Using benchmarking: Techniques in academia: Building a gaming education program

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Using Benchmarking Techniques In Academia: Building A Gaming Education Program

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Abstract

This paper discusses the use of benchmarking techniques in building a gaming education program. Four general categories of benchmarking techniques and their applicability to gaming education are presented. A template for building a gaming education program is explained, as well as the key success factors to consider when implementing benchmarking in academia. A summary of schools currently offering gaming courses, a list of gaming topics in various functional areas that can easily be integrated into existing courses, and a list of gaming-related resources are also provided. **KEY WORDS:** gaming education, benchmarking, gaming resources

Periodically, academics discover that the application of a particular strategy, technique, or tool that has met with success in business will yield similar successes in an academic setting. For several years, many universities have applied the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) as a technique for improvement in academia (Ivancevich and Ivancevich, 1992). A tool that is often used in connection with the application of TQM techniques is benchmarking. Benchmarking principles call for identifying the best practices currently in use in a given industry as they relate to products, services, or internal processes, and then attempting to improve upon these practices and placing the improved process or product into action. Typically, industry leaders are targeted for their best practices, and by incorporating and improving upon the techniques used by leaders, competitors can make significant inroads in improving their own businesses. One area where benchmarking techniques are beginning to be used and should continue to prove quite helpful is in the area of gaming education.

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Bernard N. Fried, Ed.D.; William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration; University of Nevada, Las Vegas After the rapid expansion of gaming in the early 1990s, the demand for well-trained gaming professionals increased. However, few universities offered courses

in gaming, and those that did could not possibly meet the demand for quality gaming personnel. Because welltrained management prospects for the gaming field are in such scarce supply, many gaming operations have found themselves in tough competition for qualified employees. Often, in response to such competition, gaming properties have filled important management positions by hiring gaming executives away from other gaming operations, hiring executives from other industries and try-

But how can a university expand its curriculum to include gaming courses in an environment where qualified gaming faculty are scarce, and how does a university decide the scope and complexity of the courses offered when gaming is still not widely accepted as a mainstream field of study?

ing to quickly develop them into gaming experts, or by investing extensive funds in training lower level employees to become gaming managers (Cummings and Brewer, 1996). In response to this high demand, more and more universities are trying to add gaming courses or gaming programs to their curricula. But how can a university expand its curriculum to include gaming courses in an environment where qualified gaming faculty are scarce, and how does a university decide the scope and complexity of the courses offered when gaming is still not widely accepted as a mainstream field of study? This paper proposes that a possible solution to these problems is the employment of benchmarking techniques.

Benchmarking in Academia

So what are the implications of benchmarking for academia, and specifically for gaming education? Most schools and universities agree that they are striving for continuous improvement. Some universities may wish to improve their reputations through higher quality academic research. Others may wish to encourage better teaching or better service. Some may wish to begin a new curriculum or change the existing curriculum. Other schools may have recently been approved to change to a four-year status, or may want to begin a new Ph.D. or Masters program, or a new program in casino management. Benchmarking is one tool that each of these schools may use to help them achieve their goals.

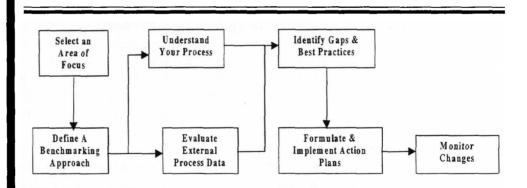
If a university wishes to encourage higher quality academic research, better teaching, or better service, how can benchmarking help? One way to utilize benchmarking in this area is to encourage faculty with a weakness in one of these areas to select another faculty member who has strong skills in that particular area as a model. By doing so, less skilled faculty members can learn important strategies and abilities to improve their own skills. For instance, if Dr. D. is struggling in the classroom and consistently receives poor student evaluations, why not encour-

age Dr. D. to benchmark Dr. J's teaching style, since Dr. J. has won numerous teaching awards? Similarly, Dr. J. may want to benchmark Dr. A related to Dr. A's research skills, since Dr. A. is a renowned researcher.

