Canaries in the Coal Mine: Industry Partnerships In the Culinary Arts Classroom Point Towards a Greater Problem

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During the summer of 2024, I attended one of *those* interminable Career and Technical Education conferences. You know the type: a well-meaning sponsor funds a gathering. The main speaker and specialty forums are designed based around a pet theory some friend-of-education *thinks* will be helpful, but rarely *is*. It was exhausting.

There was a bright spot, however.

At a breakout session on day number two, the moderator began by asking a room of culinary arts educators to make an honest appraisal of our working relationships with industry partners. Blank looks from those assembled let me know that for at least a few, this was an unfamiliar topic. We spent the better part of an hour talking about how BENEFICIAL school/work partnerships could be, how IMPORTANT professionals from the F&B world were to our student's success. For most of this, I nodded along, my experience, research, and interviews with successful culinary programs supporting their claims.

After the *rah, rah, rah* portion of the presentation was over, our moderator passed out a pile of brightly colored index cards and we were asked to score the health of our current industry relationships on a scale of 1-10, basing our score on what we had learned. I wrote "5," flipped the card over, and perked up, curious to see how my fellow teachers would rate themselves, interested to see how they would justify their reckoning.

I had given myself the lowest score in the room.

Now, I am not a pessimist. Few who've heard me wax poetic about the award-winning culinary program I have built or the student successes that have come from it would mistake me as a "glass-half-full" kind of chef. However, I am a realist. And on the topic of partnerships, we desperately need a tall mug-o-realism.

> This essay is the first in a multi-part series. I intend to share the oftimes uncomfortable research on where we are today in terms of industry/ kitchen classroom partnerships. Future essays will focus on what the research indicates needs to change and will be, I'm certain, more rosy.
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> Please don't be put off by the critical self-analysis I'm leading us through. Things *will* look brighter on the other side. But for now at least, we must take off our rose-colored glasses and make a sober assessment of *how things really are*

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THE CANARY STOPPED SINGING A WHILE AGO (AND NOBODY NOTICED)

A decade ago, after transitioning from restaurant work to high school education, I reached out to my contacts from the industry, sure I could get them involved with a small Culinary Arts class I inherited from a previous teacher. No one returned my calls. I shrugged and kept working, transforming a small high school teaching kitchen with 185 students into a greatly expanded Magnet Program with over 400. As years went by, the frustration of trying to entice industry professionals to become actively involved didn't end. These chefs and restaurant owners - people I knew! - were unwilling to help advance the preparation of their future employees. Emphatically.

Because I'm quite the nerd, I started taking grad school courses at night a few years into my new position, intent on learning all I could to build a remarkable culinary program. As part of that work, I researched school/work partnerships as a major focus of study. In the process, my understanding of the underlying issues was clarified, the challenges highlighted, and the problem with the current environment laid bare. If industry/school partnerships are the canary in the coalmine - as I now believe - ours stopped singing a while ago and nobody noticed.

Despite all I have learned, I remain an optimistic fellow. Like many others, I spend untold hours working to build a solid, empowered, engaged Advisory Board for my Culinary Arts program. I contact at least one new potential industry partner each month. I no longer limit myself to "fancy" outlets or even traditional restaurants at all. I invest in professional relationships and give away precious classroom time so possible partners can engage with my students. The entire process is a game of inches, not yards, and I alternate between frustration, fantastic hope, and a persistent sense that *something needs to change.*

Culinary students on a field trip to Domino's Pizza, 4 April 2023

And here's where change starts: across the board, culinary arts educators and program leaders need to get a more accurate grasp on the problem.

Let's start with a simple fact, one which career and technical education scholars have researched, had peer-reviewed, and published for the world to see: **effective school/work**

partnerships spell the difference between lackluster outcomes and powerful opportunities for students. We even know how to measure successful school/work relationships with a fair degree of accuracy: Victor Hernandez-Gantes and Dana M. Griggs, two of the leading voices on industry/school partnerships, boil down the issue to five quantifiable components. According to these scholars, effective industry/education partnerships are characterized as being

- A close-knit network with
- Purposeful planning,
- Shared values and common goals,
- Open and regular communication,
- Where all members are committed to helping students become career-ready.

