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Hein and Riegel: A Systematic Model for Program Evaluation and Curriculum Transformation

A SYSTEMATIC MODEL FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION AND CURRICULAR TRANSFORMATION:
A TALE FROM THE TRENCHES

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Abstract

As the hospitality industry has matured, the knowledge expectations for hospitality graduates have increased. In response, the curricula of many hospitality programs have evolved to meet this demand. However, many observers have noted a systematic approach to curricular revision or program evaluation is absent from hospitality curriculum planning. Some have suggested that mere revision is insufficient and sweeping change or curricular transformation is needed. Recognizing the need to change, the Hospitality and Restaurant Administration Department at Missouri State University developed and employed a systematic approach to program evaluation that resulted in curricular transformation.

Keywords: hospitality curriculum; hospitality education; curriculum planning; curriculum transformation; program evaluation

Introduction

As the hospitality industry has matured and has become increasingly sophisticated, the expectations placed on hospitality professionals and graduates have also increased. In response, the curriculum of hospitality undergraduate programs has evolved in order to meet the industry demands. Riegel and Dallas (2006) put forward five common approaches to hospitality education: a) technical approaches, b) tourism approaches, c) food systems approaches, d) business administration approaches, and e) combined approaches. Despite the existence of different approaches, many educators have acknowledged a need for a more common philosophy in developing curricula. For example, Rappole (2000) noted that in recent years hospitality curricula have increasingly adopted a more business-focused approach. Similarly, Dopson and Tas (2004) suggested an increasing need to develop curricula that results in producing graduates who are well prepared for professional hospitality careers.

While significant progress has been made in the advancement of hospitality curricula, Chathoth and Sharma (2007) found the “current curricular structure of hospitality and tourism related undergraduate educational programs reflect a lack of direction if the impact of the forces driving change is considered in evaluating the effectiveness of the core curricular models” (p. 10). As hospitality educators work to address the lack of direction in the hospitality curriculum, the need for effective program evaluation and curriculum planning becomes clear.

According to Patton (1997), “program evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming” (p. 23). The systematic approach offered by structured program evaluation processes is particularly beneficial when considering curricular planning, design, and improvement. Rossi (2004) further noted conducting a formative evaluation is valuable when the goal of information gathering activities is to guide program improvement. The processes utilized to collect data for a formative evaluation are similar to those used in scientific research. Program evaluation takes the principles of research one step further. Patton (2008) suggested the difference between research and evaluation is that “research aims to produce knowledge and truth”, whereas “useful evaluation supports action” (p. 40).

When considering an evaluation approach, the case study method has been noted by some (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Kenny & Grotelueschen, 1984; Merriam, 1998) to be an appropriate tool to use in educational research and program evaluation. The case study method allows for rich, thick description to occur and enables results to be communicated in a common language, thereby improving a reader’s understanding and implementation of results (Merriam, 1998). Reineke (1991) added use of evaluation results could be further supported by actively involving stakeholders and by establishing a structure or conceptual framework that helps keep conversations focused. The conceptual framework serves as a structured mechanism for stakeholders to share ideas, identify additional information needed, and interpret the results of the evaluation process.

Regardless of the program evaluation approach used, it is important for those involved in the process to adhere to stringent technical standards, consider strengths and weaknesses of the approaches implemented, and communicate the methods used accurately so that others can understand and critique the evaluation (American Evaluation Association, 2004). If properly implemented, program evaluation is a critical component of the continuous curriculum planning and improvement process (Briggs, Stark, & Rowland-Poplawska, 2003) and potentially leads to successful curriculum transformation when necessary. Generally, transformation extends far beyond mere revision and involves radical changes in structure, content, outcomes, and at times, even culture. In many ways, it is almost like starting from scratch.

Despite recognition that hospitality curricula would benefit from transformation with respect to focus, content, and structure, a limited amount of literature exists that identifies or proposes models for evaluation and change (Milmann, 2001; Nelson & Rutherford Silvers, 2009; Ashley, et al., 1995). The literature is equally thin when it comes to relating how programs have implemented processes of sweeping curricular examination and overhaul.

