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Abstract

Experiential learning is an important component of undergraduate hospitality programs, but most of the research in this area has focused on administrative and design issues. The author reports on a study undertaken to ascertain student perceptions as they relate to three commonly stated goals of experiential programs: the application of classroom studies, technical training, and management development.

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Experiential learning is an important component of undergraduate hospitality programs, but most of the research in this area has focused on administrative and design issues. The author reports on a study undertaken to ascertain student perceptions as they relate to three commonly stated goals of experiential programs: the application of classroom studies, technical training, and management development.

The need for experienced and skilled managerial employees in the hospitality industry is well established. Hotel and restaurant companies design their own training programs and also rely on vocational schools and colleges to educate future managers. Educators and industry professionals agree that a combination of classroom studies and work experience is the best way to train future managers for hospitality enterprises. Therefore, almost all undergraduate hospitality programs incorporate some form of experiential learning.[1] Furthermore, educators have identified a variety of objectives that may be met through experiential learning.

The integration of theory and practice is a key strategy in experiential learning programs.[2] Field experiences provide directed training in various departments of hotels and restaurants that is impossible to duplicate in the classroom.[3] Experiential learning is also an integral part of curricula designed to develop future managers in the hospitality industry.[4]

Undergraduate hospitality students who completed experiential learning assignments in the guest services areas of hotels were surveyed to determine their perceptions concerning the objectives of experiential learning programs. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

• To what extent do students perceive that they apply classroom studies during the experiential learning program?

• To what extent do students perceive they receive technical training during the experiential learning program?

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• To what extent do students perceive they have an opportunity to participate in management development programs during the experiential learning program?

The first step in designing the questionnaire was conducting an informal survey of hospitality educators to determine the activities that students should be involved in while enrolled in experiential learning programs in the front offices (or guest service areas) of hotels. A questionnaire was sent to 15 educators who were either program coordinators or members of the CHRIE subcommittee for internships. The survey was divided into three parts, each corresponding to a different objective of experiential learning: application of classroom studies, technical training, and management development.

Survey Seeks Training Information

The first part of the educators' survey asked respondents to identify which classroom studies students should have a chance to apply while working in the field for academic credit. Fourteen areas were listed; educators were asked to include others they believed appropriate. The original 14 were forecasting, budgeting, yield management, relationship management, resolving guest conflict, market segmentation, pricing, promotions, Theory X, Theory Y, Theory Z, cost per occupied room, interpersonal skills, and management information systems.

The second part of the survey asked about the types of technical training that students should receive and included 13 skill areas: switchboard, cashiering, credit card validation, emergency procedures, guest registration, posting transactions, room rack interpretation, updating room status, room cleaning, operation of laundry equipment, use of office machines, and completing the housekeeper's report.

The third part asked about the types of management development or training programs that students should experience while in the field and included 10 types: mentoring, junior boards, attending executive committee meetings, attending department head meetings, job rotation, special projects, coaching/understudying, structured company programs, supervisory development programs, and role playing.

Respondents clearly identified certain activities as being most important. In the application of classroom studies, interpersonal skills, resolving guest conflict, and relationship management were considered the most critical. In the area of technical training, taking reservations, handling emergencies, and registering guests were most significant, while in management development, attendance at meetings, mentoring, and job rotation were most meaningful.

A search for other studies that described activities associated with interpersonal skills, resolution of conflict, and management development yielded useful questions for the survey. One survey contained questions relating to adept and inept interpersonal

skills.[5] Another described activities relevant to management development.[6] A third included an additional set of activities associated with management development.[7] A fourth presented ideas about mentoring that were most useful.[8]

The survey that was sent to the students included a total of 45 statements relating to the three objectives of experiential learning, 17 on the application of classroom studies, 15 about technical training, and 13 about management development. Students rated their participation in these areas on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being "not applicable" and 5 being "strongly agree."

The data for the study were gathered by means of a Likert scale instrument sent to experiential learning program coordinators at 20 hospitality programs in the United States. The program coordinators then administered the surveys to students who had worked in the front offices of hotels participated in experiential learning courses in the spring or summer of 1991; 200 students met the criteria. Twelve institutions (60 percent) responded to the survey, with a total of 64 valid responses, representing a 32 percent response rate.

The survey also asked students for demographic information, including age, gender, and ethnicity. No statistically significant differences in responses were found between the genders or among the ethnic or age groups.

