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Online Graduate Degree: Hospitality Executive Perceptions

Shane C. Blum

Texas Tech University, null@ttu.edu

Ben K. Goh

Texas Tech University

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Abstract

Distance education is an option that allows managers to continue with work while completing a program of study. The authors report on the establishment of a distance education graduate program and describe how participants learned of the program, what their motivations for participating were, how it impacted their jobs and personal lives, and what their initial reactions to the first courses were.

Online graduate degree: Hospitality executive perceptions

by Shane C. Blum, Tim H. Dodd,
and Ben K. Goh

Distance education is an option that allows managers to continue with work while completing a program of study. The authors report on the establishment of a distance education graduate program and describes how participants learned of the program, what their motivations for participating were, how it impacted their jobs and personal lives, and what their initial reactions to the first courses were.

As the hospitality industry matures, new companies are formed, others merge, and the competition becomes more intense. New regional and national chains, such as Brinker International, intensify this competition by bringing a host of marketing and management skills to the table. These skills have been used in other industries for many years. The reason why the hospitality industry did not use these skills historically is partly because of the lack of extensive formal education traditionally held by many hospitality practitioners, and the attitude that experience is the key

attribute required of management. Moreover, customers are becoming more demanding and expect improved and faster service, along with greater value from hospitality businesses.

With this increased pressure from competitors and customers, the need for hospitality managers to improve their decision-making abilities increases too. Managers who have risen through the ranks with little formal education are becoming fewer, and companies are pressing managers to increase their levels of education. Some companies such as J. Alexander's have policies of promoting people with certain educational qualifications and are assisting with this process by paying the tuition costs for management and hourly employees wishing to further their education.¹

This emphasis on supporting further education has become the norm for companies who are willing to invest in their management

and their futures. These organizations recognize the strategic advantage that a highly educated workforce provides.

Managers have options

Managers seeking to improve their knowledge and credentials have several options. They can become involved in self-study, attend in-house training programs, participate in industry conferences, or attend higher educational institutions. For managers who may not have an undergraduate degree in a hospitality or business-related discipline, a graduate degree provides both important credentials and some theoretical foundation to the practical experiences they have gained. As such, obtaining a graduate degree may be particularly attractive for this group.

Executive programs organized by universities are designed for managers with considerable experience and are typically taught on weekends or after regular business hours. The value of executive programs for managers already in hospitality is principally that these programs enable them to complete their degree without putting their careers on hold and turning to a full-time graduate program.

Universities have been offering a variety of distance education programs for a number of years in order to satisfy these needs. Because of the hours that many managers must work, some executive programs may be unsuitable

for many in hospitality-related businesses. For instance, many managers work weekends, which is the typical time when executive programs are offered. Therefore, it may be best to examine other alternatives for the delivery of these courses, and only recently has the Internet become a potential delivery method.

Program provides flexibility

Distance education includes any type of educational program where the learner and the instructor are at different physical locations.² The delivery method can include everything from printed study guides to videos, teleconferencing, and computer-based courses. These types of educational delivery methods provide a number of advantages for hospitality managers in particular. The majority of hospitality industry people work long and often unpredictable hours. Weekend work and travel are frequently standard parts of the job. As such, these managers may be reluctant to enroll in a traditional graduate program even if there is a university close by.³ They are concerned about the likelihood of being called away to their jobs and not being able to complete their courses. Distance courses can provide some flexibility to enable these managers to work at their own pace to finish their degree.

Distance education can, to some extent, help with this constraint because of the potentially flexible nature of the program. In

addition, as other managers seek increased educational levels too, a master's degree may become the norm for managers wishing to advance their careers. Thus, the perceived benefits of attending an executive program and obtaining a degree are likely to continue to increase.

During the early part of 1998, faculty discussions began within the Restaurant/Hotel and Institutional Management Program at Texas Tech University concerning the possibility of developing some graduate distance courses for executive students. Issues such as the types of courses to be taught, delivery method, and faculty involvement were discussed.

Several managers in a variety of hospitality businesses expressed interest in the program and indicated a desire to be members of the first class. Some of these people were recruiters to the campus; others were alumni of the undergraduate program or people who were associated with the program in other ways. At first, informal discussions occurred where faculty discussed the possibilities, benefits, and problems associated with establishing the program.

The faculty was generally supportive of the idea to move ahead, but there were concerns about the time it would take to establish the program, teach the courses, and recruit students. Concerns were also raised regarding the current reward compensation systems for teaching the courses and the impact on non-tenured faculty. In

addition, there were concerns about the technical knowledge that would be needed to develop an Internet-based course.

Cohort system used

In the early stages of the discussion concerning the structure of the program, it was decided to establish a cohort system. All of the students would start the program at the same time and take the courses together throughout the approximately two and one-half years it would take to complete. This structure would have several benefits with respect to course provision and the teamwork and camaraderie that could be developed within the group. Little effort was made to extensively publicize the program; through existing university contacts, seven managers were chosen to participate.

