

Competencies and Skills Required for Foodservice Directors in Assisted Living Facilities

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Abstract:

A national mail survey of administrators and foodservice directors currently employed in Assisted Living Facilities (ALFs) was conducted to identify knowledge and skills needed for successful employment as future foodservice directors in ALFs. Data included socio-demographic information and importance ratings of 34 competencies and skills assessed with a five-point Likert-type scale. “Acts as effective team leader and/or team member” were rated highest by both groups. Educators must continue to assess whether the curriculum is adequate for preparing dietetic, hospitality, and other students for employment in this growing field.

Key Words: educational competencies/skills, assisted living facilities, foodservice management

Introduction

The number of Americans aged 65 years and older is increasing. By 2030, older adults are expected to comprise 20% of the total United States (U.S.) population (approximately 71.5 million Americans) (AoA, 2005). Life expectancy is predicted to increase with a resultant increase in the prevalence of chronic health conditions and assistance being needed for activities of daily living (ADLs) (Schoenborn, Vickerie, & Powell-Griner, 2006). Many older adults depend on others to assist them with ADLs thus, the demand for appropriately trained professionals in healthcare and long-term care is expected to increase.

A 2004 report published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services indicates that approximately 36,000 older adults (2.5 % of the 65+ age group) reside in assisted living facilities (ALFs) (National Center for Assisted Living, 2006a). The demand for ALFs as an alternative housing option is predicted to increase not only because they are a less costly alternative to nursing homes but because they allow more independence while providing needed assistance with ADLs. ALFs typically provide services such as 24 hour supervision, scheduled or unscheduled assistance with ADLs, nutritious meals, social activities and some health related services. Regulations of ALFs differ by state as do the costs and precise services that are provided. Some costs and services are influenced by the sources of payment available, e.g. Medicaid, Medicare, private pay insurance plans, etc (Cohen & Miller, 2000).

The quality of food and foodservice have been identified as important considerations when residents select and evaluate ALFs (Chao & Dywer, 2004). Thus it is important for ALFs to change their foodservices to meet the needs of residents. When the residents dislike and cannot enjoy food served in facilities, they are dissatisfied with their overall care (Kayser-Jones, 1996). Huang (2004) and Huang and Shanklin (2008) found that food quality is linked with ALF residents' intake of nutrients. Further, perceptions by ALF residents of food quality and foodservice quality had a positive influence on satisfaction with the overall dining experience (Howells, 2007; Howells & Shanklin, 2007). Enhancing the quality of food and services provided by the foodservice department in ALFs could increase residents' overall satisfaction level with all services provided by the facilities. Furthermore, providing appealing nutritious meals and a dining environment that promotes socialization, positively contributes to improving residents' quality of life in ALFs (Popper & Kroll, 2003). Ginn and Young (2003) suggested that ALF administrators should make customer service a top priority by creating value, ensuring quality service, and increasing customer satisfaction. To achieve this goal, ALF administrators and foodservice director's management skills especially in recognizing the resident needs and preferences are becoming more important. They must have the competencies and skills to provide the quality of food and services expected by their residents and their families, maintain their satisfaction and attract other potential customers.

A growing number of older population will boost the demands of nutrition services and nutritional counseling in residential care facilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2006). This change contributes to potential employment growth in these areas. Additional job openings will also occur when experienced workers, retire or leave positions they hold. Foodservice professionals and dietetic educators need to address the demands of the changing health care systems and

ready current and returning students for potential employment opportunities in ALFs and other housing alternatives.

Administrators and foodservice directors currently employed in ALFs are in a unique and ideal position to identify essential knowledge and skills needed for employment as future foodservice directors. Dietetic educators must continue to assess whether the curriculum is currently adequate for preparing dietetic and other students for employment in this growing field. The purpose of this study was to identify the essential knowledge and skills of foodservice directors in ALFs.

