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# Hospitality Education: Prevalent Perceptions

## **Abstract**

The composition of hospitality curricula has been debated by educators, alumni, and industry professionals for the last 30 years. Some higher education programs have emphasized the teaching of professional courses, while others have focused primarily on management. This study recalls highlights of curriculum research conducted since the late 1970s and provides current perceptions of alumni, lodging, and restaurant professionals on core, support, and advisor-approved electives.

## **Keywords**

Matt Casado, Education

# Hospitality education: Prevalent perceptions

by Matt A. Casado

*The composition of hospitality curricula has been debated by educators, alumni, and industry professionals for the last 30 years. Some higher education programs have emphasized the teaching of professional courses, while others have focused primarily on management. This study recalls highlights of curriculum research conducted since the late 1970s and provides current perceptions of alumni, lodging, and restaurant professionals on core, support, and advisor-approved electives.*

Studies of higher education as preparation for business careers have been conducted over the years. A case in point is the 1959 study by Robert A. Gordon and James E. Howell, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, whose results were a sharp indictment of the general state of business education in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The report criticized the conventional subjects offered in the nation's collegiate business schools.

Higher education for the hospitality industry is a discipline

that has made considerable advances in the last 30 years in both curriculum quality and number of undergraduate programs. Among the institutions offering hospitality degrees, a wide variation is found in the courses taught. Some programs emphasize professional courses, which can range from basic Housekeeping Management and Commercial Food Preparation to specialized electives such as Yield Management in Lodging Operations and Chemistry of Foods.

Lately, the widespread use of technology has compelled hospitality schools to modify their curricula to adopt pedagogical methods based on computers as indispensable tools. In most cases, hospitality programs have attempted to adjust their courses over the years to fit the needs of their students as well as those of the industry. Consequently, there is an ongoing need to identify the critical competencies that lodging

and restaurant professionals are seeking when hiring hospitality school graduates.

The purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the perceptions of lodging and restaurant professionals and alumni toward core, required support, and advisor-approved elective courses commonly taught by hotel and restaurant management programs offering baccalaureate degrees in order to bring hospitality curricula in line with current needs of the industry.

### **Research dates to '70s**

As the hospitality industry began to develop during the decade of the 1970s, demands for educators to do a better job of preparing students for their hospitality careers started to be heard. In an address before the annual convention of the Council of Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education (CHRIE) in Las Vegas, Nevada, on August 9, 1977, Howard Varner, president of Host International, asked hospitality schools to prepare students to become good, committed businessmen who could operate establishments profitably and advocated for more practicums in industry establishments.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, he recommended that graduates possess knowledge of the profession, as the industry shouldn't spend precious time teaching them the basics of the business. As early as the 1970s he was asking hospitality programs to provide technical education, together with managerial and business courses and

industry internships in their curricula.

In an article published in February 1980, Professor Thomas Powers clarified Varner's curriculum advocacy stating that while technical management skills were an important component of baccalaureate degree programs, these specific competencies might result in "vocalized" curricula, adding that educational programs must reflect current changes in the nature of general management as the industry itself could teach the technical aspects of the profession more quickly and effectively than the university. Powers advocated for the 1980s institutions of higher learning to adopt a shift from vocationally-oriented education to the development of human and conceptual management skills of students.<sup>3</sup>

### **Education loses relevancy**

During the early 1980s, several papers were published suggesting that business education in colleges and universities was losing pragmatic application and real world relevancy. The articles expressed concerns that communication between academia and industry had not been keeping pace with the changing conditions in the real world environment, indicating that the two sectors might be moving in opposite directions.

In 1984, Professor David Pavesic stated that at the time there was danger of schools ill preparing the next generation of business leaders. He added that educators must seek input from

industry practitioners and graduates from hospitality programs before matching curricula with their needs. "After heeding the counsel of their customers," he added, "curriculum review and design must be regularly and thoroughly conducted by hospitality programs."<sup>4</sup>

He conducted a study to determine the perceptions of hospitality educators, recent graduates, and industry practitioners toward the importance of course subject areas common in hospitality curricula. The results showed the following five courses ranked highest by industry professionals: Supervision and Human Relations, F & B and Labor Cost Control, Internship Work Experience, Financial Analysis, and Training and Coaching Techniques. The alumni made this selection: Internship Work Experience, Financial Analysis, F & B and Labor Cost Control, Supervision and Human Relations, and Computer Applications. The importance given by the two groups to the courses commonly taught was nearly similar.<sup>5</sup>

In a 1988 article, Patrick Moreo and David Christianson emphasized that the American curriculum was based on an emphasis on management over technical skills development. This, the authors stated, contrasted with the European programs at the time, which integrated a great deal of technical, task, and skill-oriented material into their curricula, especially in the food and beverage area.

