WE ALL WORKED IN FOOD SERVICE ONCE:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FOOD SERVICE EMPLOYMENT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CRITICAL THINKING DEVELOPMENT.

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study explores how recent graduates perceive the influence their on-campus food service job had on their critical thinking development. This study sought to answer two research questions. The first research question - *what factors were associated with students choosing to work in food service for multiple years?* - focused on finding out why the graduates continued to work in their food service position for multiple years during college. All the participants were not planning to have a career in the food service industry, so this question investigated why they stayed rather than finding employment more related to their future career field. The second question asked - *how do recent (1-5 years) graduates perceive their past on-campus employment contributed to their development of critical thinking?* Six recently graduated students were each interviewed two times. The students interviewed were able to articulate examples of where their food service positions helped them develop and demonstrate critical thinking skills. While the levels of development varied among participants, there was a perceived benefit to working in food service while in college.

We All Worked in Food Service Once: A Phenomenological Study of the Student Perceptions of Food Service Employment and Its Influence on Critical Thinking Development

Many undergraduate students work while in college (Riggert et al., 2006). These students balance their study time with their workloads and their social needs. Because of this, their schedules, priorities, and overall college experience often looks different than their non-working classmates. Students work for a multitude of reasons and in many different types of positions (Peck & Callahan, 2019). Many topics surrounding student employment have been researched, such as the relationship of student employment with belonging, leadership development, academic success, retention, and more (Baert et al., 2016; Bergman & Remenick, 2021; Choi, 2018; Lang, 2012; Millard, 2020). Scholars have found that students who hold an on-campus job often have an increased sense of belonging and have higher rates of degree completion (Bergman & Remenick, 2021; Chiang et al, 2020). These studies were looking at students that worked 20 hours or less a week. Additionally, career-related job experience has been shown to enhance a student's future career readiness by enriching learning in their area of study with real-life work experience and the development of transferrable skills (Gaon, 2013).

While the outcomes of student employment have been analyzed from different lenses over the years, many have been focused on the number of hours worked or whether the employment took place on or off campus (Peck & Callahan, 2019). As student employment has increased, these conditions become harder to define as more students work more hours and often hold positions on- and off-campus simultaneously.

Because of this, many students won't fall into the traditional on- or off-campus employment categories (Peck & Callahan, 2019).

Looking at student employment from a different perspective, defining workers by whether students are working in a position related to their chosen career path, may help shape how student employment outcomes are viewed. This will raise the question, are student employment opportunities, such as those in campus dining where most students working are studying subjects outside of foodservice management, providing beneficial experiences when it comes to career readiness? Can, and do, these employment opportunities produce skills that directly benefit students in their full-time positions after graduation? These questions directly relate to the career readiness of students after graduation, and few scholars have investigated student employment from this lens.

Campus dining services is one of the largest contributors to the on-campus student job market, yet the benefit the experience provides to students is being questioned by students (Carrasco, 2021). For many students, working in food service does not provide them with direct field experience in their area of study, yet the employment opportunity alone can provide transferable skills to be used in future jobs (Dunens & Otto, 2021). There is research surrounding the benefit of on-campus jobs on the sense of belonging and degree completion (Body et al., 2014) as well as how student jobs in the student's selected future field benefit future career readiness (Nealy, 2020; Seemiller, 2018). In contrast, there is very little research on how recently graduated students' experience in food service, or other unrelated position, prepared them for their non-hospitality management career path. This creates a two-part problem. First, if student employment opportunities are not perceived as beneficial by students, fewer students will take the

opportunity to gain the transferable skills that can help them in future careers (Parker, 2019). Employers are looking for these transferable skills and job experience when hiring recently graduated students (NACE, 2015). Second, campus dining services in higher education institutions across the country rely on the student workforce to operate daily (Carrasco, 2021).

Colleges and universities rely heavily on student labor, especially in dining services, employing many students on campus in positions outside of their future career fields (Carrassco, 2021). Very little research can be found on how these employment opportunities affect their career readiness and whether these experiences are treated as learning and professional development opportunities. At the same time, higher education institutions have increasingly emphasized the need for learning laboratories and high-impact practices to promote individual and career development for students (Hansen & Hoag, 2018; Perozzi, 2019). Campus employment, even when unrelated to the student's major, could bridge this gap and provide opportunities to develop and improve on their career readiness while they also study.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether recently graduated students who held on-campus foodservice jobs perceive their positions as activities that increased their career readiness in the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) competency category of critical thinking and problem solving. To determine this, two questions will be addressed throughout the process. First, what factors do recent graduates describe as being associated with their choice to work in on-campus food service employment during college? Second, how do recent graduates perceive their past

on-campus food service employment contributed to their development of critical thinking skills?

For this study, recently graduated students who worked in on-campus food service positions will reflect on how their work experience prepared them for their non-hospitality management career path. This group of graduates was selected intentionally to see whether student jobs outside their major could influence career readiness. This study asks the question, can jobs in unrelated fields still help prepare students for their future positions? This research will help institutions develop and modify current training practices for student food service positions to better communicate career readiness skills tied to NACE competencies that students can obtain while working in those positions. Without further study of this problem, student positions on campus that are unrelated to one's career path may continue to be seen as merely a paycheck. Students lose out on the opportunity to develop skills and career readiness competencies because the experience is not treated as an additional learning opportunity outside of the classroom. Additionally, departments like campus dining services, where a majority of students do not plan to go into hospitality management in the future, will continue to struggle to hire students for their positions due to the lack of perceived benefits.

Because student food service positions make up a large percentage of campus jobs and Campus Dining Services structures rely heavily on the student labor force for their daily operations, the student perception of those opportunities is that much more important (Carrasco, 2021). If the Campus Dining Services student positions are treated as opportunities for development and perceived as an experience that would contribute more than just financial gain, more students would potentially apply for food service

positions and leave with transferable skills that would help them as they enter the workforce after graduation. Based on the research that has been completed, it is unknown if students who are post-graduation and currently in the workforce, perceive their food service experience on campus as a beneficial development tool that promoted career readiness, because most research focuses on general work experience or work experience specific to their projected career path (e.g., Gaon, 2013; Hall, 2013; Otto & Dunens, 2021). If they do not feel it promoted career readiness, it is an opportunity to adjust how campus foodservice positions are structured and marketed to students. If they do see it as a beneficial step in building these competencies, there is an opportunity to expand on some of the career readiness competencies that were highlighted during their food service employment.

Literature Review

Research on student employment and its relationship with the student experience and their marketability in future careers has been around for decades (Horn & Malizio, 1998; Kuh, 1995). This body of literature includes the effect of student employment on retention (e.g., Pascarella et al, 1994; Watts & Pickering, 2000), the effect on sense of belonging (e.g., Choi, 2018; Pusser, 2010), and even the effect of student employment on grades and graduation rates (e.g., Bergman & Remenick, 2021; Chiang et al., 2020). Another line of research has investigated career readiness and transferable skill building (Griffin, 2016; Peck et al., 2014). However, very little research has linked student employment in jobs unrelated to expected careers with career readiness skill development. This creates the question, can students who hold jobs that are unrelated to

their major, still gain valuable skills, such as critical thinking, that produce career readiness?

Very little research can be found on how a specific job, such as food service influence future career readiness. This study looks at this problem through the theoretical framework of critical thinking. Thus, this literature review explores employment trends on campuses, outcomes of working during college, career readiness competencies, and critical thinking to better understand the recent graduates' perceptions of their food service employment during their undergraduate studies.

Employment Trends on Campuses

Most students are employed during their undergraduate studies (Lewis, 2019). These students hold a range of positions anywhere from working as a desk attendant in a residence hall to planning events, to providing food to fellow students as front-line foodservice workers. These students are the foundation to large campus operations especially in Student Affairs divisions on campus across the United States (McClellan et al., 2018). Starting in 2021, food service employees were needed more than ever. Since 2000, when the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey program began, quit rates in the United States were at an all-time high in 2021. (Gittleman, 2022). By the end of 2021, the quit rate reached 3.0 percent, when the quit rate has remained below 2.4 percent since 2001. This high quit rate has been referred to as the Great Resignation. Out of the industries reviewed, food service held one of the highest quit rates of them all. Low pay was one of the cited reasons for these individuals leaving their jobs (Gittleman, 2022). In addition to varying work hours, weekend shifts, and potentially low wages, some individuals perceive the image of the food service

industry as undesirable (Innerhofer et al., 2022). When surveyed, 36.6% of food service employers and employees noted they thought the image of the industry was either poor or very poor. This survey revealed that of those 36.6% that ranked the food service image lower, many of them were current food service workers. Higher quit rates and lower moral continue to contribute to staffing shortages in the food service industry across the country (Innerhofer et al., 2022).

