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Matt A. Casado

Northern Arizona University, null@nau.edu

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Abstract

Corporate recruiters and alumni of the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management at Northern Arizona University were asked their perceptions of hospitality professional courses. The study investigates the importance that these groups attribute to 22 professional courses commonly offered in institutions of higher education.

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by
Matt A. Casado

Corporate recruiters and alumni of the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management at Northern Arizona University were asked their perceptions of hospitality professional courses. The study investigates the importance that these groups attribute to 22 professional courses commonly offered in institutions of higher education.

Almost every institution of higher education at the four-year level has certain “core” requirements which must be satisfied before a student can graduate. Often these requirements comprise almost half the hospitality student’s curriculum. The courses themselves tend to vary with each program, with some emphasizing food and beverage operations, others hotel or institutional management, and still others, financial analysis.¹

European hospitality schools integrate a great deal of technical, task, and skill-oriented material in the curriculum, especially in the food and beverage area. Typical curricula tend to emphasize skill development and practice in such areas as pastry production, dining room service, and actual accounting machine and computer operations.²

Whatever emphasis a school decides to give its curriculum, a number of core and elective professional courses must be taken to provide students with adequate technical knowledge to fulfill the needs of the industry. Very often, faculty involvement in curriculum design is substantial, while input from industry experts and former students is, at best, limited.

The reason for the diversity of courses from one institution to another does, therefore, depend on the composition of the university’s industry advisory council, the background of the school’s curriculum committee members and dean, and the make up of the teaching faculty.

A pertinent goal would be to reach a consensus among the industry, alumni, and colleges on the professional courses needed to adequately prepare students in hotel and restaurant management. The purpose of this study is to analyze and rank the perceptions of these two groups on the technical hospitality courses commonly offered by institutions of higher education.

Search for the Right Curriculum Is Difficult

The “right” education of business leaders has been a long-lasting concern for industrial companies, institutions of higher education,

and students. Industry leaders have traditionally complained about students not being adequately prepared by universities; colleges and universities have worked hard to mix the right knowledge to be imparted to potential industry managers destined to lead companies of diverse business characteristics. Alumni have often complained about having to take college courses with no significant relevance to the jobs that they undertake after graduation.

Several studies have been conducted through the years to bridge the gap between the needs of business entities, the performance of universities, and the satisfaction of higher education students. Some experts have attempted to identify the skills needed by the hospitality managers of today's operations. Thomas E. Powers has merged the functions performed by persons of different levels of the modern organization described by Talcott Parsons with Robert Katz's conceptual frame of reference for thinking about management skills.

Powers identifies the following three skills at which the hospitality manager should be proficient: technical management skills, such as operational know-how; human skills, or the executive's ability to work well with others and to build an effective team; and conceptual skills that involve seeing the organization as a whole composed of interactive parts that in turn interact with systems external to the organization.³

Powers claims that today's complex operations cannot be managed with technical skills alone: "It is clear that organizations whose top men and women have the conceptual skills necessary to cope with an increasingly more complex environment of hospitality service will be those that survive and prosper into the 1990s."⁴ Because of difficulty of maintaining adequate staff levels already experienced by many operations, it can also be expected that the human skills of managers will become even more important in the future.

Industry Needs Must Be Met

Other business specialists are not sure that academe is providing students with the skills needed in the industry. Larry Hastie, vice-president for corporate development of the Bendix Corporation, in an article that appeared in the *Journal of Financial Management*, suggested that business education in our colleges and universities was losing pragmatic application and real world relevance.⁵

Another article published by *Collegiate News and Views* by William Muse, vice-chancellor for academic affairs at Texas A&M University, expressed concern that communication between industry and academic sectors had not been keeping pace with the changing conditions in the real-world environment.⁶

In the *Cornell H.R.A. Quarterly* Michael Lefever presented the views of nine deans or program directors on issues that will concern hospitality education as this century draws to a close. One of the views was that academe may not be producing the graduates that the industry needs. The panelists warned that unless hospitality

programs truly begin to differentiate themselves from other programs on campus with respect to curricula designed to make hospitality graduates valuable products to this industry, industry executives will continue to look elsewhere for their future managers.⁷ Because of the different opinions on the education of future managers, it would seem relevant to attempt to identify the perceptions of corporate recruiters and hospitality alumni toward the subject areas found in most hospitality curricula.

Perceptions of Recruiters and Alumni Are Investigated

The goal of this survey was to identify and compare the perceptions of corporate recruiters and alumni of the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management at Northern Arizona University as they relate to the 22 professional courses most commonly offered in the curricula of leading hospitality institutions of higher education.

