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## **From Psychology to Hospitality: My Journey as a Professor in a Hospitality Management Program**

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## About the Author



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## **From Psychology to Hospitality: My Journey as a Professor in a Hospitality Management Program**



My career as an academic in hospitality was not a traditional, linear path. About fourteen years ago I took a gamble by joining the hospitality management program at the University of Houston's Conrad N. Hilton College. I was in the final year of my Ph.D. program at Rice University's psychology department, specializing in industrial/organizational (IO) psychology. So, why was this a gamble? I thought I would start my career in psychology or in a business school, but fate had other plans for me. I had never considered hospitality management as a path for my academic career, given that my degrees (BS, MS, and Ph.D.) were in psychology. While I worked in restaurants during my college years, I did not know a lot about this industry or how my training as an IO psychologist could apply to it.

Despite my late introduction to hospitality management as an academic discipline, I was hooked. After meeting and getting to know the students and faculty at Hilton College, I had a better understanding of the hospitality industry and the potential for making a name in this academic discipline. I met with some superstars of hospitality management, namely Dr. Kijoon Back, Dr. Stowe Shoemaker and Dr. Carl Boger. I quickly learned how my line of research was suitable for the needs of the hospitality industry, as well as the ways that my training as an IO psychologist was a strong fit for Hilton College's curriculum. After interviewing with Hilton College, I received a job offer and accepted it in time to celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday.

Fourteen years later, I am a tenured professor with an endowed professorship, a special academic appointment with the prestige that is approved by the Dean of the college and the university's provost and president. I am also a Fellow for the Society of Industrial/Organizational Psychology, belonging to a special category of membership that recognizes outstanding contributions to the profession. I am an editorial board member of numerous peer-reviewed journals (the best journals in hospitality), and the author of over 80 peer-reviewed journal articles, trade articles, and book chapters. Lastly, my research has been cited by multiple local and national media outlets, including the *Houston Chronicle*, *Forbes.com*, *Reuters.com*, *USA Today*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, among others. For example, my research on sexual harassment in the hospitality industry was cited by national media outlets, such as *New York Magazine*, the *Associated Press*, *NPR*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

## **How it all started**

When I talk about my successes with my parents, they are never surprised. They always remind me that I always excelled in school and that they never had to worry about my progress. As a psychologist, however, I know that my career in academia is unexpected. One of the first principles you learn in psychology is the importance of one's environment and how factors we cannot control, such as your parents' education, income, and the type of neighborhood you live in, are strong predictors of academic success. I was born and raised in a working-class neighborhood. My parents were immigrants, and I was a first-generation college student. The expectation was to graduate high school, get into college, and get a "good" job. This expectation was not enough for me. I wanted more.

As an undergraduate student, I majored in psychology and completed all of the research methods and data analysis courses that were offered. I was intrigued by the research process and volunteered in the social psychology laboratory. I asked a professor if I could volunteer to help her conduct studies and after she agreed, I quickly became immersed in her research. I volunteered in her research lab while working 30-40 hours a week in food service jobs. At first, it was tough balancing work and school, but the sacrifices that were required for this experience were worthwhile. As an undergraduate student, I was able to travel to conferences across the US and present research from my professor's lab. More importantly, this experience piqued my interest in academia as a career.

This experience gave me a great preview of what professors do outside of the classroom; that is, the other side of their job that many students do not know about: conducting research. I learned about the process of asking research questions and

developing studies to answer these questions as well as collecting data, analyzing data, and then disseminating the results via research presentations and papers. Equally important, I learned about the many benefits of being a professor, such as getting winter and summer vacation, being able to travel internationally to present research, and having autonomy in one's schedule. The work-life balance is unlike most professions. How many professionals receive three months of vacation time? Not many. Above all, I learned how professors can inspire and motivate students to look beyond their original goals.

### **My journey into academia**

During my senior year as an undergraduate student, I applied to over 15 Ph.D. programs in psychology. Out of these, I was accepted to attend my top choice: Rice University. Here, I would complete an MS degree on the way to my Ph.D. degree. The ultimate goal was to be a professor at a research-intensive university where I could teach and conduct high-quality research.

