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# Creating an International Hospitality Management Major

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# Creating an International Hospitality Management Major

## **Abstract**

In times of growing international tension and diminishing job opportunities for students enrolled in hospitality management programs, a major with an international emphasis can serve an important role in the global hospitality environment. The author discusses the creation of a new and relatively unique major among hospitality management programs in the United States, international hospitality management, its first year of existence, and its appeal to students.

# Creating an international hospitality management major

by Hubert B. Van Hoof

*In times of growing international tension and diminishing job opportunities for students enrolled in hospitality management programs, a major with an international emphasis can serve an important role in the global hospitality environment. The author discusses the creation of a new and relatively unique major among hospitality management programs in the United States, international hospitality management, its first year of existence, and its appeal to students.*

When someone familiar with the hospitality industry is asked to characterize the likely nature of the industry in the 21st century, terms like “quality,” “service,” “leadership,” “customer oriented,” and “technology driven” are bound to come up, together with words like “global,” “international,” or “multi-national.” Unfortunately, words like “uncertain” and “volatile” have also come up recently.

Concepts such as quality, service, technology-driven, customer oriented, and leadership have been

incorporated in many hospitality management courses, and some programs have even dedicated specific courses to such topics as leadership or customer service. Yet, very few programs have truly addressed the international nature of the hospitality industry. Most programs have a course or two called “International Hospitality and Tourism” or “International Hospitality Operations,” but few, if any, programs do more than that.

In the United States, the hospitality industry is being acknowledged as a global industry, but there is no four-year hospitality management program in a state university that offers a major dedicated to the international aspects of the industry. In Europe, on the other hand, it is fairly common for hospitality management programs to offer an international major alongside a more traditional hospitality management major. This is especially the case in the United Kingdom, where several programs

offer international hospitality management degrees.

This article describes the thought process behind the creation of an international hospitality management major at a large state university in the United States, highlighting the requirements of the major and describing what distinguishes it from existing hospitality management majors. It will look at the hurdles that need to be overcome, discuss its first year of operation, and address its appeal to students.

### **World citizens created**

Besides creating professionals who are capable of functioning successfully in society, one of the cornerstone philosophies of university education in the U.S. is that it contributes to the creation of rounded world citizens, young men and women capable of critical thought, equipped with problem solving skills, and appreciative of other cultures and societies regardless of their field of studies. This is the main reason why U.S. students take liberal studies classes in their undergraduate degree plans.

Internationalization of the curriculum can help in creating that world citizen, and has been an important topic of discussion in many university programs, both in the United States and around the world.<sup>1</sup> Quality education "must reflect and encompass knowledge of diverse societies and cultures as well as the realities of global interdependence."<sup>2</sup>

The literature on the topic of international education is exten-

sive, and volumes have been dedicated to the benefits of international education and exchange. There are even journals in print that deal with the subject exclusively, i.e., *Journal of Studies in International Education* and *International Educator*.

Numerous benefits of an internationalization of curricula and international exchange have been identified over the years. Most importantly, there is the exposure to different social and cultural environments.<sup>3</sup> Students are presented with an alternative view of the world,<sup>4</sup> and change their stereotypes and attitudes about other nationalities.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, students who participate in international exchange programs have demonstrated significantly more growth and maturity as persons as compared to students who do not.<sup>6</sup>

If living in another culture for an extended period of time is part of the internationalized curriculum, it will help shape the student in ways education alone cannot accomplish. Students return from an international experience "with a new-found recognition of the extent to which their own cultural values and norms differ from those of their counterparts in their host country."<sup>7</sup>

### **Reasons for major abound**

Based on the idea that an international curriculum would help students in becoming well rounded and culturally sensitive individuals, as well as better-qualified hospitality industry professionals, the School of Hotel and Restaurant

Management at Northern Arizona University started a new major entitled "International Hospitality Management" in fall 2000.

Besides the formative reasons found in the literature, there were several other reasons for creating this major. First, it was felt that the hospitality industry had changed over the years in that it had become more globalized than ever before. More and more U.S. companies are looking into branching out all over the world. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has removed some of the barriers of doing business with and in Mexico and Canada, and hospitality companies based abroad are increasingly trying to get a foothold in the United States through mergers and acquisitions. American hospitality management methods are employed globally and are used as standards of operation; potential customers from all over the world now have access to reservation systems and hotel websites at the push of a button. On any given day, many guests staying in hotels in the U.S. are people from foreign countries that are here on business or for pleasure.

