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Monitoring Student Success: A systemic model for hospitality and tourism education

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ABSTRACT

Academic programs in all disciplines must show evidence of progressive student learning to ensure students are prepared for careers in their respective fields. Many times administrators and faculty members identify and validate core competencies in the profession and collect stakeholder feedback on student competency performance, but do not systemically use the information to enhance the program’s curriculum or to drive student advising. This study will propose a conceptual, multi-step model that allows hospitality and tourism faculty members to continually track evidence of student learning to ensure career preparation.

Key words: student learning, competency-based curriculum, conceptual models, professional development plans.

INTRODUCTION OF THE COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL

The Department of Tourism, Conventions, and Event Management (TCEM) program at IUPUI recently celebrated its 10th year of offering a Bachelor of Science degree. The mission of the department is to transform undergraduates into highly competent tourism professionals through a well-rounded education that develops communication, technical and organizational skills; develops and integrates understandings of sociocultural, environmental, economic and ethical foundations of tourism; and builds creative and critical thinking competencies necessary to meet the constantly changing challenges global tourism presents.

The TCEM Bachelor of Science degree is composed of 124 total credit hours; 24 required courses (67 credit hours) in the major and 15 general education courses (45 credit hours). Our required courses in the TCEM major address tourism, business management and marketing, and event management principles. As the program has matured, the faculty is now focusing on the assessment of a competency-based curriculum. This requires reaching out to our stakeholders, consolidating the feedback, and using it to improve our courses and to inform our students of relevant industry needs. Preparing students to enter the workforce involves a continual process to evaluate student learning.
Identification of Core Competencies

Since 1998, IUPUI has followed a ‘principled approach’ and the university faculty identified six Principles of Undergraduate Learning (PULs). The six PULs include: (a) core communication and qualitative skills, (b) critical thinking, (c) integration and application of knowledge, (d) intellectual depth, breadth and adaptiveness, (e) understanding society and culture; and (f) values and ethics. These represent “what every IUPUI graduate will know and be able to do in terms of general education” (IUPUI Center on Integrating Learning, 1998).

To implement the PUL initiative, the TCEM faculty reviewed and revamped existing ‘general education’ and major requirements to meet the PUL standards. To access the PUL learning outcomes, faculty across the campus - not just faculty teaching the traditional general education courses [e.g., writing, communication] - included the PULs on course syllabi and worked toward developing PUL outcomes. While some courses lend themselves more directly to PUL outcomes than others, every faculty member is charged with infusing applicable PUL outcomes into each course.

In conjunction with implementing IUPUI’s PULs, the TCEM department added discipline-specific competencies and created an internal assessment tool wherein student learning outcomes in TCEM courses were categorized into three competency levels. The basis for the competencies was two ‘general education’ frameworks: the cognitive and affective domains from Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives. TCEM has then modified and described the departmental learning domains as: (a) foundation, (b) application, and (c) execution.

Mentorship of Students/Professional Development Plan

To track student progression in the PULs, IUPUI’s University College, the “home” to all first-year students entering the university prior to be accepted in a school, introduced the concept of student personal development planning (PDP). This is a process which will enable first-year students to understand, implement, and mark progress towards a degree and a career goal by creating and following a personalized plan that is open to revision and reevaluation every semester in collaboration with a faculty member, academic advisor, and/or career mentor.

There are three key components of a PDP: (a) Semester in Review: Reflect on individual strengths, long term goals, challenges faced during the first semester, and IUPUI resources utilized (b) Principles of Undergraduate Learning: Identify how IUPUI’s learning outcomes (PUL’s) are connected to personalized academic and experiential goals, and (c) Peak Performance Plan: Outline specific action steps, courses, and extracurricular activities targeted for the undergraduate experience. In addition, five learning outcomes have been identified in the PDP process: (a) self-assessment, (b) exploration, (c) evaluation, (d) goal setting, and (e) planning (IUPUI University College, 2005). This process allows links to the competencies and for continual discussion during the student’s academic career on their progression to the stated plan’s objectives. Currently, the TCEM program is not requiring students to complete or submit a PDP as a requirement, but are considering it as a best practice for incoming first-year students.