As previously recommended by Varner in 1977, practical experience (hours worked in the industry) and internships were being widely required by most programs. For example, at UNLV students were placed in local establishments in observational practicums, working about 15 hours per week combined with weekly seminars. At Cornell, co-op, monitored internships were in place with students working at properties for a semester or longer.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Ideal courses cited**

By the end of the decade of the 1980s, leaders of hospitality programs defined the ideal curricula. Deans Joseph Cioch, University of Houston, James Dawney, University of New Haven, and Peter Van Kleek, Northern Arizona University, outlined the characteristics that should be found in hospitality graduates: Technical Skills (professional courses), Analytical Skills (business courses), Interpersonal Skills (liberal arts courses), and Management Skills (management courses).<sup>7</sup>

Casado<sup>8</sup> conducted a study in which nationwide recruiters showed preference for curricula composed of one-third liberal studies, one-third general business, and one-third professional courses rather than for those offering a substantial number of courses in any of the three components and a modest scattering in the remaining two. It is interesting to note that this even distribution of knowledge had been already

advocated by Varner in 1977 and by Powers in the early 1980s.

By the early 1990s, the core requirements for hospitality programs suggested by Varner and Powers 10 years previously had been established. In another study conducted by Casado,<sup>9</sup> the ranking given by recruiters to the first five courses considered as most important were F & B Labor Cost Control, Principles of Management, Hospitality Human Resources Management, Industry Internships, and Hospitality Accounting.

### **Study investigates perceptions**

The sample curriculum adopted in this study is that of the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management (SHRM) at Northern Arizona University (NAU), Flagstaff. NAU's SHRM is a free-standing school teaching undergraduate courses to more than 600 majors per semester. The professional or core courses must be taken and passed by all students in order to graduate from the program. The required support courses are not taught in the school; students must take economics, finance, and accounting in the university's School of Business and two semesters of a foreign language in the Modern Language Department. The advisor-approved electives are hospitality courses taught in the SHRM that are not included in the core component of the curriculum.

The study was designed to reach 500 subjects as follows: 250

NAU alumni, 25 recruiters, and human resource directors of 125 lodging companies and 100 restaurant companies nationwide. While the lodging group managed both rooms and F & B outlets, the restaurant group consisted only of restaurant, institutional, and catering operations.

Addresses of alumni who had graduated from the school in the last five years were obtained from NAU's alumni office. The university's career office provided addresses of recruiters. Addresses of lodging companies were taken from the current edition of the Hotel Index and those of restaurants from the Directory of Chain Restaurant Operations. The sample included at least two companies from each state. In total, 353 pieces were sent by mail, and 147 interactive questionnaires were sent to alumni and companies whose e-mail addresses were known. The breakdown of the mailout was 252 questionnaires sent to alumni, 142 to lodging companies, and 106 to restaurant companies.

The instrument consisted of a questionnaire with Semantic Differential (SD) scales. Each scale item had a length of seven points with contrasting adjectives at each end. Values ranged from one for "very important" to seven for "quite unimportant"; four was considered to be "neutral."

The SD is intended to measure people's reactions to stimulus words in terms of rating on bipolar scales and has been

used extensively as a measure of attitudes in a wide variety of studies. Evidence of the validity of evaluation factor scores has been demonstrated by correlation with other scales measuring respondents' perceptions. Several test-retest reliabilities of SD ratings have been determined, correlation for different constructs having reached acceptable ranges.

Following the return of the valid questionnaires, data were entered into the SPSS program and processed to obtain frequencies within the three groups of respondents, showing mean scores and standard deviations.

### Results are shown

Table 1 shows the number of valid responses received by group. A substantial number of letters and interactive questionnaires were returned because of unknown addressees. Of the 353 questionnaires sent by mail and the 147 by e-mail, 141 and 68 were received, respectively, with an overall total of 209.

