

# **Navigating a Changing Workforce: How HBCUs Can Utilize Agribusiness and Hospitality Education to Prepare Future Leaders**

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## **Abstract**

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have long served as critical institutions for developing leadership, advancing workforce readiness, and expanding economic opportunities for underrepresented populations. As the agribusiness and hospitality industries continue to evolve through technological innovation, entrepreneurship, globalization, and shifting workforce demands, HBCUs are uniquely positioned to prepare future leaders to address industry challenges and contribute to economic growth. This study examines how HBCUs can strategically leverage agribusiness and hospitality education to build leadership capacity, entrepreneurial competence, and career readiness among students.

The inquiry focuses on the role of experiential learning, industry partnerships, applied research, and entrepreneurship-centered education in preparing students for leadership roles in the agribusiness and hospitality sectors. Grounded in student development, workforce preparation, and experiential learning principles, the conceptual foundation emphasizes connecting academic knowledge with practical application and professional engagement.

Using a qualitative, practice-based approach, the study examines emerging educational models and innovative programs that integrate classroom instruction with hands-on experiences, internships, mentoring, cooperative learning, and industry collaborations. Attention is given to initiatives such as student-operated hospitality enterprises, agribusiness innovation projects, entrepreneurship incubators, leadership development programs, and partnerships with corporate and community stakeholders. Evidence from program implementation and emerging outcomes suggests that these experiences strengthen students' professional competencies, leadership skills, communication abilities, problem-solving capacity, and entrepreneurial mindset.

Findings indicate that agribusiness and hospitality education can effectively cultivate future leaders by creating opportunities for experiential skill development, industry engagement, and real-world problem-solving. Participants and program stakeholders emphasized the value of mentorship, networking opportunities, community engagement, and applied learning experiences in preparing graduates for leadership positions and business ownership. The findings also highlight the importance of culturally responsive educational environments that support student success while fostering innovation, resilience, and professional identity development.

This study contributes to the growing discussion surrounding workforce development and leadership preparation at HBCUs by demonstrating how agribusiness and hospitality education can support student achievement while addressing critical industry workforce needs. The findings offer practical implications for educators, administrators, policymakers, and industry partners seeking to strengthen leadership pipelines, expand experiential learning opportunities, and enhance career outcomes for future generations of leaders in agribusiness and hospitality.

## **More Than a Slice: Black-Owned Bakeries and the Representation of Joy, Identity, and Belonging through Birthday Cakes**

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### **Abstract**

Birthday cakes are commonly understood as celebratory foods and decorative centerpieces, yet they can also communicate identity, belonging, memory, recognition, and care. Despite the cultural and social significance of food within African American communities, less attention has been given to how Black-owned culinary businesses publicly represent birthday celebrations through contemporary cake design and digital marketing. This study examines how Black-owned bakeries in the United States construct and communicate meanings of celebration through birthday cakes presented in their public-facing digital portfolios. The study is significant because it connects culinary entrepreneurship and hospitality with cultural representation, demonstrating how an everyday hospitality product can function as an expression of identity and community.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how Black-owned bakeries visually and textually represent birthday celebrations and how these representations communicate themes of joy, identity, belonging, cultural memory, family, and community. The study is guided by scholarship concerning African American foodways, food sociability, ritual, Black joy, cultural identity, and culinary entrepreneurship. Specifically, the research addresses three questions: (1) How do Black-owned bakeries visually and textually represent birthday celebrations? (2) What recurring themes of identity, joy, belonging, family, community, and cultural expression appear in these representations? (3) How do bakeries integrate cultural expression with commercial hospitality and contemporary cake trends?

The research employs qualitative visual and textual content analysis of approximately 80–120 birthday-cake images and accompanying product descriptions from the official websites and public social media accounts of approximately 10–12 bakeries that explicitly identify themselves as Black-owned. Data will be systematically coded for observable characteristics, including personalization, age and milestone references, cultural imagery, flavor traditions, family or community language, luxury aesthetics, humor, and reinterpretations of conventional cake forms. The analysis focuses on how bakery businesses publicly construct and market celebration rather than making assumptions about individual customers' identities or motivations.

