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# Benchmarks for Excellence Cornell's Management-Development Program

Judi Brownell

*Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, jlb18@cornell.edu*

Daphne Jameson

*Cornell University*

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# Benchmarks for Excellence Cornell's Management-Development Program

## **Abstract**

Rather than create separate courses for such critical skills as effective communication and working with groups, Cornell's redesigned master's degree program requires students to achieve specific performance benchmarks.

## **Keywords**

management skills, management development programs, group process skills, Masters of Management in Hospitality

## **Disciplines**

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# Benchmarks for Excellence —

Cornell's Management-Development Program

by *Judi Brownell and  
Daphne Jameson*

Rather than create separate courses for each critical skill as effective communication and working with groups, Cornell's redesigned master's degree program requires students to achieve specific performance benchmarks.

**T**he demand for leaders with strong communication skills has repeatedly emerged in discussions of business education generally and hospitality education specifically, both at the bachelor's level and in connection with the redesign of

*Judi Brownell, Ph.D., is a professor and Daphne Jameson, Ph.D., is an associate professor of managerial communication at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.*

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master's degree programs.<sup>1</sup> A 1993 Darden School study of key factors considered by recruiters in making selection decisions revealed that effective communication, interpersonal competence, and teamwork ranked at the top of the list. A similar study from the Katz Graduate School of Business reported almost identical conclusions.<sup>2</sup>

A study by Stanford's graduate business school determined that greater emphasis needed to be placed on internationalization of the curriculum, interpersonal skills, and teamwork.<sup>3</sup> The University of Chicago's graduate school of business concluded that not enough was being done to prepare graduates to manage people and introduced communication and team-building opportunities in its curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the chorus of voices speaking to the importance of communication in graduate business education is loud.<sup>5</sup>

**Cornell, too.** The graduate faculty of Cornell's School of Hotel Administration was reminded of the importance of communication and

leadership skills during its 1993 reconsideration of the school's professional master's degree program. Questions regarding the appropriate mission of graduate hospitality education led the school to ask alumni and other industry practitioners, faculty, and students to identify the attitudes, knowledge, and skills perceived as most essential for top industry leaders. Elements identified by these stakeholders contributed to the central themes that would constitute an effective graduate program.<sup>6</sup> The survey revealed that all constituencies ranked communication and leadership skills as among the most critical competencies for future managers.

In response to the stakeholder survey and in recognition of the demand for excellence in communication and related abilities, Cornell's faculty substantially revised the curriculum of the two-year professional master's program, which leads to a Master of Management in Hospitality degree. Faculty members developed team-taught, interdisciplinary courses in the

function areas of hospitality management, shifted course sequences, and introduced additional opportunities for personal contact with top hospitality executives through an industry mentorship program.

The revamped master's program accepted its first students in September 1994.

An unusual aspect of the redesigned curriculum is known as the management-development program, a comprehensive, ongoing effort to ensure that each graduate has achieved excellence in selected communication, computer, and group-process skills. As we describe in this article, the communication component of the management-development program does not involve specific courses. Instead, students are expected to achieve personal and program benchmarks that are set in several different ways.

### Developing Key Management Skills

Although hospitality educators have repeatedly addressed curricular issues in specific content areas, improving students' communication and team skills in the context of a two-year academic program presents a particular set of challenges. Among them are the following:

- Communication traditionally has not been a substantial component of hospitality-management programs and, consequently, few models exist for the integration of this dimension into the curriculum;
- Communication and group-process skills develop over time with repeated practice, but traditional course structures do not always provide an appropriate context for that practice;
- Instructional quality is significantly affected by the number of students in each course section;
- Cultural differences among students affect skills students bring to the program and influence

<sup>1</sup> For discussions of undergraduate education, see: Charles G. Partlow and M.B. Gregoire, "Is Graduate Hospitality Education Relevant? Ask Graduates," *CHRIE Hospitality & Tourism Educator*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1994), pp. 13-16; Carolyn U. Lambert and Carl D. Riegel, "Professional Education: Balancing Rigor with Relevance," *Hospitality Research Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1994), pp. v-vi.; John J. Hogan, "Common Sense: A Smart Subject for Hotel Schools," *Journal of Hotel & Resort Industry*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1991), pp. 44-47; Fred L. Conner, "The Cornell Programs: Staying on Track," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 6 (December 1993), p. 95; Judi Brownell, "Personality and Career Development: A Study of Gender Differences," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (April 1994), pp. 36-43. See also: Robert C. Ford et al., "A Customer-Based Approach to Hospitality Education," in this issue of the *Cornell Quarterly*, pp. 74-79. With regard to graduate programs, see: E.T. Jennings, Jr., "Accountability, Program Quality, Outcome Assessment, and Graduate Education for Public Affairs and Administration," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (1989), pp. 438-446.