The percentage of lodging professional respondents represented 15

human resource managers, 14 human resource directors, 10 managers of recruiting, 9 directors of recruiting, 8 vice-presidents of human resources, 6 corporate resource managers, 6 vice-presidents of operations, 5 corporate directors of talent acquisition, 1 operational effectiveness manager, and 1 vice-president of diversity. Titles of restaurant professionals were 14 directors of human resource, 6 vice-presidents of human resource, 5 college recruiters, 4 human resource managers, 4 managers of recruiting, 3 directors of recruiting, 3 vice-presidents of operations, 2 corporate owners, and 1 corporate staffing manager. Of the 92 questionnaires returned by alumni, 58 were from graduates working in the hospitality field (63 percent) and 34 from graduates working for other industries (37 percent).

Table 2 shows the rankings by mean of professional courses by the three groups.

### Courses are listed

Judging from the responses, the five most important courses perceived by alumni were Hospi-

**Table 1**  
**Total percent of response to survey**

Group	By mail	By e-mail	Total received	Percent
Alumni	54	38	92	44
Lodging	53	22	75	36
Restaurants	34	8	42	20
Total	141	68	209	100

**Table 2**  
**Mean ranking of 17 professional courses by group**

	Alumni	Lodging	Restaurant
1. Hospitality Leadership	1.84	1.68	1.90
2. Food & Beverage Controls	2.22	2.03	1.71
3. Hospitality Managerial Accounting	2.24	1.99	2.33
4. Food Service Management	2.36	2.07	1.67
5. Hospitality Human Resources Mngt.	2.39	1.56	1.86
6. Hospitality Law	2.42	2.00	2.10
7. Senior Seminar	2.54	2.55	3.14
8. Hospitality Information Technology I I	2.54	2.65	3.10
9. Hospitality Marketing	2.73	2.08	2.90
10. Commercial Food Preparation	2.75	3.01	2.62
11. Hospitality Sales Management	2.75	2.00	3.43
12. Hospitality Information Technology I	2.79	2.65	3.00
13. Guest Service (Front Office) Mngt.	2.96	1.75	3.19
14. Dining Service Management	2.96	2.48	1.90
15. Housekeeping/Engineering Mngt.	3.03	1.99	3.48
16. Introduction to the Hospitality Industry	3.22	2.52	2.71
17. International Hospitality Operations	3.88	3.56	4.14

tality Leadership, Food & Beverage Cost Controls, Hospitality Managerial Accounting, Food Service Management, and Hospitality Human Resources Management. The five least important courses were International Hospitality Operations, Introduction to the Hospitality Industry, Housekeeping/Engineering Management, Dining Service Management, and Guest Service (Front Office) Management.

The five most important courses perceived by lodging professionals were Hospitality Human Resources Management, Hospitality Leadership, Guest Service

(Front Office) Management, Hospitality Managerial Accounting, and Housekeeping/Engineering Management. The five least important courses were International Hospitality Operations, Commercial Food Preparation, Hospitality Information Technology I, Senior Seminar, and Introduction to the Hospitality Industry.

The restaurant professionals perceived as most important Food Service Management, Food and Beverage Cost Controls, Hospitality Human Resources Management, Dining Service Management, and Hospitality Leadership. The five least important courses were



International Hospitality Operations, Housekeeping/Engineering Management, Hospitality Sales Management, Guest Service (Front Office) Management, and Senior Seminar.

The three groups agreed on Hospitality Leadership and Hospitality Human Resource Management as being most important and International Hospitality Operations as being least important.

Table 3 shows the ranking by mean of required support courses by the three groups.

Judging from the responses, the three most important required support courses in the perception of alumni were Industry Work Experience, Conversational Hospitality Spanish, and Financial Accounting. The three least important courses were Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, and Second Semester of a Modern Language.

The three most important required support courses in the perception of lodging professionals were Industry Work Experience,

Conversational Hospitality Spanish, and Financial Accounting. The three least important courses were Second Semester Modern Language, Microeconomics, and Macroeconomics.

The restaurant professionals perceived as most important Industry Work Experience, Conversational Hospitality Spanish, and Financial Accounting. The three least important courses were Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, and Second Semester Modern Language.

All three groups viewed as most important Industry Work Experience, Conversational Hospitality Spanish, and Financial Accounting. The groups' consensus of the least important courses were Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, and Second Semester Modern Language.

