A Customer-Based Approach to Hospitality Education

In downsizing its hospitality-management curriculum, the faculty at the University of Central Florida consulted the customer—the hospitality industry—regarding what topics are absolutely essential. Among their findings, specific operations-related skills were not high on the list.

by Robert A. Ashley, Susan A. Bach, Jerald W. Chesser, E. Taylor Ellis, Robert C. Ford, Stephen M. LeBruto, Ady Milman, Abraham Pizam, and William J. Quain

ducation in hospitality management is undergoing a dramatic reevaluation in the United States, if our experience at the University of Central Florida is any indication. Across the country, we see hospitality programs reassessing what they are doing, why they are doing what they are doing, and how they should go about doing it. Hospitality programs today are as diverse as the opinions offered by both industry and educators regarding the adequacy (or inadequacy) of current approaches to preparing tomorrow's

The authors constitute the faculty of the hospitality-management program at the University of Central Florida.

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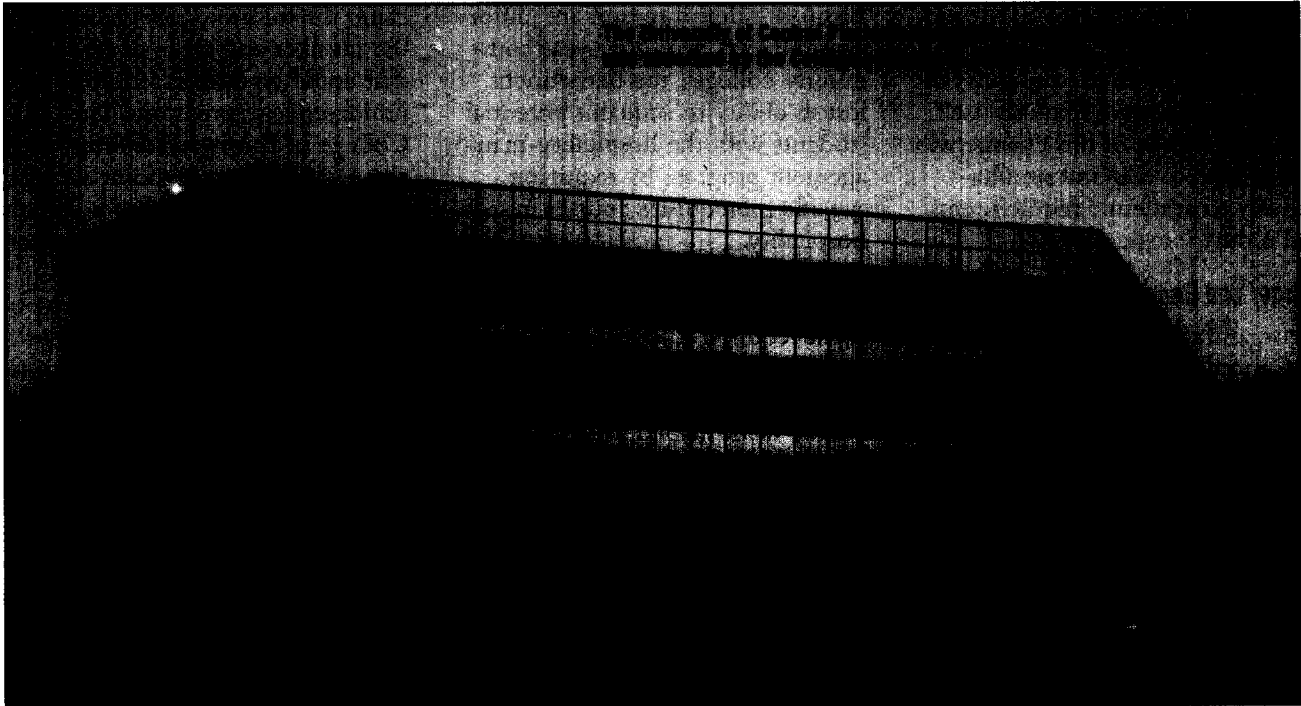
managers for the hospitality industry. The academic literature reflects a debate regarding whether the most appropriate educational program in hospitality management today should be focused more on specific skills or on general management. While one may believe that rational firms are likely to pay a premium for specifically trained employees over those who are generally trained, the recent tendency of the hospitality industry to hire more generally trained graduates is calling that belief into question.[1]

Complaints from industry leaders that educational programs have lost touch with the general managerial demands of the workplace are a large part of the reason for many curriculum changes.[2] To a great extent the complaints reflect the growing pains of hospitality management as an emerging discipline. Program directors and faculty seek to resolve the tension between teaching what are current best practices as opposed to teaching the managerial skills and competencies that are becoming increasingly needed in the hospitality industry. Indeed, Thomas Powers and Carl Riegel recently argued that unless hospitality programs make a better effort to keep current, they may not even survive for another generation.[3] Other writers have made similar points as they reflect on the apparent lack of responsiveness on the part of educational institutions to the changes occurring throughout the hospitality industry.[4] Terry Umbreit, for instance, concluded: "Hospitality educators must understand that these changes [in the industry] are permanent and that graduates from their schools will need a different set of skills to succeed in a restructured business environment. Hotel and restaurant firms are already learning that their survival is predicated on taking a fundamentally different approach to the way they manage their operations."[5] The changes facing the industry call for a change in what educational programs define as general education and what is defined as specific training necessary and appropriate for preparing students for success in the hospitality business.

