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## Assessment of Higher-Education Hospitality Programs

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# Assessment of Higher-Education Hospitality Programs

## **Abstract**

The function of assessment in higher-education hospitality programs is to improve student learning. Although the assessment process is common in higher-education institutions, examples of assessment practices in hospitality programs have not been made available to academic practitioners. This paper describes a method successful at formulating assessment in a hospitality college professional program.

## **Keywords**

Hospitality, Higher Education, assessment, academic, quality graduates

# Assessment of Higher-Education Hospitality Programs

By Matt A. Casado

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## INTRODUCTION

The current assessment movement has arisen primarily from outside academia, specifically from legislatures, employers, parents, and other constituents who have demanded better-quality graduates. The emphasis on quality assessment is particularly relevant when the final product of our academic institutions is correlated with the ever-increasing costs of putting students through college. In addition, accreditation commissions are focusing on standards and evaluation functions that make student learning outcomes central to the accreditation review process; this new focus emphasizes the application of accountability standards. Thus, assessment has become an unavoidable procedure of analyzing the output of academic efforts in order to improve programs and meet the requirements of external audiences and of accrediting bodies.

Since the 1990's, educational reformers have been seeking answers to two fundamental questions: How well are students learning? And, how effectively are instructors teaching? The first question is being addressed by the assessment movement. The second involves the matter of how to assess good teaching (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Classroom assessment directly answers the concerns about more effective teaching if it is performed with the premise in mind of applying the results of the assessment to achieving better student learning. While these reformers do not intend to dictate the learning outcomes of individual institutions, they insist on compliance with standardized learning goals and congruence between the institution's mission and its learning objectives, curricular offerings, and student learning outcomes. Institutions are also expected to use assessment data to enhance

organizational efficiency and to improve educational programs. This involves regular adjustments of pedagogy to better meet the needs of students and to develop strategies for gauging how much students are learning in their classes (Huba & Freed, 2000).

### **Assessment Focuses on Student Learning Outcomes**

Professional programs can respond to stakeholders and interested communities by establishing academic outcomes oriented toward professional practice. In addition, we should focus on student learning rather than teaching in order to improve students' college experiences. The idea of focusing on learning rather than teaching requires that we rethink our role and the role of students in the learning process. To focus on learning rather than teaching, we must challenge our basic assumptions about how people learn and what the role of the teacher should be. We must grapple with fundamental questions about roles of assessment and feedback in learning. We must change the culture we create in the courses we teach. We must change the focus of our paradigm regarding teaching and learning. For example, in a teacher-centered paradigm, knowledge is transmitted from professors to students, but in a learner-centered paradigm, students construct knowledge by gathering and synthesizing information and integrating it with the general skills of inquiry, communication, critical thinking and problem solving (Huba & Freed, 2000). Thus, the assessment of program effectiveness based on real outcomes should provide educators with the information to choose realistic methods for measuring and improving those outcomes.

Efforts to promote student-centered teaching and assessing should be made at the academic program level. Senge (1990) stated that, "systems thinking is a conceptual framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, patterns of change rather than static snapshots" (p. 68). For this reason, the outcomes of a system are based on how each part is interacting with the rest of the parts, not on how each part is doing.

It is important that student course outcomes be articulated at the program level. This poses challenges because usually professors set individual expectations for the subject matter they

teach when, in fact, the assessment should focus on students' achieving criterion-oriented knowledge and skills at the program level. For this reason, there must be a difference between course-level evaluation and program outcomes assessment.

### **Steps for the Assessment Process are Explained**

Because the basic purpose of assessment is to verify and improve student learning outcomes, the process should include the following steps:

1. Formulation of intended student learning outcomes, including what evidence in student work will be considered to determine the effectiveness of the program.
2. Selection of the assessment measures for
  - a) Direct evidence
  - b) Indirect evidence
3. Decision about the method for collecting, analyzing, reviewing, and interpreting the evidence.
4. Determination of when and how the findings will be communicated to the department chair/dean and disseminated among faculty for the improvement of learning.