Benchmarking can work in a similar manner with respect to establishing new programs or curricula. A school that wishes to establish a doctoral program, for instance, would collect information on all the top doctoral programs in that specialty in the country. A school wishing to establish a hospitality program could benchmark the top hospitality programs. Likewise, a school hoping to establish a gaming program would benchmark the top gaming programs.

Some of the steps commonly included in the benchmarking procedure are: identifying the process, product, or service to be evaluated; identifying the industry leaders against which to benchmark; establishing current performance levels; comparing these performance levels to the industry leaders; setting goals; developing plans necessary to achieve these goals; executing actions; reviewing progress; and adjusting benchmarks. While these are generic steps found in the benchmarking process, each entity can customize benchmarking to meet its own needs.

The process for benchmarking in higher education is quite similar to the process popularized in industry. First, the school must select an area on which to focus its attention. Next, the school should determine which schools appear to be the best performers in the area of focus, and select one or more benchmarks with which to make contact. Generally, other schools with expertise in one area will be relatively receptive to answering questions, sharing information, or helping to direct individuals to useful sources of information when approached diplomatically. Next, the schools should evaluate their own processes and needs while comparing them to those of the industry leaders (benchmarks). The culmination of this evaluation is the identification of best practices and gaps between the best practices and the school's own procedures. After this process is completed, the next step is to take action and implement changes. Lastly, the changes implemented should be monitored to determine their success. This process is summarized in Figure 1.



Adapted from "Applying Benchmarking to Higher Education: Part II. Steps in the Process." (1993). www.innovet.com.

Figure 1. Steps in the Benchmarking Process

Types of Benchmarking

While numerous variations of the benchmarking procedure are possible, there are four general categories of benchmarking: internal, functional, generic, and competitive (Camp, 1993). Internal benchmarking involves comparing similar practices within an entity, identifying which practice is superior in performance, and then requiring the business segments not following this practice to adopt it. Hence, multi-property organizations such as Mirage Resorts or Hilton Hotels can use benchmarking among the different properties to ensure that the most efficient and effective practices are continually adopted and used by each property. This ensures that each of its properties is continually improving its operations by implementing the most effective measures currently in use within the organization. Similarly, if a college or university finds that a particular department has adopted a method of scheduling classes that is far superior to methods used in other departments, the institution may want the departments using less effective measures to benchmark the department with the superior scheduling system.

Functional benchmarking entails benchmarking a specific function, such as a player tracking system or inventory procedures. With functional benchmarking, an entity can cross industry lines to identify the benchmark firm or stay within its own industry depending upon the function being benchmarked. For instance, a casino trying to evaluate its player tracking system will likely choose another gaming operation to benchmark that it believes has the best system in the gaming industry. Alternatively, a university attempting to update its payroll system may go outside of academia to benchmark a service or manufacturing firm's payroll system if that system is considered to be the best available.

Generic benchmarking refers to the adoption of benchmarking within an entity on a global basis across many functions and processes. Once identified, benchmarks for processes are located according to internal, functional or competitive lines. For instance, when Mirage Resorts, Inc. decided to build the Bellagio resort on the Las Vegas strip with the intention of making the new property a world class, five-star resort, many of the procedures, systems, and services were developed with the mind set of improving upon the best practices currently used in the industry. Mirage Resorts' goal in this process was to build a property that would still be the best resort in the world fifty years from now. In this case, a number of processes, services, and property features were identified for benchmarking, rather than focusing on just one item. Furthermore, the entity can look to its internal processes, competitor's processes, or other industries for benchmark identification. Similarly, a university wishing to improve upon its overall operations may choose to revamp and improve upon a large number of its systems in a global benchmarking effort rather than just evaluating one system at a time. For instance, the university may identify that its accounting, marketing, student registration, contracts and grants, fund-raising, and assessment efforts all need improvement and that within each of these areas, ten to fifteen smaller functions need to be revised. Hence, generic benchmarking results when an entity applies benchmarking techniques in a global effort across a variety of functions and processes within the entity.

