

New LIGHT Casino Advancement Program Graduates First Class of 23 ‘rising stars’

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Atlantic City, N.J. — Twenty-three of the Atlantic City casino industry’s “rising stars” graduated on March 5 as part of the first in-person certificate program created by the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism (LIGHT) at Stockton University.

The Integrated Casino Resorts Operations Certificate Program is an eight-work course providing an overview of the casino industry to those interested in getting their first job in the casinos or moving into higher levels of management if they are already working at a property, said LIGHT Faculty Director Jane Bokunewicz, who’s also a professor of Hospitality and Tourism Management Studies at Stockton.

“When you work in the casino industry, sometimes you are in one specific area, such as human resources or food and beverage, and you don’t always get to see the whole big picture,” she said.

Each week focused on a different area of the casino business — accounting and human resources, table games operations, slots operations, security and surveillance, regulation, hotel operations, food and beverage and marketing.

“I’ve been in the industry since 1990 and this was very helpful because at the beginning of my career as a security officer, I wasn’t offered this,” said Anita Scott, of Pleasantville, who works at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Atlantic City. “This gives me a little more knowledge about how everything works.”

The certificate has been a dream of Levenson, the CEO of the Cooper Levenson law firm, since he founded LIGHT at Stockton in 2010, Bokunewicz said.

“He’s worked as an attorney in the casino industry since its inception, and he thought the certificate fills a void providing something that’s really needed in the industry,” she said.

When creating the program, Bokunewicz said it was important to have it taught by casino industry experts.

“We wanted to give a networking opportunity for the students to meet people from different organizations,” she said. “We want them to get the latest information from people who do the job every single day and talk about the challenges the industry is facing.”

That was an important aspect for Dina Capaldi, an assistant security manager at Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa.

"I'm big on leadership. I like to hear other leaders speak and how they operate," said the Winslow Township resident. "I take a little bit from this person, and a little bit from that person and then you build your own career from bits and pieces of everyone else."

Robert Ambrose, a casino industry professional and consultant, taught the third week on slots operations and analysis. He appreciated being involved and said the program delivers a "profound message" to employees.

"This serves as validation for their dedication, fostering confidence as they progress within the organization and undertake greater responsibilities," he said. "This certificate program serves as a prime illustration of what can be achieved when these two sectors work together effectively."

Samantha Phommalya couldn't agree more. The 28-year-old from Egg Harbor Township started her career in 2018 as a hostess at the Hard Rock and has worked her way up to be the general manager at Kuro, a Japanese restaurant at the casino. She said she was especially proud since she was nominated to take the class.

"That was really great for me because that means they see something in me. I can build on my career," she said. "I've always looked at the casino as one team, so this just helped reaffirm that."

Several of the participants, including Phommalya, Capaldi and Scott, had their tuition paid for by their employers and many did not have college degrees.

"It means they are willing to put in the time and money for their employees to help them build their careers," Phommalya said.

And that's what the course is primarily designed for, Bokunewicz said.

"We said pick your rising stars. The people that have ambitions to move up," she said. "This will really help them as they get into those higher levels and need to know other aspects of the business."

Bokunewicz said LIGHT plans to offer the certificate again next year. The institute already offers a fully online certified tourism industry professional certificate and is considering creating other industry-focused certificates within Stockton's School of Business.

"The synergy between the hospitality industry and academic institutions is indispensable," Ambrose said. "It's a symbiotic relationship that has sometimes been underestimated. The potential for collaboration is vast."

PHOTOS (Credit: Stockton University)

Certificate1: The 23 members of the first cohort of the Integrated Casino Resorts Operations Certificate pose for a photo on the last day of class on March 5. The certificate was created by the the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism (LIGHT) in the School of Business at Stockton University.

Certificate 2: From left, Robert Ambrose, LIGHT Faculty Director Jane Bokunewicz and Greg Schaaf. Ambrose and Schaaf are two of the instructors in the certificate program.

Certificate3: Bill Fritz, the director of food and beverage at Caesars Atlantic City, leads his class on food and beverage operations during one week of the eight-week certificate course.

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