    (Griggs, 2015, Hernandez-Gantes et al., 2018).

Actual culinary arts educators and specific F&B Industry leaders? They are a disparate group, rarely clear on what they want to do, infrequently plan with the end in mind (if they plan at all), almost never clarify expectations or set goals for their partnership, and frequently demonstrate a noncommittal relationship to one another and the programs they support, more akin to a 14 year-old's three week love interest than a long-term partnership driving change.

Why is there so much mileage between what we SHOULD be like and what we are ACTUALLY doing? Three big misconceptions.

INDUSTRY MISCONCEPTION NUMBER 1: THE PURPOSE OF WORK/SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IS SO BUSINESSES CAN GAIN ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYEES

Just before Coronavirus turned everything upside down for a time, I was speaking on "Building Industry Partnerships" at a gathering of Hospitality and Lodging leaders in my home city of Orlando, Florida. My little talk led to a wonderful conversation with the Vice President of a well-known and respected hotel chain. While we chatted, I was somehow able to maintain a serious, professional demeanor (while on the inside I had transformed to a giggly fanboy, thrilled at the chance of partnering with such a powerful company).

She was very kind.

Before walking away, this executive texted a subordinate to set up what she *assured* was the first of many school visits. Imagine my disappointment when the representative of the company treated the occasion as a recruitment opportunity, using the time I had allotted for them to inspire or educate as a timeshare-sales-style pitch, one where they attempted to talk/ bully/ cajole my students into applying for an uninspiring hourly position at one of their locations.

When no one applied, I never heard from that hotel chain again.

Unfortunately, that experience is far from uncommon. Many, *many* potential industry partners see the relationship between their workplace and the culinary arts classroom as little more than an arena to find unskilled labor - a fishing hole for low paid, hourly employees. And even when

they are willing to hire employees for a position more challenging than "Entry Level, Cook 1, no experience required," they aren't satisfied with the employees we are sending them. We'll return to this topic towards the end of the essay, but for now, suffice it to say that our students are rarely *kitchen ready.*

I've asked industry partners about this. On occasion, they have been bluntly, *brutally* honest: "I donated $3000 for a handwashing sink a couple of years ago. I fired one of your kids for always coming to work late and another for constantly messing up dishes. Since that time, none of your students have even applied to work at my restaurant. That three thousand dollars? It was *wasted* money."

MISCONCEPTION NUMBER 2: EDUCATORS NEED SUPPLIES, MONEY, AND EQUIPMENT; COMPANIES WANT TO GIVE TALKS, HOST FIELD TRIPS, AND VISIT CAMPUSES

This issue isn't so much a misconception as it is a two-way miscommunication.

Allow me to explain:

Industry leaders tend to see investing time and resources in ANY culinary arts program as a very low return on investment. A given executive chef may love the idea of supporting education, and the owner of a small chain of steakhouses may have a genuine desire to help a low-income culinary arts program succeed, but they tend to see that "help" in a very limited light: things they can do which don't cost them any money.

This is where we notice a singular difference between culinary arts programs and other types of Career and Technical Education classrooms.

Compare a typical culinary arts program with a variety of other CTE classrooms. Car repair programs don't have trouble getting donations of entire CARS for students to learn on, nor tools, nor large pieces of equipment. I have an acquaintance who runs a high school Automotive Repair Magnet program in South Florida. He was shocked when I told him of how I had *unsuccessfully* begged donors for an oven that costs 1/10th the price of just *one* of his hydraulic lifts.

Walt Disney World Chefs and F&B Executives pose with Wekiva Culinary's two-time national NASA HUNCH Culinary Challenge Finalists.

We need that oven. Partners *agree* we need it. I have been persistently reminding anyone who would listen we need that piece of equipment for 3 years.

Do we have this thing *everyone admits we need?* No.

The same dissimilarity is true between culinary arts students and programs where students are preparing for healthcare and human services, for construction, and at least in Florida, *anything* related to Agricultural sciences. Businesses and industry associations within these fields see nothing strange about donating pricey equipment, giving core supplies, and even paying for costly infrastructure.

