

Michael Olsen: An early pioneer of hospitality education

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Introduction

The emergence of a given discipline as it relates to education, as in other domains, is to a large extent dependent on the leadership role that incumbents assume within that discipline. In particular, academic disciplines are influenced by scholars who contribute towards their success both in terms of knowledge building and dissemination activities as well as in the administration of programs. Within hospitality and tourism academia, a name that come up more often than others, and whose contributions have pushed the boundaries of education to levels that have made it more global in terms of reach and acceptance, is the late Dr. Michael Olsen. To many of his doctoral student graduates, and for many others who have been influenced by him, his legacy will remain as the beacon that will pave the way for hospitality and tourism academia for years to come, not just in the United States, but globally. This portrayal is a tribute to Olsen's legacy from the authors' own account based on their association and interactions with him over a combined period of three decades. Needless to say, a short account such as this would not do justice to the contributions of a legendary academic, but is simply a reflection of our respect and remembrance, which could be summarized in four simple words: "To Sir with Love".

A son of the Olszewski

Dr. Michael Olsen was born in Buffalo, New York, on 4 July 1943 but he has lived his entire life of 69 years as "Michael Olsen" until his passing on 20 March 2012. His parents, John Olszewski and Emily Olszewski, were new immigrants from Poland to the United States during the second World War. New immigrants arriving in America were often referred to as "FOBs" (Fresh Off the Boats), a derogatory term associated with the newly arriving immigrants to their newly adopted country. Olsen's parents did not want to see their son subjected to such prejudices and discrimination so they decided to register him for the primary school under the name of Michael Olsen. This led him to live his life with a rather complicated identity. All of his educational and professional life has been under the adopted name of Michael Olsen while he was carrying the passport and any other official documents which carried the birth name of Michael Olszewski.

Background

Olsen's early years growing up in upstate New York helped him to lay the foundations of his professional career. He often referred to his early days as instrumental in shaping his future, particularly the influence of his immediate family members. He received his Bachelor's and MBA degree from Michigan State University, USA (1973) and his Doctorate in General Business at Virginia Tech, USA (1980). He started off at Virginia Tech as an instructor (1975), going on to become an Assistant Professor (1980); the Program Director with a promotion to Associate Professor (1981); and a Full Professor (1985). His contributions led him to become the Founding Head of Department (1987), at which capacity he served until 1992. During the 10 plus years in a leadership capacity, Virginia Tech's Hospitality and Tourism program became a major contributor to the emerging discipline. Research and scholarly contributions from Olsen himself and other academics alike, who Olsen hired as a Department Head, laid the foundations for the emergence of the discipline for years to come.

A visionary

Olsen helped provide the impetus to education in the field during its early years of growth in the 1970s through the 1990s, and was highly influential in getting tertiary institutions to develop a strategic orientation towards the discipline within the field. The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of hospitality education, notably in the United States, with this emphasis as opposed to previous decades, wherein the focus was on a skills based approach and vocational orientation to hospitality and tourism education. Particularly, his influence was in moving education within the field from an operations orientation to a more business orientation. His vision and background provided the required thrust to influence others to adopt the value-based approach of building academic programs. The value-based approach combined contingency and resource based theories in Strategic Management and Economics with the mission of educating stakeholders to adopt a life-long learning orientation to education.

To some extent, Olsen implemented the value-based orientation to education as Program Director, and subsequently, as the founding head of Virginia Tech's hospitality and tourism management department from 1981 to 1992. He continued with such initiatives as a faculty member after his tenure as department head. Many of these initiatives, from the late eighties through to the early 2000s, were witnessed by the co-authors of this article as his graduate students during that period. He laid the foundation for strategically developing the program, particularly its graduate education, which led to it being ranked among the top programs worldwide. As stated by the former Department Head of Virginia Tech's Hospitality and Tourism Department, Dr. Rick Perdue, at the time of his passing, "Olsen's vision, unrelenting commitment to excellence, strategic leadership, and success in recruiting a world-class faculty

laid the foundation for the department's successes," which influenced many other programs within the United States and abroad. Such is his influence today that many an administrator within the field has either directly been mentored by him or guided by his principles to education. For instance, the University of Delaware Department of Hospitality and Tourism started the Michael Olsen Award which is annually presented at the Graduate Education and Graduate Students Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, in recognition of Professor Olsen's contribution in founding the hospitality program at the University of Delaware.