This paper details the strategy used by the hospitality department at the University of Central Florida to respond to changing industry requirements for both general and specific educational needs. We believe our procedure is innovative

[1] Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 44-45.
[2] Megan Rowe, "Hard Times in the Ivory Tower," *Lodging Hospitality*, Vol. 49, No. 11 (1993), pp. 59-70.
[3] Thomas F. Powers and Carl D. Riegel, "A Bright Future for Hospitality Education: Providing Value in the 21st Century," *Hospitality Research Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1993), pp. 295-308.
[4] Raymond J. Goodman, Jr., and Linda G. Sprague, "The Future of Hospitality Education: Meeting the Industry's Needs," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (August 1991), pp. 66-70; K. Michael Haywood, "A Radical Proposal for Hospitality and Tourism Education," *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1989), pp. 259-264; Robert C. Lewis, "Hospitality Management Education: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?," *Hospitality Research Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1993), pp. 273-283; and W. Terry Umbreit, "In Search of Hospitality Curriculum Relevance for the 1990s," *Hospitality & Tourism Educator*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1992), pp. 71-74.
[5] Umbreit, p. 71.

both in the process used to identify the new hospitality management curriculum and in the outcome of that process, the curriculum itself. The importance of this change was in the need to respond simultaneously to academic requirements and industry expectations.

Merger and Redesign

Reorganization gave the University of Central Florida's hospitality-management department an unusual opportunity to seek out and respond to the hospitality industry's emerging curriculum needs. When the department was absorbed by the College of Business Administration in 1991, the college's accreditation standards and a reduction in the number of credit hours specifically controlled by the hospitality faculty from 43 to 27 forced the faculty to revise its curriculum.

With fewer credit hours available for hospitality-specific courses, the faculty decided to reconsider thoroughly— from the industry's point of view—the proper curriculum balance between hospitality-specific knowledge and general managerial competencies (e.g., communication, financial knowledge, and interpersonal relations) so that the limited available classroom time was put to optimal use.

The department also faced a second challenge as a result of its merger with the College of Business Administration, a challenge connected with attracting students. Whereas it still had to "compete" with other university departments for students who might declare hospitality as their major, the department was left with a reduced student market comprising those who had already entered the business program as juniors. No longer could the program itself draw juniors directly from other colleges. Moreover, since the vast majority of students entering the College of

Business Administration are junior-year transfers from two-year community colleges, the department lost its ability to acquaint potential students with the hospitality-management program by requiring specific prerequisite courses in hospitality.

Prior to the curriculum revision, the hospitality-management department required students in its own and junior-college programs to take several prerequisite courses. That course work helped students identify with the program early in their educational careers. It also allowed the inclusion in the curriculum of several specific courses that provided students with basic hospitality-related skills. If the new curriculum continued to require those courses of entering juniors—in addition to the existing work-experience requirement—the major would be unattractive in comparison to other business majors because its prerequisites would add some 12 to 15 hours to the graduation requirements. Consequently, the faculty not only had fewer course hours available for upper-level courses, but also it could no longer expect that specific skills would be covered in first- and second-year courses. Within the relatively small number of course hours available in the business-school curriculum, the faculty sought a way to provide appropriate coverage of both the specific topics that are traditionally associated with a hospitality degree and the general managerial background that would meet the industry's needs and requirements.

In redesigning the curriculum, the hospitality department faced two other changes resulting from its move into the College of Business Administration. The department lost most of its flexibility in working with the many associate's degree programs in hospitality, be-

cause the business college limited the number and types of courses that could be transferred from junior-college programs. The College of Business Administration also requires a grade-point average for entering students that is higher than that set by virtually any other college in the university.

The forces set off by the program merger combined with the changes in the industry to become the impetus for curriculum change and a complete recrafting of the hospitality-management major. In short, the major could not continue to exist if it remained unchanged. When the hours available for the major become a scarce commodity, scrutiny of every course, every topic, and every classroom hour becomes critical.

Responding to the Customer

The curriculum-revision process began with a concept that is fundamental to any guest-service operation—the customer defines product attributes. Since the program's goal was to provide a quality work force for the hospitality industry, hospitality employers are our customers.