Competitive benchmarking involves looking solely at an entity's competitors in an attempt to improve upon its own operations. By identifying which competitors have excelled in certain areas and trying to improve upon these procedures, an Using Benchmarking Techniques In Academia: Building A Gaming Education Program entity can substantially improve its own operations while still minimizing the risks of making a significant change in its operations. If a procedure has proven its worth in one entity, the risk of failure is somewhat reduced if another company chooses to adopt it. This phenomenon has proven itself in the gaming industry with respect to slot clubs. Several properties have benchmarked existing slot clubs at competing casinos, and successfully implemented similar procedures within their own casinos. This process has also proven quite useful in academia, particularly with respect to executive master's programs. By benchmarking successful executive master's programs at other schools, a school hoping to develop a solid executive program can mitigate some of its risks.

Even though four types of benchmarking can be identified, these four types are not necessarily distinct. For instance, it appears that Mirage Resorts is using a combination of all four types of benchmarking concurrently in its quest to develop the Bellagio as the world's best casino resort.

Using Benchmarking to Develop a Gaming Program: A Step By Step Approach

If a university wishes to develop gaming courses or a gaming program, the first step of the benchmarking process is to identify the focus of the process. What is the intent of the process? Does the school want to integrate gaming into its existing courses, provide students the opportunity to take gaming specific courses, or develop an entire gaming management program? Once this question is answered, the school must then identify schools that offer gaming courses that would be appropriate benchmarks. This process would generally be considered functional benchmarking. The International Gaming Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) maintains one such source of information on gaming courses.

This source includes a current listing of gaming courses taught in the United States at four-year institutions of higher learning. Table 1 includes a summary of the four-year schools currently offering gaming courses or courses with a gaming component. If a school is thinking of adding gaming to its curriculum, this table should prove helpful in identifying the appropriate schools to select as benchmarks. The schools listed in the table range from schools that have integrated gaming into one or two existing courses, to schools such as UNLV, University of Nevada, Reno, and Fairleigh Dickinson University that have fairly extensive gaming programs. Depending upon a school's individual needs, one or more of the schools listed should qualify as an appropriate benchmark. It is important to note that all schools wishing to increase the extent of gaming content in their curricula will not select the same benchmark schools. Instead, the benchmarks should be selected on the basis of what resources are available and what constraints exist, so that the ideal benchmark is not beyond what is economically and realistically feasible.

Table 1 Schools Offering Gaming Courses

School (Number of Courses Offered) Bethune-Cookman College (1)	Course # HM 444	Course Description Classic Resort Operations
California State University, Carson (1)	REC 448	Hotel and Resort Management
Central Michigan University (7)	various	Offered through UNLV
Cornell University (1)	HADM 408	Introduction to Casino Operations
Fairleigh Dickinson University (8)	HRTM 3230 HRTM 3231 HRTM 4232 HRTM 4233 HRTM 4234 HRTM 4235 HRTM 4236 HRTM 4237	Overview of Casino Operations and Management Protection of Casino Games Mathematics of Casino Games Gaming Regulation and Control Accounting for the Casino Hotel Sociology of Gaming Advanced Casino Management Seminar in Casino Management
New Mexico State University	HTS 404 HTS 434	Gaming Operations and Organization Seminar Hotel/Resort Operations
New York Institute of Technology	HT 4803	Casino Management
Northern Arizona University	HA 401 HA 477	Resort Management Gaming & Casino Management
Pennsylvania State University	HR&IM 456	Casino Operations Management
Rochester Institute of Technology	0622-310	Resort Development and Management
University of Denver	HRTM 3550	Resort Management
University of Houston	HRMA 3357 HRMA 3356	Gaming and Casino Management Resort Management
University of Nevada, Las Vegas	HMD 131 HMD 334 HMD 339 HMD 376 HMD 426 HMD 434 HMD 437 HMD 439 HMD 442 HMD 474 TCA 495 HOA 718 HOA 763	Introduction to the Casino Casino Operations and Management Protection of Casino Table Games Special Topics in Hotel Admin. (Casino/Gaming) Casino Accounting and Control Casino Operations and Management II Gaming Regulations and Control Seminar in Casino Management Sociology of Gambling Seminar in Hotel Research (Gaming Topic) Casino Marketing Principles of Casino & Gaming Management Customer Development Strategies for the Casino and Gaming Industry Research Seminar in Casino and Gaming Management
University of Nevada, Reno	GM 325 GM 415 GM 425 GM 430 GM 440 GM 460	Introduction to Gaming Management Commercial Gaming Law Accounting for the Gaming Industry Gaming Management Casino Marketing Tourism Marketing