Apart from growing the discipline, he was instrumental in building the body of knowledge as it relates to strategic and financial management of hospitality and tourism organizations. He was one among the few strategic management scholars who emphasized the importance of financial management and value creation in the hospitality and tourism sector while building an undergraduate and graduate curricula at Virginia Tech that mirrored his prophecy.

In fact, his arduous commitment to education led him to take significant steps to bridge the gap between academia and industry, not just at the local and domestic levels, but at the global stage. As the Director of Research of the International Hotel and Restaurant Association (IH&RA) in the mid-nineties, he was a pioneer in getting them to adopt the value adding model he derived from his line of research so that members of the Association (hospitality firms from around the world) could benefit from the underlying concepts. He later coined the term "The Co-alignment Model" that explained the value adding process in his co-authored book entitled Strategic Management for Hospitality and Tourism, published in 1998. Several of his graduates' theses and Ph.D. dissertations were, either holistically or in part, based on the underpinnings of the model.

The concept used to develop the model was not just for getting practitioners to benefit from a value adding orientation, but equally for educators, who in essence, it could be said, lacked a guiding principle to curriculum development at the time. His major achievement in this regard was to get educators within the field to reorient towards value centric education which was based on the co-alignment principle of employing strategic resources to create organizational value. This approach was first formalized in the curriculum building activities at Virginia Tech and later adopted in institutions worldwide where Olsen spent several years as a visiting faculty.

During his 32 years as an academic at Virginia Tech, he recruited and mentored many masters and doctoral students, who went on to carry his legacy forward of building the body of knowledge in the domain of strategic and financial management for hospitality organizations. Olsen's disciples are numerous and they have made significant contributions in further advancing the field of hospitality and tourism through research and program administration. His first Ph.D. student, Cynthia Mayo, became the first African American woman professor in

America's hospitality education in 1985 and served as the department head at Virginia State University in Richmond, Virginia. Olsen supervised 39 Ph.D. graduates in his academic career and his former students include many prominent names in hospitality and tourism education. Among his Ph.D. graduates are many influential hospitality and tourism educators, researchers and program administrators worldwide, including Chekitan Dev (Cornell University, USA), Joe West (Florida International University, USA), Kaye Chon (Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China), Fred DeMicco (University of Delaware, USA), Prakash Chathoth (American University of Sharjah, UAE) Inès Blal (Lausanne Hotel School, Switzerland) and Eliza Tse (University of Missouri, USA) just to name a few.

A major contribution he made in this regard was to get his students to appreciate a strategic approach to education within the field while at the same time building their research expertise in their chosen area of specialization.

Research & scholarly contributions

Olsen's contributions to academia as they relate to hospitality and tourism education globally are reflected in the invited visiting professorship appointments he held over a period of three decades. Notably, they included appointments such as the Paul Wise Professor at the University of Delaware, USA (2001); the Shaw Foundation Professor at the Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (1997), Darden Eminent Scholar in Restaurant Management, University of Central Florida, USA (1996); and Conti Professor at Pennsylvania State University, USA (1994). He also served as an invited visiting professor at various institutions globally, including The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong; ESSEC Business School; France, University of Reims Management School, France; Associazione per l'Istituzione della Libera Università Nuorese, Italy, Ecole Hoteliere De Lausanne, Switzerland (over a period of 5 years); Hotel School of the Hague, The Netherlands (over a period of 6 years); Nankai University, Tianjin, China; Hotel School Cesar Ritz, Switzerland; the Haaga Institute, Helsinki, Finland; Tianjin University of Commerce, Tianjin, China; and Sheffield City Polytechnic (later known as Sheffield Hallam University), Sheffield, England. These appointments contributed to the programs that Olsen taught at, particularly in curriculum development through the offering of contemporary topics related to strategic and financial management of hospitality and tourism organizations. His influence on some of the programs he served at as a visiting scholar is evidenced even to this day.

