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Abstract

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Current Perceptions of Hospitality Accreditation

by
Robert H. Bosselman

*The role of accreditation in hospitality education has always been controversial.
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The process of voluntary accreditation in educational disciplines has been an American phenomenon. Around the globe, government agencies are the usual source of accrediting educational programs. Today, more than 40 professional accrediting agencies serve as regulatory bodies for professional education. Programs which agree to peer evaluation are judged on standards determined to represent their respective professions.

Accreditation has greater importance today in light of society's increased interest in the quality of higher education, diminishing resources for higher education, and widespread dissatisfaction with higher education accountability. Perhaps professional accreditation will satisfy educational critics and provide valuable evidence of consistent and informative program assessment. It has long been accepted that specialized accreditation assures educational quality.¹

The actual process which has led to formalized hospitality accreditation began over two decades ago. A small group of educators within the Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education (CHRIE) theorized that accreditation would be one means by which to strengthen the position of hospitality education with respect to higher education in general. Their early work led to a CHRIE committee formed in the early 1980s, and the funding of doctoral research at Purdue University. From this research came the format for current hospitality accreditation, now under the auspices of the Accreditation Commission for Programs in Hospitality Administration (ACPHA).

ACPHA defines accreditation as "a communal self-regulatory process by which voluntary associations recognize educational institutions or programs that have been found to meet or exceed stated standards of educational quality; and assist in further improvement of the

institutions or programs.²² Today approximately 30 programs in hospitality education have achieved accreditation, and many others are engaged in the process. However, several large and well respected programs have opted out of accreditation. Hospitality accreditation has many critics who question the purpose and outcome of the process.

Conflicting Views Exist

The path to today's accreditation climate has not been without conflict. In one of the first studies on hospitality accreditation, Guyette³ noted that program administrators favored the concept of accreditation, but lacked the knowledge as to what constituted the organizational realities of hospitality accreditation. Van Kleek⁴ criticized the accreditation process, stating that the result would be lowered standards to please as many programs as possible. Waskey⁵ suggested that in the attempt to achieve academic stature, hospitality education was seeking to serve itself, and not students or the industry. This latter assessment was also identified by Tanke⁶ and Brady⁷, both of whom noted that most criticism of accreditation results from a lack of emphasis on student benefits.

Most hospitality educators would likely agree with the proposition expressed by Riegel and Powers⁸ that accreditation does not solve the problems facing the field. They noted that industry still questions the purpose/value of hospitality higher education. Individuals can enter this field with or without hospitality education, accredited or not. There are no formal educational requirements for entering the field of hospitality, nor have any long-term studies been conducted which measure the success of those already employed. Industry recruits at schools long recognized as producing top professional candidates. Unless these institutions fail at such a mission, industry will continue to seek graduates from their programs regardless of whether or not the program has met some educational criteria.⁹

Over the past two decades, hospitality education has grown significantly in number of programs and students. Whether or not hospitality education flourishes in the next century depends upon its ability to continually produce quality graduates. The diversity of needs associated with the hospitality industry suggests that no individual hospitality education program can serve the total industry. This does, however, suggest that some minimal standards be established to provide a quality educational foundation. Does specialized hospitality accreditation serve this function?

Perceptions of Accreditation Are Examined

Perceptions of accreditation were examined via a five-question instrument, based on work conducted by Stewart and Shute.¹⁰ It was reviewed by selected members of the graduate faculty of a large hospitality management program and then mailed, along with a cover letter containing a definition of accreditation, to the sample population.

This population was comprised of the following four groups:

- Directors of specialized accrediting agencies approved by the Council on Postsecondary Education (COPA). The population of 40 served as the sample.

- Administrators of hospitality management programs that were participating in the accreditation process. Some programs had filed applications only, while some had completed the accreditation process. The population of 48 served as the sample.

- University administrators of the aforementioned hospitality programs. The population of 48 served as the sample.

- Recruiting directors from hospitality corporations whom recruit at hospitality programs. A sample size of 60 was selected for the study.

A five response (1 = always, 5 = never) Likert-type instrument was mailed to all 196 members of the sample. At the end of three weeks, follow-up instruments were sent to non-respondents. In addition, the researcher randomly selected a number of non-respondents to contact by phone. The follow-up process resulted in additional returns, as well as interesting comments which might not have been included in the questionnaire's comment section.