The assessment process begins when faculty develop a set of intended learning outcomes, statements describing what students should know, understand, and be able to apply when they finish their passage through college. As Plater (1998) questioned: What does the degree mean and how can we prove it? The second step of the assessment process is designing data-gathering measures to assess whether or not intended learning outcomes have been achieved. This step obligates us to reach a thorough understanding of what we really mean by our intended learning outcomes (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Both direct and indirect assessment of student learning should be included (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Direct assessments may take a variety of forms: projects, products, papers, theses, exhibitions, performances, case studies, clinical evaluations, portfolios, interviews, and oral exams. In all these assessments we ask students to demonstrate what they know or can

do with their knowledge. Most of these forms of assessment can be incorporated into typical college courses. At the program level, we can gather assessment data from assessments embedded in courses (Huba & Freed, 2000). Indirect evidence provides signs that students are learning or have learned in our courses. Indirect assessments include self-report measures, such as surveys answered by students, alumni, or employers in which respondents share their perceptions about what students/graduates know or can do with their knowledge. Some examples of indirect evidence are: admission rates into graduate programs, placement rates of graduates into career positions, starting salaries, alumni perceptions of their career responsibilities and satisfaction, and end-of-course student evaluations that ask about the course (Suskie, 2004). Gathering internal and external feedback on our program is critically important in helping us understand our practice as teachers, involving and engaging participants, and making decisions based on data (Chaffee, 1997). Formative assessment involves gathering information from our students as a group during the course. This approach helps us make immediate changes to our courses to improve student learning. Summative assessment consists of gathering feedback at the end of the course. Instructors must decide which formative and summative assessment-gathering techniques are to be adopted to improve learning in the classroom or the quality of the program (Huba & Freed, 2000). Objective assessments are those that need no professional judgment to score correctly. Subjective assessments, on the other hand, yield several possible answers of varying quality. Many faculty would agree that a writing example is more convincing evidence of a student's writing skill than her answers to multiple-choice questions on how to write. The assessment evidence gathered can be summarized using rubrics. A rubric is a scoring guide: a simple list, chart, or guide that describes the criteria to be used to score graded assignments. Once the data have been gathered and summarized, the results should be analyzed in order to explain, predict, or explore the issues. The results can be scaled or ordered according to the data collected (Suskie, 2004). Finally, the results must be communicated clearly, accurately, and usefully to those involved, usually to the college faculty, administration, and students.

## **STUDENT LEARNING IS ASSESSED IN A HOSPITALITY PROGRAM**

Most higher education institutions today have student learning-outcome assessment policies in place. Descriptions of assessment programs at the departmental level, such as for education, English or biology, can be found in literature reviews, but the methods used to implement assessment programs in hospitality settings are rare. In all instances, a definition of assessment can be summarized as the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available in order to inform decisions about how to improve learning; in other words, assessment gathers indicators that will be useful for decision making. Faculty make informed judgments about student critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, professional knowledge, or other qualities of student work without having to use standardized testing; faculty then use these judgments to inform departmental and institutional decisions. These decisions, based on the best possible data, pertain to curriculum, pedagogy, advising, and student support. In addition, departments that pay careful attention to student learning can help create a climate of caring and engagement that supports students' own commitment to their learning (Walvoord, 2004).

Assessment, however, is an activity that includes some difficulties as well as possibilities. There are always factors beyond the program's control, such as the students' academic background when they join the institution, lack of academic support resources, or the students' own reasons for being in college. On the other hand, assessment can provide a way to discover what is really happening; it serves as the basis for actions that can gain widespread support for improving student learning (Walvoord, 2004). In a college or university where the faculty take a learner-centered approach, the assessment process takes place at all levels—the institution, the program, and the course. The system is fundamentally the same at all levels, the process at one level being related to the process at another. Thus, the quality of student learning at the end of the program—the focus of program or institutional assessment—depends in part on how and how well we

are assessing student learning in our courses. In turn, the quality of student learning depends on the type of information yielded by program assessment data. Program assessment and classroom assessment interact to provide data to enhance student learning (Huba & Freed, 2000). Practical examples of the many ways in which faculty have approached assessment at their institutions can be found in the case examples provided by Banta, Lund, Black & Oblander (1996).

