RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tourism Program Shifts at an Aerospace University: A Case Study

Author/s: Annalyn C. Alsola, Zytka Laverne Torralba, Raulph Rexen Magale, Eugene E. Toring, Kimberly N. Toring, Nonita Legaspi, Jimmy B. Maming, Jhoselle Tus

Affiliation: Indiana Aerospace University

Abstract

This study aims to identify the underlying reasons that lead students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Tourism and Travel Management (BSTTM) program to shift to other academic programs. A single-case study methodology was employed, utilizing purposive sampling to select students who had changed their field of study. Eight participants took part in the interviews. The research applied Cresswell's data analysis techniques. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, incorporating recorded audio with participant consent and detailed notes. Comprehensive analysis was performed, resulting in key findings and conclusions. The study offers significant insights and recommendations aimed at improving the program to reduce the incidence of student shifting. Despite its valuable findings, the research acknowledges limitations related to the small sample size drawn from a single institution. It is recommended that future research expand to include multiple institutions and a larger number of participants for better generalizability. Future studies should also consider a broader exploration across various universities to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing students' decisions to shift programs.

Introduction

The Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management (BSTM) is a four-year course designed to provide students with the necessary skills in business and tourism services to pursue a dynamic career in the tourism sector. The program uses a competency-based training approach to develop globally competitive, professionally skilled, morally sound, and socially responsible individuals who contribute to national progress (CMO 62, series of 2017).

The BSTTM program prepares students with comprehensive knowledge of products and services related to travel and tourism activities. It encompasses various sectors such as travel, hotels, resorts, wellness, leisure, event management, and destination management. Some courses within the program, such as tour guiding and cruise ship management, require substantial industry exposure and financial investment from students.

Students often change majors due to evolving interests or the need to confront institutional challenges, such as high tuition fees. Major shifts may be unsuccessful without proper recognition and support. With appropriate curricular and career counseling, many students can successfully transition to new academic paths. Programs aimed at assisting students in exploring and deciding on alternative educational and career options are essential. Academic shifts can be attributed to various factors, including unrealistic initial choices based on limited understanding of course requirements or job prospects. Admission limitations in oversubscribed programs and inadequate preparation in subjects like math and science can also contribute to these decisions (Elliott, 1984; Gordon & Polson, 1985; Holland & Nichols, 1964; Pierson, 1962; Theophilides et al., 1984; Titley & Titley, 1980).

Given the prevalence of this issue, this research seeks to investigate the challenges students face when shifting programs and to develop intervention strategies as an outcome of the study.

Research Question/ Objectives

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of BS Tourism Management students?

2. What challenges do they encounter that lead to shifting to different programs?

3. What opportunities can be identified to address the challenges faced by these students?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the experiences of Tourism Management students who shifted courses. Qualitative research gained significant attention over the past decade, but many researchers still lacked a clear understanding of how to conduct a robust qualitative study. This paper aimed to offer guidance for those venturing into qualitative research (P.W. Wong, 2014). The sections below detail the research design, sampling, data collection, analysis, and trustworthiness.

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative approach, specifically a single-case study design. According to Yin (2003), a case study design was appropriate when: (a) the research focused on answering "how" and "why" questions; (b) the behavior of the participants could not be manipulated; (c) contextual conditions were deemed relevant to the study; or (d) the boundaries between the context and phenomenon were not clearly defined.

Participants/Respondents

Purposive sampling was utilized in this study. The target participants were eight students from the BS Tourism and Travel Management program who had shifted to other courses during the Academic Year 2023-2024. The researchers coordinated with the College Registrar to identify participants who met the following criteria: a) officially enrolled during A.Y. 2023-2024, b) initially enrolled in the BSTTM program but later shifted to a different course, and c) capable of communicating in English.

Instruments

The main data source was in-depth interviews guided by a semi-structured interview tool designed by the researchers. Interviewers received training to standardize interview techniques and enhance the credibility of the data. When necessary, research assistants were involved. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with each participant assigned a code to maintain anonymity. All data were carefully stored to ensure confidentiality.

Procedure

The study followed Creswell's (2012) seven-phase data collection method: 1) selecting cases that met the criteria, 2) obtaining permission to conduct the study, 3) reaching out to potential participants with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, 4) commencing data collection promptly, 5) documenting interview records, 6) discussing field notes with participants, and 7) coding and storing data using a systematic coding system. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face at the university, with consent obtained for audio recording. Notes were also taken during interviews, and all data were securely stored to protect participant identity.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed qualitative research practices to identify emerging patterns (Daniels, 2012). The initial step involved preparing and organizing the data for analysis, which was then reduced into themes through coding (Creswell, 2013). Techniques outlined by Dodge (2011) were applied. The first phase included data collection and organization, transcribed using MS Word. The second phase involved reading, understanding, and reflecting on the data to identify themes. The coding process was completed in the third phase, during which data was categorized by question, and responses were reviewed to identify key themes. The fourth phase involved describing these categories, while the final phase connected the themes into a coherent narrative. The final analysis aimed to interpret the meaning of the data and develop overarching themes.