Many departments in Student Affairs depend heavily on the student workforce and use student employment to reduce the number of full-time hires in their departments. Students in these positions work for a number of reasons, however many work due to the need for additional funding rather than to gain experience in a particular career field (Lewis, 2019). According to Lewis (2019), 80% of all part-time students work and 40% of students enrolled in full-time classes are employed. Often these students work to help pay for their classes, rent, food, or other necessities.

The cost of higher education has continued to rise from year to year, which has also led to the increase of employed undergraduate students (McClellan et al., 2018). With the increasing costs of tuition, the number of hours worked has also increased, but vary from student to student. Students may work to fulfill work study requirements, work multiple jobs, or work both on and off campus while still attending classes. Studies have shown how these varying work experience led to changes in sense of belonging, retention, and career readiness for those involved (McClellan et al., 2018).

Outcomes of working during college

Studies that have been completed on student employment outcomes have produced mixed results (Rossmann, 2019). While some suggest that the number of hours

a student engages in employment can take away from their academic success and study time, others have found that employment can increase the student workers' sense of belonging. The focus of these studies is often how the number of hours worked influence the student and their grade point averages or whether the student worked on or off campus and how that effected their sense of belonging on campus (McClellan et al., 2018). Hall (2013) completed a study on students that worked in campus recreational settings and found that students felt as though their experience led to deeper levels of career readiness competencies such as critical thinking, teamwork, and overall communication. In this study, students were asked to reflect on their experience and specific tasks or job responsibilities that led to these increased levels of career readiness.

A significant percentage of students work while they are in college (NCES, 2018). While there is dispute over how this employment affects their academic performance, few argue that students that work on-campus have greater levels of persistence than those that work off campus (Dakas, 2011; Flora, 2011; Warren, 2002). Additionally, the number of hours worked while studying can have a direct impact on student GPAs (Dakas, 2011; Flora, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2005). In a study looking at transferable skills gained by student employees in an on-campus job, the NACE competencies were used to determine whether positive outcomes resulted from the students' employment (Anderson et al, 2018) In this study, Anderson found that students attributed their skill development in nearly all NACE competency areas to their campus employment rather than their in-class experience. Student employees felt that only in the areas of technology and written communication, did the classroom provide more support and skill development. Of the students surveyed, nearly all of them reported that their employment led to the

development of problem-solving skills as well as the ability to effectively work on a team.

Career Readiness Competencies

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has developed a set of eight competency clusters to assess the career readiness of students upon graduation: Career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity & inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, technology (NACE, 2021 p. 1). For each cluster, NACE provides sample behaviors that demonstrate how these competencies look in practice. According to a survey given to employers by NACE, almost 80% stated that leadership and experiences on resumes were two of the main elements they looked for in a potential candidate for one of their positions. These results indicate that on-campus positions that provide opportunities for career development create stronger student candidates seeking entry-level employment upon graduation.

Career readiness can be hard to assess and therefore the NACE competencies were developed based on the common needs and desires of employers hiring newly graduated students (NACE, 2021). Similarly, competencies are often used in businesses and organizations to measure success (Seemiller, 2018). Competency models are used to develop a standard language that allow businesses to assess the progress of employees and the organization. The NACE competency model was developed to create a common metric for assessing the career readiness of individuals entering the labor force (NACE, 2021). Before development, there was pressure to prove and quantify the benefit of higher education on career readiness (Cruzvergara et al., 2018). The NACE model provides students with a deeper understanding of what businesses are looking for when

hiring through the provision of example behaviors to demonstrate these skills as well as provide higher education professionals with a way to assess the career readiness of their students. By focusing on common vocabulary, example behaviors, and information for higher education institutions, colleges and universities can better incorporate these competencies into both the curriculum and outside of the classroom experiences.

Using the NACE competencies to assess the career readiness of students has increased in popularity in recent years (Callahan & Peck, 2019; Cruzvergara et al., 2018; Nealy, 2020; Seemiller, 2018). This model has shed light on the importance of integrating opportunities for development both inside and outside of the classroom to create more of an impact for students on campus (Nealy, 2020). By itself, student employment is not considered a high-impact practice (HIP) even though it has many elements of a HIP (Kuh, 2008). According to Kuh, high-impact practices are educational and result in a student gaining transferrable skills that can be used in different contexts. Some common elements in student work environments that would mimic high-impact practices are the incorporation of regular feedback, consistent personal reflection, as well as exposure to new and differing ideas (Kuh, 2008). Student employment settings that create a space where these key elements are present can become more effective in developing career readiness when they are critically analyzed and structured to focus on learning and development (Hansen & Hoag, 2018). By using the NACE framework when developing learning outcomes for student employment settings in higher education spaces, student employment could potentially produce transferrable skills to promote career readiness upon graduation.

The need for the implementation of reflective practice among students has been addressed as one of the ways to promote deeper engagement and development among students. While little research has been completed on how on-campus employment has impacted undergraduate students' post-graduation experiences, multiple studies have been completed using reflective surveys and interviews during a student's employment experience in college (Burnside et al., 2019; Otto & Dunens, 2021). One study found that when on-campus student employment is looked at as a learning laboratory where reflection is a part of their regular practice, students had a greater understanding of their career readiness based on NACE competencies (Anderson et al, 2018). In a similar study, an end-of-the-year survey was used, and students were asked to evaluate their career readiness (Akos et al., 2021). This survey showed there was a difference between the ratings of the students and the ratings of their employers. This suggests that employers and students may perceive the competencies differently and therefore additional research should be done to close this gap.

Critical Thinking

One of the NACE career readiness competencies is critical thinking. The definition of critical thinking according to NACE (2021) is one's ability to "identify and respond to needs based upon understanding of situational context and logical analysis of relevant information" (p. 2). According to employers that participated in the Job Outlook 2016 Spring Update survey by NACE, critical thinking and problem solving was the competency area that scored the highest as an essential need on the job (NACE, 2015). The overall rating for critical thinking was 4.7 out of a 5-point scale, with 5 being deemed 'essential'.

Critical thinking and one's ability to solve problems in a work setting is a skill that many believe increases overall employability (Nirmala & Kumar, 2018). Employability refers to the ability for someone to successfully obtain and keep employment due to their combination of knowledge and skills. The employee's successful transition and increased employability can lead to future promotions. Critical thinking is a skill that many employers consider to be valuable when it comes to hiring individuals that could contribute to the organizations quickly after the hiring process is complete (Nirmala & Kumar, 2018).

While one of the goals of many higher education institutions is often to produce career-ready graduates that can contribute to their field of study, some have argued that institutions produce graduates that are more subject-matter experts than career ready individuals (Che et al, 2021). Over the years employers have placed emphasis on the need for new employees with developed communication and soft skills that is often not taught in a classroom (Nirmala & Kumar, 2018). Many employers believe that they are better able to train new hires in technical skills and subject matters pertaining to the job than they are soft skills and other higher level thinking skills. While institutions often place focus on providing these technical skills and subject matter knowledge, employment and other extracurricular activities can lead to development of desirable soft skills (Che et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study explains the development of critical thinking, a career readiness competency defined by NACE. The guiding concept is the NACE definition of critical thinking and NACE's supporting sample behaviors. In this

study, the sample behaviors of critical thinking provided by NACE are used as a tool to assess a student's career readiness in critical thinking.

Scholarly Definitions of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a concept that has been researched over the years in many different contexts (Padmanabha, 2018). The definition and how an individual develops critical thinking have been disputed, but the importance of critical thinking for personal growth and success has been constant (Lin, 2018). Lin (2018), wrote that Glazer studied critical thinking in 1941, where he hypothesized that critical thinking is developed as a product of a person's experiences. He thought that exposure to problems throughout one's life led a person to develop skills that allowed them to thoughtfully work through those subject matters. Another definition of critical thinking comes from Robert Ennis, a researcher of critical thinking from the University of Illinois. Ennis defined critical thinking as a form of thinking that was mediative. According to him, critical thinking stemmed from one's ability to think sensibly in order to decide what needed to be done (Fisher, 2011). Ennis's focus is on the nature the thinking, rather than how the individual developed it. More recently in 2010, scholar Mulnix defined critical thinking as a formulation of beliefs using reason (Han, 2015). In 1934, Dewey came to a similar conclusion when defining critical thinking. He viewed is it as a form of thought that came to a person when there was evidence to support the belief. Dewey described critical thinking as an active and thoughtful consideration where the consequences were also taken into consideration when making decisions (Jiang, 2017).

John Dewey, an American psychologist, philosopher, and educator is often credited as one of the leading scholars on critical thinking research (Padmanabha, 2018).

He referred to critical thinking as reflective thinking. To him, “thinking” was simply to be aware of something. We are aware of our surroundings and our dreams, and in those spaces we are thinking according to Dewey. To him, in order to think critically, one had to be more analytical and reflective. To do this, he proposed that an individual thinks critically when they do more than have ideas, but rather the individual goes through a series of choices and those choices lead to a product. Throughout the process the individual reflects on those choices which then shape their future thought process and product. For Dewey, critical thinking creates new questions and new problems that shape how the person views the world and what they believe. Dewey emphasized that critical thinking was more than just cognitive, it was also emotional. To develop the skill, individuals must first learn how to think through and analyze a problem, ask hard questions, and then reflect on key take aways. A person must recognize what they have learned through reflection otherwise critical thinking is not achieved. For Dewey, a person’s experiences and reflecting on those experiences produce critical thinkers (Padmanabha, 2018).