<sup>2</sup> K. Doyle, "Mastering Motivation," *Incentive*, Vol. 166, No. 3 (1992), pp. 20-23.

<sup>3</sup> S. Rock, "Can Stanford Stay Top of the Class?," *Director*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1989), pp. 90-94.

<sup>4</sup> D. Greising, "Chicago's B. School Goes Touchy-Feely," *Business Week*, Nov. 27, 1989, p. 140.

<sup>5</sup> J.P. Neelankavil, "Corporate America's Quest for an Ideal MBA," *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (1994), pp. 38-52; R. Garner, "Hire Education," *Computerworld*, Vol. 28, No. 8 (1994), pp. 73-79; G.T. Gabris and K. Mitchell, "Exploring the Relationships between Intern Job Performance, Quality of Education Experience, and Career Placement," *Public Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1989), pp. 484-504; M.B. Goodman, J.W. Hill, and K.R. Greene, "Communication in Graduate Management Programs: Results of a Survey," *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1991), pp. 24-35.; W. Roth, "Designing a New Academic Management Training Program," *Advanced Management Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (1988), pp. 17-22; R.L. Jenkins, "A New Era in MBA Education: Tennessee's Leadership Role," *Survey of Business*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1992), p. 2; R. Hotch, "This is Not Your Father's MBA," *Nation's Business*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (1992), pp. 51-52.

<sup>6</sup> Cathy A. Enz, Leo M. Renaghan, and A. Neal Geller, "Graduate-Level Education: A Survey of Stakeholders," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (August 1993), pp. 90-95.

selection of instructional content and methods; and

- Students' ability to transfer communication skills acquired in classroom settings to other aspects of their program, and later to workplace settings, has largely been unexplored.

As a component of Cornell's Master of Management in Hospitality curriculum, the management-development program aims to ensure that graduating students have expertise not only in functional areas of hospitality management, but in implementing their ideas by working effectively in teams, influencing their colleagues, and clearly articulating their thoughts and vision. That is, the redesigned program is based philosophically on the premise that students need communication skills integrated with function-area knowledge to be effective. Communication is not treated as a separate course to be completed, graded, and then forgotten.

The management-development program addresses these concerns by including the following aspects:

- Clearly articulated communication, computer, and group-process skills, expressed as benchmarks, with established performance standards;
- Ongoing skills assessment, starting with an initial assessment weekend;
- A personal development plan and individual advisement so that each student's skills are continually monitored;
- Continuous benchmarking opportunities integrated into the required core curriculum;
- A variety of resources and instructional options, including learning modules, so that students can meet individual skill-development needs;
- Opportunities to increase cultural sensitivity and team effec-

tiveness through a full semester group project; and

- Continuous program evaluation.
- The management-development program follows an integrated systems model to ensure that each student receives individual assistance in meeting or exceeding specific standards of excellence in selected communication and leadership skills.

### Components of the Management-Development Program

Professional master's students are selected through an intensive admissions process in which personal interviews, writing samples, industry experience, test scores, and other criteria are used to determine which applicants are most likely to become outstanding hospitality-industry leaders.

After an intense week of orientation activities, new MMH students begin their journey through the management-development portion of the master's program, as they also begin their first-semester course work. Below, we discuss the features of this integrated model.

**(1) Development of program benchmarks.** Although the experiences and personal characteristics students bring to the professional master's program are impressive, it is imperative that the school ensure that they have full competence in skills essential to effective leadership: group process, written communication, and presentational speaking. Toward this end the management-development facet of the professional master's program has established specific standards of accomplishment, known as benchmarks, in each of those three areas. These benchmarks make explicit the criteria all students must meet before graduation. (Another necessary area of expertise is computer applications, with a separate set of benchmarks.)

In this context benchmarking is the process of systematically comparing students' performance in selected skill areas to program standards. Each benchmark comprises three or more components, with clear performance standards specified for each aspect.

To achieve the benchmark in written communication, for example, students are required to demonstrate: **(a)** fundamental writing skills, **(b)** a professional writing style, **(c)** a clear and effective organizational structure, and **(d)** an appropriate and convincing communication strategy.

Each of these components is further defined by specific measurement criteria. To demonstrate mastery of the component on style, for instance, students must construct effective sentences, link ideas to achieve coherence, emphasize key ideas, and select a vocabulary suitable for their context, purpose, and readers. Faculty members will reassess the benchmarks each year to ensure that standards of excellence are maintained, and they will determine whether any modifications are required.