The population of the study included corporate recruiters and alumni of the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management at Northern Arizona University. A sample of 150 recruiters was randomly selected from a list of 183 provided by the university's advisement and placement office. The list included nationwide hospitality companies interested in recruiting hospitality graduates from four-year institutions. The companies selected operated both lodging and restaurant units so as to homogenize the sample. The researcher expected a 38 percent rate of response, or a minimum of 57 valid responses so as to detect an anticipated medium effect at a statistical power of .90 for a two-tailed statistical test conducted at the .05 alpha level.⁸

From a list of 209 school graduates provided by the alumni office, 150 were randomly selected who graduated in 1988, 1989, and 1990. The investigator calculated a 38 percent rate of response, or a minimum of 57 valid responses so as to obtain an anticipated medium effect at a statistical power of .90.⁹

The study was designed to measure, analyze, and rank the perceptions of the respondent groups using descriptive/analytical statistics, and analysis of variance (ANOVA). The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-x, 1986).

The instrument consisted of a questionnaire with seven-point semantic differential scales;¹⁰ the polarities of the scales were reversed to minimize response sets.

Respondents Vary Widely by Rank

Had the total groups responded, the sample size would have been 150 recruiters and 150 alumni. The actual return was 110 or 36.7 percent of the 300 questionnaires sent; 55 individuals in each category responded.

Some of the recruiters who responded held titles such as recruiting coordinators, vice-presidents of human resources, human resources managers, personnel managers, directors of human resources, directors

of employment, directors of personnel, employment managers, corporate managers of human resources, professional staffing representatives, directors of recruitment, and managers of college relations. Companies represented included Walt Disney World, Regal/Aircoa, Holiday Inn Worldwide, Westin Hotels, Hyatt Hotels Corporation, Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Marriott Corporation, Stouffer Hotels and Resorts, Radisson Hotels International, Amfac Resorts, and Red Lions Hotels and Inns. Only recruiters of companies operating both food and beverage operations were selected.

Sixty percent of the alumni responding held current positions in food and beverage operations, 25 percent in other hotel departments, such as sales, accounting or personnel, and 2 percent in positions other than hotels.

The "F" ratios of the 22 professional hospitality courses treated by analysis of variance listed in Table 1 show a significant difference among the mean scores in four courses: Introduction to the Hospitality Industry, Housekeeping Operations, Hospitality Accounting, and Food Service Equipment and Layout. The null hypothesis of no difference among the means of these areas was rejected.

The perceptions of alumni toward Introduction to the Hospitality Industry were significantly different from those of recruiters. Evidently, alumni do not see that it is as important to spend a semester in a course that has no practical application when they are hired. Recruiters, on the other hand, seem to consider important learning the underpinnings of the hospitality career. There were also significant differences between the perceptions of recruiters and those of alumni toward Housekeeping Operations; recruiters attached more importance to the management of this department, in most cases the largest in hotels. This finding is particularly interesting since some universities have diminished the importance of this course by combining it with Front Office Operations. The perceptions of the alumni surveyed were also significantly different from recruiters on Hospitality Accounting; alumni perceived this course as less important than the recruiters did, perhaps because at the early stages of their careers hospitality graduates are not generally directly involved with accounting procedures.

The study also showed a significant difference concerning Food Service Equipment and Layout between recruiters and alumni, with recruiters viewing it as less important than alumni. The reason might be that, in practice, hospitality operators are provided with these services by industry consultants.

Tables 2 and 3 rank the order of importance that recruiters and alumni attribute to the 22 professional courses. The highest totals strongly point to the control of costs and the management of finances and personnel. Recent graduates consider Internship Work Experience their top priority. Alumni see the importance of gaining hands-on experience before joining the workforce. The two groups coincide in perceiving Fast Food Management as the last professional course in order of

Table 1
Difference in Perceptions of Importance
of Professional Courses Among Recruiters and Alumni

Professional Courses	Mean Scores		“F” Ratio
	Recruiters	Alumni	
1. Purchasing for Hotels & Rests.	23.5	22.55	.55
2. F&B and Labor Cost Control	14.09	15.73	1.51
3. Introduction to the Hosp. Industry	20.91	26.55	6.30*
4. Housekeeping Operations	20.18	27.00	8.16**
5. Hosp. Marketing and Sales	18.64	19.64	.24
6. Computer Applications	20.91	16.73	3.80
7. Front Office Operations	18.18	21.45	3.13
8. Principles of Food Preparation	24.82	25.45	.07
9. Principles of Management	14.36	15.73	.87
10. Fast Food Management	36.36	33.36	1.39
11. Hospitality Law	18.45	18.27	.01
12. Hotel Engineering	24.64	24.00	.07
13. Menu Planning	24.64	28.27	3.27
14. Convention and Group Planning	23.18	22.18	.29
15. Beverage and Bar Operations	22.77	21.09	.41
16. Hospitality Accounting	16.09	21.73	7.64**
17. Financial Analysis	19.00	17.82	.31
18. Industry Internship	14.64	15.09	.07
19. Resort Management	27.96	26.09	1.01
20. International Hosp. Operations	33.91	30.45	1.43
21. Food Equipment and Layout	34.64	25.82	13.40**
22. Hosp. Human Resource Management	14.36	16.73	1.93