Another key scholar in critical thinking is Paulo Freire (Padmanabha, 2018). Similarly to Dewey, Freire believed that people needed to work through complicated problems and ask deep probing questions to solve problems and form their beliefs. According to Freire, this process forces people to reexamine their existing knowledge and assumptions very similarly to Dewey’s views on the role of reflection in the critical thinking process. Freire defined critical thinking as a more disciplined process. He broke critical thinking down into analyzing and evaluated information that was gleaned from the environment and context around him. He also believed that critical thinking took in a

step further by incorporating reflection and personal experience into the decision-making process as well. To him, critical thinking sought to understand the intention behind the problem (Padmanabha, 2018). Much like Dewey, Freire placed emphasis on personal experiences and personal reflection to develop critical thinking skills.

NACE Definition of Critical Thinking

According to NACE (2015), career readiness can be broken down into core competencies that are intended to guide college students toward success after graduation. These competencies were developed to provide information that would help prepare students for future careers. These career readiness competencies provide a framework for individuals in higher education to better address how experiences inside and outside of the classroom impact students no matter what future career path they are working toward. Additionally, NACE competencies were developed in part by feedback from employers that identified important skills for new graduates to have when hired. NACE has identified 8 core competencies in career readiness: (1) Career & Self-development, (2) Communication, (3) Critical Thinking, (4) Equity & Inclusion, (5) Leadership, (6) Professionalism, (7) Teamwork, and (8) Technology.

For this study, the core competency critical thinking will be used as a theoretical framework. The NACE definition of critical thinking is one's ability to "identify and respond to needs based on an understanding of situational context and logical analysis of relevant information" (NACE, 2021, p. 4). In addition to defining critical thinking in terms of career readiness, NACE also provides sample behaviors that demonstrate an individual's development of the skill. The six behaviors that NACE (2021) says demonstrates one's critical thinking skills are their ability to:

1. Make decisions an solve problems using sound, inclusive reasoning, and judgement.
2. Gather and analyze information from a diverse set of sources and individuals to fully understand a problem.
3. Proactively anticipate needs and prioritize action steps.
4. Accurately summarize and interpret data with an awareness of personal biases that may impact outcomes.
5. Effectively communicate actions and rationale, recognizing the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of stakeholders.
6. Multi-task well in a fast-paced environment (p. 4).

The NACE definition of critical thinking and the six supporting behaviors will be the guiding principles of this study. Students that have worked in campus positions will be evaluated according to their skill development in these areas and their ability to identify activities and experiences that lead to development of the six behaviors outlined by NACE.

Research Design and Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach was chosen because the purpose of the study is to produce a deeper understanding of a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By focusing on developing a better understanding of the individuals' experiences, the study sought to provide a deeper understanding of how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their past experiences.

This study has a qualitative phenomenological study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2016). This methodology is used to study an individual's experience to

see how he or she describes the different details of a phenomenon. This study looked at phenomenon of critical thinking development that was experienced by recent graduates during their undergraduate employment. The participants were asked a series of questions in which they had to reflect on their employment experience. Throughout this process the participants articulated examples of critical thinking development, though level of detail and ability to reflect on those experiences varied from participant to participant.

Positionality statement

Because this study is looking at describing a specific phenomenon, there is a set number of participants and the researcher is the primary collector and analyzer of the data (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). As the primary collector and researcher of the data, I recognize that my own experiences could influence how I interpreted the data being gathered. Stake (1995) states research should come from a constructivist viewpoint where interpreting data should lead to constructed knowledge that carefully considers the details of the situation to provide a robust narrative. My research questions were formed because of my personal experiences working in food service as an undergraduate student. Because of my experience, I felt as though I was able to develop critical thinking skills that helped me in my first full-time job after graduation.

As an undergraduate student, I worked full-time and my experience was very heavily influenced by my campus employment. My job was my source of friends and community, as well as a heavily relied on source of income. My experience working at the coffee shop on campus lead to my love for customer service and problem solving. It was a fast-paced environment that often consisted of balancing the customer's needs with those of the company. It was at my on-campus job that I learned to work on a team and

later manage one, which was an experience that I think back on now in my current position as an event planner. For me, the experience provided many opportunities to develop critical thinking. We were continuously learning how to quickly adjust to schedule changes, supply shortages, equipment failures, and customers that were difficult to please. All of these situations lead to developing problem solving and critical thinking skills and through this study I want to see if others have had the same experience. Additionally, one of my first full-time positions was as an assistant manager within campus dining services. While I wasn't directly in charge of the student workers within my dining location, I did directly work and interact with them every day and this does influence my understanding of their roles as food service workers. I have a deep familiarity with the location, environment, and tasks associated with their jobs. Throughout this study my role is as an observer, interviewer, and interpreter of data, I recognize that my own favorable experience influences how I perceive food service positions.

Setting of the Study

The setting for this study is the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. This higher education institution is a public, four-year, land grant, research institution in the Midwest. The institution has around 30,000 students in attendance. This location was chosen because of the accessibility of research participants and familiarity of Campus Dining Services which was the case study's research site. Campus Dining Services vary widely from institution to institution in their structure and offerings. At the University of Missouri, Campus Dining Services, the department that provides most of the food and beverage to undergraduate students, is run in-house with minimal outside contracts. The

University of Missouri Campus Dining Services has 31 locations ranging from various coffee shops to traditional all-you-care-to-eat locations and has been the employer of anywhere from 250 to 750 students each year. This differs from many intuitions, where food service management companies operate and provide services. As a result of management being in-house, student food service worker onboarding, training, and development are all completed in-house and are unique to the institution. It is important to note that because this is unique to the institution, the case study is for a large institution where food services are run by the university and not an outside contract.

Participants

The sample group for this study was recently graduated students (graduated between 2017 and 2023) who worked in foodservice on the University of Missouri campus for over a year during their undergraduate studies. While it was not the original intent, all participants who agreed to participate worked at the same two dining locations. Because the purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of the students' experiences, only students that had worked for campus dining services for at least two semesters were eligible to participate. Individuals in the sample group reflected on their own experiences with on-campus employment through the lens of critical thinking. For some, this reflection is the first time they have looked back on their student employment and thought deeply about the job outcomes. The individuals all were employed by the same university, but the finer details of those experiences are what really shaped how they perceive their experience. All the recent graduates that were interviewed had graduated and had been employed full-time at the time of the interviews. For these

graduates, this was the first time they worked full-time in the industry that was tied to their chosen discipline of study.

These participants were chosen for a few reasons. First, as a current MU employee and former manager for campus dining services, I have strong relationships with current leadership within Campus Dining Services as well as relationships with former CDS student employees. Because of this, I was able to easily solicit participation in the study as well as have convenient means of communicating with recent graduates. Another reason this cohort of graduates was chosen, was because I wanted the individuals' to have graduated recently so that their personal reflection on their experiences would be easier to recall. If individuals are too far removed from their experience, it can be harder for them to determine what may have contributed to their development.

Participant Recruitment

For recruitment, I sent an email to Campus Dining Services asking for the opportunity to send information about the study to recently graduated students. A member of Campus Dining Services agreed to share the details and the purpose of the study with the department as well as provided names and contact information of potential participants that were eligible to participate in the study. The email contained information that detailed the timing and scope of the study to be completed. A copy of the solicitation email as well as the informed consent form can be found in the appendix (Appendix A & B.) It is also important to note that while all participants were previously employed by the University of Missouri's Campus Dining Services, the responsibilities they had and supervisors they reported to varied.

The solicitation email was sent to the campus dining services employee, who provided information for twelve individuals. Of the twelve individuals eligible for the study, eight responded stating that they were interested in participating when followed up with. The first six individuals to respond to set up an interview were the six participants that were selected for the study and no additional communications were sent out. All six participants were interviewed twice.

Data collection tools and procedures

The study focuses on student experiences with Campus Dining Services. This setting was selected with the goal of identifying characteristics of the setting or situation that may have influenced how the participants perceived their experience working in foodservice during their undergraduate studies. Because the study is qualitative in nature, the focus was on the interpretation and analysis of the description of the situation, rather than forming a hypothesis and determining how variables relate to one another (Creswell, 2014). The data was analyzed to describe a specific phenomenon by analyzing the setting and characteristics of the situation. The graduates interviewed were asked to reflect on the details of their experience and relate how that effected their first full-time employment appointment after graduation. The results of this study are not meant to be generalized across populations or used to describe situations outside of this body of research. Rather, the information gathered can provide details that can inform theory or concepts and can potentially lead to further studies.