Interpersonal Skills Rank High

Table 1 identifies areas of classroom study that students engaged in most or least while enrolled in experiential learning programs. Most had to do with interpersonal skills and guest relationship management. Almost all of the students, 97 percent, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they made eye contact when speaking with people; 94 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they tried to resolve guest conflict. Slightly more than 90 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they felt self confidant when speaking with people, and more than 8 out of 10 students, 84 percent, agreed or strongly agreed that it was their responsibility to assure that the guest had an enjoyable visit at the hotel.

Forty-one percent of the students strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that direction on handling guest conflict was given at the work site. More students, 46 percent, strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that they sometimes criticized people than with any other statement.

Guest Registration Training is Positive

Table 2 identifies those variables that students agreed with the most or least in the area of technical training. The statements that students agreed with most had to do with guest registration and information. Eighty percent agreed or strongly agreed that they learned the importance of keeping guest information confidential; 75 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were instructed to get

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Table 1
Application of Classroom Studies

Variable	SD	D	NS	A	SA	NA
			Percentages			
I made eye contact when speaking to people	0	0	3	44	53	0
If a guest had a complaint, I would try to resolve it rather than pass it on to my supervisor	0	0	5	61	33	1
I felt self confident when speaking with others	1	1	6	55	36	0
It was my responsibility to assure the guest had an enjoyable stay	3	9	6	42	37	1
Direction in how to handle guest conflict was not given at the work site	11	30	0	31	11	17
I sometimes criticized people without knowing much about them	5	41	0	25	17	12

Note: SD=strongly disagree; D=disagree; NS=not sure; A=agree; SA=strongly agree; NA=not applicable

the guest's signature on the registration card, and 73 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they learned the importance of verifying guest information at registration.

The statements about technical training that the students disagreed with the most had to do with emergency procedures. More than half the students, 56 percent, strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that they knew what to do in the event of a bomb scare, and slightly less than half, 45 percent, strongly disagreed or disagreed that they learned what to do if a guest reported a robbery or burglary was taking place.

Management Development Needs Improvement
Table 3 identifies those aspects of management development that students participated in most or least. Sixty-three percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that a variety of jobs helped them understand the whole hotel operation; slightly fewer, 61 percent, agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to gain an in-depth understanding of one area of the hotel while enrolled in experiential learning.

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Table 2
Technical Training

Variable	SD	D	NS	A	SA	NA
			Percentages			
I learned the importance of keeping guest information confidential	5	9	0	36	44	6
I was instructed to get the guest's signature on the registration card	8	5	5	25	50	8
I learned that it is important to verify all of the guest's information during registration	5	12	6	28	47	1
I would have known what to do in the event of a bomb scare at the hotel	26	30	0	19	17	8
A supervisor or co-worker explained what to do if a guest reported a burglary or robbery in progress	25	20	8	33	11	3

Note: SD=strongly disagree; D=disagree; NS=not sure; A=agree; SA=strongly agree; NA=not applicable

Students were least likely to agree with variables concerning mentoring. Almost 7 out of 10, 67 percent, strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that they had somebody at the work site to talk to about their careers; 62 percent strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that they had developed a mentor relationship at the work site.

Educators expect students to achieve a wide array of objectives while enrolled in experiential courses. Students who responded to this survey did not participate in some activities that educators believe would help students reach these goals. The failure of experiential courses in guest services to include emergency training is of particular concern. The growing awareness of a hotel's liability in various emergency situations should make hotel managers sensitive to the need for training in emergency procedures.

Although the number of students responding was too small to draw conclusions that could be applied to all experiential learning programs, it does raise several questions that deserve further investigation. Additional research might discover whether students who complete their field experiences in areas other than hotel guest services have different responses. Further studies in this area might

Table 3
Management Development

Variable	SD	D	NS	A	SA	NA
			Percentages			
Experiencing a variety of jobs helped me gain a better understanding of the whole operation	5	9	8	16	47	16
Working in one area of the hotel exclusively helped me gain an in-depth understanding of the department	1	11	12	34	27	14
There was somebody at the work site to whom I could talk about my career goals	31	36	0	8	11	14
There was somebody at the work site with whom I developed a mentor/mentee relationship	45	17	11	14	6	6

Note: SD=strongly disagree; D=disagree; NS=not sure; A=agree; SA=strongly agree; NA=not applicable

also consider the size of the property in which the student is working and the position of the person at the work site who oversees the student. Other variables that might be investigated are the number of hours the student spends at the work site, at what point in the academic career the experiential learning is undertaken, and whether the experience is "hands-on" or observation oriented.

Hospitality educators should have further discussions about learning objectives with on-site coordinators. If industry and education experts agree on the purposes of experiential learning, there is a better chance that students will have more educationally worthwhile experiences that complement classroom instruction. The integration of classroom studies and real world experience is essential to the success of hospitality education.

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