In 2008 and 2009, the Hospitality and Restaurant Administration (HRA) faculty at Missouri State University (MSU) recognized a need for far-reaching curricular change and set out to develop a disciplined and systematic process of program review and curricular transformation. The purpose of this paper is to describe that process and to propose a model of curriculum review and development based on that experience.

Background

The HRA program at MSU was founded in 1983. Originally, it was a program in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences. Like many such programs, the initial curriculum reflected the philosophy of that department as well as the backgrounds of the founding faculty. As such, the original curriculum combined technical and food systems approaches. Over HRA's 26 year history, only minor curricular modifications were made—mostly involving the addition of courses—and for the most part the curriculum reflected its founding orientation.

In 2007 and 2008, several events served as a catalyst for change. First, the program was elevated to department status. Second, leadership and faculty changes provided impetus for an expanded vision as well as a change in perspective. Finally, the department was given an administrative directive to restructure the mission and enhance the stature of the department both externally as well as inside the university community. The comprehensive changes desired would require examination and potential alteration of virtually all of the department's activities. The faculty believed an evaluation of the curriculum would be a logical place to begin the department's transformation process as it would serve as the foundation for restructuring.

At the start of the 2008 school year, the HRA faculty considered approaches to curriculum review. Ground rules were established to ensure the process was comprehensive and “zero-based” while at the same time sensitive to, but not driven by, the department's capabilities, faculty expertise, history, and culture. The following guidelines were developed as a result of these early discussions:

1. Involving all faculty members in such an evaluation might prove to be cumbersome, time consuming, and possibly counterproductive; the review and subsequent recommendations would be handled by a Curricular Development Team (CDT). The CDT would regularly report to the faculty, and all faculty members would have a voice in the process.
2. Initially, examining existing courses was not considered. Instead, the CDT defined a core body of knowledge based on the Accreditation Commission for Programs in Hospitality Administration's (ACPHA) guidelines and faculty direction. Learning outcomes were specified under broad headings such as lodging operations, foodservice operations, business and management, and so forth. This core body of knowledge would later be used to evaluate existing curricular content.

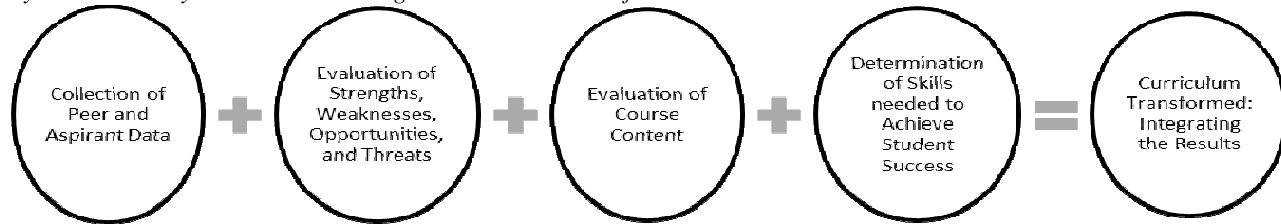
3. The CDT conducted an examination of peer and aspirant hospitality programs; analyzed departmental strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; evaluated course content; and reflected on skills needed for student success.

The guidelines were important in establishing the direction of the inquiry and allowed for multiple stakeholder concerns to be recognized. In order to properly evaluate the curriculum, however, a systematic analysis process or conceptual framework was needed.

The Systematic Analysis Process

A deliberate, systematic, and structured approach was developed and employed to analyze and inform curriculum decisions. The systematic analysis process consisted of four phases with each phase building upon the other. These phases are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Systematic Analysis Process Leading to Curricular Transformation



Phase 1: Collection of Peer and Aspirant Data

Although peer and aspirant comparisons have long been used for university and college level strategic planning purposes, they have played a rather limited role in program and curricular review. The department felt that, by identifying and studying peer and aspirant programs, it could identify curricular gaps, best practices, and other factors that might assist not only with curricular change, but also with program development. Peer programs were selected on the basis of size, number of faculty, type of institution, history, and other factors. The aspirants were hospitality departments or schools that have been successful in specific ways that were consistent with the HRA department's goals. While none was a perfect match, an evaluation of these programs with respect to certain criteria would provide useful information for both curricular and programmatic development. In addition to peer and aspirant institutions, a list of "non-aspirant" programs was also created. Non-aspirant programs were identified to ensure that transformation efforts that were not consistent with HRA's mission, capabilities, and culture were not pursued.