Interviews

Six individuals were interviewed for 30 - 60 minutes using a semi-structured format on two separate occasions for a total of 12 interviews. The format was flexible and

allowed for additional follow-up questions to be asked to foster deeper responses. These interviews took place via Zoom and Teams and were completed as a video call. The first interview can be broken down into two sections. The first section, focused on learning the details of the students' food service experience, and the context behind the job. It sought to explain how the student ended up working in Campus Dining Services and to answer the research question, "what factors were associated with students that chose to work in food service for multiple years?" These questions were structured around the characteristics of the job, rather than the skills or competencies they gained. The second part of the interview was designed to answer the question, "How do recent (1-5 years) graduates perceive their past on-campus employment contributed to their development of critical thinking?" This interview question set was focused on the detailed events, or elements that may have contributed to the development of critical thinking skills.

A second round of interviews was then completed to focus on identifying the phenomenon. Each testimony of the participants was different and therefore this final set of questions also varied. To identify the phenomenon, the previous transcripts and recordings were reviewed, and key words and elements were noted. Once common themes from each participant's stories were identified, the final set of open-ended and loosely structured questions were created. The goal of this final question set was to see how results or outcomes of the participant's experience may change, based on the presence or absence of the phenomenon. Participants were then asked to reflect how that has influenced them in their full-time employment positions.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using an online application, however no additional notes were taken to foster casual and honest dialogue. Interview

protocol was created based on Seidman's model of phenomenological interviewing (Seidman, 2006). While is Seidman's model, the interview process is completed through three separate interviews, this study used the same concepts but in two parts instead of three. In the original model, the first interview is a set of questions that seeks to understand the background information and environment of the individual. My first half of the first interview sought to answer the same. Participants were asked to describe why they chose to work in campus dining and what factors lead them there. The second part of the first interview contained questions that follow in line with Seidman's second interview. These questions focused on their experience. The final interview for this study was based on Seidman's third interview question set. These questions asked participants to describe what their experience meant to them (See Appendix C & D).

Data Analysis

Phenomenological analysis was used as way to code my qualitative data. This form of analysis looks to interpret the essence of the experiences of the participants (Mertens, 2020). The goal of the analysis is to identify themes across the experiences of the participants using data collected from the twelve interviews. Inductive reasoning was used as common themes are developed. Once the themes are identified, they were coded to better understand the unique experiences of the individuals. The coding process grouped like descriptions and themes together.

Each interview was annotated individually first to look for key critical thinking behaviors, and then after all interviews are completed the interviews were compared to see if additional similarities or differences arose. Each interview was reviewed six times, looking for a different critical thinking behavior each time, before the next interview was

analyzed. This helped me look past my own experiences and preconceived beliefs when interpreting the data because a specific type of behavior was being looked for. Prior to the coding process, I read through the recordings of the twelve interviews. The transcripts were edited for accuracy and common themes were noted. Each interview was read once initially for accuracy and edits and then an additional six times looking for each critical thinking behavior. After the critical thinking behaviors were noted, all the interviews were read again looking for common elements/themes among the interviews – job type, years worked, amount of job responsibility, etc. These themes were noted in a spreadsheet in Google Sheets. Each interview was coded by hand, and each review of the interviews was completed in a different color to build on findings or identify when new themes were noted regarding the essence description of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2014).

Comparative analysis was used to help form common themes as each piece of data was reviewed. This process also allowed me to find contradicting responses, which were recorded, and the participant was followed up with for further clarification in their second interview when necessary. The development of the essence description created common themes, and eliminated conflicting information and may have decreased data validity. The comparison throughout the analysis process helped provide reliability of the results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By comparing the information gathered in the interviews, the development of themes and emerging topics can remain consistent. This allowed me to be more aware of my own biases and preferences when interpreting the data.

To promote credibility within the study, I met with each participant twice for in-depth interviews. All participants were interviewed until saturation was reached. This allowed for a deeper understanding of their experiences. To provide transferability, the setting of the participants was also noted and described in detail. This allows for future studies to better determine if the findings are relevant to their own research sample.

Findings

This phenomenological study sought to explore and understand the lived experiences of students who were employed in foodservice positions during their undergraduate studies. The goal was to reveal the ways in which their employment shaped their development of critical thinking skills. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study revealed several notable findings within each of NACE's critical thinking behaviors. The participants interviewed ranged from customer service attendants (entry-level food service positions) to student supervisors, to student managers and the levels of decisions-making correlated with the level of the position that the interviewee held during their employment. These behaviors included sound and inclusive decision-making, information gathering and analysis, proactive participation and prioritization, awareness of personal biases in data interpretation, effective communication in diverse contexts, and mastering multi-tasking in a fast-paced environment.

Sound and Inclusive Decision-Making

The first behavior that NACE states demonstrates critical thinking is the ability to solve problems using sound reasoning and judgement. Participants consistently demonstrated the ability to make decisions rooted in sound reasoning and inclusive

judgment. Throughout the interviews, 56 examples of decision-making were shared between the 12 interviews. Of those stories, only two examples were given by students who spent most of their time as a customer service attendant. The students that were able to give the most examples where they used sound reasoning to make decisions while working were those who were given more responsibility and held higher positions. A participant that held a management role for much of his time working in foodservice stated:

> Being able to make decisions quickly is really, really important. You have to juggle a lot of different tasks. So, I'd have to keep an eye out at the end of night, while I'd be cleaning a bunch of stuff. I'd also have to keep an eye on what everyone [working] in the dining hall was doing for close. I would be eyeballing it and seeing if someone looked behind, then solving that problem by figuring out who to send over there to solve that problem so that we're not waiting on a group of three people at the end of the night.

He continued on to say that as he gained more experience in the role, he was better able to know how much time something would take in order to make quicker decisions and create greater efficiency. He stated that management required a form of "mental gymnastics" because he was always trying to solve personnel and efficiency problems all the while juggling his own responsibilities. This individual also said that being given decision making power, was one reason he continued to work in his foodservice position. As a political science major, he had other opportunities to work elsewhere, but the responsibility and autonomy he was given played a huge roll in

keeping him in the position for over three years. He felt as though he could make real changes, and real contributions to his work which he found very valuable.

The fast-paced nature of foodservice roles required thoughtful and quick decision-making, fostering the development of a skill set that goes beyond mere problem-solving. Several of the participants gave examples of when they had to make decisions about how they dealt with work-place conflict. One participant said that as a supervisor, when students would regularly be late to their shift, it was her job to find the source of the problem. She said that she learned as a student supervisor that students worked better when they liked their shift and felt like their supervisors listened to their concerns. Another student participant said, “If you take your job seriously, you're going to learn a lot more about yourself and how to be better, in general, and how to use those skills somewhere else.” She is now a scientist in a commercial lab and mentioned while she doesn’t run into the same problems as she did in her foodservice job, she is thankful for the experience she gained in being able to stay calm under pressure and make decisions.

All six participants were able to identify times in their undergraduate foodservice position where they had to use sound reasoning to solve problems. The frequency of these examples increased with the amount of responsibility within their role, though the types of examples varied. The customer service attendant examples focused on tasks and how to accomplish them, while the supervisors and managers had more examples about working with people and managing what happens during a shift. One student that spent most of his time as a customer service attendant said, “if I was in a closing shift, I would help out with some other duties such as cleaning the dining room or wash, put away dishes until everything is clean, and then we'd all leave home at the same time.” He said

it was important to work together and divide tasks so that people didn't have to stay extra late just because one person was running behind.

From the supervisor perspective, one mentioned:

> So as a CSA (customer service attendant), you knew what you were doing for the most part and you kind of stayed at the station unless someone asked for help otherwise. And then [when it came to] student supervisors, that was more. There's a lot more tasks to do. I needed to help make sure that everything was prepped. So, there was a lot of prepping sandwiches or salads, and making sure that things were stocked and available for everybody. Also dealing with conflict if a customer got a little rude with somebody, and they couldn't seem to handle it, or needed help to handle it, washing bottles, and then going back to making sure everything was cleaned. I did more cashier as a supervisor just because that was the spot that needed to be filled. And then on the Plaza side, it was a lot more serving food just because we had full timers cooking. And then that was also cleaning up making sure everyone was good in their stations and covering any breaks as a supervisor that needed to be covered and working at that section until they came back.

She said that her role as a supervisor meant that she had to quickly being able to make decisions and decide how to help people all the while making sure the operation was running smoothly and both employees and customers felt taken care of.

Information Gathering and Analysis

Another behavior that NACE includes as an example of critical thinking is one's ability to learn from their environment to better understand the situation. The participants of this study provided 37 examples of where they had to gather and analyze information

while working in foodservice. Their examples showed that the complexity of the foodservice environment required them to have a comprehensive understanding of problems, prompting participants to draw insights from varied perspectives and information channels to arrive at well-informed decisions. When talking about training new employees with varying levels of experience and backgrounds, one interviewee stated, “I learned just to observe people and try to figure out their own communication styles.” She continued to say that she often had to take time to get to know the new students and observe how they interact in the workplace so that she could be a better resource and trainer for them since everyone learns differently and the environment was so fast paced and ever changing.