Purpose of the Study

The principle aim of this study is to propose a systemic model to ensure student academic success and career preparation. Specifically, it is a five-step, cyclical approach that requires faculty to be intentional and reflective when assessing the students’ learning progress. Through the implementation of this proposed model, hospitality and tourism faculty members and administrators can track evidence of core competency learning ensuring students are prepared for their respected career paths.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The TCEM Department is currently only assessing the university’s PULs and is in the process of revising the discipline-specific competencies to be evaluated. There have been many studies that identified core competencies for tourism and hospitality students (Annaraud, 2006; Christou, 2002; Dopson & Nelson, 2002; Fjelstul, 2007; Gursay & Swanger, 2005 & 2007). Some of these studies (Dopson & Nelson, 2002; Gursay & Swanger, 2005) also suggested models or pedagogy for creating or revising curriculum to help students develop the core competencies. To date, there is no research which follows up on those approaches suggested by previous research, and no empirical data to examine the effectiveness of these curricular design suggestions.

Competency-based education is the transformation process from a young person into a life-learner in the workforce (Neill, 1978; Lowry & Flohr, 2005). In a 2004 study conducted by Dopson and Tas entitled A practical approach to curriculum development: A case study noted “that in developing curriculum, educators must consider three major components of hospitality education: substantive knowledge, skills and values” (Gursoy & Swanger, 2005, p. 46).

Many researchers have attempted to identify hospitality management competencies, as it is expected that the tourism and hospitality curriculum should equip students with important management knowledge and skills (Christou, 2002). In a study of hospitality competencies, Christou (2002) asked hotel managers and tourism graduates in Greece to rank 36 competencies for management trainees. The ranking shows the top three competencies are managing guest problems with understanding and sensitivity, demonstrating professional appearance and poise, and developing positive relations. In a next step, he compared his rankings with scores from several similar studies conducted in the U.S. and Europe. The comparison shows that regardless of geographical areas, the most imperative competency is the ability to manage customer service problems.

This finding was confirmed by Annaraud (2006) who studied skills necessary for successful careers for American and Russian hospitality graduates. Her findings indicated that customer relations were listed by students and faculty in both countries as one of the top three skills. In a 2002 study Dopson and Nelson found the most important skills and abilities for hospitality related positions were leadership, cost control, positive customer
relations, identifying and solving managerial problems, crisis management, and solving customer problems. Additionally, Gursoy and Swanger (2005) investigated what course content areas are perceived as required by hospitality professionals. They collected 328 surveyed completed by professionals working in various segments of the hospitality industry. The results show that the five highest ranked course content areas are oral communication skills, leadership skills, a clear understanding of profit and loss statement, good work habits, and customer service skills.

Fjelstul (2007) studied knowledge, skills, and attitudes for entry-level golf and club management careers by surveying members of Florida Club Managers Association of America. The results show that business management and ethics, professional image, customer service, ability to be a team player, and taking personal pride in satisfying the needs of others were ranked as essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Although it can be challenging to precisely define what competencies are important given the diverse nature of the industry (Christou, 2002), there were several common competencies identified in these studies. Among those common ones, customer service skills were found to be one of the top competencies in all studies cited above.

As a result, Christou (2002) concluded that hospitality education needs to emphasize soft skills such as guest relations, leadership, and communication skills and provide opportunities for student to continuously improve their soft skills. This can be achieved by using creative forms of learning activities such as role-playing, case studies, simulations, business games, internships, and psychodrama. Dopson and Nelson (2002) explained that although industry professionals know what outcomes of a curriculum are essential, they do not claim to be experts in curriculum design and believe that educators are better equipped to design curricular that help to achieve the outcomes that the industry desires. Therefore, the researchers recommended three models for curriculum design which focus on the important skills and knowledge identified without suggesting any specific course content areas. The first model is that a hospitality program can focus on a specific segment in the hospitality industry (i.e. restaurant, hotel, events) and provide knowledge and skills that are important for the segment. The second approach is to develop a general, broad curriculum that provides a basis for life-long learning skills. The third model is to develop a curriculum that incorporates core competencies that are considered as most important by industry, alumni, faculty, and then include other emphases in specialized areas (Dopson & Nelson, 2002).

Gursoy and Swanger (2005) found that industry professionals do not expect a curriculum that teaches students specific applications because of the varying segments in the industry, company cultures, and operational procedures. Therefore, a curriculum should focus on developing higher-order concepts so that students will be well-rounded graduates. Thus, they proposed that content areas such as communication skills, customer service skills, and work ethics need to be embedded in the majority of courses in a curriculum to allow students develop those skills continuously throughout their college education. In addition, Gursoy and Swanger (2005) recommended that students’ performance need to be assessed at each stage of their education and ensure their growth. In a follow-up study, Swanger and Gursay (2007) recognized that the implementation of assessment of student learning could be overwhelming at first. They suggested that instead of evaluating all competencies at the same time, faculty can choose a few learning outcomes first to start.