Of the 196 sampled, usable responses were received from 101 (51.5 percent). By group, returns were as follows: accrediting agencies, 42.5 percent; hospitality administrators, 62.5 percent; university administrators, 62.5 percent; and recruiting directors, 40 percent. (See Table for mean scores). One of the 48 hospitality programs had initiated termination proceedings since filing an application; its instrument was returned blank. One of the 40 accrediting agencies had also ceased operations, and its questionnaire was returned undeliverable.

Quality Does Relate to Accreditation

The first question focused on the relationship between accreditation and program quality. Generally low numerical means were obtained from each sample group. Of the four groups, hospitality administrator scores were significantly higher than university administrator scores. While university administrator and accrediting agency scores represented the "usually" response, both recruiting directors and hospitality administrators leaned toward the "sometimes" response. The findings do suggest that a positive relationship between accreditation and quality exists, although further research would be required to more accurately define such.

At the very least, according to one accrediting agency representative, accreditation indicates the program is in sufficient compliance with published standards. While the accreditation process within hospitality education is relatively new, the differences noted may be of concern. As one hospitality administrator commented, there are several high quality programs which remain unaccredited. If hospitality educators do not value accreditation as a measure of quality then the long term potential of hospitality accreditation may be in doubt.

Table 1
Perceptions of Accreditation

Q1: Accreditation & Program Quality	Mean
Hospitality administrators	2.56a
Recruiting directors	2.46a
Accrediting agencies	2.31a
University administrators	1.96b
Q2: Job Potential	
Hospitality administrators	3.06
Recruiting directors	2.92
Accrediting agencies	2.75
University administrators	2.66
Q3: Recruiter Concern	
Hospitality administrators	3.73 a
University administrators	3.17 a
Recruiting directors	2.83 b
Accrediting agencies	2.66 b
Q4: Hiring & Accreditation	
Accrediting agencies	3.00 a
Recruiting directors	2.75 a
University administrators	2.64 a
Hospitality administrators	2.33 b
Q5: Accreditation Worthwhile	
Recruiting directors	2.46
University administrators	2.07
Hospitality administrators	2.07
Accrediting agencies	1.88

Scale: 1 = Always, 5 = Never

Significant differences indicated at $p < .05$.

Question two focused on the job performance potential of students from accredited hospitality programs. Hospitality administrators again registered the highest score of the four groups, although no significant differences were observed for this question. All four groups scores were in the "sometimes" category. As one hospitality administrator noted, just because individuals are exposed to quality instructors and information, it does not always follow that they use these resources. Accreditation focuses on the quality of the program, not the competence of individuals in the program. While graduates of accredited hospitality programs might be expected to perform, it cannot be

assumed they will actually do so. Another hospitality educator commented that with or without accreditation, students must still be developed into good managers and leaders. Should hospitality programs graduate unqualified students, the hospitality industry will quickly ascertain that such programs do not warrant recruiting visits or employment possibilities.

The third question asked if recruiters were concerned with whether a program was accredited or not. Hospitality administrator scores were significantly higher than both recruiters and accrediting respondents. Educator score represented the "seldom" category, while the other groups were indicative of a "sometimes" response. The combined mean score of all four groups was the highest of the five survey questions (3.2). This suggests that what industry looks for has only a slight relationship to whether the program has been accredited. Industry remains concerned foremost with whether the candidate possesses the skills capable of performing the job in question. However, the response from recruiters suggests that industry does seek some measure of quality. One industry respondent noted that top programs were selected for recruitment based on reputation, rankings, and past hiring success. Graduates of these programs can promote themselves with this information. Several hospitality administrators commented that if several of the larger, well known programs were to become accredited, then accreditation would more likely become a factor in recruitment and hiring.

Accreditation Benefits Graduates

Question four related directly to the question of hiring a candidate even though they graduated from a non-accredited program. Again hospitality administrators expressed significantly different responses than the other groups. While hospitality administrators responded that "usually" a qualified applicant would be hired regardless of the accreditation status of his/her program, the other groups suggested a "sometimes" answer. The latter scores imply support for accreditation based on perceived benefits to graduates in the job application process. As one accrediting agency representative indicated, if accreditation was not required for graduates to practice, then employers rely on the reputation of the program and the performance of past graduates. This seems to be underscored by the comments of an industry representative who noted that graduates of four year hospitality programs are assumed to be of high quality. If a decision came down to two candidates, one from an accredited program and one from a non-accredited program, the job would go to the applicant with the highest level of work experience. Comments from another accrediting agency representative provide a possible direction; hospitality accreditation needs to demonstrate that its standards address deficiencies that are concerns for employers.