Of the information gathering examples given throughout the interviews, over half of the examples came from interviews of two participants. One of the participants was a student manager who oversaw shift planning and scheduling. Because of this, many examples were focused on working with supervisors and other individuals to make sure that the shift was covered by students that were in the place of full-time staff due to staffing shortages. Students in the full-time positions had to have the right training and skills to work there in order to make that shift the most successful. He often would see who had experience in an area on the floor and try to make sure that students were working where they liked but also attempted to make sure that there weren’t too many people in new positions in order to make sure everyone could be properly trained. The participant mentioned that he was often a manager of the closing shift, which meant that he was checking in with those who were before him to see what needed to be done to get everyone out quickly and as on-time as possible.

The other participant that had the most information gathering and analysis examples was the student whose role was to help with ordering, procurement, and forecasting. This student had to make sure that inventory was current and then look at past data to ensure that future orders were properly forecasted. This participant mentioned several times that she had to continually ask questions of the cooks and production manager to make sure she had enough information correctly take inventory. She also mentioned that when she was new in the role it was difficult because she didn't know the correct questions to ask or who to go to. It wasn't until she had been in the role, was familiar with menus, and more familiar with the individuals involved in production that she was able to recognize what information she needed to know. She stated:

> And it's hard to explain to someone how to do something, especially when they've never seen something like that before. So, when I when I was leaving, I had to train someone to take over my position. Me trying to not be rude, me trying not to impose and say like, I'll do it, you know, because I knew how to do it. So, it was just more of me giving them the opportunity, giving them the chance and not just taking over and helping them if they needed help, and allowing them to like make mistakes.

She said one of the hardest parts of training the student after her was trying to explain how to know what to do and when, because much of it was gathering info and then making informed decisions.

Proactive Anticipation and Prioritization

A notable outcome of foodservice employment was the participants' ability to proactively anticipate needs and prioritize action steps. In 12 interviews, examples of

proactive decision making and prioritization was mentioned over 80 times. While there were more examples articulated by participants who spent most of their time as student supervisors and managers, this critical thinking behavior was the most prominent behavior in all the interviews. Every participant was able to articulate multiple examples of when they had to think ahead when making decisions. For some, thinking ahead allowed them to be more efficient and finish the tasks they were given more quickly. Several examples referenced the need to think about what jobs needed to be completed to close the building and get out on time. These examples focused on how to analyze what needed to be done in their workstation and then either delegate tasks to individuals who were able to help or find ways of doing things that afforded them more time. One student manager said, "I always tried to be as proactive as possible to get that stuff done one so that we distribute the rest of the work and get not get backed up [in the dishroom], because usually, they're always the last tables and vacuuming at an earlier time which allowed her to help other students with their one to get stuff done." One participant said that on shifts where the customer count was lower, she would start closing the seating area in the back earlier because it wasn't needed. This meant she would be done cleaning stations and get out sooner.

Other examples of proactive anticipation and prioritization focused on anticipating the needs of customers. Several of the individuals interviewed mentioned that this was particularly important at shift change-over. One participant stated, "As a supervisor, your primary role was making sure that you were prepared for the next shift, making sure that you had prepped items, and then also handling customers and conflict." Rather than simply going to work at the station assigned, it was important to see where

the exiting student employees had gotten ahead or fallen behind. Prepping food for the next shift in anticipation of students getting out of classes, or primary mealtimes was important in order to get the most customers through the line quickly. Similar examples were given about closing shifts. It was the closing shift's responsibility to make sure that there was enough food prepped to start the day and if there wasn't, to communicate that to the correct people. Some of the examples that were given showed that supervisors and managers regularly had to prioritize tasks and often they had to leave some tasks unfinished. One participant said that as a closing supervisor in the café, she prioritized cleaning everything and getting students out on time. She said that at times this meant that there would be items that needed to be stocked or prepped after she sent her student staff home, but it was important to her that they get out around the time their shift was supposed to end. As she reflected, she mentioned that at times that led to her staying later to complete those tasks by herself, or having be to the person that let the managers know not everything was completed. Because she really prioritized the time of the people on her shift, she said that it helped create loyal and appreciative workers.

The fast-paced nature of the work that each of the participants described demanded foresight and effective time management. This contributed to the cultivation of critical thinking skills related to anticipating challenges and strategically prioritizing tasks.

Awareness of Personal Biases in Data Interpretation

An interesting finding was that only two participants described situations where they had heightened awareness of personal biases that may impact their interpretation of data. Both individuals were student managers and held that position for multiple

semesters. The examples they gave revealed they made a conscious effort to approach information with a critical eye, recognizing and mitigating potential biases. This reflective awareness added a layer of depth to their critical thinking processes but was not reflected in the interviews of other study participants even when prompted. This behavior was mentioned the least in both frequency and by the fewest number of participants. Awareness of personal bias and how that impacted their decisions was only mentioned 9 times throughout the interviews, making it only 2.8% of the critical thinking behavior examples from the study.

The examples that were mentioned focused on personnel or employee related problems that they faced. Both participants mentioned how they had taken extra time to understand the disagreement, or the situation of the students involved, in order to make a well-informed decision. One mentioned that he had to be careful to treat everyone equally and be careful not to play favorites with the workers that were his friends or worked similarly to him. The participant stated, “I would say where I had definitely a bias was with scheduling with close friends.” He continued on to say that it was hard to separate wanting to do something for your friend, like give them a better shift or position to work at and being the supervisor. He remembered having to try to be fair to all employees and not just giving the best jobs to his friends.

Effective Communication in Diverse Contexts

Communication emerged as a central theme, with all 6 participants showcasing the ability to effectively communicate their actions and rationale. Each participant brought up multiple scenarios where they felt they had developed communication skills or had to use effective communication to effectively do their foodservice job. Some of the

examples focused on the customer service aspects of the job. Whether the participant held an entry-level food service position or a manager role, they all expressed how they had to work with a diverse set of customers. This required them to practice listening skills when customers wanted to make changes or had a complaint, and then know how to respond appropriately. Multiple of the individuals interviewed expressed how they felt their communication skills improved over time simply because of practice. On a daily basis they had to communicate and talk with customers with the gold of providing high quality service and finding guests the answers they needed. Additionally, the findings highlighted a recognition of diverse perspectives and lived experiences among stakeholders. At times, guests would ask for something that was unable to be provided, and it was important to try to explain the why behind the decision.

While reflecting on her experience in campus dining and her current position as an attorney, she stated:

> The place that I work at now, definitely was one that I was most comfortable asking questions at and where I liked the team. I wouldn't have realized that the people you work with was such a big deal if I hadn't of worked at Plaza. I would have never thought of picking a job based on the team itself. Even though I work as an attorney and most of my job is by myself, you have an assistant and paralegals who helped me sometimes, and I need to be able to rely on them. I also have supervisors who if I have a question, I need to go up to them. And I need to be comfortable going and asking questions and not feeling like they're going to judge me or that they're going to think that I'm dumb. And I wouldn't have thought about those things going into a full time career, if I wouldn't have worked

> at plaza where I could ask questions. I now realize this is what makes a job--making sure that you can rely on people and that you can work together. Because I worked in other places, after working at Plaza, and it wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't as comfortable.

She continued to say that she learned a lot about herself and what she liked and didn't like in a job. When she graduated, finding a position meant more to her than a paycheck. She wanted to work in a space where she felt part of a team that she believed in and that kept her coming back to work each day. It was much more important to her that the task she was doing.

Nearly all the students interviewed stated that they also had to communicate regularly and clearly with the full-time staff and other co-workers in order to be successful. One participant said that he had to communicate allergies to the cooks or let them know if something was running low. If he didn't, they could potentially run out of food for guests waiting in line or give something to a customer that could make them sick.

While all participants spoke of the importance of good communication and could articulate examples of when they had to exercise communication skills, many also mentioned what happened when there were communication breakdowns. They were able to articulate times when they hadn't properly communicated and what the consequences were. An individual that had been a student manager said that if he didn't communicate what needed to be done at closing and delegate tasks, it could significantly extend the evening for the staff. The 71 communication examples that were given throughout the interviews were evenly distributed between participants. The managers and supervisors

gave examples that focused on resolving conflict and communicating decisions made to co-workers. These examples were more people-focused and the examples of the students that held entry-level roles were more focused on the communication of tasks and their progress. Articulating decisions and actions in a way that resonated with different audiences underscored the participants', especially the managers' and supervisors' advanced communication skills as a product of their foodservice employment.

Mastering Multi-Tasking in a Fast-Paced Environment

The demanding nature of the foodservice industry showcased the participants' multitasking abilities. Like communication, multitasking was a critical thinking behavior that all participants were able to articulate examples of throughout their interviews. Juggling multiple responsibilities in a fast-paced environment was part of the structure of their job environment, contributing to the development of critical thinking skills related to managing complexity, adapting to changing circumstances, and maintaining a high level of performance under pressure.