A continuing challenge in higher education is using assessment findings to inform curriculum improvements (Ewell, 2002). The assessment effort presented in this paper took place at Northern Arizona University (NAU), Flagstaff, an institution accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. The comprehensive evaluation team, which conducted a site visit in 2007, found that the university fulfilled all the criteria for continued accreditation. In 2009, NAU was one of two institutions to receive the Council of Higher Education Accreditation award for institutional progress in student-learning outcomes. The university-wide assessment process was launched after the revitalization of the University's Office of Academic Assessment (OAA) in 2005. The drive behind it was the accreditation body's requirement for academic accountability in adopting assessment processes intended to adjust curricula and thereby improve student learning. The OAA established that all undergraduate and graduate degree programs must implement assessment plans focusing on program-specific learning outcomes identified by each unit. These plans are reviewed annually by a faculty-led University Assessment Committee, an arm of the university's faculty senate. All academic units are asked to submit annual reports highlighting assessment activities during the academic year and to show how the assessment data collected were used to improve curricula and to identify progress in student-learning outcomes.

Beginning in the 2006-2007 academic year, NAU's School of Hotel and Restaurant Management (SHRM) adopted the process of establishing clear, measurable learning goals, and gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well student



learning matches the expected outcomes. Specifically, the technical/professional goals were those stated in the hospitality core courses offered in the SHRM program curriculum (operational strategies) while other outcomes considered were in the areas of students' communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (managerial strategies).

A course effective for gathering assessment indicators useful for decision making in higher education programs is the senior seminar or capstone course. In this course, students are required to compile comprehensive portfolios of their work. The portfolio is worth 25% of the final grade and requires students to keep samples of direct evidence, such as the resolution of quantitative operational cases, and indirect evidence from reflective essays. Suskie (2004) recommended the use of reflective essays to encourage synthesis of course material and learning through metacognition. Results of these indirect methods do complement those of direct methods as proposed by Maki (2004). The instructor of the senior seminar capstone course first and the department's assessment committee later, evaluate examples of students' work and final projects and use the information for curricular and pedagogical improvements in the future. This is achieved by reporting annually to the department's executive director, outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the students' work in relation to pre-established departmental learning goals.

The School offers two sections of its capstone course to cover discussion and in-class resolution of cases of most topics taught in core courses offered in the SHRM curriculum. This course focuses on operational situational experiences (technical/professional competencies) and on managerial strategies (related to communication, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills). The measurement of student-learning goals in technical/professional experiences is conducted from the assessment of portfolio assignments and from a comprehensive midterm test; the measurement of managerial strategies is determined from assessment of portfolio case assignments and from the resolution of a comprehensive case given to students as a

final examination. The SHRM's assessment efforts are complemented by a senior exit survey and an alumni survey.

### **The Assessment Process Consists of Specific Activities**

The degree-program assessment plan consists of the following activities:

- Quantitative assembling of technical/professional performance related to hospitality core courses offered in the SHRM program from technical/professional resolution of student portfolio assignments and a midterm examination.
- Qualitative analysis of managerial strategies related to communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills from student resolution of case-study portfolio assignments and from the resolution of a comprehensive case given to students as a final examination. Two outcomes were identified to assess student writing:
  1. To think critically and analytically and to integrate and synthesize knowledge.
  2. To communicate effectively with logical considerations in conveying ideas.

Two other program-assessment activities are conducted to supplement the quantitative and qualitative information described above. The main purpose for gathering this information is to establish benchmarks against which future data can be compared:

- A quantitative analysis of graduating seniors' perceptions towards the core courses of the SHRM program, using an exit-survey questionnaire. A qualitative analysis of graduating seniors' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the program.
- A quantitative analysis of alumni perceptions of the core courses of the SHRM program, using a survey. A qualitative analysis of alumni perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

## **A Method to Assess Learning Outcomes is Adopted**

The measurement of quantitative student reasoning achievement in technical/professional concepts is conducted by the members of the program assessment committee (PAC) from scores obtained from portfolio assignments and from the midterm examination on questions related to the following core courses: Food Operations Management, Beverage Operations Management, Housekeeping Department Management, Front Office Management, Sales and Marketing, Engineering, Quantitative Operational Controls, and Hospitality Accounting.