Methods

Sample

The three geographic regions with the greatest number of licensed ALF beds were selected from the nine Administration on Aging (AoA) regions as the sampling frame. These three regions comprised 18 states. The proportional sampling was used in this study. First, a percentage of total licensed beds by each state among the sampling frame were calculated. Base on the percentage, each state would result vary number of the ALFs sample. Thus, a total of 250 ALFs assembled from 18 states were randomly selected from ALF directories shown by state on the official AoA website (National Center for Assisted Living, 2006b). This sampling method can assure adequate national representation of administrators and foodservice directors/managers currently employed in licensed ALFs.

Data collection and analyses

The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects before commencing data collection. With permission, the data collection instrument was adapted from a mail questionnaire evaluating preparation of foodservice directors in acute care hospitals (Gregoire, Sames, Dowling & Lafferty, 2005). A list of 34 competencies and skills statements were assessed with a five-point Likert-type scale (1=Extremely Unimportant, 2=Somewhat Unimportant, 3=Neutral, 4=Somewhat Important, 5=Extremely Important) to determine the relative importance of each of the 34 competency and skill statements for success as foodservice directors in ALFs. Ten socio-demographic questions were added to the survey so that participants could be fully characterized.

Two inquiry phases were conducted. Initially a cover letter and questionnaire were mailed to 250 ALF administrators and 250 foodservice directors employed in the sample of ALFs described above. Postage-paid return envelopes and a summary request card were included in each mailing. A reminder postcard was mailed two weeks after the first mailing to non-respondents. Two weeks later, a replacement questionnaire was sent to all non-respondents. Responses were extremely limited thus a second more targeted mailing commenced.

Return rate for the first questionnaire administration was only 4.2%. Second phase surveys were then mailed to a second randomized sample of AFL administrators and food serviced operators from the same regions with a minimum of 100 beds. To further personalize the surveys in the second mailing, administrator names and correct addresses were secured by searching individual ALF homepages or by telephone calls placed to the facilities, assuring that they were operational and of at least 100 bed

capacities. The order and types of contacts were the same as phase one. Return rate for this mailing was 16.2% (81 out of 500 surveys). Response rate for combined first and second administration was 10.2%.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 13.0 for Windows, 2004, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) was used for statistical analyses. Before performing actual data analyses, Mann-Whitney tests were used to determine if there were differences between key variables of phase one and phase two. The results were not statistically significant for all variables tested. Since no significant differences were found between the two phases, data were combined for analyses without any restriction. Descriptive statistics were run to determine mean importance ratings of competencies and skills, comparisons between administrators and food service directors, and demographic profile of respondents. Assumption of normality could not be met because of small sample size, thus nonparametric analyses were conducted (George & Mallery, 2003). Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests compared importance rating mean differences among demographic characteristics of foodservice directors and administrators. Statistical analyses $p \leq 0.05$ was used for all tests.

Results and Discussion

Demographics

The majority of the foodservice directors were male (58.8%) and between 41-50 years of age (51.0%) (Table1). Many (44.0%) had an associate degree with majors in hospitality management and culinary arts. Most respondents had been employed in their current position for 5-10 years and had 5-10 years of experience working in ALFs. The majority of foodservice directors were also certified dietary managers (37.3%; n=19) and certified food protection professionals (27.5%; n=14). Only 4 were registered dietitians.

In contrast, the majority of administrators were female (74.5%); 44.7% were between 30-50 years of age. Most had either a bachelor's (44.7%) or master's degree (27.7%) with majors in long-term care administration and business management. The majority had worked between 5-20 years in their current position (60.8%); 40.4% had worked in ALFs for 5-10 years. All respondents were licensed or credentialed to work as an administrator in ALFs.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Foodservice Directors and Administrators