The three most important advisor-approved elective courses in the perception of alumni were Employee Training & Evaluation, Industry Internship, and Corporate

**Table 3**  
**Mean ranking of eight required support courses by group**

Alumni	Lodging	Restaurant	
1. Industry Work Experience	1.54	1.20	1.24
2. Conversational Hospitality Spanish	2.40	1.92	1.50
3. Financial Accounting	2.54	2.28	2.50
4. Finance	2.89	2.32	2.57
5. First Semester Modern Language	3.14	2.80	3.62
6. Second Semester Modern Language	3.34	3.01	3.62
7. Microeconomics	3.79	2.96	3.74
8. Macroeconomics	3.86	2.92	3.71

**Table 4**  
**Mean ranking of nine advisor-approved electives by group**

Alumni	Lodging	Restaurant	
1. Employee Training & Evaluation	1.82	1.36	1.40
2. Industry Internship	2.04	1.40	1.62
3. Corporate Finance for Hosp. Managers	2.63	2.44	2.71
4. Advanced F & B Management	2.80	2.92	2.17
5. Resort Management	3.15	3.00	3.69
6. Hospitality Litigation	3.29	3.12	3.00
7. Beverage and Bar Operations	3.33	3.00	2.81
8. Club Management	3.60	3.20	3.71
9. Gaming and Casino Management	3.84	3.75	4.14

Finance. The three least important courses were Gaming and Casino Management, Club Management, and Beverage and Bar Operations.

The three most important advisor-approved elective courses in the perception of lodging professionals were Employee Training & Evaluation, Industry Internship, and Corporate Finance. The three least important courses were Gaming and Casino Management, Club Management, and Hospitality Litigation.

The restaurant professionals perceived as the most important advisor-approved elective courses Employee Training and Evaluation, Industry Internship, and Advanced F & B Management. The three least important were Gaming and Casino Management, Club Management, and Resort Management.

The three groups chose as most important Employee Training & Evaluation, and Industry Internship. Alumni and lodging profes-

sionals both chose Corporate Finance, while restaurant professionals indicated that Advanced Food & Beverage Management was the third most important course. All groups coincided on selecting Gaming and Casino Management and Club Management as least important. Alumni considered Beverage and Bar Operations as the third least important course; lodging professionals selected Hospitality Litigation, and restaurant professionals chose Resort Management.

#### **Changes are identified**

One limitation of this study is that perceptions of respondents could have been subject to individual or group biases. Thus, responses of the alumni surveyed could have been based on specific experiences of each individual respondent. For instance, the effectiveness of the instructor who taught the course, the rigor demanded by the instructor, and

the use of the course content in the graduate's present job. For example, a front office course would have limited value to a graduate working in a restaurant. Conversely, a food management course would seem a waste of time to a graduate working in the rooms division of a lodging property. The success (or lack of success) of graduates in the workplace could also have been a determinant factor. If a graduate was not been promoted for whatever reason, she/he might put the blame on the quality of the courses taken.

The responses of lodging and restaurant executives could again have been construed on biased individual perceptions. Although as professionals they should have been quite familiar with the content of the courses, directors of F & B may have been inclined to rate courses with F & B management content higher. Conversely, lodging professionals may have been biased toward courses of intrinsic lodging nature.

However, the population of this study, industry professionals and alumni, constitutes the only appropriate forum whose opinions are pertinent to render the final judgment on hospitality curricular issues.

Looking retrospectively at the years of curriculum research in "modern" hospitality education, the perceptions of industry practitioners and alumni have changed somewhat, but not a whole lot. The managerial and business back-

ground advocated by Howard Varner in 1977, together with industry internships, still is perceived as most important. Power's suggestions that hospitality education should not become vocationalized but follow the same principles of business schools continue to be demanded by alumni and professionals. Most of Pavesic's findings in 1984 are still followed, and so are Casado's.

### **Respondents agree**

Overall, respondents seem to agree on a curriculum that combines management, business, and operation concepts, a pattern already advocated by Powers in the 1980s. However, a few new perceptions have emerged. The concept of leadership as a core course appears to be most important. A required course in international operations doesn't seem to be needed by industry or alumni, due perhaps to the fact that graduates from American hospitality schools are recruited by companies to work in domestic establishments. In addition, a required course in conversational Spanish for hospitality managers was perceived as very important by the three groups. This could be the result of important demographic trends resulting from massive immigration from Latin America.

As in the past, criticism is still common in colleges and universities about hospitality courses seeming to be vocational in nature. The critics often ignore that these operations courses are just but a

component of the baccalaureate hospitality curriculum and that, essentially, this curriculum needs to be tailored to fit the needs of the industry itself. The results of this study suggest that the preferred course area concentration by industry professionals and by alumni should be a well balanced combination of management, business, and professional courses, with a marked emphasis on employee supervision and quantitative and communication skills.

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