A subjective measurement of communication, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills is conducted from in-class portfolio situational case resolution. The evaluation of managerial strategies related to strategic planning, organizational behavior, human resources management, law and ethics, and leadership skills is conducted from student resolution of a comprehensive case study in the final examination.

Information about the students' skills, knowledge, development, quality of writing, and critical thinking can be acquired through a comprehensive collection of work samples (Black, 1993). This method of assessment is effective because the courses themselves become the instruments for assessing student teaching and learning (Julian, 1996). The performance of student portfolio work, and midterm and final exams is summarized using rubrics (See Table 1), guidelines that clearly articulate performance expectations and proficiency levels (Andrade, 2000). Rubrics identify benchmarks for success and provide consistent means of assessing subjective tasks or characteristics, such as writing, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills, thereby helping educators measure and document student progress while presenting informative feedback about the process and products of learning (McGury, Shallenberger, & Tolliver, 2008).

**Table 1**  
**Rubric for the Analysis of Student**  
**Portfolio Work from the Sample Measured**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Outstanding</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Basic</b>	<b>Unacceptable</b>
<p><b>Quantitative Portfolio Assignments</b></p> <p>Scores from the resolution of practical professional cases completed in class.</p>	<p>The percentages falling between 90 and 100 for completing all assignments correctly</p>	<p>The percentages falling between 80 and 90.</p>	<p>The percentages falling between 70 and 80.</p>	<p>The percentages falling below 70.</p>
<p><b>Qualitative Portfolio Assignments</b></p> <p>Communication, problem- solving and critical-thinking skills from situational cases completed in class.</p>	<p>The subjective analysis of work completed showing a higher-than-average degree of achievement.</p>	<p>The subjective analysis of work completed showing an average degree of achievement.</p>	<p>The subjective analysis of work completed showing a below-average degree of achievement.</p>	<p>The subjective analysis of work completed showing an unacceptable degree of achievement.</p>
<p><b>Midterm examination</b></p> <p>Specific scores from quantitative problems on eight core courses (students were not tested for quantitative reasoning on human resources, law and ethics).</p>	<p>Out of 50 maximum points possible, students scoring between 45 and 50 points.</p>	<p>Out of 50 maximum points possible, students scoring between 40 and 45 points.</p>	<p>Out of 50 maximum points possible, students scoring between 35 and 40 points.</p>	<p>Out of 50 maximum points possible, students scoring below 35 points.</p>
<p><b>Final examination</b></p> <p>Strategic planning, organizational behavior, human resources, law and ethics, and leadership skills from a comprehensive case study given to students as an end-of-the-semester test.</p>	<p>The subjective analysis of the resolution of a complex case study showing a higher-than-average degree of achievement.</p>	<p>The subjective analysis of the resolution of a complex case study showing an average degree of achievement.</p>	<p>The subjective analysis of the resolution of a complex case study showing a below-average degree of achievement.</p>	<p>The subjective analysis of the resolution of a complex case study showing an unacceptable degree of achievement.</p>

The survey of the seniors' perception of the core courses offered in the SHRM curriculum is conducted during the last week of class and consists of having to rate the perceived value of the courses on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. The seniors' perception survey of the strengths and weaknesses of the program is gathered from open-ended statements. Using this method, departments have reported gaining insight into how students experience courses, what they like and do not like about various instructional approaches, what is important about the classroom environment that facilitates or hinders learning, and the nature of assignments that foster student learning (Dyke & Williams, 1996).

The survey of the alumni's perception of the core courses taken at SHRM is conducted using the Internet and consists of having to rate their perceived value of the courses taken on a scale ranging from 1 to 5. The questionnaire also asks open-ended questions about what the alumni perceive to be strengths and weaknesses of the program. The primary use of the data collected in the questionnaire is to help the program assess the students' perceived quality of the teaching and to find out what alumni think about the applicability of the curriculum to real life.

## **FINDINGS**

- **Technical/professional**

The scores obtained from the technical/professional concepts are compared with the course competencies. In this particular academic year, specific deficiencies were identified in the areas of Food and Beverage Operations Management, Housekeeping Management, Front Office Management, Sales and Marketing, Engineering Management, Food Cost Controls, and Hospitality Accounting.