Characteristic	Foodservice directors		Administrators	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Male	30	58.8	12	25.5
Female	21	41.2	35	74.5
Age				
<30	3	5.9	2	4.2
31-40	8	15.7	10	21.3
41-50	26	51.0	11	23.4
51-60	6	11.7	17	36.2
>60	8	15.7	7	14.9
Level of education				
Associate degree	22	44.0	10	21.3
Bachelor's degree	14	28.0	21	44.7
Master's degree	3	6.0	13	27.7
Doctorate degree	0	0.0	1	2.1
Other	11	22.0	2	4.2
Years in the position				
<5	14	27.4	14	29.8
5-10	20	39.2	13	27.7
11-20	11	21.6	11	23.4
21-30	6	11.8	7	14.9
>30	0	0.0	2	4.2
Years in the field^a				
<5	13	25.5	9	19.2
5-10	21	41.2	19	40.4
11-20	12	23.5	15	31.9
21-30	5	9.8	3	6.4
>30	0	0.0	1	2.1
Major area of study				
Long-term care administration	1	2.4	14	31.1
Business	8	19.0	13	28.9
Nursing	1	2.4	10	22.2
Social work	0	0.0	3	6.7
Culinary art	11	26.2	0	0.0
Hospitality management	16	38.1	0	0.0
Dietetic	3	7.1	0	0.0
Others ^b	2	4.8	5	11.1
Credential (foodservice directors only)^{cd}				
Registered dietitian	4	7.8	0	0.0
Certified dietary manager	19	37.3	0	0.0
Dietetic technician registered	2	3.9	0	0.0
Certified food protection profession	14	27.5	0	0.0
Others ^e	6	11.8	0	0.0
No response	16	31.4	0	0.0

Profit status				
Profit	31	60.8	30	63.8
Non-profit	20	39.2	17	36.2
No. of Licensed beds				
<100	19	37.2	15	32.6
100-199	27	52.9	28	60.9
200-299	3	5.9	3	6.5
300-399	0	0.0	0	0.0
400-499	1	2.0	0	0.0
≥500	1	2.0	0	0.0

^aYears of experience in assisted living facilities

^bIncludes psychology, journalism, education, home economy and law

^cAll of administrators were required to hold a specific credential, certificate or license according to the state regulation.

^dRespondents might hold more than one credential; thus the total exceeds 100%

^eIncludes registered nurse, certified food safety manager

Importance Ratings for Competency and Skills

Foodservice directors and the administrators rated 23 and 17 competencies as extremely important or somewhat important, respectively. “Acts as effective team leader and member” was rated highest by both groups (Table 2). The four competencies rated least important by both groups were the same and included “conduct research,” “interprets research for use in practice,” “demonstrates knowledge of factors that affect information services,” and “participates in education of dietetics students.”

Table 2 illustrates the eleven competencies and skills rated significantly higher by the foodservice directors than the administrators ($p \leq 0.05$) using Mann-Whitney analyses. These competencies and skills were financial management, budgeting, education and research, strategic planning, negotiation skills, and information services. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to determine statistically significant differences based on highest level of education attained. Respondents with graduate degrees rated the following as more important: budgeting, proficiency in computer software usage, maintaining relationships with other professionals, and financial management.

Table 2. Importance Rating^a Competencies and Skills Essential Success for The Role of ALFs Foodservice Directors

