important, at least at higher levels	Can provide needed skills, but so can OTJ	Can segregate applicants, and unfairly so	Very important as a marketing tool	Can be a measure of productivity, but other factors exist

Research Question #2

The themes that emerged from this study with respect to the sources of higher education values provide strong evidence for the workings of SLT. All of the people and experiences cited by the interviewees as catalysts for the way they view education are in perfect conformity with the premise of SLT: that we learn from our social environment by observing, evaluating, and repeating behavior that appears to yield advantage. Some of the most popularly cited sources of higher education values included family, personal experience, and prior supervisors. The table below indicates the most prevalent sources for each career level.

Table 3

Sources of Higher Education Values by Career Level

Career Level	Sources
Top Management	Family (parents, siblings, etc.) No effect by organizations
Middle Management	Family (parents, siblings, etc.) Prevalence of role models Personal experiences No effect by organizations
Aspiring Professionals	Family (parents, siblings, etc.) Personal experiences No effect by organizations

Research Question #3

With respect to the similarities and differences between the values of education at each career level, there appears to be general agreement among many of the reporting relationship

chains explored in this study. Many followers agreed with their leaders. In one or two cases, there was near perfect alignment between all three levels. In only one or two cases did there appear to be absolute and irreconcilable discord. In order to provide a more digestible illustration, the table below summarizes the dispositions for each reporting chain.

Table 4

Dispositions Higher Education Values between Leaders and Followers

Reporting Chain	Disposition
Bill, Tim, and Tina	Top manager/aspiring professional agreement only
Bill, Doug, and Carl	General agreement between all three
Bill, Linda, and Jack	General agreement between all three
Matt, Al, and Vince	<i>Disagreement</i> between all three
Matt, Tony, and Lindsay	General agreement between all three
Matt, Kristen, and Kevin	Middle manager/aspiring professional agreement only

However, in reviewing the data, what was unexpected is that there does not appear to be any overt acknowledgement of the correlation between the views of the leaders and followers at any of the levels evaluated. In spite of the agreements present where they were, none of the followers cited their then-current leaders as cause of or even or even contribution to their own views. This could be indicative of one or both of two things. First, the lack of acknowledgement of such correlations could be indicative of the fact that the correlations are little more than coincidence, and that the real causes of followers views are extraneous. Second, the lack of acknowledgement could indicate a failure on the part of followers to recognize the ways in

which their views have been shaped by their leaders. This study, qualitative as it is, relies on little more than subjective perceptions of the interviewees, and there is no reason to rule out the possibility that causal relationships are indeed at work, but that they are simply beyond the perceptive abilities of the subjects interviewed. The responses here, taken as true and accurate, definitely suggest that social learning theory is alive and well in the machinations of behavioral learning from such sources as families, role models, career events, and other factors. However, the correlations between the views of leaders and followers in this study give strong reason to question whether social learning is indeed taking place there as well, notwithstanding whether the followers realize it.

The specific case of role models may provide evidence of SLT at work in just this context. Al, Tony, Kristen, Linda, Doug, and Carl all cited role models for influencing their values on education, but what is most interesting is that all but Carl cited *prior supervisors* as these role models (Carl cited Dale Carnegie). Therefore, if we were to have conducted our study at the times in which these individuals worked for their respective role models, it is at least possible that we might have seen the kind of relationship of values that SLT might predict. Again, why the respondents didn't recognize relationships between themselves and the superiors for whom they worked at the time of our study is unknown. Without a doubt, the sample size and exploratory nature of this study leaves many questions unanswered, but it appears from this evidence that there may in fact be a 'recycling of values' of some design occurring after all.

Implications

Having reviewed findings both relevant and tangential to the main research questions of this study, the following are important implications derived from this research.

All four socio-economic theories discussed in this study (HCT, CT, JMST, and FT) were shown to be supported. Aspiring industry professionals should carefully consider the importance of education to their future careers, and the sacrifices of foregoing it.

SLT and the ‘recycling of values’ proposed to exist among leaders and followers was not recognized by subjects in *this* sample, but the correlation of views and the prevalence of *former* supervisor role models shared by respondents suggests that this may still be a legitimate phenomenon. The industry as a whole (its practitioners and its academics) should consider the effects that this ‘recycling of values’ might continue to have on the motivations of young professionals to pursue higher education.

The *quality* of students and institutions matters more than degrees by themselves. It may be prudent for aspiring professionals to carefully contemplate the reputations of the institutions which they plan to attend, and the level of effort which they plan to commit. Employers might also want to consider requesting information on student GPAs as part of recruitment strategies in order to weigh academic performance in hiring decisions.

There is an apparent difference in hiring standards between the eastern and western United States. The industry should more closely examine differences in standards across regions, to determine whether they do in fact exist, and if they do, whether they are justified. Aspiring professionals should consider the standards for the region in which they wish to work when making decisions about higher education.