Results

After analyzing the in-depth interview transcripts, the following themes were identified: 1) Counselling and mentorship of students, 2) Stress and loss of interest, 3) Passion for Tourism and Travel, 4) Financial Burdens, and 5) Lack of Participation in Extracurricular Activities in Tourism Management. Below are their key stories:

Theme 1: Counselling and Mentorship of Students

Guidance and mentorship played a crucial role in shaping students' academic and personal paths. A mentor provided direction and support, helping students navigate the complexities of their studies. Beyond academic content, mentors offered practical insights relevant to their field, bridging the gap between theory and real-life applications. Regular interactions allowed mentors to recognize students' strengths and areas needing improvement, tailoring their guidance accordingly. This mentor-student relationship created a sense of belonging and built the confidence needed for academic success.

The participants were asked about Counselling and Mentorship. Participant 1 shared: "In my own opinion, they should provide academic advisors who can offer guidance and solutions for each student because we have different challenges we are facing."

Similarly, Participant 2 expressed:

"The schools can hire other experienced staff who have been in the tourism industry for a long time and can advise to add to the curriculum."

Participant 4 stated:

 "Students should attend career guidance seminars in order to choose what's best for them."

Participant 5 responded:

 "They could benefit from tutoring services, and mentorship programs."

Participant 6 added:

 "A mentorship program connecting students with industry professionals would be beneficial, offering guidance on navigating challenges and shaping career paths."

Participant 7 remarked:

"I believe that students and the administration should both invest more on certain career guide seminars. In that way, the students may be able to prioritize career choices that are right for them. I think they should incorporate personal development with the students as well as career guide seminars."

Finally, Participant 8 shared:

"I believe that the opportunities or solutions that can be done is to consult with mentors, advisors, or career counselors to gain insights into which skills are most relevant to the chosen career path. Through this, they can provide guidance on what skills to prioritize. Support services that I believe could benefit students facing this challenge is access to counseling services where students can discuss academic, personal, or emotional challenges with trained professionals."

According to Ziegler et al. (2021), mentoring is a process where an experienced individual, the mentor, supports the personal and professional growth of the mentee. This relationship creates an environment for development, where the mentor's maturity and skills guide the student, who brings their own questions, challenges, and aspirations.

Theme 2: Factors Causing to Shift

The transition to college life posed various challenges, leading some students to face reduced interest, higher stress, and declining motivation. The newfound freedom could become overwhelming, creating struggles with responsibilities and diminishing enthusiasm. Academic pressures, heavy workloads, and constant deadlines increased stress and, for some, led to burnout. Competing in a more challenging environment and comparing oneself with peers could amplify self-doubt and reduce motivation.

When asked about the factors leading to their shift, Participant 1 revealed:

 "While I'm passionate about tourism, my parents motivated me to pursue engineering related."

Participant 3 mentioned:

"The challenges are activities, the financial burden gets too much for me, and tuition is hard enough a bit challenging for me. Regarding my finances, it's straining for me. Financial problems and me realizing this isn't the course for me to take."

Participant 4 stated:

 "The challenge that I faced while studying tourism was having financial distress, since tourism course indulge in so many activities that involves money. Aside from financial problem, I was lost interest in my previous course and I think this course I've taken now is the best for me for my future."

Participant 5 shared:

 "Yes, I have troubles keeping up with the course. It's probably because of my decision making. I couldn't really find my passion in life until I've really thought about it. That's why I have shift into a different course which is Real Estate Management. It's a course which I really love doing and it's for my future as well."

Participant 6 added:

 "Shifting to a different program became necessary to acquire a more technical skill set aligned with evolving career goals. The decision was influenced by a desire for a curriculum with a stronger technological focus and promising career prospects in emerging sectors."

Participant 7 said:

 "I am honestly in an identity crisis and I felt like the course must not have been my calling. That it really wasn't for me. I cannot see it working for me in the long run."

Participant 8 stated:

"Time management, balancing assignments, and maintaining self-care are common challenges are the aspects I struggle with a lot with my old program. It's important for psychology students to seek support, engage in self-reflection, and actively participate in practical experiences to navigate these challenges effectively which I find hard to do."

According to Alkhawaldeh et al. (2023), university students often experience moderate to high levels of stress, influenced by a combination of biological and environmental factors that affect their resilience. Various stress predictors include personal, environmental, and coping mechanisms.