The final question asked if accreditation was worthwhile. No significant differences were observed between the four groups in response

to this question. The overall mean score from all four groups was the lowest of any question (2.13). All four groups were in the "usually" category, suggesting that the process of accreditation was indeed beneficial. Hospitality administrators noted that accreditation helps to build the credibility of the academic discipline by providing a baseline of excellence. Thus, the self-study process was by its very nature quality enhancing. This was echoed in the accrediting agency responses, several of whom noted that the biggest value of accreditation was quality enhancement in the academic program. The status of accreditation indicates commitment to quality and substance. This commitment can possibly translate into enhanced status with university administrators. This latter group were particularly supportive of the process, noting the impact on the faculty involved in completing the self-study and planning for the future. Several noted that the value of the self-study was in keeping abreast of the current and future market of the discipline. This can be helpful for the hospitality program to get resources and support.

Study Raises Questions

The results of this study raise several questions for hospitality educators to address. If the purpose of accreditation is to establish that education of a particular quality takes place, educators have yet to be convinced. It appears that at present educators are best served by accreditation. Several comments characterized this; an industry representative stated that hospitality accreditation was unimportant to industry, and self-serving to education. A hospitality administrator noted that hospitality accreditation was more useful to the institution, and it only indicated that the particular program had met criteria based on its own stated objectives. Perhaps the most revealing comment came from an accrediting agency representative, who noted that a desire to professionalize education for an occupational area (held by a select group of educators) was not sufficient to establish an accreditation process.

Hospitality corporations must be identified as key players in the accreditation process. The performance of graduates in the industry should serve as a measure of quality. While the industry has diverse needs, this diversity must be addressed in the overall picture of accreditation. Employers are not only users of accreditation; they must have a stake in its composition. As one university administrator indicated, the standards of accreditation must be recognizable by industry. Accreditation as a process must meet a need that has been identified by both educators and industry. For accreditation to become relevant, it must demonstrate that without it, the needs of industry are not met. This perspective of quality assurance would likely lead to additional industry support for hospitality education.

The results of this study also suggest that accreditation has little to no effect on enhancing job opportunities for hospitality students.

Graduated students working in the industry should be the source of outcome measurements. In its truest form, accreditation would be outcomes-based. This study suggests that accreditation cannot yet provide assurances of job performance. However, several respondents indicated that it takes time for a new concept to have influence. One hospitality administrator suggested that as employers become more aware of the value of accreditation, they will place more emphasis on such programs.

The concept of accreditation did receive a positive response in this study. Since the general concept was viewed as favorable, the problem facing hospitality education would seem to be communication of its value. However, there also exist potential problems with the implementation. It would appear that hospitality accreditation has not made a strong case for its acceptance. Many educators originally involved in the accreditation conceptualization have been disappointed with its actual implementation. Most complaints focus on the vagueness of standards. Many also note there has been little attention paid to students and outcome measurements. Recent studies of professional academic fields have found that few accrediting bodies value outcome assessment as a major criteria for achieving accreditation.¹¹ At least three of the top hospitality programs have stated that they will not participate in the current accreditation process. There are multiple reasons for their sentiment, but perhaps the comment from one hospitality administrator sums it up best: "ACPHA has not evolved to a point where personal bias, politics, and favoritism are not the key elements for accreditation. Until this happens, the designation will be hollow."

Clearly, if hospitality accreditation were to become long term, then additional planning and revision may be required. Of concern was the finding that hospitality administrators have the lowest perceptions of the process. While the overall perception of accreditation was positive, questions related to the specific measures indicate that further study on the benefits of accreditation are necessary.

The accreditation process in hospitality education has been an expensive undertaking, and additional resources are needed for the future. A minority of programs have been involved in the process, while others continue to evaluate the costs and benefits to their respective programs. The process of hospitality accreditation would not have started unless educators recognized the need for professional standards. Accreditation can provide those standards. Tanke¹² noted that failure to maintain minimal standards provides no assurance that quality education has taken place. ACPHA has an opportunity to take corrective action on what seems to be a flawed process. If accreditation is to be part of hospitality education's plan for increased academic recognition then let students, educators, and industry representatives together revise it as a measure of professional achievement.

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