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Perspectives

Is the road to effective assessment of learning outcomes paved with good intentions? Understanding the roadblocks to improving hospitality education

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ABSTRACT

Learning outcomes form the core of what hospitality programs and educators offer students and therefore should be the primary focus of a quality hospitality education. While all major university accrediting bodies require the assessment of learning outcomes and their use in improving educational quality, the transition for hospitality programs is taking too long and is not as transparent as it should be. This article reviews the most significant challenges to implementing an effective assessment of learning outcomes process and offers solutions that can help hospitality programs and faculty fulfill their responsibilities to students by offering them the best education possible.

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1. Introduction

The starting point for a discussion of the assessment of learning outcomes topic must begin with two related concepts, passion and promises. Virtually all hospitality educators are passionate about teaching. The problem is that if a hospitality program does not have an effective assessment of learning outcomes process in place, it is all but impossible to harness that passion. And, if a program is not harnessing the passion of its faculty, it is not doing all that it can for its students. Regarding promises, the primary responsibility of hospitality programs and their universities is to provide a quality education to their students. This responsibility is a promise that hospitality programs and universities make to all stakeholders through value and mission statements that focus on promises regarding the educational quality, excellence and rigor that the program and university will provide. Fulfilling these educational promises can only be achieved by utilizing the best practices available, and the best educational practices for higher education are encompassed in the assessment of learning outcomes process. The title of this article is obviously based on the old adage—the road to hell is paved with good intentions. All hospitality programs have great intentions. The challenge is to find a way to develop and implement an effective assessment of learning outcomes process that can help educators to act on their intentions and maximize their passion.

Why do hospitality programs not maximize faculty passion and fulfill their promises in the critical area of assessment of student learning outcomes? The main reason is that programs must figure out ways to traverse the many structural impediments of higher education bureaucracies. This bureaucratic problem in higher education creates a lack of systematic accountability for the quality of the education that hospitality programs offer their students. No matter how capable the leadership of our state governing bodies (e.g., board of regents, trustees, etc.), universities and faculty may be; no matter

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how concerned each group is with doing its best for students; if the leadership must function in a system where explicit authority is unclear or leaders are hesitant to exert their statutory authority, then it will be unreasonable to expect that major educational objectives will be achieved. While it is possible that hospitality programs could do much of this work on their own, the challenge of going it alone in an environment without university guidance or motivation in the form of policies that require it, would be challenging at best.

Because of the pressure to prepare students for their careers and the perceived shortcomings in traditional assessment through grades rather than what is learned, a major focus of virtually all stakeholder groups in public higher education is the development of an effective assessment of student learning outcomes process (Astin, 2013; Kuh & Ewell, 2010).

The concept of the assessment of learning outcomes is particularly important for hospitality programs because their primary responsibility is to provide students with the specific skills (i.e., specific learning outcomes) they will need to help them become successful hospitality managers (Dressler, Cedercrutz, & Pacheco, 2011). Unfortunately, the position in which we find too many hospitality programs is that they are simply succumbing to the many obstacles between current educational habits and the implementation of an effective assessment of learning outcomes process. The problem, according to Kuh and Ewell (2010) is that even though about three quarters of higher education institutions have implemented various forms of learning outcome assessments, using them “to inform decision making and to improve teaching and learning..... remains the most important unaddressed challenge related to student learning outcomes assessment in our country” (Kuh & Ewell, 2010, p. 24). The term closing the loop on assessment of learning outcomes or simply closing the assessment loop is frequently used to describe this particular challenge of setting learning outcomes, matching the appropriate pedagogy to the learning outcomes (e.g., experiential learning, case studies, research, lecture, discussion, etc.), assessing the students' knowledge of the learning outcomes, and then making appropriate changes to improve learning. A further example of the ineffectiveness of the efforts of higher education was offered by Banta and Blaich (2011), where they found only 6% of excellent programs could show that even their best efforts in the assessment of learning outcomes resulted in measurable improvements in student success.

2. Need for the study

To determine if hospitality programs could improve in their assessment of learning outcomes (i.e., if there was a need for this research and discussion), the authors randomly selected 25 U.S. hospitality programs from an article that included the world's top 100 hospitality programs (Severt, Tesone, Bottorff, & Carpenter, 2009) and examined the transparency of their assessment efforts and that of their universities. According to the National Institute of Learning Outcome Assessment (NILOA), the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), and the Spelling Commission Report, each university's assessment of

Table 1
Transparency (posting) of learning outcomes and their assessment.

Program number	Posted on Program Web Site			Posted on University Web Site			
	Assessment Policies	Learning Outcomes	Assessment Results	Univ. Assess. Policies	University LOs	Program LOs	Assessment Results
1	No	No	No	Yes	YES	YES	No
2	No	No	No	Yes	YES	YES	YES
3	No	No	No	Yes	YES	No	No
4	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
5	No	No	No	Yes	YES	YES	No
6	No	No	No	Yes	YES	No	No
7	No	YES	No	Yes	No	No	No
8	No	YES	No	Yes	No	No	No
9	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
10	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
11	No	No	No	Yes	YES	No	No
12	No	No	No	Yes	YES	No	No
13	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
14	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
15	No	No	No	Yes	YES	No	No
16	No	YES	No	Yes	No	No	No
17	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
18	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
19	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
20	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
21	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
22	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
23	No	No	No	Yes	YES	No	No
24	No	No	No	NO	No	No	No
25	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No

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