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TABLE 1 Continued

School (Number of Courses Offered)	Course #	Course Description
University of Nevada, Reno	GM 470	Quantitative Methods and Applications in Casino Gaming
	GM 490	Internship
	GM 495	Special Topics in Gaming Management
University of New Haven	HR 260	Survey of Private Club, Resort & Gaming
		Operations Management
University of New Orleans	HRT 4160	Theories of Casino Gaming
	HRT 4165	Management of Gaming Enterprises
Widener University	HM 364	Casino Hotel Management
	HM 354	Club and Resort Management

Source: Adapted from the UNLV International Gaming Institute's master list of gaming programs and updated with current data.

Once appropriate benchmark universities are selected, these schools should be contacted for assistance. Usually, other schools are happy to provide some general assistance regarding information in the gaming area. If not, information may be obtained regarding curricular content from the schools' web pages, from web pages of individual gaming faculty (where sample copies of syllabi are often posted), from personal contact with the faculty teaching in the program, or from course catalogs and descriptions. Some universities, such as UNLV, and the University of New Orleans, even offer gaming education seminars to aid in the development of new programs and the refinement of existing programs.

A useful source for identifying areas where gaming topics can be integrated into existing courses is provided in Table 2. This table includes a sample of typical hospitality related courses and identifies key areas where specific gaming topics would naturally fit into the course discussions. Schools desiring to integrate gaming into an existing curriculum rather than establishing a separate gaming curriculum should find this information particularly useful.

Table 2 Gaming Topics and Issues for Course Integration

General Topic	Sub-Topic	Gaming Topic
Hotel Operations	Front Office	Casino Rates
		Casino Reservations
		Complimentary Rooms
		Market Mix in the Casino/Hotel
	Housekeeping	High-roller Suites
	Facility Management	Energy Demands in the Casino
		Environmental Tobacco Smoke in the Casino
		Fire Safety in the Casino Environment
		Heat Load of Slot Machines
		Lighting Design in the Casino

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TABLE 2 Continued

Gaming Topic General Topic Sub-Topic Security Casino Robberies Con Artists Slot Cheats Food Service Operations Restaurants Budgeting Losses Not Profits in Some Outlets Handling Complimentaries Pricing Casino Menus Special Requirements of Running a 24 Hour Operation Allocation of Complimentary Beverage Costs Beverage Operations Complimentary Drink Policies Third Party Liability and Service of Alcohol in the Casino Financial Accounting Cash Cage Operations Cashiering Casino Credit and Collections Accounts Receivable Inventory Chip Inventory Property and Equipment Accounting for Depreciation of Gaming Equipment Liabilities Chip Liability Progressive Slot Liabilities Payroll Tip Compliance Corporate Gaming Act of 1969 Equity Timing of Revenue Recognition Revenue Expense Complimentary Items Preopening Costs Gains/Losses Foreign Currency Gains/Losses Financial Reporting Departmental Statements Uniform Systems of Accounts for Casinos Financing and Investing Trends in the Gaming Industry Cash Flows Managerial Accounting Ratio Analysis Industry Differences Pricing Integrated Pricing in a Casino Forecasting/Budgeting Forecasting/Budgeting for Casino Departments Cash Management Bankrolls Hopper Levels Buy vs. Build Decisions Capital Budgeting Internal Control Cheating Scams Minimum Internal Control Standards Protection of Games Safeguarding Casino Assets Security Surveillance Current IRS Gaming Issues (Deductibility of Marker Taxes Discounts, Employee Meals, Complimentary Expenses, Outstanding Chips, etc.) Gaming Taxes Industry Differences Corporate Finance or Evaluating the Firm's Performance Financial Management Forecasting/Budgeting Importance of forecasting/budgeting in a Casino Capitalization Rates Valuation Models for Valuing Casino Hotels Risk and Return Investor Expectations Capital Budgeting Buy vs. Build Decisions Industry Differences and Regulatory Requirements Cash Flow Cost of Capital Treatment by Lenders Capital Structure Leverage vs. Cash Dividends Reinvestment Policy of Casino Hotels Management of Working Industry Differences Capital Financial Statements Industry Differences Financial Analysis of the Service Industry