DEVELOPMENT AND ASSESSMENT OF A COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM

A number of individual initiatives and research projects have been conducted by faculty members in the TCEM department to identify the strengths and weaknesses of our program’s curriculum and to attempt to show evidence of student learning. A mixed methods approach, both qualitative and quantitative techniques, was used in evaluating the feedback of our stakeholders (current students, alumni, and industry professionals).

Student Input – Senior Exit Survey and Internship Reflection Paper
An ‘exit survey’ instrument was designed to measure students’ perceptions of the TCEM academic program and student services. It included a total of 64 questions covering a wide-scope of content, including...
students’ demographic profile, overall academic experience, skills obtained by students through learning experience, services provided by TCEM faculty and staff, and TCEM’s extracurricular activities. In addition, a specific set of questions addressing whether students believe they could demonstrate proficiency in the IUPUI’s PULs was included and analyzed.

The instrument was designed using a standard PUL questionnaire provided by the university, in order, to compare program progress with other academic disciplines across campus. In addition, other schools’ exit survey instruments were also evaluated as a guide. The instrument was administered to all seniors in the last week of the capstone course in following three semesters: Spring 2008, Fall 2008, and Spring 2009 and a total of 119 usable surveys were collected.

TCEM seniors were asked to evaluate their overall academic and learning experiences. The results are shown in Table 1. The respondents were fairly satisfied with the curriculum and his/her academic experience. The results also show that students felt they improved their presentation (4.34), teamwork (4.25), professional (4.18), communication (4.14), and analytical skills (4.02). However, the results also show that students perceive TCEM courses as not as challenging compared to other departmental courses on campus (2.78).

Table 1
Overall Academic and Learning Experience – Student Exit Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>.740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>.776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>.709</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>.727</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>.715</td>
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<td>.610</td>
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<td>3.92</td>
<td>.898</td>
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<td>3.88</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>.979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>.971</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Items were measured on a 5-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The senior exit survey also assessed the six PULs which are considered as core competencies for IUPUI students. The results are shown in Table 2. The PULs were measured based on a 5-point Likert scale. Core communication and quantitative skills received the highest mean score (3.72), followed by integration and application of knowledge and understanding society and culture (3.66 and 3.62 respectively). The PUL that received the lowest mean score was critical thinking (3.47). The results, all under 4.0 (or agree), implies that there is a need
for students to improve in all PUL categories and students are uncertain about their ability to perform these core university requirements.

### Table 2
**Principles of Undergraduate Learning – Student Perspective – Exit Survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core Communication and Quantitative Skills</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>.615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration and Application of Knowledge</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>.715</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Society and Culture</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Depth, Breadth, and Adaptiveness</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>.755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values and Ethics</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>.863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.799</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Items were measured on a 5-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Additionally, students are asked to submit a reflection paper at the conclusion of his/her internship experience. This paper gives our faculty insight on how student valued the experience and seeks evidence of learning through practice in the field. The assignment provides ten guiding questions in which the student frames his/her responses. A sample of questions include: (a) list the skills and knowledge areas that you planned to develop or expand upon during this internship, (b) ways the student was “stretched” to learn new things or change his/her approach or perspective, (c) make recommendation to enhance the TCEM curriculum, and (d) did you have the chance to do any “reverse mentoring” (student’s ability to train or share knowledge with supervisor or co-workers) during the experience.

In end-of-internship reflective essays, many students noted they wanted to focus on life skills, such as self-confidence, empowerment, assertiveness; time management, especially prioritization; delegation; supervising and organizing volunteers; negotiation, sales; dealing with conflict and not 'taking things personally' and working effectively on team and individual projects. Some reported a desire to become more proficient using integrated software for email, meeting scheduling and file sharing. Interns identified several communication skills needing improvement, notably providing adequate and accurate initial information so as to prevent follow-up confusion and issues; writing, proofreading and editing; and developing professional telephone skills, particularly with vendors and executives. Students did feel they could immediately contribute to the organization by training supervisors or co-workers in social networking technology applications. Some used the internship to explore career options while others were striving to build their resumes to include worthwhile work experience. Almost universally interns recommended a greater programmatic emphasis on hands-on, practical learning experiences throughout the curriculum and in co-curricular settings.

**Industry Professionals – Focus Groups and Intern Supervisor Survey**

The research team has also hosted four focus groups in the Fall of 2009: two for TCEM alumni and two for industry professionals. Seeking information-rich participants in these focus groups was the primary goal in subject selection, and subjects were purposefully selected to represent a variety of interests (Patton, 2003). Twenty TCEM graduate and twenty industry professionals representing the hotel, meeting management, catering, attractions, faculty management, and non-profit sectors were invited to participate.

