School of Travel Industry Management
Graduate Program Review
March 13–14, 2017

Findings and Recommendations
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Submitted by

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Introduction

The UH Board of Regents permanently approved the Master of Science in Travel Industry Management degree in 1994. It is the first and only graduate degree in travel industry management in Hawai‘i.

Since AY2010–11, enrollment in the MS/TIM graduate program has averaged 12 students per year. Between 2010 and 2016, the program awarded 20 degrees, about three per year. For the same period, the average graduate class size has been four students. The graduate program currently enrolls 14 students, all from other countries, mostly China. The school’s undergraduate program serves 370 students.

This is the first review of the TIM graduate degree program since its inception, in keeping with the university’s practice of regular periodic review. The underlying principle of this policy is “peer external evaluation focused on continuous program improvement.” TIM’s current strategic plan, calls for a similar review, to “ensure [that the program] is relevant to industry needs.”

An external review team comprised of representatives from the academic and professional communities met with university and school administrators, faculty, and graduate students March 13–14, 2017. On March 14, the team presented its preliminary findings and recommendations to Travel Industry Management Interim Dean Tom Bingham, representatives of the OVCAA and OGE, and the TIM faculty. This report documents the team’s findings and recommendations.

What is the quality of the program?

The quality of the program is high. UHM is one of only three universities in the world offering a curriculum that integrates tourism, hospitality, and transportation. Faculty members are highly productive and academically engaged, with well-established records of scholarship and publication; all full-time tenured or tenure-track TIM faculty members contribute to the graduate program. Based on interviews with graduate students and administrators, the greatest strength of the program is its faculty expertise. Fifty percent of the faculty have earned Ph.D. degrees within the past 7 years; 87.5 percent have received awards; 100 percent have a significant record of scholarly publications.

According to the self-study, the Master of Science in Travel Industry Management “seeks to provide students with the managerial, analytical, and decision-making skills necessary for them to succeed in higher level managerial and executive positions in, or directly affecting, the travel industry.” These goals are born out in the aspirations of the three second-year graduate students interviewed by the team, likewise in the employment trajectories of recent graduates.

Two of the three graduate students interviewed by the team seemed confident about their academic preparation. “The faculty is welcoming,” one student offered; the others nodded in affirmation. “The program changed my life.” All agreed that “the faculty is willing to help,
willing to spend whatever time is necessary.” All three gratefully acknowledged the efforts and dedication of the Graduate Chair.

Despite these generally positive assessments, the students noted several other concerns, including the lack of faculty advising geared to students from Asia, the lack of student diversity, and the lack of academic expertise in human resources. One of the three exhibited significant anxiety about her fit within the Master’s program. “I can’t tell what I’m good at,” she explained tearfully. “The program is really tough for international students.”

What is the cost of the program?

Annual non-resident tuition for the Master of Science in Travel Industry Management is $28,456. One hundred percent of the students currently enrolled are non-residents. Compounding the high cost of tuition is the relative scarcity of student financial aid and the high cost of living in Hawai’i.

Does the program fill a genuine student and/or community need, or represent an area unique to UH or UHM that is important for the university mission, reputation, or identity?

The School of Industry Travel Management is “situated in one of the premier destinations of the world,” of increasing significance given Hawai’i’s singular cultural and ecological context. Tourism commands 21 percent of the state’s economy, generating $14 billion per year in revenues.

“This is a perfect location to learn about the travel and hospitality industry. TIM’s graduate program is more than hospitality,” one student noted. “It’s transportation; pure tourism policy; restaurant management.” One student said he came to Hawai’i to study cruise lines, which is a growing market in China. He especially applauded TIM 606, Transportation Economics and Management, and the program’s emphasis on data-driven analytics.

Students who graduated between 2013 and 2015 currently enjoy diverse positions in the industry: one is an assistant manager at Four Season Resort in Kailua-Kona; another is a group sales manager at Marriot in Seattle; two work in research and analytics for Smith Travel Research in Denver; another works in analytics for the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group in Washington, D.C. At least one alumna has chosen to pursue a Ph.D. in sustainable tourism (on full scholarship).

Conclusions & Recommendations

This review committee finds that the School of Travel Industry Management is vital for the State of Hawai’i and the Asia-Pacific region, and that the graduate program is vital to the success and integrity of the Travel Industry Management program. The curriculum’s unique combination of
three academic concentrations—hospitality management, tourism, and transportation—
distinguish it among all other national and regional programs. Consistent with its scholarly
leadership in these areas is the school’s commitment to graduate education. Although the Master
of Science in Travel Industry Management is small, the degree provides students with unique
opportunities to build skill and expertise under the guidance of academic leaders in the field, who
encourage and support their own and their students’ rigorous standards of research and writing.
The team agrees with the Graduate Chair and the other members of the faculty that the
graduate program is essential to the identity and integrity of the school. The team also agrees
with the interim dean, who expressed concern about the identity of the program and its
connection to the industry, especially in Hawai‘i. The faculty readily acknowledges these
challenges, and seems poised to consider remedies in every area of assessment, from recruitment
to capstone requirements.