- **Communication, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills**

The analysis of student work from portfolio assignments showed that the majority of students achieved higher-than-expected critical-thinking skills training, which required them to analyze and resolve hospitality operational

situations and cases. Most seniors also demonstrated maturity and intuitive managerial know-how usually required of junior managers in entry-level positions. Seniors communicated well in oral presentations and discussions. Most students were able to synthesize concepts effectively when presenting written responses to cases. A negative result, however, was common spelling mistakes, a matter of concern for graduating seniors. As potential hospitality managers, most students were able to grasp concepts, go directly to the core of the problem, and transfer theoretical knowledge to the resolution of a real hospitality situation presented as a complex case study in the final exam.

- Senior exit survey and alumni survey

The results from the quantitative analysis of the data by course from the senior seminar exit survey and alumni survey provided the student ranking of the core courses offered in the SHRM curriculum. The range of scores spanned from 2.94 to 4.43 on a scale of 1 to 5. The results were tallied and presented in table format. The three core courses with highest and lowest scores were highlighted. Nonetheless, the following caveat statement was added: The research committee makes it clear that the purpose of this analysis is formative as there may be several factors affecting the rating of the courses taught; for example, the difficulty of the subject matter or the academic rigor used by instructors teaching the courses.

- Analysis of student comments

The committee found that about 50% of the students who responded to the survey thought that HRM is an excellent program. Overall, students seemed satisfied with HRM's advising office, the lab experience, and the recruiting process. Most responders found the computers in the technology lab to be too slow and felt that their experience in this facility was way below the standards found in other campus technology facilities.

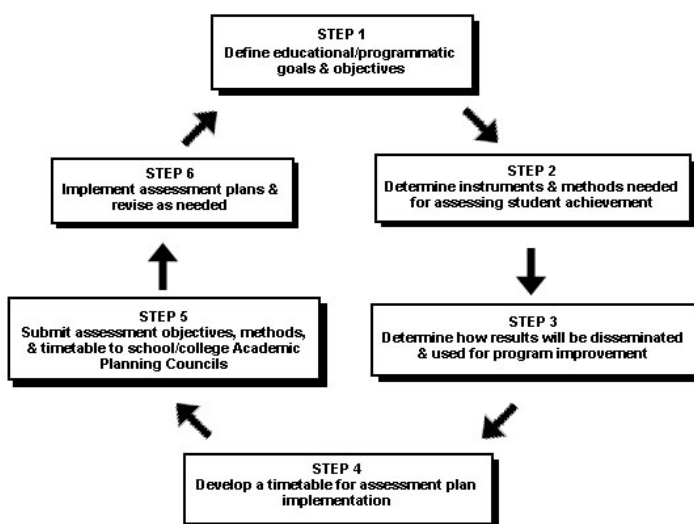
## PROPOSED CHANGES IN CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND USE OF RESOURCES

The results of the calendar-year assessment effort were provided to the SHRM Curriculum Committee. This committee accepted the report as written and forwarded a copy to all faculty members. The executive director of the program contacted the individual instructors involved, addressing the anomalies found in their respective courses and recommending remedies for correcting these deficiencies. Instructors were asked to refine the content of their courses for the upcoming academic year. The executive director forwarded a list of corrective actions undertaken by the instructors involved to the SHRM assessment committee. A petition for resources to update the student technology facility was forwarded to the dean.

### *A circular model helps implement assessment*

The program assessment process discussed above was developed and implemented using a circular model that included six basic steps:

Figure 1  
Developing and Implementing a Departmental  
Assessment Plan for Programmatic Improvement



Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison Web page

Step 1. The educational goals and objectives of the program were defined: specifically, student technical/professional concepts on eleven core subjects that students must complete prior to graduation and on managerial strategies related to communication, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.

Step 2. The instruments and methods were identified: specifically, portfolio assignments, midterm and final tests, and senior and alumni surveys.

Step 3. Determination of how results were going to be disseminated and used for program improvement, specifically by involving the program assessment committee, program executive director, curriculum committee, and faculty.

Step 4. A timetable for the assessment process was determined: collection of portfolio assignments through two academic-year semesters, gathering of senior perception surveys twice a year, and sending out periodic questionnaires to alumni for their perceptions of the program.