Competencies and Skills	Foodservice Directors (Mean ± SD)	Administrators (Mean ± SD)
Acts as effective team leader	4.9± .3	4.8± .6
Acts as effective team member	4.9± .3	4.8± .6
Manages all aspects of foodservice operations (food science, food safety, operations, menu planning, etc)	4.9± .3	4.8± .6
Assures current operations are compliant with government and regulatory agency guidelines	4.9± .3	4.8± .5
Demonstrates effective time management	4.8± .4	4.6± .4
Performs in an ethical manner in the healthcare setting	4.8± .4	4.7± .7
Demonstrates ability to coach and develop others	4.7± .4	4.6± .6
Demonstrates ability to communicate effectively verbally	4.6± .5	4.7± .4
Effectively manages projects	4.6± .5	4.6± .5
Demonstrates ability to communicate effectively in writing	4.6± .4	4.4± .7
Practices self-regulation of professional development ^c	4.5± .7	4.0±1.0
Maintains functional relationships with other professionals ^d	4.5± .7	4.2± .8
Performs duties efficiently within the organizational governance structure	4.4± .6	4.3± .7
Analyzes financial information for use in decision-making	4.4± .6	4.2± .7
Assures ongoing operation measurement and process improvement activities	4.4± .6	4.2± .8
Develops operation budgets ^c	4.4± .7	3.9±1.1
Implements risk management strategies	4.3± .7	4.4± .7
Demonstrates understanding of job analyses	4.3± .7	3.9± .9
Understands service delivery systems at different sites across the continuum of care	4.2± .7	3.8±1.2
Demonstrates understanding of principles of strategic planning and applies them to organizational decisions ^c	4.2± .6	3.8± .9
Demonstrates proficiency in computer software usage ^d	4.1± .8	3.9± .8
Develops revenue generating opportunities ^d	4.0± .9	3.7±1.0
Performs negotiation tasks ^c	4.0± .8	3.5± .9
Performs human resource functions within the legal, cultural, and union environment	3.9± .9	4.1± .9
Applies knowledge of marketing principles to decision making	3.9± .8	3.6±1.0
Serves as clinical nutrition resource to medical staff ^c	3.9±1.1	3.4±1.1
Creates business plans incorporating both financial and operational data ^{cd}	3.9± .9	3.2±1.2

Demonstrates understanding of payment and reimbursement models and their effects on providers ^c	3.8±1.0	3.3±1.1
Develops capital budgets ^d	3.8± .8	3.4±1.3
Participates in education of dietetics students (preceptor, developing materials, teaching classes) ^c	3.8±1.0	3.0±1.1
Demonstrates knowledge of factors that affect information services, such as networking and security ^c	3.7± .8	3.1±1.0
Interprets research for use in practice ^c	3.5±1.0	2.7±1.1
Conducts research ^c	3.4±1.0	2.4±1.1

^aScale: 1=Extremely Unimportant, 2=Somewhat Unimportant, 3=Neutral, 4=Somewhat Important, 5=Extremely Important

^bSD=Standard Deviation

^cRating of foodservice director differs significantly (p<0.05) from rating of administrator by using Mann-Whitney analysis

^dRatings differ significantly (p<0.05) among level of education by using Kruskal-Wallis analysis

Foodservice directors and administrators were asked to identify and rate other competencies and skills they believed were important for foodservice directors to be successful. Responses from administrators suggested that foodservice directors should have ability to “cross-training supervisors,” “demonstrate effective staffing strategies,” and “coaching in a positive way.” Foodservice directors considered “proficiency in the culinary arts” as an important needed skill. Results support work by Canter, Moorachian and Boyce (2007) which found that food and nutrition professionals believed food and culinary knowledge and skills were important competencies for dietetic practice and strengthened practice as dietetic professionals.

Results from this study exemplify differences between administrators and foodservice directors including diversity in educational credentialing. Only four foodservice directors were registered dietitians; most were certified dietary managers (n=21) or certified food protection professionals (n=13). Stonerook and colleagues (1999) found similar results in their study of foodservice directors employed in long-term care facilities. Gregoire et al. (2005) reported fewer than half of foodservice departments in acute care hospitals were managed by registered dietitians. This may reflect an unrecognized problem related to the quantity and quality of academic preparation in foodservice management for dietetics curricula or compensation of foodservice directors in AFLs. Gregoire et al. (2005) recommended that the profession explore strategies to enhance dietitians’ interest in courses in health care foodservice management and to determine the most effective education preparation.

The levels of education also differed between administrators and food service directors ranging from some high school to attainment of graduate degrees. Foodservice directors were more likely to have completed high school or an associate degree program in hospitality management and culinary art major, whereas, administrators had earned at least a bachelor’s degree. The academic majors of the administrators included a wide range of disciplines such as long-term care administration, finance and management, nursing, and/or social work. Variability among the education of administrators suggests that qualifications are not standardized for employment in long-term care. Mollica (2006)

reported that administrators were adequately prepared for their positions and had attained state requirements.