Second, lodging recruiters indicated that their companies would be very interested in employing entry-level managers who were internationally oriented, who could speak more than just a little bit of a foreign language, and who had experience in dealing with people from other countries and cultures. These recruiters specifically represented higher-end hotel chains such

as Hyatt, Hilton, Four Seasons, and Ritz-Carlton.

Third, it was felt that an internationally-oriented degree would also enhance the students' personal experiences while in college. Many young people nowadays are interested in living abroad for a while. They feel that having worked or studied abroad is an important qualification they can add to their resumes. Moreover, immersion in another culture for an extended period of time may help them tremendously in their personal growth while in college. A major requiring them to become international exchange students caters to that interest and helps them stand out among their peers when it comes to the job search process. This is especially the case in these times of political and economic unrest and of decreasing demand for young managers out of hospitality programs.

Fourth, offering an international hospitality management major not only raises the cultural awareness of the students participating in the major, but also enhances the cultural awareness of all the students enrolled in the program. Students coming back from a semester of studies abroad can share their experiences, and international students who come to a program as exchange students bring a whole new dimension to the campus.

Finally, a new major like this can also attract new international students to the campus because it offers something different and

because it goes beyond just looking at the American way of doing things in acknowledging management methods in other parts of the world.

### **Parameters exist**

At Northern Arizona University, students in any academic program must be able to graduate within 120 credit hours, and all new programs have to be designed to meet this requirement. Moreover, given that there is very little room for growth in university budgets nowadays, programs have to be designed without using any additional or new resources. These are the two parameters that had to be taken into account in the design stages of the new major.

The existing bachelor of science degree in hotel and restaurant management at Northern Arizona University requires students to take 35 hours of liberal studies, five hours of general electives, and 80 hours of hospitality management courses. Within these 80 hours, 48 hours are labeled as hospitality administration core. These are all the operational and hospitality specific classes, from food service management and hospitality law, to front office management, accounting, and hospitality sales and marketing. Twelve hours are labeled as business auxiliary classes (micro economics, macro economics, finance, and accounting, all of which are taken at the business school); eight credits are dedicated to two mandatory semesters of a foreign language, and 12 credits are advisor-approved elective classes.

Students are advised, but not required, to do an internship, which can be used to count for advisor-approved elective credits. Overall, this major is comparable to many of the hospitality management majors that are presently offered all over the U.S.

### **Program differs**

Within the parameter of 120 credit hours needed for completion of the degree, the new international hospitality management major is different in four major areas:

- Students are required to do an eight-credit internship, preferably abroad.
- Students must take at least 16 credits (or four semesters) of a foreign language, double the amount of foreign language credit presently required.
- Students take five upper-division classes, International Management, International Economics, International Marketing, International Travel, and Tourism and Destination Development, all related to international business and hospitality at the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management and at the College of Business Administration; these classes are elective classes at present, and mandatory in this new major.
- Students are required to study abroad for at least a semester at one of the school's 10 exchange partners world-

wide; the 12 credits obtained abroad will be transferred for regular university credit upon successful completion of the semester of studies abroad.

These four areas combined account for 51 credits, which makes almost half of this major different from the existing major. Students are still required to take the same 48 "core" credits of hospitality industry specific classes.

### **No new classes created**

As far as the second parameter is concerned, creating the major without using any new resources, no new classes had to be created. The school had a thriving internship and foreign exchange network in place before the major was created, and foreign language and international business classes were also readily available. The main difference between the two majors is that, whereas the hotel and restaurant management major has room for elective credits, the new major has used up all of the elective credits with required classes. This limits the choices for students in this major, yet many students tend to favor more structure and less choice in their programs.

### **Rationale drives structure**

By taking twice as many foreign language credits, four semesters, as students in the hotel and restaurant management major, students in international hospitality management hone their foreign language skills to a level where they are somewhat more comfortable in the

second language of their choice. They are still not fluent or proficient in the foreign language, but they are definitely more comfortable in speaking and understanding it. Ideally this could be reinforced in their semester of studies abroad, or in an international internship. What better way to practice Spanish than by studying for a semester in Mexico, or by working in a resort in Spain? Several students have even opted to pursue a minor in the foreign language of their choice, since this language requirement puts them on track with the foreign language minor requirements at the university.