Step 5. The content of the assessment program, methods, and timetable were made known to all stakeholders by the PAC: instructors of core and senior seminar courses, program executive director, curriculum committee, and students.

Step 6. The plan was implemented, the results were analyzed by the PAC, recommendations were forwarded to the executive director, goals and objectives were revised, and those faculty members involved were notified.

Through the program assessment process, students and other important constituencies within the institution learned about the effectiveness of student learning. The program assessment function can be summarized as being a three-step cycle: 1) defining student learning goals, 2) assessing how well students have achieved these goals, and 3) using assessment results to improve student learning.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

There are examples of successful assessment efforts. A case in point is that of California State University, Monterey Bay



(CSUMB). Driscoll & Wood (2007) published an extended case study on the development of outcomes assessment at CSUMB, interspersing abundant background information, insights, reflections, how-to advice, and examples of other institutions. They concluded that CSUMB appears to have developed a culture that is genuinely learner-centered, but at the same time they admit that an outcomes-based culture cannot be developed with a quick fix or a ready-made approach and that the work is an ongoing process that is never really finished. According to the authors, this campus has come up with the following definition of assessment: “a dynamic pedagogy that enhances, extends, supports, and expands student learning” (p.35).

Because of the work involved at administrative, departmental, and faculty levels, creating a culture of assessment in an academic unit of any size is a huge challenge. According to Bennion and Harris (2005) in their report on changing the academic culture at Eastern Michigan University, “establishing such a culture is not an easy task” (p. 9). At Northern Arizona University, all the time and effort that went into the introspective assessment was worthwhile as the effort eventually led to improved teaching and learning. As in reports from other writers, faculty did not feel that they were policed by the assessment process; rather, they perceived that program assessment was a formative tool to make appropriate future teaching decisions in order to improve student learning (Suskie, 2004). Because the outcomes assessment effort is an iterative, ongoing process that requires consistent attention and annual updating, the assessment effort can be referred to as a type of action research, intended not so much to generate broad theories as to inform local action (Paradis & Dexter, 2007). The School will continue to assess its program under the belief that it is the most effective way to address accreditation requirements, to effect an in-depth pedagogical introspection and, most importantly, to achieve the best possible approaches to student learning. Perhaps the next emphasis should be to encourage and recognize assessment efforts in faculty evaluation and departmental reviews. It is essential that assessment-driven improvements be widely publicized, recognized, and applauded. Integrating assessment into the daily life of the campus community

requires clear and direct leadership, starting with the institution's president and continuing with the faculty on the assessment committee. Anagnos, Conry, Guenter, Snell, and von Till (2008) suggested that assessment efforts, as applied at San Jose State University (SJSU), must be sustainable, meaning that the process must involve the creation of incentives, rewards, and infrastructure to achieve a state of continual assessment that is accepted as part of everyday work rather than viewed as an intermittent process that restarts with each external review. Sustainable assessment, then, is defined as a process that has become the cultural norm for university faculty, administrators, and staff, who continually collect and evaluate data and then use that evaluation to improve courses and programs and integrate learning in order to meet the needs of students.

Faculty development is another important component of assessment infrastructure. The Center for Faculty Development at SJSU sponsors several workshops each year on assessment topics, including development of student-learning objectives. In some cases, the Center and the Office of Undergraduate Studies have combined resources to sponsor on-campus speakers, workshops, and conferences.

The assessment process in two-year colleges has been particularly difficult because of the lack of assessment experience of adjunct faculty. In some community colleges, as a first step, efforts are being made to clarify the essence of assessment. Sinclair Community College, for instance, has developed a set of definitions, complete with examples, to assist adjunct instructors with data collection and analysis and to improve practice. Faculty members are helped to understand the difference between evaluation and assessment. A clear example of evaluation is the instructor correcting an examination and assigning a degree of 82% to a student, but in assessment, the same instructor would provide feedback to the student regarding performance on the test so that the student uses the feedback to study differently in order to improve learning and outcome (Goldman & Zakel, 2009).

Future empirical research is needed to evaluate assessment efforts in higher education hospitality programs. The method used

in this study could be replicated and the results made available to ascertain the function of assessment in this type of program and to generalize findings. In any case, hospitality programs should develop assessment processes focusing on learner-centered paradigms.

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