The logical place to begin defining the product was to ask those who look to the department to provide their future employees what skills and knowledge they wanted in a baccalaureate graduate. Because the university is located in Orlando, it is relatively easy to get answers from nearby employers, who effectively represent every major element of the hospitality industry (except casinos) and who are the primary customers for the students graduating from the program.

TEAM-Net. The department invited 25 leading executives in the hospitality and tourism industry to be on an advisory committee. These executives participated in brainstorming sessions to help

identify the characteristics, skills, knowledge areas, and competencies that would be critical for the baccalaureate-level employees they expected to be hiring in the year 2000 and beyond. The executives' ideas were collected and organized electronically through the use of the college's TEAM-Net (Technological Efficiency Applied to Meetings Network). TEAM-Net, a computerized group-decision-making system developed jointly by the University of Arizona and IBM, allows people to collaborate in efficient and simultaneous brainstorming sessions. In this electronic variant of the familiar nominal-group technique, participants work independently at workstations linked to a master computer that allows them anonymously to input ideas and information. After the brainstorming phase, a facilitator leads the group in organizing, discussing, ranking, voting on, and classifying the ideas. This process eliminates many of the problems associated with traditional brainstorming groups (e.g., peer pressure and the wish to be "right").

The TEAM-Net session lasted about four hours and generated a list of 83 separate items that the group then put into categories. The group's top-ten categories involved general management knowledge rather than specific technical skills. Ranked in descending order, the top categories were **(1)** people skills, **(2)** creative-thinking ability, **(3)** financial skills, **(4)** communication skills (for both written and oral presentations), **(5)** developing a service orientation, **(6)** total quality management, **(7)** problem-identification and problem-solving skills, **(8)** listening skills, **(9)** customer-feedback skills, and **(10)** individual and system-wide computer skills.

This categorization led to further discussion that allowed for additional clarification of the meaning of these ten items. The stage was now set for a second TEAM-Net session, this time among the department's faculty. The same questions were asked and their responses led to essentially the same categories as the industry responses. One faculty member led a final session with a student group, whose responses to the questions again led to the same categories.[6]

BE 2000. The department's brainstorming process duplicated a similar procedure undertaken the previous year by the College of Business Administration itself. The college had already decided that it needed to recraft its own curriculum in response to some quality concerns expressed by its customers. This curriculum-review process led to development of a novel curriculum entitled "Business Education 2000" (BE 2000). The curriculum not only contained the necessary components required for accreditation, but also added extensive exposure to four competencies and 19 skills that the college's constituencies identified as critical for an effective graduate of a business program. The four competencies have much in common with the ten categories developed for the hospitality-management program. They are creative thinking and problem solving, communication, adapting to change, and teamwork. The college subsequently teamed with four business organizations, each of which had particular expertise in one of the competencies, to develop and present a required curriculum segment with a "living case" experience focused on that competency. The fact that the college had undergone this process

6S.A. Bach and A. Milman, "A Novel Technique for Reviewing a Hospitality Management Curriculum: A Qualitative Approach," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education, Palm Springs, California, July 1994.

> The curriculum review began with a concept that is fundamental to any guest-service operation—*the customer defines product attributes.* To help define its product, UCF asked employers what skills and knowledge they wanted in a baccalaureate graduate.

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and responded as creatively as it had made it easier for the department of hospitality management to recraft its own curriculum, considering that the department's advisory board, faculty, and students identified many of the same items, areas of desired expertise, and required competencies.

The next step in the department's program redesign was to bring these insights into the curriculum while simultaneously decreasing the number of credit hours required for the major from the previous 43 to the newly available 27. This meant that any new content or topics the department's customers expected to have in the curriculum had to compete for fewer available credit hours and displace material already contained in the program. It also meant that faculty members had to question their assumptions about the necessity of including a specific topic in each course, as well as to reexamine the number of hours required to deliver the course content to students.

Q sort. The faculty held many long meetings to deliberate the nature and types of courses required for the hospitality-management major. One procedure that aided this process was cutting sheets of paper with course outlines into topics and conducting a simple "Q sort" to rank and organize the topics to see which were redundant, what topics might be reorganized into new courses, and what topics might be deleted altogether. A careful review of prerequisites in light of the transfer status of the majority of students also provided a helpful way to conserve course content and requirements.

Core Curriculum

This review process led to a six-course core curriculum with three elective courses. The core courses were designed to include all the topic areas the advisory board had identified that were not already covered in sufficient depth or not covered at all in the business college's core requirements. Those hospitality courses also were designed to include some coverage of skill areas not specifically mentioned by the advisory board because its members assumed that students already had sufficient knowledge of those areas.