Tuition reimbursement programs communicate good will, but not values. If employers want to communicate the importance of education, these kinds of programs are not an effective way of doing it.

Education matters much more at higher levels of career progress than at lower levels. Industry employers should consider whether the hiring standards are appropriate for each level. Aspiring professionals may want to weigh the apparent utility of a degree against their expected career timelines when determining the best time to pursue higher education.

Higher education curriculum is sometimes perceived as mismatched with industry needs. Academia should strongly review their degree program content for opportunities to improve the practical utility of their coursework and requirements. Emotional intelligence is an area worthy of further exploration. Students would be well-advised to tailor their elective coursework to practical (over theoretical) content to the extent possible.

All of the benefits of higher education can be achieved through other means. Institutions of academe would do well to thoughtfully assess their actual value to industry-career-oriented students, and to look for ways to provide unique benefits in the form of knowledge, skills, and abilities that cannot easily be acquired in other ways. The obvious biggest competitor is on-the-job training, so schools need to focus on developing student offerings that the industry cannot readily duplicate in order to maintain their relevance.

Limitations

This study was exploratory in nature, and insofar as the authors are aware, the first of its kind. However, if it accomplished anything, then it hopefully laid the groundwork for future studies to expand upon this research into the field of higher education perceptions in the hospitality industry. Accordingly, the following is a brief summary of key limitations of this study.

Although this study was exploratory in nature and thus the aim was not necessarily to draw inferences of *causal* relationships between the values of top management, middle

management, and aspiring professionals, this implication deserves brief discussion. The potential for qualitative research to discern any causality whatsoever is itself the subject of heated debate in the field. However, some scholars have suggested that when viewing the notion of causality through a realist rather than positivist lens, qualitative methodologies may be a workable---if not, appropriate---tool for the job (Tacq, 2011; Donmoyer, 2012). The traditional, positivist notion of causality would assert fundamentally that causation can be inferred when 1) a relationship between phenomena is sufficiently strong and consistent (i.e. ‘non-spurious association’), 2) an ‘explanatory’ variable always precedes an ‘outcome’ variable in time (i.e. ‘temporal sequence’), and 3) existing theory would support the existence of such a relationship. This recipe is, in fact, a synopsis of causality directly out of a popular structural equation modeling (SEM) methodology textbook (Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson, 2013), so it should be no surprise then that such an interpretation of the concept of causality lends itself well to quantitative research, and is simply incompatible with the tenets of qualitative methods. However, the realist perspective would assert that there is more to causality than simply a qualifying association between two variables. Indeed, realist researchers maintain that the *processes* of cause and effect (i.e. *how* an explanatory variable causes an outcome variable) can be derived through qualitative methods, and thus are sufficient to infer causality themselves. Furthermore, some supporting authors suggest that such qualitative tools are particularly appropriate for investigating causality in the social sciences, and are especially well-suited to studies involving the genesis of values (such as this one), so this lends even further credibility to the selection of qualitative tools for this pursuit (Maxwell, 2012). Notwithstanding, the authors neither intend nor expect that readers of this study assume causality in any of the relationships discovered herein.

Just as causation should not be inferred from any of the results of this study, neither should readers attempt to generalize the same results beyond their appropriate context. Due to the time and resource constraints inherent in any doctoral dissertation, the limited sample size and homogeneity of sample characteristics was an unavoidable reality. However, the two hotels investigated in this study---as similar as they were---provided an adequate basis for comparison with one another. Naturally, the hospitality industry encompasses a great body of industries outside the scope of hotels, a great span of geography outside Las Vegas, a great number of career tiers outside of the individual establishment level, and a great variety of career fields outside the departments and professions included in this study's sample. The author humbly acknowledges the limitations on this study's generalizability.

Beyond the limitations in generalizability of the study, there are also a plethora of other factors to be considered in fully understanding a topic as abstract as human values concerning education. Some of these factors, to the welcome surprise of the author, were brought to light by interviewees in this study: factors such as the differences in career success for college graduates of different institutions; the differences in career success for college graduates with high grades versus low grades; the differences in career success for college graduates in different career fields (e.g. finance versus others); the extent to which education competes with experience in the evaluation of a candidate for hire; and the ways in which family or role model values shape decisions about higher education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Out of the findings of this study and its inherent limitations come a variety of opportunities for future research in this area.

Now that the legitimacy of the four socio-economic theories investigated (HCT, CT, JMST, and FT) have been validated in this context, future research might consider angles at understanding the ways in which professionals come to adopt these views.

Enough evidence of correlation between the views of leaders and followers exists in this study to warrant future research that focuses in on how and why these ‘recycling of values’ relationships exist. Additionally, future research should not shy away from the possibility of engineering a study (qualitative or quantitative) that *does* in fact seek causal relationships.