The required 15 credits of upper division international business and hospitality/tourism classes help them in developing their conceptual and theoretical international business and management skills. Additionally, these classes help them understand the link between hospitality and travel/tourism, prepare them for their semesters abroad, and make them appreciate the social, cultural, and economic differences between countries and peoples in different parts of the world, something that has become even more important in light of the recent tragedies that struck the United States and the rest of the world.

The semester of studies abroad and the international internship allow students to work and live in a completely different culture. Living and working in another culture is a much better preparation for the global marketplace than classroom education can ever be. If students

can adjust to a foreign environment and cope with the challenges inherent in living in another country, they can also deal with changing environments in their hospitality careers. More concretely, if U.S. students can handle living, studying, and working in Germany or Mexico for an extended period of time, they can definitely deal with moving from Seattle to New York in a job situation. As such, they are better prepared to face the challenges of a working life in an industry that asks its employees to move frequently.

### **Hurdles do exist**

In creating a new program there are always some hurdles to overcome, although in this case they were surprisingly few. The only hurdle in this case was getting the program approved by the university, and it was a hurdle that was overcome easily. The program did not use any additional or new resources; there was support from the two other academic programs affected (College of Business and Modern Language Department), and the internship and international exchange program network were already in existence and were flourishing. Therefore, the opposition to the creation of the new major was minimal. At the university level, people were enthusiastic in their support, and focused on the personal enrichment the program would bring to students and on the fact that the program could benefit the university in its drive to become more internationalized. It was also

felt that the proposed program was sufficiently different from the existing major that it could claim to be a separate major.

### **First year shows appeal**

At the time of the inception of this new major in fall 2000, the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management had approximately 600 students enrolled on its main campus. Before the first semester of operation, the existing student body was informed about the possibility of transferring to the new major by means of flyers and informational meetings. At the beginning of the fall 2000 semester, 45 students, or 7.5 percent of the total student body, were enrolled in the new major. About 30 of those were students who transferred from the existing major, and 15 were new freshmen. One year later, the number of students enrolled in the major has grown to 82 students (13.65 percent), with a majority coming from new freshmen.

It is too early to determine whether the new major has been successful in attracting additional students to the program who might otherwise have opted to go elsewhere, but it has been appealing to the existing student body so far. It certainly was surprising to see that in many cases parents of incoming freshmen stimulated their sons and daughters to enroll in this major. They saw it as offering challenging and exciting opportunities.

At a time when the hospitality industry is trying to overcome the shock of the September 11 tragedy,



and with distrust of other cultures at an all-time high in the U. S., it is important to counteract these trends by educating students as broadly as possible, and to give them a truly global perspective of the world and the industry they intend to join. It is important that they have as many opportunities as possible to experience other cultures, to travel, and to become as marketable as possible when faced with a reduced number of employment opportunities.

### Major is appealing

This new major appeals to various kinds of students. There are those who are attracted to the travel aspect of the major, those who are highly motivated to do well academically, those who like being challenged, and those who are interested in improving their foreign language skills and in experiencing other cultures first hand.

Students in this major still have exactly the same technical and theoretical skills that students have received for decades, and are therefore as qualified as their peers in the regular hospitality management major. But they also have a different attitude about the world in general, and about their careers in the industry. They may be more mature and well-rounded individuals, and definitely have more advanced foreign language skills.

This major may not be for everyone. There are some personal obstacles that might be too daunting for some, as there might be some financial objections. Not

every student can afford an expensive flight abroad, for instance, or can leave home, family, and other loved ones behind for a longer period of time. Moreover, some students may not like the fact that this major is much more "regimented" than the regular major, and that it offers much less choice.

Yet, the students who have so far enrolled as international majors are pleased with all the opportunities it offers them to excel academically, and with the chances it provides them to see more of the world. It is important for a hospitality management program to be able to offer students more avenues for personal and academic enrichment. A university education should attempt to create a well-rounded world citizen, and this program is an attempt to come closer to that goal.

The first student graduated from this program at the end of the fall 2001 semester. He was one of the student graduation speakers because he had an interesting story to tell.

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