

# Training National Park Service concession specialists

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*In recent years, the Internet has become the medium of choice in distance education, and a prominent delivery tool in many hospitality management programs. When students cannot be educated on site, web-based education has proven to be the next best thing to in-person instruction. The authors describe a project in which the Internet is used to educate National Park Service concession specialists, exploring the reasons the project was instigated, its development and funding, and educational challenges and solutions. Such web-based instruction can be used as a means to attract outside grants and revenues for hospitality management programs.*

**M**any hospitality management programs in this country and around the world are in the process of putting their courses on the web. Through trial and error, and overcoming technological, logistical, and even philosophical problems about the validity of web-based instruction, more and more virtual classrooms are being created.

Web-based instruction is an educational process in which the

students and the instructor are generally not in the same physical environment but communicate over the Internet. It can help build program enrollment, since a program is able to cast a much larger geographic net when attracting students who cannot physically attend classes but who are still looking for quality education.

Web-based education, which is attractive to students who cannot attend classes in person for geographic reasons, is also appealing to non-traditional students who may be pursuing a degree part time while working full time, who learn better on their own in close consultation with an instructor, who absorb material better at 11 p.m. than at 8 a.m., or who have retired from a working life and are doing one class every semester at a leisurely pace. Whatever the type of student, web-based education can accommodate the needs of many different individuals.

Hospitality management programs are "webitizing" their curricula for educational and competitive reasons; everybody else is doing it, and if they don't get in now, they run the risk of losing market share. Moreover, by offering customized programs on the web to non-university constituencies such as the one described in this article, universities have the opportunity to qualify for federal and state grants, and compete for revenues that were beyond their reach before the Internet was a reality.

### **Web is a reality**

Web-based instruction has become a reality that many in higher education must live with, whether they like it or not. Despite some unresolved issues surrounding this type of instruction, in particular issues of intellectual property; it is growing quickly and several important benefits have been identified.

First, web-based education is generally cheaper than traditional education. This may not necessarily be the case with regard to tuition, but housing and travel expenses, for instance, are much lower, or even non-existent. Learners from around the world can be brought together quickly and cheaply.<sup>1</sup>

Web-based instruction is convenient. Individualized learning at a desktop is much easier to schedule for both the student and the instructor than classes at a particular location. The asynchronous

nature of web-based instruction where students and instructor can access and post material at different times makes the idea of education any time and anywhere closer than many think.<sup>2</sup>

Web-based instruction is self-paced and personalized. Courses can be customized to the needs of individual learners, and rather than having to go at the speed of a group, students can learn at their own pace, in their own time, from their own homes.<sup>3</sup>

More people will have the opportunity to take part in web classes than in traditional, on-site classes. The size of the classroom is no longer a determining factor in the number of people who can enroll in a class, though issues of faculty workload remain.

Web-based education allows a wide variety of educational options. Whereas the traditional blackboard and overhead projector in a classroom do not offer much variety, web-based training can be multifaceted. Web classes can be accompanied by sound and video, and the instructor can send his/her students anywhere on the Internet to look for information.

### **Drawbacks do exist**

These are only some of the many benefits of web-based education, and there are many more. There are, however, also some drawbacks to web-based education.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that it may be self-paced and personalized, there are concerns about the lack of personal, face-to-face interaction in

web-based education. In the traditional classroom, instructors often see or even feel when students do not understand a concept, without the students even raising the issue. Being able to look into a student's eyes, sensing the mood in a classroom, and putting a name to a face are very important intangible aspects of education. Retaining interactivity with a learner at a distance the same way as in a classroom requires a special mentoring effort from the instructor,<sup>5</sup> and this effort is often much more strenuous and time consuming than in a traditional classroom setting.