What's going on? While some of the disparity will probably always remain a mystery, we can make a few educated guesses:

Due to the challenging nature of the restaurant industry, many who talk with culinary educators and genuinely want to help students don't see that help as a beneficial, long-term, financial investment. Why would they? Their donation may *never* provide a direct, quantifiable benefit. Adding insult to injury, many managers and location supervisors don't see *themselves* remaining in their current position for the next 5 years. Why would they want to invest precious marketing dollars in a culinary arts program where the payoff won't be seen while they are still working there?

Sometimes, it's not a lack of interest in investing or fear of spending company resources…. It's turnover.

Here's an example: an amazing executive chef and culinary director of a four diamond, three star resort in my home city had been charmed by my students at a community event and had *finally* become prepared to lend the full weight of his position to helping us grow. It took three years for me to officially win his support. *Three years.*

We had made plans to meet over the summer to nail down our objectives and schedule how everything would work: classroom visits, a funded field trip to his location, and a joint fundraising project to FINALLY install a much needed Doyon rotating oven.

Suddenly, he stopped returning emails. Weeks went by. I finally called his secretary, intent on discovering what had happened to be ghosted so badly. She was new to the office, she told me cheerfully, as was most of the culinary staff. She tapped on a keyboard. My chef friend had moved to NYC and was working for an entirely different high end location. She apologized that his email address hadn't been disabled and offered to schedule a meeting with one of the new guy's assistants in a couple of months, asking almost as an afterthought: "And what's this all about?"

The same thing has happened to me several times now. Getting powerful folks on our side can take a long time. And then they transition to another location or company or retire. Maybe company leadership changes and suddenly supporting local education is no longer a priority. Maybe. Maybe.

Select Wekiva Culinary Seniors, posing in our kitchen with the senior leadership team of Universal Studios' Food and Beverage Division, including Senior Vice President Mandy Bond and VP and Corporate Executive Chef Stephen Jayson; 11 October 2021

In a similar way, restaurant owners are fully aware of the precarious nature of their businesses, so THEY aren't interested in making a community investment with little "bang for their buck." Better to buy a Little League team new jerseys or a Scouting Troupe new tents. The picture of restaurant employees smiling beside little kids in their cute little outfits might get into the newspaper and would at least drive community acknowledgment… and potentially market share! A high school culinary arts program? One where a bunch of pimply teenagers are mangling a croissant and grimacing in concentration? Not nearly as compelling.

What about big companies like Vulcan, Vollrath, BUNN, Robot Coupe, Doyon, and others? These manufacturers - creators of the marvelous equipment we *need* to install in classroom kitchens - see schools as customers, not as training grounds where it would be wise to donate their product. Some advertise that they support education but access to those supports is hidden and may exist as an ideal, more than a reality. Others, like Rational, have very good education pricing. But for your average underfunded public high school, half of $58,000 is still a number so far out of reach it is almost comical. I CRAVE an iVario Pro Tilt Kettle. It would be a game changer in many, many ways. But I don't have access to $20,000 and we don't have any donors willing to help with something holding a price tag that heavy.

Until this point, this essay has focused on the challenges affecting secondary and post-secondary *publicly funded* culinary arts programs; it didn't really apply to private, for-profit culinary schools. The rest of this work? It impacts us all.

EDUCATOR MISCONCEPTION NUMBER 3: WE'RE DOING A GREAT JOB (THEY'RE NOT BUYING WHAT WE'RE SELLING)

This last point is undeniably the most important and the one MANY of my culinary educator friends and colleagues will take issue with: *few outside the culinary education bubble believe what we are providing is necessary or even all that valuable*. I disagree with them and have solid arguments for our value. My counterpoints (no matter how brilliant!) don't diminish the truth: more and more, the general public isn't buying what we're selling.