Using Benchmarking Techniques In Academia: Building A Gaming Education Program TABLE 2 Continued

General Topic	Sub-Topic	Gaming Topic
		Uniform System of Accounts
	Ratio Analysis	Industry Differences
		Projected Goals
Technology	Input/Output Devices	Electronic Roulette Signs
		Keno Boards
		Other Electronic Games
		Slot Machines
		Table or Slot Machine Keypads
Technology	Systems	Cage and Credit Systems
		Casino Floor Layout and Design Systems
		Player Tracking Systems
		Slot Tracking Systems
	Peripherals	Auto Change Machines
		Bill Acceptors
		Coin Handlers
		Scales
		Security Cameras
	Interfaces	Golf/Resort Management Systems
		POS Systems
		Property Management Systems
		Restaurant Management Systems
		Time and Attendance Systems
	Communications	Camera Control
		Radio Frequency Communication for Slot
		Devices
		Security and Maintenance Personnel
		Special Issues with Riverboats
	Productivity	Increased Accuracy in Data and Speed or
	~	Reporting Holds, Win, Drop, Playing
		Information, Maintenance, Security, and Variance
Marketing	Price	Role of Complimentaries
		Take-out Rate of Casino Games
	Product	Changes in Consumer Tastes
		Changes in Technology
		Interaction Between Legal Framework and
		Consumer Demand
	Promotion	Legal Restrictions on Advertising
		Public Relations
	Place	Convenience vs. Specialty Good
		Diffusion
		Public Policy
		Technology
Tourism	Destination Life Cycle	Casinos as a Revitalization Tool in Atlantic City
	Tourism's Economic, Social,	Case Histories of Las Vegas, Atlantic City,
	and Environmental Impacts	Deadwood, etc.

Source: Jones, T., Fried, B., Ivancevich, S., Roehl, W., Brewer, K., & Eade, V. (1995). "Integrating gaming issues and topics into the curriculum: A new industry on the hospitality education horizon." Working Paper.

However, benchmarking efforts will not be successful without gaining appropriate knowledge of the intricacies of gaming. To develop background knowledge on the gaming industry, faculty and administrators would seek out and read gaming-related materials. Table 3 includes a list of suggested readings in the gaming area. While this list is in no way intended to be all-inclusive, it should serve as a solid starting point for those interested in expanding their gaming knowledge.

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Table 3 Gaming and Hospitality Books, Journals, and Magazines

Topic Title

Gaming Journals Gaming Research and Review Journal

Journal of Gambling Studies

Gaming Trade Journals and Publications Casino Executive

Casino Journal

Casino Journal's National Gaming Summary Harrah's Survey of Casino Entertainment

Indian Gaming News

International Gaming and Wagering Business

Riverboat Gaming News Slotworld Magazine Sport's Forms Gaming Today State Gaming Regulations

State Internal Control Standards and Guidelines

The Grogan Report Audits of Casinos (AICPA)

Gaming Books Casino Accounting and Financial Management by

Greenlees

Casino Management by Friedman

Casino Operations Management by Kilby Casinos: The International Casino Guide Introduction to the Casino Entertainment Industry by Eade & Eade (Prentice Hall) The Gaming Industry: Introduction &

Perspectives (Wiley)

Other Books Financial Statement Analysis by Gibson

Hospitality Financial Management by Schmidgall

and Andrew

General Publications Advertising Age

Business Week

Fortune

Other Academic Journals Annals of Tourism Research

Journal of Consumer Research

Journal of Marketing

Journal of Marketing Research

Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing

Journal of Travel Research

Marketing News

The Journal of Hospitality Financial and

Technology Professionals
Tourism Management

Other Trade Journals Amusement Business

Meetings & Conventions Magazine

Travel Trade News Travel Weekly

Library Compact Disclosure Database Corporate Annual Reports

Standard & Poor's Analyst's Handbook

Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations,

Directors and Executives Standard & Poor's Reports

Source: Jones, T., Fried, B., Ivancevich, S., Roehl, W., Brewer, K., & Eade, V. (1995). "Integrating gaming issues and topics into the curriculum: A new industry on the hospitality education horizon." Working Paper.