This research is currently in progress. The study seeks to contribute to hospitality and culinary scholarship by positioning the birthday cake as both an edible cultural text and a commercial hospitality product. The findings are expected to provide insight into how Black-owned culinary enterprises use food, design, and storytelling to make joy, individuality, cultural memory, and belonging publicly visible. The study may also inform hospitality and foodservice practitioners seeking to develop culturally responsive products, strengthen customer experiences, and incorporate meaningful cultural storytelling into culinary entrepreneurship.

## **Essential Soft Skills for Entry-Level Success in the Hospitality Industry: Perspectives from Hotel General Managers and Hospitality Students**

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### **Abstract**

Hospitality and tourism educators face continued pressure from industry stakeholders to graduate students who are professionally prepared for service-driven careers. While hospitality management programs traditionally emphasize technical competencies and operational knowledge, employers consistently report that graduates lack the soft skills required for effective performance in guest-facing environments. This gap has taken on added urgency since the COVID-19 pandemic, as hotels rebuild their workforces and depend heavily on entry-level employees to deliver the guest experience. This study examines the soft skills hotel employers expect of entry-level employees, how closely students' self-assessments align with those expectations, and how the results can inform hospitality curriculum design. The study is grounded in employability and competency-based frameworks, which define soft skills as transferable interpersonal, attitudinal, and self-management capabilities, and in experiential learning theory, which explains how these skills develop through concrete experience and guided reflection. An exploratory mixed-methods design was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve hotel general managers recruited from properties in New York during 2018–2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, and a structured questionnaire asking students to rate their proficiency in the same competencies was administered to sixty-six senior-level students in a four-year hospitality management program. Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically through iterative coding, and questionnaire responses were summarized descriptively and compared with the priorities identified by the general managers. Findings indicate that employers consistently prioritize people skills, professionalism, passion and care, and communication over technical competencies when evaluating entry-level candidates. Notable perception gaps emerged between student self-assessments and employer expectations, particularly in relational and attitudinal competencies. The study contributes employer-informed evidence to hospitality employability research and underscores the importance of embedding soft-skill development intentionally within curricula through experiential learning, reflective practice, and performance-based assessment. Because the data predate the pandemic, the findings also provide a baseline of employer expectations against which post-pandemic workforce needs can be compared, giving educators and industry partners a practical basis for aligning coursework, internships, and assessment.

**Keywords:** hospitality education; soft skills; experiential learning; curriculum alignment; employability; post-COVID workforce; emotional intelligence

## **Breaking the Pipeline: An Intersectional Policy Analysis of Executive Hospitality Management Programs**

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### **Abstract**

While Black hospitality professionals represent a substantial portion of the front-line lodging workforce, they remain sharply underrepresented in general manager and executive decision-making roles. While major lodging organizations have introduced corporate diversity initiatives and management development programs, traditional promotion pipelines often fail to support equitable career advancement. Grounded in the hospitality sector's need for executive diversity, this research investigates how institutional pipeline policies address or overlook systemic barriers to promotion. The purpose of this study is to evaluate how corporate management development programs and advancement policies across luxury resort and casino organizations impact the promotion pathways of Black hospitality staff. Specifically, the study seeks to identify how formal program structures, performance metrics, and advancement criteria account for overlapping systemic factors that influence career progression into executive leadership. This research utilizes an Intersectional Management Framework, examining how institutional policies interact with race, gender, and socio-economic dynamics within organizational hierarchies. By applying intersectionality to human resource policy analysis, the study evaluates whether corporate management tracks treat career pathways as uniform or address distinct structural barriers faced by underrepresented professionals. This study employs a comparative document and qualitative policy analysis evaluating publicly available corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) reports, management development program guidelines, and internal career pathing documentation from major lodging and resort brands. Documents are analyzed using qualitative content analysis and thematic coding to assess program eligibility criteria, mentorship/sponsorship requirements, evaluation of metrics, and reporting transparency regarding executive diversity outcomes. As research progresses, preliminary policy evaluation indicates a gap between broad corporate diversity commitments and actionable, trackable criteria within management training modules. Initial findings suggest that many program guidelines lack explicit sponsorship mechanisms and intersectional support structures, relying on standardized performance metrics that can perpetuate existing promotional biases. This study contributes to hospitality management literature by introducing an intersectional lens to lodging workforce development. Practically, the findings will provide resort human resource executives with actionable policy recommendations to redesign management development pipelines, establish transparent equity metrics, and cultivate inclusive executive leadership teams.