This new form of content delivery also requires more initial coaching, facilitation, and training, as both the student and the instructor must get used to the medium, and as many must develop the appropriate Internet skills to be effective.<sup>6</sup> When web classes are unstructured and confusing, for instance, they cause students to become even more anxious about a medium that already makes them uncomfortable.<sup>7</sup>

Instructors in web classes are relying on a student's self-initiative and drive to succeed more so than in a regular classroom setting. Where an instructor in a classroom tends to be the driving force behind student progress, and has the ability to monitor student compliance and satisfaction very closely both in tangible and intangible ways, that initiative shifts to the learner in web-based education, and many learners may not be able to complete a course if left to their

own devices. Granted, an instructor can also set deadlines for students through electronic means, yet many students will fail to complete a course because there is no personal, one-on-one contact between instructor and student. In fact, instructors in web-based instruction may have to be a little more flexible, not in terms of lowering standards as much as in accommodating student discomfort and uneasiness with the medium.<sup>8</sup>

### **Speed is a concern**

There are also concerns about the quality and speed of technological infrastructure that is in place in many organizations, especially in higher education. A lack of bandwidth, for instance, makes communication slow and cumbersome, and flawed design and poor links do not add to the appeal of training over the web. Students connecting from home on 28.8K or 56K telephone modems experience very slow downloads of graphic intensive materials, and video downloads become so slow they are really unusable.

Then there are the development and design issues. Although there is a considerable amount of knowledge on computer-aided instruction, faculty experience with creating a comprehensive Internet-based educational program is still limited.<sup>10</sup>

Instructors are also concerned about how to measure the success of web instruction, not so much in terms of whether students pass a class, but more with regard to the

effectiveness of on-line training programs.<sup>11</sup> Questions such as “Have students learned what they are supposed to learn?” and “Have they acquired the same skills and knowledge as their peers in the classroom?” are on every educator’s mind.

It takes a lot of time and effort to create, teach, and administer a web class. Recent research<sup>12</sup> found that web classes, even with much smaller numbers of students enrolled, take much more time to administer. Additionally, there is the issue of test security that has not been fully resolved. How can an instructor be sure that a test administered over the web is actually taken by the student who is supposed to take it, with or without support materials?

And, finally, an important issue that has not been resolved in the minds of many educators and administrators is the issue of intellectual property.<sup>13</sup> It is still up in the air as to whether a university may or may not appropriate an intellectual product (a web class) because the creator is a university employee, and was working on university time.

All of the concerns are valid, as are the arguments in favor of web-based education. The debate will continue for quite some time.

### **NAU initiates project**

A project was undertaken by the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management at Northern Arizona University in conjunction with the National Park Service (NPS). In the

project, National Park Service concession specialists, who are NPS employees and liaisons between the National Park Service and its concessionaires, are trained in various aspects of hospitality management by means of a web-based, customized curriculum.

In fall 2000, the National Park Service Concessions Program Division partnered with Northern Arizona University’s School of Hotel and Restaurant Management to provide professional training for the NPS concession specialists, who are responsible for administering approximately 650 concession contracts in the nation’s national parks. These contracts generate over \$700 million per year in retail revenue for the concessionaires, and over \$50 million in return and other benefits to the government.

Concession contracts are contracts between the NPS and private sector businesses to provide visitor services in national parks. The business or “concessionaire” is granted a “concession” to operate a business in a specific park, which, in most cases, is a restaurant, a hotel, or a retail outlet. Historically, there has been very little training required of the concession specialists who are placed in this position, and who are responsible for administering existing contracts, monitoring contract compliance, generating and reviewing Requests for Proposals (RFP) for new contracts, and issuing new contracts to successful bidders.

Concession specialists often bridge the conceptual gap that

exists between the park superintendent (their direct supervisor) and the concessionaire, who look upon the provision of services in the parks from different perspectives. Whereas the superintendent is intent on making sure that services are provided to visitors and that the mission of the National Park Service (preservation and protection) is maintained, concessionaires look at the situation from a for-profit perspective. Often, the concession specialist is caught in the middle, "translating" when the superintendent and the concessionaire don't speak or understand the same language.

### **Congress establishes NPS**

When the United States Congress established the NPS in the National Park Service Organic Act of 1916, the act stated, among other things, that its purpose was "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave the park unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations."<sup>14</sup> It also stated that the Secretary of the Interior could grant privileges, leases, and permits for the use of land for the accommodation of visitors in the various parks.<sup>15</sup> The act charges the National Park Service to provide for the enjoyment of the parks so as to preserve them for the future, and allows the NPS to contract outside the park service for provision of accommodation and services for visitors.