Once appropriate information is obtained on curricular content and the parties involved in the benchmarking process have familiarized themselves with the gam-

It is important to recognize that the benchmarking process is destined for failure if successful implementation of changes cannot occur.

ing industry, the process of identifying gaps between the investigating school's current offerings and the offerings at the benchmark programs can begin. Next, a school can begin to pattern its own gaming curriculum after those institutions identified as benchmarks, while try-

ing to improve and/or mold the gaming curriculum to fit the institution's needs. In this way, the school can begin its gaming program with confidence as to its quality and optimism about its eventual success. Not only can benchmarking help in adding new programs, but benchmarking can lead to continuous improvement in all programs if this pattern of investigation, improvement, and implementation continues for many years.

Key Points for Benchmarking Success

There are several factors to consider when using benchmarking techniques in an academic setting that will help to increase the chances of a successful experience. First, always remember that the same constraints or factors that govern one institution may not be present in another, so it is important to examine every aspect of the benchmarked process or course prior to implementation. Second, it is important to recognize that the benchmarking process is destined for failure if successful implementation of changes cannot occur. The most critical area of the benchmarking process is to successfully implement the changes needed. To implement change, an advocate must be selected to lead the implementation effort. The implementation of change requires focused advocacy. Not only is it important to have a strong advocate, but it is equally important for both administration and faculty to show support for the process by committing time, resources, and support to the effort.

Third, time management is a critical issue. A realistic time line must be established with clear steps outlined at each juncture. If the time lines are adhered to, constituencies are more likely to be impressed with changes being implemented and are thereby more likely to support the changes.

Fourth, it is critically important for action plans or blueprints for the change to be developed. For implementation action plans to be adequate, they must meet five criteria (Jones, 1972).

(1) Specificity: Are the actions precise and specific?

With respect to specificity, it is very important to formulate clear, precise objectives. Any ambiguity interjected into the process will hamper the benchmarking process.

(2) Performance: What do you intend to accomplish?

The performance measures necessary to implement the change must be outlined. Care should be taken to formulate a detailed mission to be accomplished.

(3) Involvement: Who is part of the action?

In terms of involvement, the faculty who will be teaching these new or adapted gaming courses should be actively involved in the process of benchmarking in order for the process to have the greatest likelihood of success. Further, appropriate administrators must also be actively involved where applicable.

(4) Realism: Do you have the necessary resources to accomplish your objectives?

Realistic cost and time expectations must be used in the benchmarking process. Deadlines, estimates of faculty and administrative time, and estimates of costs must be carefully analyzed and evaluated to ensure they are reasonable.

(5) Observability: Will you be able to measure the results?

Measurement criteria must be developed and implemented so that the results of the process can be effectively evaluated.

Finally, benchmarking should not be viewed as a one-time process that happens in isolation. Instead, post-implementation procedures must be utilized to perform an evaluation of the results, and any necessary changes must be addressed.

Conclusions

As discussed earlier in the paper, the benchmarking process involves the following steps:

- (1) Identify an area of focus for improvement;
- (2) Select a benchmarking approach;
- (3) Evaluate external process data and develop a detailed understanding of your own processes;
- (4) Identify the best practices and gaps between your processes and those identified as the "best" practices;
 - (5) Formulate and implement action plans; and
 - (6) Monitor changes.

Benchmarking can serve as a useful tool in higher education when used to help build a gaming focus in an existing curriculum or in developing a separate gaming education program. When benchmarking is used, careful attention must be paid not only to properly identifying a benchmark, but also in implementing and monitoring desired changes to the curriculum. Benchmarking serves as yet another example of how techniques popularized in industry can prove useful in

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Using Benchmarking Techniques In Academia: Building A Gaming Education Program academia. With the tools discussed in this paper and the gaming resources set forth in the tables, schools desiring to build or enhance their gaming offerings should have a reasonable starting point to help them achieve their goals.

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Endnotes

¹ This working paper was published in *Hospitality and Tourism Educator* in 1996; however, the tables were inadvertently omitted from the journal publication. A citation of the published article is included in the reference section of this paper.