The managers had various levels of knowledge of the university. Two had graduated from the undergraduate program; the others had some contact through undergraduate student recruitment for their companies. Although the participants' familiarity with the program may have somewhat biased their reactions, the executives were encouraged to be as critical as possible to help with the future development of the program.

The individuals selected were from a range of backgrounds. Three were hotel executives, one a restaurant manager, one involved in high school education, another involved with institutional food

service, and one worked for a hospitality training organization. Six of the initial participants were male and one was female. Five of the participants had bachelor's degrees in hospitality while one had a degree in business and the other in history. Ages ranged from 31 to 48, and each person had at least five years of hospitality managerial experience.

The first course was a one-credit introductory course taught by the chair of the department; she had recently placed the course on the Internet for her traditional graduate students and it readily transferred to the executive program with some minor modifications. A second course was established that provided an overview of research methods, academic literature in hospitality, and an introduction to several topics that would be taken in later courses.

Four meetings were held in Dallas during the first semester. The first meeting began on a Saturday evening where the first course was introduced. This was then followed by an all-day Sunday session where the second course was outlined and some introductory course material was discussed. Students were provided with folders that included all the information they would need for their courses. They exchanged contact information, as some of the assignments required them to work together through electronic media.

During the last session of the

first course an extensive evaluation of the pilot program was conducted. Faculty members asked students to be especially candid in their assessments of the courses, their own time commitments, and other aspects associated with this first semester. A questionnaire was distributed to gauge reactions to the course, followed by a discussion regarding the positive and negative aspects of the program. Several key findings were noted from the written responses and the subsequent discussion.

Publicity is key

It is important for universities developing distance courses to understand the information sources, such as advertising or publicity material, which likely candidates use. University personnel can then focus their efforts upon providing this information so that it will reach the appropriate customers. Hospitality managers are flooded with information; therefore, it is important that programs choose the appropriate vehicle through which to provide information to these managers about such programs. Participants generally indicated that they first heard about the program from their contacts with faculty and administrators in the department. One of the students learned about the program through a trade show and contacts with other participants. This result is certainly not surprising, as the department did little to publicize the program. There were no press releases or

advertising in trade journals or conference materials developed to attract this first cohort.

In the future, programs are more likely to use a range of media to try to reach managers, including direct mail to specific groups such as alumni. Alternatively, they may target companies specifically seeking this type of management training. Public relations and publicity efforts, as well as advertising, would be other likely approaches.

In this case there were two main sources of information used to learn about the program: through friends who had heard about the program and through professional contacts who passed the information along. There are many other potential sources, however, that could be used to gain knowledge about the degree. For instance, the university could use public relations activities, print brochures, an Internet site, and print advertising.

Table 1
Purposes for pursuing a graduate program

| Self Development | Tangible Career Enhancement Issues | Sample Quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Improve technical expertise | | Improve analytical and research techniques |
| Improve general hospitality knowledge | | Improve managerial and people skills |
| Sharing and learning from other's experiences | | Ability to write clear and informative research papers |
| Improve specific industry knowledge | | I hope to be more knowledgeable than other people in the hospitality field |
| Provide a challenge | | I plan to be able to discuss ideas and learn from other students in the program |
| | | To gain in-depth knowledge about the restaurant industry |
| | | To push myself beyond the boundaries I now have reached in my job |
| | Improve monetary benefits | The degree will help me increase my salary |
| | Promotion opportunities | Increased opportunities for vertical movement within my company |
| | Diversity of jobs | Open new career paths in other hospitality businesses |
| | Increase value as an employee | I will now be more valuable to my company |

Program is appealing

Connections with faculty from their previous undergraduate degrees or involvement through recruiting or other activities helped students feel comfortable with pursuing the particular degree plan. The flexibility offered by the Internet format was especially appealing, as some of the students suggested that the substantial travel associated with their jobs made traditional executive weekend programs impossible for them to pursue.

The titles of the courses were another factor that encouraged some students to participate. They agreed that they fit with the nature of their work more so than a general MBA, but that the program still had a strong business focus. One participant explained that he thought it would be exciting to be part of a pilot program.

Student expectations vary

Participants were asked why they had decided to become involved in graduate education through this specific program. (See Table 1)

Two main themes were noted as to why students had chosen to continue their education: self-development benefits and present and future career benefits. With respect to self-development, students indicated that their main purposes for participating were to learn more and to generally expand their

knowledge base. Some felt that during the past few years they had become locked into a fairly narrow field with little awareness of many of the areas beyond their immediate concern. They hoped that the new program would provide them with some new insights into the hospitality industry.

A new challenge was also considered a reason to become involved in the program. One person, for instance, noted "that I can work 60 to 70 hours per week and still accomplish more." This notion of trying to push oneself further is an important one, and students must have the attitude that they can continue to progress. Despite the long hours that managers face, some may feel that, after a few years, there is little intellectual challenge in their work. Beginning a master's degree would satisfy this need to feel challenged again.