The real challenge for the faculty was establishing the appropriate balance between industry-specific knowledge and general skills. Advisory-board members made it clear that they expected only minimal knowledge of industry-specific topics. They stressed that they preferred to take the responsibility for training new hires in the operational procedures necessary for their specific technical and skill areas. Many of the general managerial topics, moreover, could be taught through the pedagogy used in the core content courses. Written communication skills, for example, can be taught through required course assignments in all courses. Likewise, interpersonal skills can be taught through the use of simulations, cases, or exercises in class presentations for other topics such as financial analysis or food-production techniques.

"Guestology"

The first two courses in the six-course core are known officially as Guest Services Management I and II, but the first course might better be called "Guestology I," or the study of organizational decision making from the guest's point of view. This course owes much to the ideas developed at the Walt Disney Company, which created this term and which advised the faculty on much of the course's content. The second guest-services course combines the functional area of marketing with an emphasis on the convention and meeting-planning industry. This course is one of several that are designed to achieve multiple goals. It requires written and oral communication, includes case studies that stress interpersonal cooperation, and offers opportunities for creative problem solving. These are the kinds of general managerial skills that the TEAM-Net sessions suggested were important for the new curriculum. All of those are practiced in the context of hospitality marketing as applied to the convention and meeting-planning industry.

Operations and Enterprise

The four other core courses were designed to accomplish similar efficiencies of content coverage. Hospitality Operations I, for example, combines the operational issues and procedures of food preparation with those of rooms-division management and front-office operations. The course includes a 15-hour

food-lab component and a front-office simulation exercise to provide hands-on experiences in both operational areas. Thus, students gain insights into the specific operational issues of the food-service industry and hotel operations while learning about the general principles of operational control and managerial oversight. Similarly, Hospitality Operations II exposes students to the operational issues related to conference and convention operations as well as those in the travel and tourism industry.

The last two core courses emphasize two issues that the advisory board's brainstorming session identified as critical to the new curriculum. Hospitality Enterprises I focuses on financial and accounting issues specific to the hospitality industry. This material is presented within the framework of designing and using management-information and decision systems that promote effective decision making by getting the right information in the right format to the right person at the right time. This course makes major use of a fully equipped computer laboratory specifically designed for hospitality students.

The lab, provided with funding from the local hospitality community, is a local-area network (LAN) system that uses one of the earliest applications of Microsoft's Windows NT in the country. Hospitality Enterprises II is dedicated to human-resources management. The course builds on a strategic analysis of the travel and tourism environment from which human-resources strategies can be developed. Through the use of cases, interpersonal experiences, and other forms of classroom simulations the student is exposed not only to human-resources management but also to the processes of managing people in a hospitality work setting.

Elective smorgasbord. Beyond the six core courses, students can select three electives from a variety of hospitality courses to focus in greater depth on a particular segment of the hospitality industry. Thus, a student might take courses covering conventions, food service, lodging, tourism, or some other specific area of interest. It should be noted that because this program is in an accredited business school, students typically come to the major with a strong background in the traditional functional areas of business. They have already completed introductory courses in accounting, marketing, management, quantitative analysis, international business, and economics as well as BE 2000, the extended course covering the four essential competencies, and courses in total quality management and statistics.

Well Met

After the curriculum redesign was complete, the faculty presented the advisory board members with the results of their TEAM-Net input. The faculty demonstrated point by point how the curriculum addressed the industry representatives' critical areas of concern regarding hospitality graduates. With the advisory board's ovation came the recognition that the program had followed the marketing principles of identifying what its customers wanted, listening carefully to their concerns, and responding with a product that met their needs. The final determination of whether this program is the optimum balance among the specific skills the industry needs for performing today's entry-level jobs and the competencies needed to perform tomorrow's leadership roles will be seen by whether the industry offers jobs that will challenge the education and experiences students gain through this curriculum.

The process described here is one that all academic programs should be conducting regularly—identifying customers, asking them what they want, and then finding a way to provide it. The faculty's experience of program redesign shows that the needs of the customers and the academic integrity of a program need not be at odds. Indeed, if anything, this group of senior hospitality executives challenged the department to go beyond the specific skills traditionally included in hospitality programs and focus more intensely on the general managerial, technological, financial, and leadership skills. By carefully listening to our customers, we believe we have found an effective way of producing a student who is better equipped to help lead the industry into the next century.

The process reveals a shift in the educational paradigm involving hospitality-management programs. The traditional focus of hospitality education is being challenged by the rapidly changing needs of the hospitality industry for more general managerial skills and interpersonal competencies. This may represent a fundamental shift in the hospitality industry's definition of the optimal balance between what is generally applicable and what constitutes specific training. Perhaps, given the pace of change in this industry, there is a greater need for educational institutions to provide training in how to learn and adapt to the changes faced by the hospitality industry than to teach students traditional skills. If such a shift is occurring in the industry's concept of the balance between general and specific topics, the process and outcome of this program's experience may provide a useful model for other programs to follow as the educational community seeks to respond to the dynamics of the hospitality industry. CQ