Many of the examples spoke to how foodservice workers must interact with customers, while also completing their task (making the food, preparing the item), all the while thinking ahead to what needs to be done next. For the supervisors and managers, they gave examples of when they had to complete their own tasks while also making sure their co-workers were also getting their jobs done. When asked if he had to multitask, one participant stated, "you're not only like multitasking with like the students you have to work, but with the full timers too. Like you have to like make sure they're doing okay, make sure their breaks are covered. You just got to make sure everything's kept clean." He went on to say as a manager it was his responsibility to be helping customers as well

as making sure student employees were taken care of and knew what they needed to do. If they were short-staffed, he talked about how then he would often be working at a station, making food, and serving customers as well as making sure that breaks and food prep was getting done.

Discussion

While not all participants could articulate examples of each behavior, they all demonstrated a capacity to reflect on their experiences and provide instances of critical thinking development and application. Overall, the study adds valuable insights to the ongoing discourse surrounding the relationship between employment experiences and the development of essential skills that are beneficial for both academic excellence and professional advancement. By explaining the relationship between food service employment and critical thinking development among undergraduate students, the findings from this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the benefits of experiential learning in higher education through on-campus employment.

Research Question One

The first research question - *what factors were associated with students choosing to work in food service for multiple years?* - sought to understand why students continued to work in foodservice when it was unrelated to their major or career path. Of the individuals interviewed, over half of them worked in campus dining for more than 3 years. One participant that worked at the same dining location for all five years of his undergraduate studies. When asked why he stayed he replied, “Yeah, I just loved what I did there. And I loved just the development I had there. So yeah, just stuck it out there for five years.” Later he went on to say that the autonomy he had and the ability to make

decisions and have true responsibility was what kept him there. He said, “If I couldn't make decisions for myself and stuff like that I probably would have left.” He also mentioned that he truly felt that he was trusted with decision making power which allowed him to learn from his decisions as he gained more experience as a student manager. The other participants in the study that held supervisor or manager positions also echoed these thoughts. They all valued the fact that they were given responsibility and authority and were entrusted to use it to create a successful dining experience for everyone.

Other participants mentioned that they stayed because they believed in the team, and they felt they had a responsibility to help that team. One stated, “if there was a student who didn't finish their part, then that would mean that everyone else on the team would have to take over that [task] and finish it up. And then it affects everyone else.” She continued to say, “…if I did not do what I needed to do in the days prior to my deadlines, which were usually like Wednesday mornings, then that would mean that someone else like from the management team would have to take over my slack…it's gonna land on someone else's pile.” When reflecting on her time in campus dining, she said her coworkers and supervisors were the reason she stayed five years. The comradery and mutual respect between the team members was more important to her than finding a job within her major, even though several opportunities came about during her time working in foodservice. She felt as though she was a valuable part of the team and learned a lot throughout her time there about how to work with people and to manage her time.

In this study, every participant mentioned that they did not apply for the on-campus foodservice position because they intended to gain skills that would later help them, but rather that it was a product of the nature of the job. Part of this may be due to the structure of on-campus jobs. Campuses around the United States are set-up so that students hold a significant amount of responsibility in their day-to-day operations (Hansen, & Hoag, 2018). This often leads to the creation of student positions that are flexible with course schedules, which was a factor that several participants mentioned influenced their applying for the positions and then being retained throughout their studies.

Another direct correlation to literature on student employment in food service on college campuses was the impact of staffing shortages. Over half of the participant in this study mentioned the problems their employers had finding staffing. Other studies on food service employment trends echo the staffing problems (Carrasco, 2021). Colleges around the country have had to operate on significantly lower levels of labor due to smaller applicant pools (Carrasco, 2021). The experiences of students in this study echoed those findings, however much of it focused on how that effected their own responsibility loads. One participant stated, “once we got settled in, we tried to prepare for closing, especially if you were short staffed. Obviously, if you had full staff, that would be a lot easier. But I always thought about if we're short staffed, can we close down a station early, or maybe help prep like pizzas ahead of time before close?” This statement demonstrates how the short staffing levels added to both the responsibility levels of the students as well as their problem-solving development. Several participants mentioned that while low staffing levels lead to an increase of work-related stress, it also forced creative critical thinking.

They were always having to adjust and find ways of getting everything done with less people to do it.

Research Question Two

The second interview question this study intended to answer was: *how do recent (1-5 years) graduates perceive their past on-campus employment contributed to their development of critical thinking?* The NACE definition of critical thinking once again guided the exploration of how recent graduates perceived their on-campus employment experiences in terms of critical thinking development. Graduates reflected on their experience and were able to relate with NACE's sample behaviors, recognizing the practical application of critical thinking in problem-solving scenarios within their food service roles. This alignment reinforces the value of NACE's framework in evaluating and understanding the multifaceted nature of critical thinking development. The recent graduates were not only able to articulate example behaviors they practiced or developed during their time as an undergraduate working in foodservice but were also able to connect those same behaviors to their current areas of work. Overall, all participants felt they had a beneficial experience in campus dining. While many stated it was stressful, hard, or frustrating at times, they also emphasized that what they learned was incredibly transferrable and valuable to their positions after graduation.

The integration of NACE's critical thinking framework with prior literature on student employment provided a nuanced lens through which to analyze this study's data. The sample behaviors of critical thinking served as a valuable tool in assessing the effectiveness of on-campus employment in cultivating career readiness. This alignment underscores the relevance of existing career readiness frameworks in the specific context

of on-campus employment, emphasizing the practical demonstration of critical thinking skills in real-world scenarios.

All participants in this study were able to articulate examples that demonstrated the use of or development of a NACE sample behavior no matter what they did during their employment. Their experiences and stories were all different, yet how they felt about their employment and its value to their career readiness was all positive. Some of the participants held supervisor positions for most of their experience, and others were front-line workers. This difference in experience was the most noticeable theme that rose from the data. The students that were in supervisory positions and were given more autonomy and responsibility were better able to articulate a larger number of scenarios in which they had demonstrated critical thinking sample behaviors. An additional study that focused solely on front-tine workers in customer service may produce results that further explain the career readiness development for students that didn't hold supervisory roles.

Limitations

While the purpose of this study is to deepen the understanding of recently graduated students' food service experience during college and not to be generalized broadly, there are several limitations of the research design to acknowledge. One limitation of the study is that the data collected is retrospective. While most of the research completed on undergraduate employment and career readiness has been done using self-assessment tools (Akos et al., 2021; Burnside et al., 2019; Otto & Dunens, 2021), there is also discussion on the accuracy of these assessments due to personal bias and other factors (Brown, 2014; Halper et al, 2020). Additionally, if reflection and self-assessment is not a practice that is taught throughout employment, it is argued that

students will be unable to effectively analyze how their employment experience has impacted them (Halper et al., 2020). Further research needs to be done to see if a phenomenological study approach to self-reflection, where it is fostered through a series of interviews, could help deepen the understanding of the impact of their employment experience.

While the study focused on the development of critical thinking, it is essential to acknowledge that other factors beyond the scope of NACE's framework may contribute to students' decisions to persist in on-campus employment. Other factors such as proximity, transportation, and schedule conflicts lead to their decisions to stay in their role in food service. Some me students, such as international students, have limitations that influence where they work and how many hours they work while they study. Similarly, this study did not take into considerations any socioeconomic or identity-based factors. These factors should be investigated on a deeper level to see how they may impact the retention and longevity of on-campus student food service employees.

Additionally, the limitations of relying solely on self-reported critical thinking perceptions should also be considered, as students may interpret and articulate their experiences differently. While these students were all recent graduates and were able to reflect on their experiences, some were able to remember more details than others. Self-reflective testimonies rely on a degree of self-awareness, which also can vary from participant to participant. In addition, even though the NACE definition of critical thinking was used throughout this study, preconceived ideas of what critical thinking looks like or how it is developed could also impact a participant’s perception of their own development.

Implications for Practice

Campuses rely heavily on this student workforce to run their offices and daily operations (Hansen, & Hoag, 2018). Campus Dining Services (CDS) depend on student workers and in recent years, it has been harder and harder to find enough student employees to run operations (Schilling, 2019). The staff shortage can lead to higher turnover because of the added responsibility and the stress the low labor levels create. Many colleges and universities have experienced these shortages at greater levels than in the past. Michigan State University started the 2021 school year operating with only ten percent of its normal student food service worker labor pool (Carrasco, 2021). Similarly, the University of Iowa, which normally employs around 1,400 student foodservice workers, was operating with 500. These low employment numbers have continued to influence the perceived value of on campus employment by students. The additional responsibility because of low staffing has in some cases decreased the perceived benefit of student campus dining employment (Carrasco, 2021).