Wanting to be a professor and becoming a professor are two different things. Let me be honest and succinct: Ph.D. programs are intense and difficult. There are countless sleepless nights, exams that require months of studying, statistics courses that require hours to complete a single assignment, and then there is the stress of being constantly surrounded and judged by brilliant people. Every Ph.D. student has to complete a dissertation – a huge research project that takes over a year to complete and culminates in a paper that is hundreds of pages long. Despite the struggles and sacrifices, attaining my Ph.D. was the best decision of my life.

The best part of my job is being a positive role model for undergraduate and graduate students. I teach one of the required Ph.D. courses at Hilton College, and on the first day of class, I share my experiences as a Ph.D. student – both the good and bad. I do this to let my students know that I was once in their shoes so they can see themselves in my shoes in the future. I believe that sharing my experiences as a student creates a stronger bond with the current Ph.D. students.

As a first-generation college graduate and historically underrepresented minority (URM) faculty member, I also know that I am a role model for other first-generation college URM students. Often, other URM students will ask about my background and career path. In all my courses, both for the undergraduate and graduate programs, I incorporate my research to show students what they can research and investigate. This usually piques their interest to talk to me about my program of research, my educational background, and my career as a professor.

## **My research**

One of the highlights of my career as a professor is becoming a leading scholar in diversity management in the hospitality field. My research has been featured in several literature review papers from the top hospitality management journals (Kalargyrou & Costen, 2017; Manoharan & Singal, 2017; Tracey, 2014). My area of research investigates issues of diversity and discrimination in the context of human resource management.

Specifically, I focus on how organizational human resource practices related to diversity and inclusion can influence (1) the manifestation and experience of discrimination and (2) organizational attitudes, such as perceived diversity climate, job satisfaction, and commitment. Why is this important for the industry? The hospitality industry relies on a diverse labor force. For example, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the fastest-growing groups in the United States are ethnic minorities and foreign-born immigrants. The workforce is aging, and disability accommodations in the workplace are ever-present. As a result of this diversity, corporate investments in diversity management efforts have grown in the last two decades. Thus, my line of research has been a perfect fit for this industry.

## **What about you?**

I hope that this introspective article not only draws your attention but inspires you to become a professor. As a professor, I get to teach future leaders in the industry. I stay in touch with many former students on LinkedIn and get to see their progress over time. I also get to work on research that addresses “real-world” issues from the hospitality industry. In addition, my work environment is full of brilliant people including faculty, staff, and students. Lastly, as a professor, I have a lot of autonomy.

If you are thinking about Ph.D. programs, talk to your professors. Ask them about their experiences, recommendations, and guidance. You also have to do some homework.

First: Figure out what type of research interests you. Think about problems and issues you see in the hospitality industry. Are they related to human resource management, organizational behavior, consumer behavior, finance, marketing, strategic management, etc.? Take courses in these areas to see if they interest you.

Second: Make a list of the hospitality colleges that offer Ph.D. programs. Think about the schools’ reputations, locations, and regional areas. Ph.D. programs can range from three to five years, so think about that as you think of locations, too. Take a look at

faculty websites to read about their research interests and find their publications. At some point in the application process, you are going to be asked about who you want to work with, so be prepared. Ask the faculty in your program about the schools and people they recommend.

Third: Once you figure out an area, such as organizational behavior or consumer behavior, and you have identified hospitality programs that offer Ph.D. programs, contact professors from those programs. Do not be afraid to email them and ask questions about whether they are accepting Ph.D. students. Faculty are accustomed to these types of emails. I have “zoomed” with many students across the globe who are interested in our Ph.D. program.

Fourth: If you have elective credit hours that you must complete, use them to take research methods and/or statistics courses from other disciplines. It doesn’t matter whether you are enrolled in an undergraduate or master’s program. I am obviously biased, but I always recommend research methods and statistics courses from the psychology department. These courses will provide you with foundational skills that are needed for a Ph.D. program.

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