The challenge the NPS concessions program faces is balancing the provision of accommodation and services that enhance current enjoyment of the parks, while at the same time safeguarding the parks for the future by enhancing revenue for the government and by protecting the government's contract rights.

### **Competition hurts quality**

The first director of the NPS, Stephen Mather, determined that unbridled competition was hurting the quality of visitor services, and directed the selection of a single major concessionaire in every location who would provide all needed services. That policy spread throughout the park system, and, with some exceptions, continued until 1965.

The Concession Policies Act of 1965 was passed to clarify and codify concessions policy after almost 50 years of administrative decisions by NPS directors and individual park superintendents. The act states that the development of public accommodations, facilities, and services "shall be limited to those that are necessary and appropriate for the public use and enjoyment of the national park area in which they are located and that are consistent to the highest practicable degree with the preservation and conservation of the areas."<sup>16</sup>

The historical NPS attitude toward concessions was that they were a headache that should be minimized by granting concessions for the maximum allowable term,

30 years, and by making it easy for existing concessionaires to renew their contracts. Concerns that the federal government was missing funding opportunities and that concessionaires were unjustly enriching themselves in public parks led to pressure for the NPS to more actively manage concession contracts. This generated the need for trained professionals to oversee and administer the contracts for NPS.

### **Funding becomes available**

The NPS Concession Program Division repeatedly requested funding for improved training of its personnel. This need for a better qualified NPS concession staff was raised throughout the 1990s by the Department of the Interior's inspector general, as well as in a 1997 NPS task force report.<sup>17</sup> Yet, in an era when doing more with less was the modus operandi, funding for concession specialist training never survived the final budget cuts.

In 1998, the National Park Service Omnibus Management Act modified and clarified a number of the provisions of the 1965 act, and provided a new source of funding.<sup>18</sup> Whereas federal policy generally mandates that all of an agency's funding comes from congressional appropriations, and that all funds generated by a federal agency must be returned to the U.S. Treasury, the 1998 act provided that the franchise fees generated by concession contracts could be retained by the NPS, with 80 percent staying in the

park where it was generated and 20 percent available for use at the discretion of the NPS. This 20 percent provides a source of funding for improved training in support of professionalization of the concession management program.

### **Audit enhances motivation**

In recent years the NPS has identified concessions training as higher priority, in part because of recommendations that were contained in an audit report published by the Government Accounting Office (GAO) in March 2000. The audit was conducted at the request of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Historic Preservation, and Recreation. The subcommittee chair asked the GAO to review the factors affecting the condition of lodging facilities in the National Park System, and to provide options available to address these factors. The GAO identified improved training of NPS concessions personnel as a major factor.

Lodging, food and beverage, and marina operations in the National Parks System represent 24 percent of the contracts, but 68 percent of the revenue. Complex business operations in the parks necessitate that NPS concession specialists not only have general business knowledge and training, but also specific hospitality knowledge and training.

Faculty in the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management had previously consulted with the NPS

concession program in Washington, D.C., so managers and supervisors at the concession program were familiar with NAU's hospitality program and its ability to put a customized web-based program together. At the same time, school faculty were familiar with the needs of the concessions program.

The National Park Service had an existing contract with NAU and HRM, and extending the existing contract helped to speed up the development of a concession specialists training program and avoided having to generate a new RFP and a competitive bidding process.

### **Needs are identified**

The needs of the NPS concessions division were for both specific content and a cost effective delivery system; 125 of the nation's 370 national parks have concession activities, spread from Hawaii to the U.S. Virgin Islands, and from Alaska to Louisiana. The depth of training needed called for a substantial time commitment by concession personnel. Yet, the limited funds available, combined with the geographic location of the 120 concession specialists who needed to be trained, did not permit conventional classroom instruction.

Currently, the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management is delivering over 80 percent of its core courses in the bachelor's degree program via the Internet. HRM not only has experience in hospitality management education and pedagogy, but also in Internet delivery,

and has a substantial amount of content available for web delivery. Much of the content that was identified for the NPS concession specialist training program was extracted from existing undergraduate courses, and adapted to the context and needs of the NPS program.

Program format, length, and content were discussed in a series of meetings between NPS concessions program management and HRM staff, with additional input from curricular design consultants and consultants from PricewaterhouseCoopers, who had been engaged by the NPS to help develop a comprehensive business-based program plan for concessions.