The researchers developed a standardized, in-depth, open-ended interview guide. The questions were specific, direct, and structured, prompting “spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant responses” (Kvale, 1996, p. 135). A series of probes and specific questions were identified to ensure the richness of the data. The interview guide consisted of five primary research questions and nine probing questions. The primary open-ended questions...
consisted of: (a) give examples knowledge areas that pertain to your tourism field, (b) give examples skills that are necessary to ensure success in a tourism-related profession, (c) give examples of the types of abilities students graduating with our degree need to possess, (d) list any competencies that you consider critical and unique to your individual tourism segment that were not listed above, and (e) list any unique challenges that tourism professionals may encounter in their daily work. Both researchers took detailed notes during the focus groups and then met to code and theme the feedback.

The industry professionals identified the competency areas critical for success in tourism-related careers. Business management principles, problem solving, communication, and critical thinking skills were the knowledge and skill areas they noted as most important. Those unique to the field that students should focus on include fundraising, relationship building, negotiation, cultural sensitivity, and volunteer management skills. Consistently, employers comment professional business communication skills are lacking in graduates entering the field. Our findings are consistent with previous studies indentifying core competencies in the hospitality field (Annaraud, 2006; Christou, 2002; Dopson & Nelson, 2002; Fjelstul, 2007; Gursay & Swangar, 2005 & 2007).

Additionally, all internship supervisors starting in 2009 were asked to provide an ‘overall rating of intern’s performance’ as it relates to each of the six PUL categories. The results of the 27 collected surveys are reported in Table 3. Interestingly, core communication (4.63) and understanding society and culture (4.62) were rated the highest, with critical thinking (4.32) the lowest rated category.

Table 3
Principles of Undergraduate Learning– Internship Supervisor Perspective – Final Intern Performance Evaluation

| Core Communication and Quantitative Skills | 4.63 | 0.72 |
| Understanding Society and Culture         | 4.62 | 0.68 |
| Intellectual Depth, Breadth, and Adaptiveness | 4.51 | 0.65 |
| Values and Ethics                          | 4.48 | 0.62 |
| Integration and Application of Knowledge   | 4.40 | 0.58 |
| Critical Thinking                          | 4.32 | 0.57 |

Note: Items were measured on a 5-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Notably, different stakeholder groups may have similar or conflicting perspectives on the importance and student’s progress in the core competencies; furthermore, the qualitative and quantitative research results of the same group may agree or disagree. For example, critical thinking was ranked lowest by both students and industry professionals on the survey. On the other hand, industry professionals in the focus group clearly identified business communication skills as an area that students were not meeting their supervisor’s expectations; however, in the internship supervisors’ survey, it was the highest ranked PUL for student performance. For this reason, stakeholder feedback should be complied, analyzed, and discussed prior to making curriculum changes.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

In order to successfully track and record evidence of student learning and career preparation, academic programs must intentionally use a systemic approach. As we noted in the literature review, significant work has been done to identify core competencies in the hospitality field. However, assessment of the competencies is lacking attention. This indicates a strong need for future research which tracks and assesses students’ development of competencies.
Our program traditionally has identified the tourism profession’s core competencies and simply incorporated them into course student learning outcomes (from foundational step in our model to directly predict the student learning and career preparation). To date, the program’s competencies have been identified, but not mapped to the individual courses to ensure that students develop these skills throughout their academic career.

Over the last two years, a variety of departmental faculty members have initiated projects related to discipline-specific competency review and started collecting stakeholders’ feedback on their impressions of our student’s performance. However, it is not our current practice to consolidate or report findings to the entire departmental faculty. Therefore, we rarely use this information in making curriculum changes or communicate the input to students through faculty advising.

The IUPUI University College advisors are reporting success in implementation of a student professional development plan. This initiative allows students to identify their career and personal goals and objectives, and for advisors to identify avenues (academic, internship, scholarship, student organization involvement, etc) to meet those goals. Advisors need to regularly monitor and assess students’ performance and progress on the core competencies. TCEM advisors need to understand the importance of the PDP initiative, start to receive curriculum updates to better communicate with students, and relay student progress and challenges back to the faculty.

In addition, there is a need to collect longitudinal assessment data that monitors students from the beginning of their education journey through post-graduation. These kinds of studies will provide a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of the professional development plan, as it relates to learning and proficiency of the competencies. Implementation of this systemic model should be continually evaluated and additional recommendations and modifications made for use in assessing student learning outcomes and career preparation.

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