

## NACUFS (2025)

### Employee Development Program of the Year

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Sharpening Skills, Building Futures: Vanderbilt Culinary Academy

Vanderbilt University

#### Introduction:

The Vanderbilt Culinary Academy (VUCA) is transforming the future of campus dining, one chef at a time, through an innovative approach to workforce development. Under Chef Douglas Best's leadership, VUCA features a curriculum that prepares staff for career advancement by equipping them with a comprehensive skill set and qualifying them for American Culinary Federation (ACF) certification.

VUCA addresses workforce challenges by offering a structured training program for Campus Dining staff. Through a blend of classroom instruction and hands-on kitchen practice, the program equips participants with essential culinary skills.

#### Essay:

The Vanderbilt Culinary Academy (VUCA), launched in 2021 through a partnership between Vanderbilt University and Nashville State Community College, addresses hospitality workforce challenges that intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Designed as a two-tiered employee development initiative, VUCA equips dining staff with essential and advanced culinary skills through a structured blend of classroom instruction, hands-on kitchen training, and mentorship.

Level 1 spans eight weeks, with participants dedicating one full day each week to training. Each eight-hour session focuses on core competencies such as knife techniques, butchery, mise en place, food safety, and kitchen professionalism. Graduates of

Level 1 are eligible to enroll in Level 2, a 16-week advanced curriculum that continues the one-day-per-week format and explores leadership, global cuisine, nutrition, menu planning, and more.

Graduates receive a certificate of completion, professional chef's knives, and a uniform patch, recognizing their achievements and new skills. The program ensures participants gain both theoretical knowledge and practical expertise, directly enhancing job performance and career potential.

Beyond individual development, VUCA contributes to employee retention and morale, strengthening the local hospitality talent pipeline. Vanderbilt's investment in workforce advancement reflects a commitment to operational excellence and long-term community impact.

#### Introduction:

In today's fast-paced work environment, retaining skilled employees is more important than ever. VUCA plays a key role in this effort by offering Campus Dining staff a pathway to enhance their skills, gain professional recognition, and feel valued within the organization. By fostering a culture of growth and collaboration, VUCA helps create a positive work environment that strengthens employee loyalty and satisfaction, ultimately reducing turnover and promoting long-term retention.

#### Essay:

VUCA serves as a powerful tool for employee retention by focusing on skill enhancement and professional growth. Participants gain advanced culinary techniques and expand their capabilities, which not only improves job performance but also boosts overall job satisfaction and pride. This tangible career development, reinforced by earning ACF certification and receiving professional recognition, creates a lasting sense of achievement. As Chancellor Daniel Diermeier noted, "This program is a great point of pride for our university... a physical manifestation of our dedication to helping each member of our community realize their full potential."

Additionally, VUCA fosters a culture of lifelong learning and personal growth, cultivating a supportive and collaborative work environment. The academy's emphasis on teamwork and continuous improvement helps employees feel more connected and valued, enhancing their sense of belonging. Leadership support plays a crucial role; recognition from university leaders highlights the importance of the dining team's contributions to Vanderbilt's mission and strengthens their loyalty to the institution.

These efforts have paid off significantly: program participant turnover is 18% lower than the Campus Dining average. By investing in its staff through comprehensive training and meaningful recognition, VUCA sustains a skilled, empowered workforce committed to Vanderbilt's success.

#### Introduction:

VUCA plays a key role in shaping the future of Campus Dining by emphasizing internal growth and career advancement. The program cultivates a workforce eager to enhance their skills and take on greater responsibilities. Through its focus on professional development, VUCA not only strengthens retention but also creates a clear pathway for employees to advance within the organization. This internal development strategy reflects Vanderbilt's commitment to nurturing talent, ensuring that those seeking long-term career growth find both opportunity and support within the university.

#### Essay:

VUCA may not directly recruit new employees, but it plays a significant role in attracting talent by offering existing staff opportunities to elevate their careers. By fostering personal and professional growth, VUCA helps employees transition into new roles, empowering them to seek higher-level positions within the organization. The Academy's focus on skill development and certification positions Campus Dining as a place for long-term career growth, appealing to individuals who are looking for more than just a job, but a path to advancement.

This internal recruitment strategy aligns with Vanderbilt's commitment to continuous learning and workforce development. Instead of targeting external job seekers, VUCA attracts "career builders" – individuals who want to expand their culinary expertise and contribute to a more skilled, confident workforce. The program creates a culture where employees feel valued and supported, encouraging them to pursue opportunities for advancement.

As a result, VUCA strengthens retention and builds a stronger, more capable workforce, while enhancing Vanderbilt's reputation as an employer that prioritizes employee growth. This focus on internal development ultimately helps attract top-tier talent—those eager to grow within a respected institution that values their contributions and offers tangible opportunities for advancement.

Introduction:

The Vanderbilt Culinary Academy (VUCA) has become a powerful tool for enhancing employee satisfaction within Campus Dining. Launched in 2021, VUCA reflects Vanderbilt University's commitment to investing in its workforce by offering structured training, hands-on skill development, and pathways for career advancement. Employees who participate in the program report feeling more valued, engaged, and motivated. With recognition from university leadership and opportunities for American Culinary Federation certification, VUCA fosters a culture of respect, growth, and pride, leading to improved morale, retention, and a stronger sense of belonging among dining staff.

Essay:

The Vanderbilt Culinary Academy (VUCA) has significantly improved employee satisfaction within Campus Dining. Staff who complete the program gain more than just technical skills; they gain confidence, purpose, and recognition for their efforts. With certificates of completion, professional-grade chef tools, and formal graduation ceremonies, participants feel valued and proud of their accomplishments.

The program creates a workplace culture that supports growth and celebrates success. Turnover among VUCA participants is 18 percent lower than the department average, which reflects increased engagement and loyalty. Employees often express appreciation for the opportunity to learn and grow while working in a collaborative environment.

Support from university leadership further enhances morale. Chancellor Daniel Diermeier and other senior leaders regularly attend graduation events and publicly recognize the contributions of dining staff. This visible support reinforces employees' sense of importance and belonging within the university community.

VUCA has transformed Campus Dining into more than a place to work. It has created career pathways, improved communication and teamwork, and inspired long-term commitment. Staff who once saw their roles as jobs now view them as careers. By investing in employee development, Vanderbilt has cultivated a more skilled, connected, and satisfied workforce.

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