Wekiva Culinary students cook alongside third and fourth graders at a local elementary school, cooking and serving "Tacos-for-Teachers" to 180 faculty and staff; 27 March 2024

Culinary Arts teachers need to become comfortable with this very *uncomfortable* reality: there is a pervasive lack of faith in Culinary Arts Programs of ANY stripe producing young cooks ready for the commercial kitchen on day one. **To put it another way: the skills, values, and work habits our partners want new employees to have are not the skills, values, and work habits we are teaching.**

This is a fundamental fact, underscored by a significant quantity of research. Feel free to check the references at the bottom of this essay. What you read will probably upset you if you don't know it already.

Is the public's lack of confidence merely a problem of perception? Do we need to invest more of our time and limited resources in a generalized marketing campaign to improve the perceived value of technical education? The research says "Yes. A bit…. But mostly no."

There are a number of innovative programs and instructors out there, talented chef educators struggling to address the disparity between what we are teaching and what industry leaders and community partners want. I count myself as one of these. I regularly talk with hiring managers at restaurants, at resorts, and at two of the biggest theme parks in the world. I ask them what values, skills, and work habits they want us to focus on, what will give our graduates a leg-up in their kitchens, what traits will make them decidedly *hireable*. This is, after all, one of the primary indicators of a strong school/ work partnership: investor input into curriculum and student

outcomes. Their suggestions have radically changed the way we do things and perhaps in a later article, I'll share some of the fundamental, structural evolutions we made in my program.

And I am not alone! Many chef educators are pursuing a similar path, working diligently to train their students with the values, skills, and work habits our industry friends want.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of teachers and entire culinary schools are training students as they did 50, 75, even 100 years ago! These schools are marked with a heavy focus on specific theory and technique, with little emphasis on the grinding challenge of the line, with little focus on generative, transferable skills like communication and planning, sense of urgency, or food cost awareness (to name just a few).

This is not my opinion. It is the damning judgment of many of our critics. It is the opinion of human resource workers who report having to terminate or re-assign our graduates. It is the opinion of the hiring class, where what should be a simple onboarding is now a process of deep and basic retraining. Worse still, it is the opinion of many of our graduates, who report not feeling prepared after getting a job, of feeling misled and fed promises which did not bear fruit.

As a result, we continue to see the same, large percentage of graduates leaving the workplace within their first three years of restaurant employment, with some reports claiming the number as high as 50%!

Where are these culinary graduates going? They are off to pursue real estate or car sales, to join the military, to chase some other, more financially rewarding, more accessible, less physically, emotionally, and mentally *challenging* career.

And how is our reputation faring among the station cooks and sous chefs, the folk who have to work with the students who remain, side-by-side? We hear the same tired line: "I'd rather bring on a Denny's line cook than a culinary grad."

As if all this wasn't enough, we are witnessing the steadily diminishing reputation and enrollment numbers of one culinary arts school after another. Why are more and more students opting out of our programs? Enrollment numbers are dropping at least in part because there is a snowball-rolling-down-the-mountain movement, a viral TikTok/ Instagram/ Snapchat message circling the 20-something crowd proclaiming culinary arts education is worthless.

Adding yet a final crushing weight to the avalanche, employers have NEVER required applicants to hold the education or certifications we provide. Similar challenges can be laid at the feet of the American Culinary Federation, an organization I remain a proud member. We offer certifications and degrees but the workplace doesn't REQUIRE them. And why would employers require a culinary school diploma from one of their workers? Why force an applicant to show our credentials to take a position as a sous chef or ACF certification to work as a chef de partie? We're not training our students with the values, skills, and work habits those workplaces need. Our grads don't walk into their kitchen job-ready and for some reason, we have simply accepted it. Our students have NEVER been prepared for work on day one.

So, as John Oliver might say, *what can we do?*

I believe in culinary education, deeply and passionately. I can make a case for what I teach that I believe is compelling and rational. However, the canary has stopped singing. We NEED to make aggressive and deep changes to our institutional model to remain relevant. I believe we must make these changes to *continue to exist at all.*

There is a mountain to move and our first task is simply to acknowledge the mountain is there. Once that incredibly basic hurdle is crossed, we can begin to rethink *on a fundamental level* what we are attempting to accomplish and first steps in that direction.

Oddly enough, the very thing that *points* to our problem - effective industry partnerships - is the key to becoming relevant again.

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