**(2) Application of assessment centers.** Assessment centers have a variety of advantages as a method of evaluating students' performance and providing individual feedback. First, specific behavior is determined in advance. Students understand exactly what skills and attitudes are valued and what they will be asked to demonstrate. Since desired competencies are stated in behavioral terms, skills can be measured readily and reliably. Finally, multiple tools, including role plays, interviews, in-basket exercises, presentations, and memos are used to assess students' performances.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Florence Berger, "Assessing Assessment Centers for Hospitality Organizations," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (August 1985), pp. 56-61.

The first semester of Cornell's professional master's program begins with a two-day assessment center during which groups of 28 students participate in a variety of communication, group, and leadership activities. The process begins with personal assessments in management style and critical thinking, the results of which are later linked to activities within the required curriculum.

A team of five to six industry representatives closely observes students' activities and interactions and provides feedback to each student on his or her behavior. Assessor training and orientation is a critical factor to the success of the assessment. The assessors observe the students working in teams throughout the weekend as they make decisions, solve problems, and role-play management activities. The assessors also judge the students' presentational speaking skills and written-communication competency through simulations that require students to respond to management problems.

The center concludes with 20-minute individual sessions where each student receives structured feedback from at least two industry representatives. The insights of practicing hospitality managers are a valuable supplement to the ongoing feedback from faculty as students begin to assess their leadership skills. This initial dialogue with well-respected practitioners assists students in focusing their efforts throughout their graduate studies, and provides direction as they meet with their advisers to begin setting both individual and program goals.

### **(3) Personal development plan.**

Graduate faculty advisers play an essential role in helping students to develop individual programs of study. Immediately following the assessment weekends, students meet with their advisers and a designated

member of the management development faculty to develop a personal action plan. Information generated from the assessment center is used as the first step in developing an individual profile that indicates each student's general level of competence in oral and written communication and in group-process skills.

The student and advisers set specific goals collaboratively and determine the most appropriate means of reaching each personal objective. Information is recorded on a "personal development plan," which is continuously updated and revised throughout the two-year program. Students have responded positively to this individual approach, which provides immediate guidance for those who may require specific resources or direction as they prepare to meet program benchmarks.

Advisers are interested in assisting individuals not only with program requirements but also with ensuring that each student explores additional opportunities to tailor his or her program to meet individual goals. A wide range of university resources might be recommended as students consider how their personal program of study can be enhanced. Interaction with industry guests, courses outside of the hotel school, independent study, and other academic or nonacademic experiences may be suggested. Such opportunities are particularly valuable during the second year when students have completed the majority of their core requirements and are able to pursue an individual program of study.

### **(4) Continuous benchmarking.**

Rather than creating separate requirements for assessment purposes, the management development faculty members work closely with core-course instructors to develop opportunities for students to achieve benchmarks in the context of re-

quired-course assignments. Each faculty member who teaches a core academic course identifies communication and group-process skills embedded in the course's content and activities. Participating assessment faculty members and the course instructor collaborate to identify a cohesive set of assignments that give students the opportunity to demonstrate each benchmark skill as it might be applied in a business setting.

During the first semester, for instance, students achieve benchmarks in the style component of written communication through an assignment from the required quantitative-methods course. Presentational-speaking components are assessed as students deliver presentations in an information-technology class. Group-process skills are enhanced and judged against benchmarks as students complete projects in human behavior and organizations. Additional written-communication skills are assessed as they are demonstrated during the second semester in assignments from courses in marketing and human-resources management.

Benchmarking occurs, then, in a planned and systematic manner throughout the first year. Since selected assignments from required courses are used for benchmarking purposes, students who do not achieve a benchmark component are referred to appropriate resources for assistance so that they can achieve the benchmark through a subsequent core-course assignment.

While no grades are associated with the benchmarks themselves, achieving all benchmark components is a graduation requirement. Students must continue to pursue strategies to enhance their skills, and have their efforts reassessed, until the components of all benchmarks have been mastered. In the process of enhancing their skills to achieve

the benchmark, students may earn credit for course work they complete, as explained next.

(5) *Strategies for developing required competencies.* Students encountering initial difficulty with achieving benchmarks have access to a wide range of options. Strategies for increasing communication and group competence, for instance, include the use of appropriate resources such as computer-assisted instruction, individual tutoring and independent study, and relevant courses offered throughout the university. The options, selected in consultation with a faculty adviser, are based on individual needs.

In many cases the most appropriate alternative is participation in group-process and communication educational modules that are designed specifically to assist students in meeting benchmark requirements. The modules are also offered prior to the class assignment that is being used for benchmarking so that students are assisted with developing skills for the specific assignment being used for assessment.

Several weeks before an oral-presentation assignment is due, for instance, students may sign up for modules on such topics as organization, use of visuals, delivery, and speech anxiety. Shortly before the due date, students can be videotaped making a presentation. A member of the assessment faculty then meets with each student to provide feedback and suggest how the performance might be improved before the class presentation; the class presentation is when the student's skills are assessed formally.