Despite significant strengths, three problems vex TIM’s graduate program. The first problem is
the lack of a permanent dean, which has resulted in a prolonged administrative limbo. Although
academic organization of the school is beyond the scope of this review, the absence of a
permanent dean and the uncertainty surrounding TIM’s future have suspended the kind of
strategic discourse necessary to reposition travel industry management education in the
university, no less the larger context of Hawai‘i and the region. Positive change and growth
presuppose the full mobilization of TIM’s intellectual resources around a strong, central vision.
In the absence of permanent leadership, the faculty will continue to defer the problem of its
precarious institutional identity, which inhibits robust industry engagement.

The second handicap is the graduate curriculum itself, which “has not changed in at least seven
years,” according to the school’s January 2017 self-study, and which therefore would benefit
from revision. Capstone requirements seem out of sync with student interests. Students can
choose between two products: a thesis plus three electives (Plan A); or a professional paper plus
four electives (Plan B). Between Fall 2011 and Fall 2016 only two students have elected to pursue
“Plan A.” Reviewers noted the credit requirements for the program seem light: one member of
the team honestly assumed the degree was a one-year program and expressed surprise to learn it
was “a full-blown two-year program with only 36 credits, and no finance course requirement.”

The third handicap is the applicant pool. Although the academic quality of the program is high,
the standards for admission are low. The Graduate Chair candidly described the admissions
criteria as “relaxed—[a matter of] survival.” He noted that the school was “desperate” to satisfy
the university’s minimum enrollment threshold. He conceded that the school admits borderline
students who would not otherwise have qualified. Further to the point, the self-study suggests that
many graduate students are increasingly drawn to the school because they’re interested in
changing their career path “rather than building on prior education and/or experience in travel
industry management.” Consequently, they may enter the program unprepared for the demands
and rigors of graduate research in the field, given the caliber and expertise of the full-time
faculty.

According to the dean, few if any of the current faculty members conduct Hawai‘i-based
research, and only a small number of faculty members regularly engage the local professional
community. Given the significance of tourism in the state, greater attention to the local context
for advanced research and education oriented more toward the specific needs and context of
Hawai‘i and the Asia and Pacific region might provide a productive framework for assessing the current relevance and focus of the graduate curriculum. The team was unanimous in its concern that to reach its full potential, the program must be “industry-driven.”

The team recommends a curricular evolution that can keep pace with the evolution of the industry. Who are TIM’s potential graduate students? Team members with industry expertise expressed concern that course requirements are too relaxed—“a full-blown two-year program with only 36 credits and no finance course requirement,” as one member noted—and no courses in asset management or hotel development. The program currently allows up to four 400-level course in satisfaction of graduate degree requirements. Instead, they might consider developing research and teaching collaborations with other departments, e.g. economics, HRM, finance, marketing, and ITM. Further, the team encourages the faculty to revisit and reassess the effectiveness of the capstone requirement.

The team recommends that the faculty identify its market and assess the demand; review and modify the curriculum to meet that demand; and measure the effectiveness of the curriculum based on its congruence with local and regional market conditions, and on graduate job placement at the executive and managerial levels.

The team suggests that the faculty consider the merits of a 4+1 fast-track pathway that selectively cultivates promising TIM undergraduates, especially since the faculty is in an excellent position to evaluate the readiness of its own undergraduate applicants.

The school might consider “boot camp” programs or other remedial coursework to assist promising students who enter the master’s program with an unrelated undergraduate major.

The program would greatly benefit from strengthened connections to the local tourism, hospitality, travel, and transportation industries. An integrated graduate internship or summer practicum requirement would help strengthen and expand industry alliances and networks. A practicum course involving industry leaders in the three areas—tourism, hospitality, and transportation—would have a positive impact on jobs, careers, and students’ understanding of the changing industry landscape.

Finally, the team applauds the faculty’s commitment to a more ambitious marketing program, especially within its own population of undergraduate students, few if any of whom seem interested to enter the graduate degree pipeline in TIM. A robust marketing campaign, combined with novel curricula—e.g. 3+2, 4+1—might further excite interest among both local and international (especially Asian) undergraduate students, who seek an edge in an increasingly complex and competitive industry.