A variety of criteria were examined for each peer and aspirant program. These included not only curriculum, but also structure, resources, students, and other factors. Two tables on each peer and aspirant program were completed. Table 1 lists and describes the criteria utilized in the general evaluation.

Table 1
Evaluative Criteria for Peer and Aspirant Institutions

Criterion	Description
Unit	Department, program, school, or college
Host College or Department	Identify department or college by name
Degree(s) Offered	Include undergraduate and graduate
Advisory Board	Identify composition—local, regional, or national Identify function—working, promotional, fundraising, and development, etc.
Centers	List any research or study center by name
Lab Facilities	Describe number and use
Accreditation	List any specialized accreditation—ACPHA, AACSB, etc.
Students	Number by degree level Include demographics and geographic residence
Undergraduate admission	When admitted—freshman, junior, etc. Information on ACT or SAT scores plus program requirements
Faculty and staff	Number of faculty by rank Number of staff and positions
General curricular information	Math requirements Pre-professional courses (i.e. accounting, economics, etc.) Major requirements—required courses, electives List any tracks, options or majors

Table 2 was designed to assist in the analysis of the curriculum. Curricular information was categorized by identifying courses that fit into specific categories. These categories were selected because they roughly correlate to the ACPHA body of knowledge. The categories included: a) lodging operations, b) foodservice and related operations, c) other operation, d) tourism, e) business and management, f) other courses, and g) internships or work experience.

After the peer and aspirant data were collected, the results were analyzed. A review of the peer data revealed that the HRA structure and curriculum at that time was indeed similar to that of peer institutions. As the aspirant data were analyzed, attention was given to the organization of the curriculum as well as the types of courses offered. The CDT understood a simple duplication of aspirant programs would not be feasible or desirable. Instead, the intent of analyzing the aspirant data was to provide a better overall understanding of the curricular offerings of these institutions. Table 2 presents a hypothetical example of a completed evaluation grid.

Table 2
Peer and Aspirant Curriculum Evaluation Grid (Hypothetical)

Curriculum Segment	Courses Offered
Lodging Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lodging Management • Hotel Revenue Management
Food Service & Related Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principles of Food Production • Safety and Sanitation • Quantity Food Production
Other Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beverage Management • Facilities Management
Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Tourism • Destination Management
Business & Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial Accounting—(College of Business) • Organizational Leadership • Hospitality and Tourism Marketing • Hospitality Management Accounting • Human Resources Management • Controlling Costs in Hospitality Operations • Hospitality Strategic Management
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Hospitality Management • Hospitality Law
Internships or Work Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,000 hours minimum (4 credits total): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 500 hours before senior year ○ 500 hours during senior year

Phase 2: Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)

The second phase of the analysis process involved conducting a SWOT analysis of the HRA department. The SWOT analysis allowed for the evaluation of internal strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum as well as the external opportunities and threats that could impact the department's academic offerings. During the SWOT analysis phase, factors such as the current course offerings, faculty, facilities, students, resources, and industry needs were considered. The internal analysis revealed the department had a strong food and beverage curriculum in place, but work was needed to further develop the business, management, and lodging aspects. Simply adding more courses was not feasible for a number of reasons. First, resources were not available to add such courses. Second, transfer students would be unreasonably challenged to complete the program in a timely fashion. Finally, the internal analysis suggested some courses and content areas were either outdated or not consistent with the departmental vision.

The SWOT analysis also identified a number of opportunities where the department could expand and strengthen its curricular offerings by collaborating with other departments in the university. An examination of the external marketplace revealed areas where the department could expand into specific emerging segments. MSU's geographic location near multiple tourist destinations provided an opportunity to include tourism and destination management courses in the curriculum. Similarly, a number of country clubs were located in the region, providing the opportunity to incorporate club management in the curriculum. Additionally, the emerging segment of senior living management afforded an opportunity for curricular expansion.