For dining services and similar organizations that employ undergraduate students on colleges campuses, understanding that on-campus employment in food service can contribute to the development of critical thinking skills, as defined by NACE, suggests the importance of aligning job responsibilities with these competency frameworks. If on-campus employers did this, they could market their positions as experiential learning opportunities and appeal to a wider audience. This research shows that students don't always understand what skills these types of positions can give them. NACE competencies were developed based on the common needs and desires of employers hiring newly graduated students and critical thinking development ranked among the

highest for desirability amongst surveyed employers (NACE, 2021). Tailoring training programs to explicitly address NACE's sample behaviors of critical thinking could enhance the educational impact of on-campus jobs, making them more relevant to students' broader career goals. According to a survey given to employers by NACE, almost 80% stated that experiences on resumes was one of the main elements they looked for in a potential candidate for one of their positions. These results indicate that on-campus positions that provide opportunities for career development can provide stronger candidates for students seeking entry-level employment upon graduation.

By creating on-campus student positions through the lens of critical thinking development, university employers can be more intentional in developing their student employees. This is backed by further research that emphasizes the importance of integrating opportunities for development both inside and outside of the classroom to create more of an impact for students on campus (Nealy, 2020). Employers can integrate elements of high impact practices that are often connected to the classroom such as incorporating space for feedback and reflection, which is often a critique of employment alone (Kuh, 2008). For example, most of the participants in this study mentioned that they would like to have additional training throughout their employment. They felt that many of the skills they developed, they developed through necessity and through trial and error. If employers could include times of reflection and critical thinking development by sharing their own experiences, it may help streamline and influence the student's critical thinking development on the job. One of the participants echoed this idea when she stated, "there's a lot of camaraderie and a lot of like bouncing ideas off other student managers and student supervisors and figuring out like how they're gonna go about the

shift. [full-time] Managers do give a lot of leeway, being like, ‘Hey, make it happen. Come, get us if you need us’. But there's definitely less of the mentoring piece.” She went on to say how it would be beneficial for full-time managers to focus on training on both tactical skills and people skills and mentor student supervisors through their own development. If employment added this structure to the workplace, the environment that already inhibits elements of high impact practices could potentially become a high impact practice.

Implications for Research

Future research should explore how variations in job roles within on-campus employment sectors impact the development of specific critical thinking skills. Students in supervisory roles and those in more task-oriented spaces had different levels of critical thinking development which could be better explained through additional research. Additionally, investigating the transferability of critical thinking skills developed in on-campus food service roles to diverse career paths and industries could provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of these experiences on students' professional journeys. Job experience in a student’s career path has been shown to enhance their future career readiness by enriching students’ learning in their area of study with real-life work experience and gaining transferrable skills (Gaon, 2013). However, very little research has been completed on how unrelated employment impacts their career readiness.

All the participants in this study were able to make connections from their job on campus to their current full-time role. None of the individuals currently work in foodservice. They all reflected on how their experienced helped prepare them for working with people and fast-paced environments. Future studies on how the job environment

plays a role in the development of critical thinking would also be beneficial. Some research shows that for individuals to develop critical thinking skills, they must first learn how to think through and analyze a problem, ask hard questions, and then reflect on key take aways. A person's experiences and reflecting on those experiences produce critical thinkers (Padmanabha, 2018). Because of that, studies looking at the work environment could help explain whether the environment of the job or the tasks within the job description play a bigger role in skill development. Finally, a study that focuses on socioeconomic status and/or identity may help further explain why students stayed in the position or worked in the first place. Students in foodservice positions work for a number of reasons, however many work due to the need for additional funding rather than to gain experience in a particular career field (Lewis, 2019).

Scholarly Practitioner Reflection

The findings from this study are just the beginning. This piece of research sought to find out more about the experiences of students that held food service positions during college and whether it impacted their critical thinking development, and it didn't stop there. The testimonies of the students that could critically reflect on their experience and articulate how they still, to this day, think back on their experience was exciting to hear. Each young professional, no matter the career path they took, had a story to tell. Each story was able to further explain how the foodservice industry can contribute to skill development that is very transferable to other jobs. As higher education institutions, and administrators within those spaces, we shouldn't compete with that for the student's time and efforts, we should expand on that. How can we work with the dining halls and cafes on campus to provide space for a broader set of experiences?

As educators and administrators, we can change that narrative. Students should be encouraged to work and gain experience and not have that be viewed as an activity that is competing for their time which has been the focus of some studies (McClellan et al., 2018). Partnerships could be formed between the administrators running foodservice locations on college campuses and those educating in the classroom. Students could be encouraged to work to gain experience outside the classroom, but those experiences should be expanded upon. How can those employment experiences become high-impact practices? By itself, student employment is not considered a high-impact practice even though it has many elements of a HIP (Kuh, 2008). According to Kuh, high-impact practices are educational and result in a student gaining transferrable skills that can be used in different contexts. Some common elements in student work environments that would mimic high-impact practices are the incorporation of regular feedback, consistent personal reflection, as well as exposure to new and differing ideas (Kuh, 2008). All these elements - feedback, reflection, exposure to new ideas - could be incorporated into the training and structure of the campus foodservice positions.

Several of the individuals that participated in this study mentioned how the clear lines of promotion was not only a motivator at work, but also allowed them to work on certain skills. One participant said:

> Getting promoted, getting to run things, getting to learn more—I was always excited to be in a workplace where I can learn more skills. Being charged with managing people, I felt, especially by junior year, I felt very important…having to be in a position where I had to make fast decisions, or I had to say the right thing

to a group of people, it was all good. Definitely helped prepare for the working world.

This is just one example where the young professional referenced their experience as something that provided them with skills they still lean on in their current job that is unrelated to foodservice. If feedback, reflection, and other development training was incorporated into their experience, the employees may experience even higher levels of skill development.

As a manager of student employees, the information that I learned from this research has been incredibly beneficial. As an employer, I have students who are pursuing careers in English, Medicine, and Chemistry, yet they are working in event planning. The results of this study are very transferrable to what I do now. My students work in fast-paced environments. They have decision making power. They are often in spaces where they have to problem solve and show great customer service. All of these areas can help them develop skills that they can take with them to their future careers, and as their supervisor, I need to offer continuous guidance, feedback, and provide time for reflection. Several individuals in this study, said that they were continuously put in situations where they had to make decisions quickly and confidently based on their experience and the information that they had at the time. As an employer, I need to be willing to put students in those situations all the while making sure I offer the support and information they need to do the job well.

As an instructor and an employer of students on a college campus, this study provided the foundation for a bridge that needs to be built between the knowledge gained in the classroom and the experience gained in a work setting. Critical thinking skills are

put into practice outside the classroom when students work in spaces where they are given both responsibility and the autonomy to make decisions. They have to learn how to rely on others to get things done in addition to managing their own workloads. While some may find job opportunities within their related field, jobs in unrelated work settings, such as foodservice, should not be discounted. The results of this study indicate that no matter the projected career path, students in foodservice positions can gain valuable experience that leads to critical thinking development. While some were able to speak to more than others, participants were able to articulate NACE competency behaviors that demonstrate critical thinking. This indicates unrelated jobs during college can benefit students in their future employment.

As an educational leader, interviewing the recent graduates provided a lot of perspective. Throughout my time working on campus in a management role for the last 8 years, I think it is sometimes easy to forget that the student employees are gaining skills, rather than merely completing the task. For instance, while the food service managers want people fed quickly and with great customer service, the students doing it are doing much more than that. Students are not only flipping burgers, but they are also deciding how many more to prep, are working with the agitated customer, and are building relationships with their coworkers. While yes, they must make the burger, the job goes far beyond that and as their manager, I need to expand on that. As a manager of student employees, it is my job to give feedback and touch on more than just the task completion. I should create space for feedback and reflection and intentionally help students navigate moments of development.

As a scholar, it was apparent that this research study is just a small introduction to the career readiness competencies that could be looked at when it comes to food service or other jobs students hold while they pursue their undergraduate degrees. This study focused solely on the demonstration of critical thinking behaviors, though the presence of other career readiness competencies such as teamwork, leadership, and communication were also apparent. Scholars could pursue similar studies to learn more about these other career readiness competencies. This study also made me realize that the more information that a study reveals, the more questions the scholar has. After completing this study, I wanted to know even more about the subject. Do individuals in other foodservice jobs feel the same? Are all types of foodservice jobs created equal? Does management of other students across any type of student job provide critical thinking development? All of these questions remain and could be researched through additional similar studies.

Appendix A

Recruitment Email to Participate in Research Study

Subject: Invitation to Participate in ELPA Dissertation Research

Hello Campus Dining Managers!

My name is Kyla Dunn, and I am a doctoral student here at the University of Missouri in the College of Education and Human Development's Educational Leadership Policy and Analysis Education Doctoral program. My current research study is looking at how students perceive their employment in Campus Dining Services influenced their critical thinking skill development. For this study, I am looking for participants that have graduated within the last 5 years and worked for campus dining for at least two semesters. As a manager of Campus Dining Services, you have supervised many students over the last five years that may be interested in participating.