Both groups rated “acts as effective team leader and/or member” highest in importance and “conducted research and interpret research for use in practice” lowest in importance. Findings support results of previous work conducted in different settings (hospital versus assisted living facilities) reinforcing an emphasis on the need for demonstrated proficiency in management competencies (Dowling, Lafferty, & McCurley, 1990; Gregorie et al., 2005). Research skill was rated least important for foodservice directors and administrators. However, foodservice professions should recognize the need of research in order to discover and reflect shifting paradigms in long-term care. ADA position paper (Fanelli-Kuczmariski, & Weddle, 2005) suggest that conducting research to document outcomes that establish the cost-effective provision of appropriate nutrition service to quality of live was crucial for older adult.

Significant difference ($p \leq 0.05$) was found between foodservice directors and administrators in the importance rating of eleven business skill-related competencies. Foodservice directors viewed those competencies significantly more important than administrators. The competencies rated as 4.0 or higher are currently listed in the 2002 Commission on Accreditation for Dietetic Education Accreditation Handbook in the knowledge and performance statements (2006).

Conclusions and Applications

The purpose of this research was to evaluate competencies and skills needed for successful employment as future foodservice directors in ALFs. Educational attainment, academic major, professional credentials, and importance ratings between foodservice directors and administrators differed. Distinctive competencies appear to be important for those aspiring to become ALFs’ foodservice directors.

An ADA position paper (Lafferty & Dowling, 1997) stated that effective management of healthcare foodservice and nutrition service is best accomplished by dietetic professionals. The availability of registered dietitians (RDs) was an important quality indicator for food and nutrition services in ALFs (Chao et al, 2007). However, our findings are similar with Gregoire et al. (2005), that is, the majority of foodservice directors were not under the direction of a RD. Future research should focus on attracting dietetic students and determining how best to better prepare them for working in ALF or long-term care foodservice management positions.

Awareness of the competencies and skills that ALF administrators and foodservice directors identified as important is particularly valuable for those beginning careers or those who are considering an employment change to this arena. Educators working with graduates of Dietetic Programs in Dietetics, Coordinated Programs, and Dietetic Technician Registered programs, rely on standardized, approved, competency driven curricula to prepare students for the work world. They must not ignore ongoing research and the valuable perspective of current employers in the desired work settings.

Acknowledging needed competencies and skills can guide both formal and self preparation prior to undertaking work in ALFs or related long-term care environments. Being cognizant of the priorities and importance ratings of administrators and foodservice directors is also critical for consultants considering or currently working in ALFs or long term care settings since these administrators and foodservice directors most

often determine position descriptions, contracts, and services desired. Food and culinary knowledge and clinical expertise are developed in academic programs and may prepare dietetics professionals for their first employment opportunities and/or strengthen their practice as dietetic professionals (Canter et al., 2007). However, attention to the business component in management, financial and foodservice skill sets is also needed and valued by employers (Dowling et al, 1990; Sneed, Burwell, & Anderson, 1992). Those professionals with a desire to learn new skills or those adding to their professional development and portfolio documentation would do well to consider the numerous and increasing opportunities afforded by ALFs. Canter et al. (2007) suggests RDs or dietetic technicians who want to build their new skills in culinary art can join a Food and Culinary professional group, such as Research Chef Association or by browsing online culinary programs.

Limitations of this study were a low response rate (10.2%). Accepted methods to elicit best responses were used, i.e. having a clearly written, simple to read, brief survey questions with a cover letter, verifying accuracy of addresses prior to mailings, securing names of the personnel at randomized sites, completing reminder mailings, providing incentive and avoiding major holidays. Differences between those who responded and those who did not are largely unknown. A suggestion for future work with these particular groups is to collect the data through telephone interview, web survey or in face to face professional meetings or conferences.

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