While some modules may run as long as four hours over two weeks, other topics may be covered in a single two-hour session. All modules are elective. Pass-fail credit for the modules is assigned retroactively to students who accumulate substantial instructional hours and complete

optional requirements to receive academic credit.

(6) *Group project and team experience.* Yet another benchmarking opportunity is provided during the second semester as students participate in an integrated team experience. Six-member teams serve as consultant groups to a hotel- or restaurant-development project. They visit the site, analyze all aspects of the property and market, and bring to bear relevant theory from each function area as they develop a written proposal that is presented orally to industry representatives. The semester-long group activity is conducted in conjunction with five core courses (human resources, marketing, finance, food and beverage, and properties). As a "real" communication experience, both the semester-long group activities and the final presentation provide perfect assessment and benchmarking opportunities.

In the spring of 1995, for instance, student teams visited the Sheraton New Orleans for several days of orientation and exploration regarding the hotel's plans for renovation and expansion. They listened to presentations by New Orleans tourism representatives, talked with members of the Sheraton management team, and visited Sheraton's competitors. These experiences provided team members with a thorough understanding of the Sheraton's social and economic environment, labor force, and other factors that affected the development project.

When students return from their field visit, the team meetings in which they develop their recommendations and reports are videotaped, and are observed and reviewed by a member of the management development faculty. In addition to ensuring that students continue to apply their skills, continued meetings with faculty mem-



bers seek to achieve the ultimate purpose of instilling in each student the ability to analyze group behavior and assess his or her own performance. Within this framework, students who are unable to meet all group-process benchmarks during the first semester have further opportunities to demonstrate their skills.

**(7) Continuous program evaluation.**

The success of the management development component of the professional master's program will become apparent as students pursue their personal development plans and compare their entry and exit performance levels with regard to the benchmark skills. Each student is expected to master designated personal and program objectives within the two-year program period by choosing from a wide range of resources and by working closely with both his or her adviser and members of the management development faculty.

Continuous evaluation allows for minor program adjustments. Surveys, focus groups, and committee interaction provide short-term evaluation. Students provide input through a graduate-student curricu-

lum committee and on student-satisfaction questionnaires. Faculty members involved in core courses meet regularly each semester to discuss course-integration issues, and management development faculty members provide curriculum suggestions based on their close monitoring of students' progress.

Long-term program evaluation is likely to include such measures as how graduates' careers develop, perceptions of industry representatives and faculty in other hospitality management programs, and graduates' evaluations after several years of working in the industry. The program is geared to providing its graduates with the tools required by the hotel industry in the next few years. As time passes and the industry's requirements change, the program's integrated approach to management development will anticipate those changes. In part, the program's success depends on implementing the principle of continuous improvement.

### **Toward Mastery Learning**

It is clear that effective communication and group-process skills are essential to successful leadership of hospitality organizations. To make wise decisions, motivate a diverse work force, and respond appropriately to organizational changes, managers must demonstrate a high level of communication competence. Effective hospitality leaders must speak with knowledge and conviction, write clearly, listen well, and develop teams with sensitivity and vision. Responsive hospitality programs must do more than require a course in group process or communication. They must make these critical elements of effective leadership central to their academic programs.

For the past several decades, educators have explored the goals of undergraduate hospitality education until the vision for undergraduate programs has become sharp and well focused.<sup>8</sup> Graduate programs in hospitality management, on the other hand, remain less clearly positioned.

Cornell's School of Hotel Administration expects its graduate program to have substantial impact—both on the individuals it prepares for the challenges of a hospitality career and as a model of excellence in graduate education for hospitality managers. The integrated management development component of the Master of Management in Hospitality ensures that students not only have expertise in functional areas, but that they can implement their ideas with wisdom and skill. This dimension of the new curriculum clearly distinguishes it from existing graduate programs in hospitality education. Driven by the key themes that faculty, students, and industry leaders have identified, the goal of the management-development program is to respond to diverse student needs and to assist each student, on an individual basis, to reach his or her full potential with regard to the critical leadership skills that undergird excellent management practice.

<sup>8</sup> S.M. Ladki, "Hospitality Education: The Identity Struggle," *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1993), pp. 243-251; Michael R. Evans, "Graduate Education: The Next Frontier," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (August 1990), pp. 92-94; D. Zabel, "Undergraduate and Graduate Programs in Hospitality: A Typology," *CHRIE Hospitality Tourism Educator*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1992), pp. 31-36; Charles G. Partlow, "Graduate Education in Hospitality Management: Implications for Curriculum Development," *Hospitality Research Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1990), pp. 23-34; Thomas P. Cullen and Timothy J. Dick, "Tomorrow's Entrepreneur and Today's Hospitality Curriculum," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (August 1989), pp. 54-57).