This study will provide higher education institutions with a more strategic understanding of the role foodservice positions play in the undergraduate experience and students' professional skill development. Foodservice positions on campus are one of the most popular form of employment for students to hold, yet little research shows how those experiences impact them after graduation. This research will provide supporting materials and additional implications for higher education institutions engaging in student employment and career readiness work.

Participation is on a voluntary basis and therefore no financial compensation will be received by participants and participation is optional. Participants may choose to no longer participate at any time. This study is also anonymous.

Please pass along this invitation to recent graduates that may wish to participate. Six participants will be selected on a first-come, first-served basis.

If you or potential participants have questions, please contact me at any time. My contact information is 605-861-9830 or dunnkay@missouri.edu. My dissertation supervisor, Dr. Bradley Curs can also be reached at cursb@missouri.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kyla Dunn

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study

Researcher's Name: Kyla Dunn

Project Title: A Phenomenological Study of the Student Perceptions of Food Service Employment and Its Influence on Critical Thinking Development.

You are invited to participate in a research study that looks at the perceived influence of undergraduate employment in food service on the development of critical thinking skills. The researcher invites recent graduates (1-5 years) that were employed by Campus Dining Services at the University of Missouri during their undergraduate coursework to participate in this study. The purpose of this form is to gain informed consent so that you have a better understanding of the study prior to committing to taking part in the research study. This study is being conducted by Kyla Dunn, a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to take a deeper look into the perceived influence of undergraduate foodservice employment on critical thinking skill development. This study will provide higher education institutions with a more strategic understanding of the role foodservice positions play in the undergraduate experience and their professional skill development. Foodservice positions on campus are one of the most popular form of employment for students to hold, yet little research shows how those experiences impact them after graduation. This research will provide supporting materials and additional implications for higher education institutions engaging in student employment and career

readiness work. Currently there is a gap in literature on how foodservice or students in areas of employment unrelated to their course of study influence their future career and this will contribute to the existing literature to bolster a deeper understanding of the student experience.

By participating in this study, you agree to participate as a volunteer, without financial compensation. In addition, participation is optional, and if you choose to discontinue your participation at any time you may do so without penalty.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a virtual interview via Teams, or Zoom for 45-60 minutes
- Participate in a second virtual interview via Teams or Zoom for 30-45 minutes or until saturation.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is on a volunteer basis. You may choose to no longer participate at any time. This study is also anonymous. Your participation will not be known by your current or past places of employment.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study involves some risk of the minor discomforts. You will be asked to reflect on your personal experience during your campus employment during your interviews. By participating in this study you will be able to share your thoughts and opinions of a current University of Missouri program with the goal of using it to continue to improve the student experience.

Payment:

This study is completely voluntary; there will be no reimbursement or payment for time.

Privacy:

All information gathered throughout the study will be anonymous. Personal data collected during this study will not be used for any purposes outside of this research project. Names or other identifiers will not be used in study reports. All data collected will be kept secure by password and will be kept for 5 years in fulfillment of university policy unless changes in policy occurs.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions, please contact me at any time. My contact information is 605-861-9830 or dunnkay@missouri.edu. A copy of this Informed Consent form will be given to you before participating in the research. Please save a copy for your records.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchirb@missouri.edu. The IRB reviews all research studies in order to ensure all research participants are protected.

Sincerely,

Kyla Dunn

EdD Candidate, University of Missouri

(605) 861-9830

dunnkay@missouri.edu

Appendix C

Interview #1 Protocol

Study: An investigation of the perceived influence of undergraduate campus dining employment on a student's critical thinking development.

Time of interview: Place:

Interviewer: Date:

Interviewee:

Interview Procedure:

You are being asked to participate in a study about your campus dining employment during your undergraduate studies and its impact on your critical thinking skill development. This is for a doctoral research study and answers will be kept anonymous and will not be used outside of the scope of this study. During this interview, you will be asked to respond to several open-ended questions. You may choose not to answer any or all of the questions. The procedure will involve recording the interview, and the tape will be transcribed verbatim. Your results will be confidential, and you will not be identified individually.

Informed Consent

Please sign the informed consent form signaling your willingness to participate.

Questions

Context/Lived Experience Questions

1. When did you work in Campus Dining Services?
2. How many hours did you work a week and how long did you work there?
3. Did you hold any jobs previous to your Campus Dining position? If so, what where they?
4. Tell me about why you decided to work in foodservice during your undergraduate studies.
5. Tell me about your experience in campus dining. How would you describe the atmosphere?
    a. Supervisors?
    b. Coworkers?

Descriptive/Structural Questions

6. Please describe your role(s) while employed by Campus Dining. Did these roles change throughout your employment? If so, please describe.
7. Tell me about your typical day while working in Campus Dining Services.
8. Tell me about your job responsibilities while working in Campus Dining Serives.
9. Critical thinking is one of the most highly desired skills by employers according to NACE surveys. The NACE definition of critical thinking is one's ability to "identify and respond to needs based on an understanding of situational context and logical analysis of relevant information". Based on that definition, how did your position in campus dining services provide you with opportunities to develop or exercise critical thinking skills? Please explain.

10. In addition to defining critical thinking in terms of career readiness, NACE also provides sample behaviors that demonstrate an individual's development of the skill. The next six statements will focus on identifying these six behaviors.
    a. Can you think of an example during your undergraduate employment in foodservice where you made decisions and solved problems using sound, inclusive reasoning, and judgement? Please explain.
    b. Can you think of an example of when you had to gather and analyze information from a diverse set of sources and individuals to fully understand a problem? Please explain.
    c. Can you think of an example of when you had to proactively anticipate needs and prioritize action steps? If so, please explain.
    d. Can you think of a time where you had to accurately summarize and interpret data with an awareness of personal biases that may impact outcomes? Please explain.
    e. Can you think of an example when you had to effectively communicate actions and rationale, recognizing the diverse perspectives, and lived experiences of stakeholders.
    f. Can you give an example of when you had to multi-task well in a fast-paced environment?

Closing

Thank you for participating in this interview. We appreciate you taking the time to do this. We may contact you in the future for the purpose of follow up interviews. Again, let me assure you of the confidentiality of your responses. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by telephone at 605-861-9830.

Appendix D

Interview #2 Protocol

Study: An investigation of the perceived influence of undergraduate campus dining employment on a student's critical thinking development.

Time of interview: Place:

Interviewer: Date:

Interviewee:

Interview Procedure

You are once again being asked to participate in a study about your campus dining employment during your undergraduate studies and its impact on your critical thinking skill development. This is for a doctoral research study and answers will be kept anonymous and will not be used outside of the scope of this study. During this interview, you will be asked to respond to several open-ended questions. You may choose not to answer any or all of the questions. The procedure will involve recording the interview, and the tape will be transcribed verbatim. Your results will be confidential, and you will not be identified individually.

Questions

Clarifying the Phenomenon Questions (potential example, but will be based on previous responses)

1. Describe how your experience would have been different if XYZ was not part of your experience (supervisor, mentor, training --- whatever they stated lead to critical development)

2. Now that you have had a chance to reflect, would you say your campus dining position helped you further develop your critical thinking skills and better prepare you for your first full-time position after graduation? Why or why not?
3. What additional supports, if any, would you have like to have had from your undergraduate employer to further develop your critical thinking skills prior to working in your first full-time position after graduation?

Closing

Thank you for participating in this interview. We appreciate you taking the time to do this. We may contact you in the future for the purpose of follow up interviews. Again, let me assure you of the confidentiality of your responses. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by telephone at 605-861-9830.

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Vita

Kyla Dunn grew up on a farm in South Dakota. She moved to Manhattan, Kansas for college at Kansas State University and Manhattan Christian College. She graduated with a B.S. in Hospitality Management and a B.S. in Leadership and Biblical studies. During her time in college, she worked full-time between her two on-campus positions. At Kansas State University she worked in a coffee shop as a barista and at Manhattan Christian College she was an office assistant and event coordinator for the office of Admissions. It was through these two positions where she made friends, met study partners, and learned time management and critical thinking skills. Both positions were customer-facing, and often very fast-paced. While the jobs were drastically different in the tasks and to-dos, the core skills needed to be successful in the jobs were the same. Both required the ability to problem solve quickly, work together with co-workers, and to prioritize.

Through these jobs, she decided she liked the world of higher education. Working on campus required a unique ability to find community, work in an environment that prioritized development and learning, and provided the necessary income needed to pay for education. Since then, Kyla has continued to work in higher education in the hospitality industry. She moved to Columbia, Missouri after graduation where she was an assistant manager in a couple of the dining locations on campus. As an assistant manager she oversaw the everyday tasks of around 200 students, 40 full-time staff, and several part-time staff members. She then worked as the catering and events manager for the University Club. During the pandemic, she helped create and enforce event and food and

beverage policy through her position at the Environmental Health and Safety. Kyla is now an event manager for the College of Arts and Science.