His legacy as an academic is defined by his connection with his students. Olsen had in him the "X" factor as an academic that brought him closer to his students in a classroom setting. It had to be experienced to be believed and cannot be described in words. The authors have been through this experience, first as graduate students, then as a faculty member/ administrator of programs,

where Olsen was a visiting professor. He won several teaching accolades for inspiring his students in their quest for learning and for getting them to become better in their pursuit of excellence. There was no compromise in this pursuit, and anyone not up to the challenge had to reconsider their association with him at a professional level. And students knew it beforehand, which is what made the association with him both challenging and memorable.

His work was recognized not just in the United States but globally; as a result he held several key positions within professional bodies around the world. Notably, he was the Chairman of Economics Committee of the International Hotel Association (later known as the International Hotel and Restaurant Association – IH&RA) for over a decade and its Director of Research for over five years. It was during his tenure as the Director of Research for the IHA/IH&RA that saw a series of think tank on strategic issues. These sessions were held globally to address the forces driving change in the industry and how to address them through visioning. The output was published as a White Paper series put forth by the IH&RA authored by Olsen and some of his graduate students. He was also a board member of the Hotel Investment Council. He held several other positions nationally within the United States that are too many to mention. However, three items need special mention - he was the founding board member (1990-92) of the Commission for the Accreditation of Programs in Hospitality Administration, Washington, DC; the Chairman of the Accreditation Committee (1983-90); Council on Hotel Restaurant and Institutional Education; President 1981-1982, and the Chairman of the Board, 1982-83. They all go to show the dedication and commitment he had, and above all, his leadership skills and motivation to contribute to the discipline.

Olsen made significant contributions to the body of knowledge as they relate to Strategic and Financial Management in Hospitality and Tourism. He co-authored four books within the field as well as over 100 refereed research publications. He authored/co-authored over 80 articles in industry trade publications. He also contributed to the American Hotel and Motel Association through research and publication activities. His leadership in research related work is seen in his appointment as the Founding President of the International Academy of Hospitality Research and as a fellow, a position he held for over a decade. He was the Associate Editor of the International Journal of Hospitality Management from 1989-98. His scholarly activities led to several research grants and related funding worth over USD1.2 million.

Achievements and awards

Olsen's contribution to the field won him many accolades, seen in his list of achievements. Olsen's research contribution was recognized early on (in 1983) when he received the Donald K. Tressler Research and Scholarship Award for excellence in research and scholarship awarded by the Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education. In separate publications in Tourism

Management and JHTR, as of 2008 and 2011, he was listed among the top 50 most accomplished scholars in hospitality and tourism academia for contributions to the field in terms of research publications. Other achievements include the industry recognition he received through the appointment as Officer of the International Hotel Association's "Confrérie des Amis de l'Hôtellerie Internationale" (1995). These contributions are evidenced by CHRIE's recognition of presenting him the Howard B. Meek Award (1995) for lifetime contributions and outstanding service to hospitality education. Arguably, his greatest achievement was in successfully supervising over 39 doctoral students.

Conclusion

As academics of a growing body of knowledge, the authors, and perhaps many of the readers of this article, would appreciate the effort and sacrifice of Olsen in setting a foundation for the future generations of scholars. Olsen's contribution to the field cannot be documented in words – his effort to build the foundation for hospitality and tourism education, the influence he had on others to partake in this mission; and above all, his global reach. We were privileged to be part of the journey, for having known him, and for having become better academics in the process. We hope this account of Dr. Micheal Olsen provides some inspiration as it has to many of his students and others who were associated with him over the years.

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