In these discussions, it was determined that content areas to be addressed were the following:

- introduction to hospitality management
- hospitality accounting and finance
- business and hospitality law
- management and leadership skills
- NPS concessions policies, regulations, and procedures

Based on conversations with concession specialists in the field, managers in the Washington, D.C., office, and concessionaires, it was determined that accounting and finance were of sufficient importance and complexity that two courses would be devoted to those subjects. It was also determined that changes in NPS concessions

regulations and policy, and a number of recent court cases, made it desirable to offer two courses in that area as well.

### **Format fits NPS needs**

HRM and NPS developed a format of eight-week courses to be offered back-to-back during normal academic semesters, fall and spring, with no courses offered during the summer period. Most national parks have their heaviest visitation in summer, so this fit park activity cycles, as well as faculty schedules.

Research and experience in adult learning suggested that the maximum time working adults can commit to classes is six to 10 hours per week; course syllabi and course loads were developed with a target time of eight hours of student time per week. The NPS requires four to six hours per week of work time for training, and a personal commitment of students to commit an additional four hours per week of their own time. Eight hours per week for seven eight-week courses makes for 500 hours over a two-year period, a *considerable investment of both time and effort on the part of the students and of funds on the part of the National Park Service.*

Experience also suggested that Internet class size should be limited to 20 students. The program was designed for cohorts of 20 students to go through the seven-course program together over a period of two years. This would simplify scheduling and planning, and would provide a cohesive learning

community for students who could support each other and provide valuable feedback for improving the program. It was decided to start a new cohort each semester, with the goal of eventually including all 120 NPS full-time concession specialists in the program.

There was some concern about student familiarity with the communication tools used in delivering the content, such as Internet and spreadsheet software, and about students' understanding of the intent and importance of the program. A *three-day introduction and orientation session* was developed for each cohort and conducted at the NAU Mountain Campus in Flagstaff, Arizona, to give the students an opportunity to get to know each other face-to-face, meet the faculty and support personnel, and become familiar with the programs and course format.

The first cohort, which started in fall 2001, will complete the program at the end of the spring 2003 semester. All cohorts will be done by spring 2006, if the current schedule is maintained.

### **Internet selected as medium**

Most of the courses, such as Introduction to the Hospitality Industry, Hospitality Management Accounting, and Business and Hospitality Law, are based on existing college-level courses, yet are tailor made to fit the needs of participants. Students perform college-level work. Academic rigor is safeguarded not only by the fact that the courses are designed and

taught by college professors, but also by the stipulation that only those students who have obtained at least 70 percent of the points available will pass a course. This is considerably more demanding than the 60 percent passing grade that is common in most college-level courses. For those students who do not pass an eight-week course, there is the option to do a four-week remedial course, which focuses on the weaknesses that were identified during the semester. Not until they have passed either the course or the remedial course will students be allowed to take part in the next one. Those students who do not pass the remedial course will have to re-take the course with a following cohort.

#### **WebCT is used**

WebCT is the environment used to deliver the course, and content is presented in various ways, depending on the topic and the instructor/designer. The introduction class, for instance, makes extensive use of a discussion or bulletin board for student-student and student-instructor interaction. Students spend a lot of time researching on the web, and are rewarded for participating in discussions.

The accounting class, on the other hand, requires students to read a textbook chapter themselves, read materials posted on the web, and then complete assignments. Communication between instructors and students occurs in the form of personal e-mails,

bulletin boards, which are asynchronous, and chat rooms, which allow for synchronous communication. Students tend to prefer the bulletin board option since there is no specific time frame involved, and they can react to and read comments on the bulletin board at any time.

WebCT was selected as the environment of choice because of its versatility not only in presenting course materials, but also because it has built-in chat rooms, bulletin boards, and e-mail capabilities. It also allows the instructor to post grades in an electronic grade book which enables students to keep abreast of their own performance on a weekly basis, and allows course and program administrators to check up on cohort performance overall. Parts of the program can be hidden from the students, and a webmaster can shut off all communication tools (chat room, e-mail, and bulletin board) from one central point, for instance in a situation where students are doing timed tests.