Two potential threats were identified that could hamper the progress of the department. One threat, of course, was the economy. As the economy slowed in 2008, so did the hiring of new college graduates. Another threat was the duplication of hospitality-related content by other departments who had substantially fewer students. The analysis revealed duplication of academic content in at least three different departments outside of HRA.

Phase 3: Evaluation of Course Content

The SWOT analysis revealed the need to restructure and redesign course offerings as well as the manner in which content was delivered. The third phase of the analysis process entailed an evaluation of course content. This stage used the ACPHA body of knowledge as a reference and examined both individual courses as well as the curriculum in its entirety. Individual courses were evaluated to determine which content areas should be covered and which content should be removed. Once this was completed, the overall curriculum was assessed to identify missing content areas as well as obsolete courses that contained content better learned on the job.

The content evaluation also considered the value of curricular content with respect to both its immediate and long-term value. Early in the process, a conscious decision was made to develop a curriculum that not only addressed the immediate needs of graduates, but also addressed the needs of a long-term career in the hospitality industry. Two key questions, “Is the content vital to the success of our graduates?” and “Are we adequately addressing ACPHA’s body of knowledge?” guided the evaluation process. Finally, a deliberate effort was made to separate needed course content from faculty preferences in order to achieve a more objective perspective.

A number of recommendations resulted from the evaluation. Five courses were recommended for elimination because they were determined to be either obsolete or contained content that could be addressed in a more effective manner. As a result, the number of required courses was reduced, allowing for curricular restructuring. The addition of a limited number of courses was also recommended to take advantage of identified opportunities. Most importantly, and perhaps most challenging, a standardized set of content and learning objectives was developed and recommended for each course. A heightened emphasis on business-related concepts was recommended throughout the curriculum, resulting in a number of courses being renamed to better reflect content. These recommendations were substantial, and in some cases, radical curricular transformations.

Phase Four: Determination of Skills Needed to Achieve Student Success

The fourth phase of the analysis process involved an examination of the skills and competencies students would need to successfully complete the transformed curriculum. Previous analysis identified a need to develop a curriculum that enhanced students’ learning and critical thinking capabilities as they progressed through the major. With the understanding that learning is a building process, attention was given to areas in the curriculum where fundamental knowledge as well as higher-level concepts would be presented.

The curriculum development team recognized the mastery of fundamental concepts and skills was essential for students to successfully navigate the newly transformed and business-oriented curriculum. They examined areas such as accounting, communication, technology, and quantitative reasoning. After deficient areas of knowledge were identified, recommendations were made to overcome the deficiency. In some instances, specific hospitality classes were recommended to remedy the shortcoming. In other situations, courses outside of the HRA department, but already offered at the university, were recommended to address the knowledge need. The result of this work was the development of a curriculum that had a very distinct and intentional building effect in course design and prepared students for higher levels of performance.

A Curriculum Transformed: Results of the Process

The systematic analysis process resulted in sweeping changes to the curriculum and its structure. These changes included a) the development of a core group of required course which involved the elimination of outdated HRA and general education course, b) the addition of specialization options, and c) the progression of prerequisites and advanced learning skills.

Required Courses

Previously, the curriculum consisted of 61 semester hours of required courses. The required courses were pared down to 39 semester hours that the faculty believed comprised the common body of knowledge. This was accomplished by eliminating some of the more technical courses that could best be learned on the job as well as subjects such as nutrition that could be incorporated into other courses. Furthermore, courses that were required when HRA was a program within another department were eliminated. For example, the Child and Family Development course that was required when HRA was housed with Family and Consumer Sciences was no longer relevant for hospitality students. In other cases, the technical courses were replaced with business oriented courses such as Organizational Leadership and Strategic Management. In addition, some courses were relegated to elective status to accommodate the specialization options.