Writing is central

Two students suggested that an opportunity to improve writing and research skills was important. Graduate programs typically place a significant emphasis on writing, with numerous case studies, reports, and research papers to be produced. Students were aware that this would be an emphasis in this program and that they could develop these skills as they worked on their courses. As they progressed through management positions, the participants

noted they were increasingly expected to write clearly and informatively. However, they did not feel that they were accomplishing this very well at present.

Increasing their value to their companies, opening new career opportunities, and increasing future earnings were considered important reasons that would impact participants' present and future careers. One person indicated that others at his company might begin to seek him out for his knowledge and that he would become an expert in these areas. In addition, the opportunity to interact with other professionals was also mentioned as a reason for pursuing the program.

Students had a number of specific expectations for the program. Learning key concepts, models, and ideas to improve job performance were the most dominant. They expected to be able to learn concepts that could be directly applied to their workplace. Practical application in the workplace was a key issue for the students, and students felt that university faculty had to ensure they provided this in all courses. In addition, other students expected to learn from others in the group. Three participants suggested that learning about a variety of hospitality industry segments was important. For example, one person noted that he had only been involved in the restaurant business and wanted to learn more

about the travel industry and hotels.

Monetary costs vary

The time requirements of the program were significant, and most of the participants indicated that they gave up mainly leisure time in order to complete assignments and readings. Students spent a varying amount of time working on the courses, both on a person-to-person and week-by-week basis. One participant noted that he regularly spent eight hours per week, while another suggested that time varied from zero to 25 hours. In general, they agreed they averaged about 10 hours per week during the semester for the introductory courses.

Monetary costs also varied. Some students who lived near meeting locations had little in the way of travel costs, while another had to fly to the various meetings. In more than half the cases, students indicated that their employers paid for tuition expenses related to the course.

Students mainly studied in their free time. Two indicated they were able to do a little at work, but that, generally, they gave up free time in the evenings and weekends to complete their work. Table 2 is a summary of the costs related with the students' involvement in the program and the strategies adopted by the students to ensure they could meet the challenges.

Table 2
Costs and strategies adopted by students
to undertake the distance program

| Issues | Costs of Student Participation | Approaches Adopted by Students |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Time | I spent from 0 to 25 hours per week depending on my schedule. I spent 6 to 8 hours per week. About 8 hours per week with 2 hours of work time. About 15 hours per week. | All studies were performed during my free time. I have ignored my wife at various times because of my studies. I quit my part-time teaching job. I stayed after work to use the computer at my company, they were happy for me to do this. I have given up some sleep time for studying. |
| Money | Apart from tuition costs, the only money I spent was on travel to the meetings. I spent about \$100 on travel to each of the meetings. Costs were pretty minimal. | I took a loan to cover the tuition expenses. Savings and current income paid for my expenses associated with the program. |
| Productivity | Work has suffered to some extent as I am not as focused on my job. I spend some of my work time with my studies and this tends to hinder my performance. | My time has become more precious and I have given up mindless television shows. I have had to once again learn the art of pulling all-nighters. I am prioritizing errands, decreasing social activities, and reducing charity work. |

Cohort system is effective

Students agreed that the cohort system was beneficial, and that the communication and interaction with other students was helpful. The opinions and advice of others was considered an important reason to continue the cohort structure.

The number of times that the cohort should meet was also discussed. Students believed that while it was important to have some meetings, it was not necessary to meet four times during the

semester, and most suggested one meeting to allow an introduction to the topics for the course was sufficient.

Lessons learned

Based on these initial experiences, some significant lessons were learned regarding the requirements that are necessary to develop an executive program. The major issues related to faculty, administration procedures, potential students, and appropri-

ate incentives.

Faculty required to prepare students for top-level hospitality management will be largely indistinguishable from instructors at an executive level business program.⁴ A significant pool of qualified faculty with significant teaching and industry experience is needed to work with hospitality managers.

Managers taking these graduate courses are extremely knowledgeable and demanding concerning the quality of instruction they receive. Students want significant feedback, and the majority is not just looking for a grade and to complete the courses, but to develop the ability to perform better on the job. They want content that is relevant and that can be applied immediately to their current positions.

The major reasons for participating were related to self and professional development and to increasing the opportunities for promotion and career change. The intellectual challenge of doing a master's degree was also considered an important reason for wanting to participate.

Universities wishing to offer a degree through the Internet are confronted by a number of major issues. There may only be a limited number of students interested in this format, and the costs and benefits of developing a program must be weighed. Faculty will need to be experienced, well prepared, able to work with experienced industry professionals, and

available continuously to grade assignments and answer questions that students may have.

Although this type of program requires a great deal of work, there are several benefits for universities and for the hospitality industry in general through the offering of such programs. University programs can keep in better contact with managers performing on the front line of the industry. Through these contacts, faculty can continue to keep pace with current trends in the application of management, marketing, technology, finance, and other organizational functions. In addition, managers who would otherwise not be able to complete a degree due to time constraints now have the opportunity to further their education.

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Shane C. Blum and Tim H. Dodd are assistant professors, and Ben K. Goh is assistant chair of the of the Education, Nutrition, and Restaurant/Hotel Management Department at Texas Tech University