WebCT presents navigation bars and breadcrumb trails which show the students at all times where they are in the class and how they got there. It works well with DreamWeaver, the software used to write the actual text of the courses, and is compatible to most Internet platforms such as Explorer and Netscape Navigator. This latter feature is of particular importance since students access the course from different sites,

with different computers, and through different browsers.

A program such as this one, and the instructors taking part in it, face several challenges that are different from a regular college setting. By far the most interesting challenge is that the participants come from various academic backgrounds and are at different educational levels. There are students who completed high school, students with some junior college education, students with college degrees, and students with master's degrees in business and finance.

Creating a course that caters to the needs of all of these students and that has sufficient feedback loops for student-instructor communication is not easy to accomplish, and at the end of every semester, instructors have to revise not only the class materials but also the ways in which they communicate with their students. Where a single e-mail message will suffice for some students, others need continuous feedback and encouragement by any means available. This led to instructors adopting a variety of communication tools. E-mail was used for general messages to all students, and for personal student-instructor communication. Bulletin boards were used for asynchronous class discussion. Either the instructor or a student "posted" a question on the bulletin board, and asked for others to react to it over time. With a group as geographically dispersed as this one, this proved to be much more

effective than the chat room, the third means of communication. Communication in a chat room is synchronous, and is not as feasible for a group as widely dispersed as this one. The students' personal as well as professional schedules were too far apart to create a successful chat room environment.

### **Backgrounds differ**

An additional challenge is that participants come from different professional backgrounds. Some are park rangers asked to step into a concession specialist position; some are administrative assistants by trade, and some are outside hires who were bankers and financial consultants in previous careers, just to name a few. This not only makes for an interesting mix of expertise, but also means that some students are more business-minded than others. This difference is often reflected in a clash of cultures between NPS concession specialists and the concessionaires they monitor. The concession specialists with a business background might feel more comfortable dealing with concessionaires, whereas the re-assigned park ranger, who was primarily trained to safeguard and manage the natural resources of the park, may feel uncomfortable in monitoring and evaluating the concessionaire's performance.

In all, every cohort moving through the program is a mixed bag of educational levels, professional backgrounds, mindsets, and attitudes. It is up to the instructor to

make sure that all of these varied students are served properly and are provided an opportunity to learn. This is an interesting, yet not impossible task.

### **Goals can be reached**

The original impetus of the program was the fact that the U.S. Congress did not feel comfortable with the way in which the National Park Service managed its relationship with its concessionaires. The concession specialists who work for the NPS and who are the on-site links between concessionaires and the park service were not adequately trained to oversee concession operations successfully; in many instances they lacked both the business experience and the financial skills to be a resource to concessionaires and to protect the interests of the NPS.

This program provides the concession specialists with a better understanding of how the hospitality industry operates, especially from a financial and legal perspective. If it succeeds in making them more comfortable and more effective in their day-to-day dealings with concessionaires and in helping the NPS improve the visitors' experience at hotels, restaurants, rentals, horseback riding operations, and ice cream parlors inside the national parks, it has been successful already. If, as an added benefit, it leads to increased revenues for the National Park System and the federal government, it will have surpassed its goals.

On a more personal level, the program is designed to become a major component in the career development of the concession specialists. With NPS headquarters not only instigating and sponsoring the program, but tying it to career development as well, it will be very important in the professional lives of the concession specialists, something that has become clear in the first year of operation. Both students and instructors take great pride in the program and dedicate a lot of their time to successful completion of the classes. The students perform college level work and would qualify to receive college credit, if that opportunity were available to them. Many of them have spent more than eight hours a week on studying the material, and dedicate much of their free time to the classes. If the first year of operation is any indication, this project will be very successful, and the first cohort, which graduates in spring 2003, can be proud of itself.

### **Other opportunities beckon**

HRM hopes to identify additional opportunities to apply the model that has been developed for NPS concession specialist training. The process involves identifying an entity with hospitality needs and a geographically dispersed target student group. HRM and the entity can investigate specific needs and training priorities, match these with existing curricula and course content, and then modify existing materials to meet student needs.

HRM's experience in delivering undergraduate courses via the web and its recent experience delivering customized content to adult learners have provided a pool of technical, administrative, and pedagogical expertise that will allow seeking new applications and student populations.

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