A potentially important factor that this study did not consider due to time and resource constraints is the extent to which the dynamics of the relationships between leaders and followers moderate the ‘recycling of values’ phenomena. Taking duration as an example, all of the relationships examined in this research were no younger than six months old at the time of data collection, but outside of that the lengths of the relationships varied from less than a year to several decades. Other factors worth considering might include the frequency and nature of interactions between leaders and followers. The effects that these different dynamics might have on the extent to which values may be passed from leaders to followers are unknown, but future research might consider exploring this further.

Future researchers might choose to explore the way in which the quality of institutions and the quality of effort from students moderates the relationships between higher education and career success.

Given the theme in this research about a substantial difference in hiring standards between east coast and west coast, one avenue of subsequent research might compare such hiring standards across different parts of the hospitality industry in an effort to either confirm or refute this notion.

This study's findings strongly suggest that if an aim of company tuition reimbursement programs is to communicate the importance of education, they are failing to do this. Future research might investigate employee perceptions of this matter further to understand why, and how companies can improve their efforts.

Since so many respondents in this study felt that the importance of higher education is dependent on the career level at which an employee happens to be, future investigation might look more closely at the machinations of this moderator, with the aim of understanding the importance of higher education *relative to* one's career level and immediate aspirations for promotion and/or development.

The opinion shared multiple times in this study that esoteric and abstract "book knowledge" lacks relevance and utility in an industry practitioner setting echoed prior research that already identified this problem. Future research should attempt to pinpoint precisely where these disconnects lie, in hopes of recommending revisions to undergraduate hospitality curriculum for the benefit of aspiring industry professionals.

Apparently, many industry practitioners feel that college offers nothing which cannot be accomplished through on-the-job training. They may or may not be correct. One opportunity for future research might assess the validity of this statement, and attempt to carefully articulate the current value proposition of higher education so that administrators may work to improve on the status quo.

Finally, in addition to all of these other suggestions, the authors enthusiastically encourage future researchers to expand on this work. Such expansion might include: other industries such as cruise lines, airlines, restaurants, theme parks, and travel agencies; other cities, both within domestic United States and abroad; other professional levels including corporate

governance; and other professions within the scope of hospitality. Again, future researchers may consider different qualitative strategies (such as focus groups) or even a quantitative design in order to bolster the generalizability of their own work.

APPENDIX A

IRB Exempt Determination Letter



UNLV Social/Behavioral IRB - Exempt Review Exempt Notice

DATE: July 22, 2015

TO: Robert Woods, PhD
FROM: Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects

PROTOCOL TITLE: [779362-1] PERCEPTIONS TOWARD THE VALUE OF HIGHER
EDUCATION FOR HOTEL PROFESSIONALS IN LAS VEGAS: A CASE
STUDY

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
EXEMPT DATE: July 22, 2015
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this protocol. This memorandum is notification that the protocol referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45CFR46.101(b) and deemed exempt.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence with our records.

PLEASE NOTE:

Upon final determination of exempt status, the research team is responsible for conducting the research as stated in the exempt application reviewed by the ORI - HS and/or the IRB which shall include using the most recently submitted Informed Consent/Assent Forms (Information Sheet) and recruitment materials. The official versions of these forms are indicated by footer which contains the date exempted.

Any changes to the application may cause this protocol to require a different level of IRB review. Should any changes need to be made, please submit a **Modification Form**. When the above-referenced protocol has been completed, please submit a **Continuing Review/Progress Completion report** to notify ORI - HS of its closure.

If you have questions, please contact the Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects at IRB@unlv.edu or call 702-895-2794. Please include your protocol title and IRBNet ID in all correspondence.

Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects
4505 Maryland Parkway . Box 451047 . Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-1047
(702) 895-2794 . FAX: (702) 895-0805 . IRB@unlv.edu

APPENDIX B

Guiding Question Outline

Part1: Higher education experience

- Have you completed any higher education?

Part 2: Perceptions of the value of higher education

- In your opinion, is higher education important to career success in the hospitality industry?
 - Does higher education provide skills needed to perform jobs in the hospitality industry?
 - Does higher education serve to separate job applicants between those with and without college degrees?
 - Does higher education allow degree holders to market themselves more effectively to employers than those without higher education?
 - Does higher education screen out less capable workers from more capable workers through the rigors of academic achievement?
 - Are there any other roles that you believe higher education plays in the dynamic of career success not discussed so far?

Part 3: Source(s) of these perceptions

- From what or whom do you think you learned or acquired these perceptions?
 - Have any experiences that you've had influenced your views on this topic?
 - Have any of the people you've encountered in your life (family, friends, coworkers, bosses, etc.) influenced your views on this topic?

- Have any companies or organizations for which you've worked influenced your views on this topic?
- Are there any other factors that have influenced your views on this topic?

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