Specialization Options

The review also indicated that students needed in-depth learning in at least one area as well as flexibility in their course of study. One approach to addressing the need for flexibility in the curriculum is the specialization option. Baldwin and Baumann (2005) suggested that options “define a coherent set of courses that provide a foundation of knowledge and skills in a specialized, often interdisciplinary subject field” (p. 93). Therefore, the newly renovated curriculum requires students choose at least one specialization option. These options consist of three courses, or nine semester hours, in the area of specialization. Students can specialize in Food and Beverage Management, Lodging Management, Club Management, Senior Living Management, or Tourism. Options were built by using existing HRA courses, developing a limited number of new HRA courses, or by working with other programs, such as Tourism and Gerontology, to establish the specialization. Students are required to select an option when they declare HRA as their major and the option appears on their transcript.

Prerequisites and Advanced Learning Skills

The analysis focused special attention on the skills and knowledge that students needed to succeed as they advanced in their studies. This resulted in a complete revision of the general education courses that were required of HRA students. Specific general education courses previously required by HRA were eliminated and replaced with the university’s broader general education program. However, the new curriculum requires students to take specified courses in mathematics, geography, marketing, and accounting to ensure success in the HRA curriculum. In addition, all prerequisites were evaluated and strengthened not only to ensure student success, but also to heighten learning outcomes in advanced courses.

Curricular transformation does not stop at curricular revision. Though the initial tasks of evaluating and restructuring the curriculum have been completed, transformation requires continuous improvement efforts.

The Work is Never Done: Ongoing Efforts

The curricular makeover that was developed and implemented in 2008 and 2009 has been a success. The HRA program has experienced increases in support from both industry and upper administration. In addition, student recruitment has improved and satisfaction is high. With any process, however, there is always room for improvement. As students began to register for courses offered in the revised curriculum, the new prerequisites and course sequencing created unforeseen bottlenecks. This required faculty to reexamine the required prerequisites and propose an alternative set of prerequisites that would reduce bottlenecks and improve students’ progress through the curriculum.

The process does not stop after the curriculum is redesigned and the glitches are repaired. Program evaluation and curricular transformation is a process and, as such, requires continuous improvement. Presently, the department is engaged in the task of validating curricular content and student learning. It has recently completed a large scale data gathering project in order to obtain a better understanding of what industry partners perceive as the necessary skills and knowledge graduates need to succeed in hospitality careers. Once these data have been

analyzed, the results will be used to further refine the curriculum and to develop an exit examination designed to gauge both student learning and teaching effectiveness. The department understands the curriculum must continue to evolve in order to prepare graduates for careers in an industry that is rapidly changing in both complexity and sophistication.

Recognizing the need to incorporate higher levels of critical thinking skills and challenge in the classroom, the HRA faculty have committed to adapting and improving their teaching practices. Although most of the full-time faculty members each have over 20 years of teaching experience, they have recognized the need to enhance their teaching proficiency to meet the needs of the newly transformed curriculum. Recently, all HRA faculty successfully completed training and testing to become Certified Hospitality Educators (CHE) by the American Hotel and Lodging Association. The willingness of each faculty member to give the time and energy necessary to become a CHE demonstrates their commitment to the continual improvement of the department's efforts.

While the curriculum evaluation and revision process has been challenging, the impact of these efforts has been rewarding. After implementing the transformed curriculum, the department experienced a slight but expected decline in enrollment as the radically changed curriculum also created marked changes in the expectations of student performance. However, the drop in enrollment was short-lived as word of the newly revised HRA curriculum spread across the campus community. Student enrollment is once again increasing and has recently surpassed 2008-2009 enrollment levels.

Overall, students have willingly embraced the newly transformed curriculum and have been supportive of the changes. Students recognize the changes that have been made to the curriculum have added value to their degree. They appear to realize the changes were strategic and designed to improve their marketability and success in the industry. Students have also positively responded to the advanced learning concepts that have been incorporated across the curriculum. Faculty report students seem more committed and better prepared in their classes.

By balancing internal and external perspectives, the systematic analysis process put forward in this paper served as a mechanism for incorporating multiple viewpoints while maintaining a structured framework for effective decision-making. While the specific recommendations that resulted from the evaluation process would be neither desirable nor appropriate for all programs, the systematic analysis process could be beneficial to other programs wishing to continually improve their curriculum.

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