*p < .05. **p < .01.
(Lower mean scores indicate more positive ratings)

Table 2
Order of Importance and Means
of 22 Professional Courses by Recruiters

	Mean
1. Food, Beverage and Labor Cost Control	14.09
2. Principles of Management	14.36
3. Hospitality Human Resources Management	14.36
4. Industry Internship Work Experience	14.64
5. Hospitality Accounting	16.09
6. Front Office Operations	18.18
7. Hospitality Law	18.45
8. Hospitality Marketing and Sales	18.64
9. Financial Analysis	19.00
10. Housekeeping Operations	20.18
11. Introduction to the Hospitality Industry	20.91
12. Computer Applications	20.91
13. Beverage and Bar Operations	22.77
14. Conventions and Group Planning	23.18
15. Purchasing for Hotels and Restaurants	23.45
16. Hotel Engineering and Maintenance	24.64
17. Menu Planning	24.64
18. Principles of Food Preparation	24.82
19. Resort Management	27.96
20. International Hospitality Operations	33.91
21. Food Service Equipment and Layout	34.64
22. Fast Food Management	36.36

Note: Judging from the intensity of the responses, courses one through nine were considered as "very" important; courses 10 through 19, as "quite" important; courses 20, 21 and 22, as "slightly" important.

importance. This result is understandable since recruiters were selected from companies operating both lodging and food and beverage; this generally means that they do not manage fast food operations. However, several alumni were employed by fast food operations and they also strongly agreed that the importance of this course is relatively low. Although this segment of the industry offers tremendous career opportunities, alumni might have found the management of fast food operations easy enough not to warrant having to take a semester course on the subject.

Study Is Useful to Develop Hospitality Curricula

Perhaps an equally important result of the study was the fact that the two groups did not differ on their perceptions of the remaining 18 hospitality professional courses. The results of this study can

Table 3
Order of Importance and Means of
22 Professional Courses by Alumni

	Mean
1. Industry Internship Work Experience	15.09
2. Principles of Management	15.73
3. Food, Beverage and Labor Cost Control	15.73
4. Hospitality Human Resources Management	16.73
5. Computer Applications	16.73
6. Financial Analysis	17.82
7. Hospitality Law	18.27
8. Hospitality Marketing and Sales	19.64
9. Beverage and Bar Operations	21.09
10. Front Office Operations	21.45
11. Hospitality Accounting	21.73
12. Conventions and Group Planning	22.18
13. Purchasing for Hotels and Restaurants	22.55
14. Hotel Engineering and Maintenance	24.00
15. Principles of Food Preparation	25.45
16. Food Service and Equipment Layout	25.82
17. Resort Management	16.09
18. Introduction to the Hospitality Industry	26.55
19. Housekeeping Operations	27.00
20. Menu Planning	28.27
21. International Hospitality Operations	30.45
22. Fast Food Management	33.36

Note: Judging from the intensity of the responses, courses one through eight we considered as "very" important; courses nine through 20, as "quite" important; courses 21 and 22, as "slightly" important.

be useful to develop pertinent curricula in institutions of higher education offering hotel and restaurant management programs. The subjects ranked highly in importance should be emphasized and considered core courses; those ranked lower could be offered as recommended electives or incorporated in core courses.

Since this study is primarily descriptive, causation cannot be inferred. However, several specific and general recommendations can be formulated. The following recommendations are based on the analysis of the data collected:

- Hotel and restaurant management school administrators should provide curricula emphasizing Food, Beverage and Labor Cost Controls, Principles of Management, Hospitality Human Resources Management Skills, and Monitored Practical Training in the industry prior to graduation.

- The teaching of Fast Food Management and Food Service Equipment and Layout should be discontinued as independent courses and incorporated in other food and beverage courses in the curriculum.
- Hospitality executives should be asked to cooperate with colleges and universities to provide internship experiences to hospitality students. This undergraduate training would benefit the industry by preparing students before they are hired.
- Hotel and restaurant management school administrators should include the teaching of Property Management (Housekeeping Operations) in core course requirements.

References

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⁵Larry Hastie, "A Perspective of Financial Management," *Journal of Financial Management*, (Winter 1982), pp. 55-62.

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⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Charles E. Osgood, G.J. Suci, and P.H. Tannenbaum, *The Measurement of Meaning*, (Urban, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1957), pp. 189-199 and 305-311.

Matt A. Casado is an assistant professor in the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management at Northern Arizona University.