Theme 3: Motivations for Tourism and Travel

Motivations behind pursuing tourism and travel were varied, influenced by personal interests, cultural curiosity, and a desire for unique experiences. The desire for exploration led individuals to immerse themselves in new settings and learn about different cultures, customs, and ways of life.

When asked about their motivations for studying tourism management at Indiana Aerospace University, Participant 1 stated:

"I chose to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management at Indiana Aerospace University because I'm passionate about exploring different cultures and I like the excitement of the travel industry."

Participant 2 responded:

 "When I first heard of Indiana Aerospace University I was fascinated with the environment and the world of travel and tourism fits the atmosphere. I like how social interaction is exhibited throughout the program and encourages students to improve their social skills."

Participant 3 mentioned:

"Tourism is a fun profession where you can explore and learn more about history. Positive encounters, ambiance, the people, and the instructors are nice."

Participant 4 added:

"My love of travel was always sparked by the appeal of discovering new places and civilizations. My ambition to turn this passion into a fulfilling job led me to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management."

Participant 5 explained:

"My choice is motivated by my genuine love of travel as well as my realization that Indiana Aerospace University meets and even surpasses my expectations for a comprehensive, forward-thinking tourist management curriculum."

Participant 6 stated:

"I chose to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Tourism Management at Indiana Aerospace University because of my fascination with travel and a keen interest in contributing to the dynamic tourism industry."

Participant 7 said:

"Personally, I have heard a lot of reviews from the tourism department in IAU and I am also inclined with management and meeting new people so I knew that partaking in this course would exercise my knowledge, managing skills, and familiarization with tourism in general."

Participant 8 shared:

"Bachelor of Science in Tourism is a field that offers opportunities for hands-on experiences, cultural exposure, and a chance to develop strong communication and management skills. Some of the many reasons I pursued studying in tourism is the dynamic nature of the industry and the potential to contribute to positive travel experiences for others."

According to Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2013), students who are passionate about their studies tend to be more engaged and motivated. Passion is characterized by a deep emotional connection that fosters dedication and perseverance.

Theme 4: Addressing the Factors

Tackling the reasons behind students' decisions to shift academic programs requires a well-rounded and compassionate approach from educational institutions and support services. Given the complex nature of these factors, schools should aim to cultivate an environment that promotes not just academic success but also overall personal growth. It is essential to implement mental health resources and counseling services to help ease the pressures that could influence students' decisions to change programs.

When asked about how students address the factors that cause them to shift programs, Participant 2 responded:

"My suggestion is that the school should collaborate with other institutions to organize more activities and events, as well as provide seminars or additional classes related to these activities."

Participant 3, when asked the same question, shared:

"If the school offered more financial support for activities, it would help with financial stability, as some activities require significant contributions that can be financially challenging for some of us."

Similarly, Participant 4 answered:

"The department shouldn't compel students to pay for non-mandatory activities, as the money collected should be directed toward tourism-related activities."

Participant 5 responded:

"I believe that better communication with instructors and peers, along with team-building activities, would help. The university should also introduce practical workshops, establish mentorship programs, and broaden support services."

Participant 6 suggested:

"Exploring internships or partnerships with the industry could help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application."

Participant 7 remarked:

"Take your time with career planning and clarify your goals, so you can see how you might fit into your future career."

Finally, Participant 8 shared:

"Peer Support Groups: It would be helpful to create spaces where students can connect with peers facing similar challenges. Peer support can greatly reduce feelings of isolation and foster a stronger sense of community."

According to Sansawi (2022), choosing the right college course is a difficult decision for many students, as it involves considering a range of external factors that could affect their preferences. For most students, this decision is challenging because they must account for many variables to select a course that will lead to a successful career.

Theme 5: Lack of Participation in Extracurricular Activities in Tourism Management

Extracurricular activities in school are one of the best ways to foster social connections across the student body, boosting morale, teamwork, and offering students opportunities to engage with peers from the same academic discipline. These activities are also a great way for students to stay involved and build future connections through meaningful interactions.

Participants were asked about their lack of participation in extracurricular activities in Tourism Management. Participant 1 responded:

"Personally, I didn't participate in any extracurricular activities at the university."

Participant 3 answered:

"I haven't had any experience with extracurricular activities so far, as this is my first year at the university."

Similarly, Participant 5 responded:

"I haven't participated in any extracurricular activities at the university."

Finally, Participant 8 shared:

"I haven't participated yet, but I'm looking forward to activities such as student tours to tourist spots."

According to Stuart et al. (2011), extracurricular activities are those that students engage in outside of their primary academic responsibilities. These activities, defined as "all activities beyond the classroom," include involvement in university clubs, societies, paid and volunteer work, family commitments, and religious activities. These activities are distinct from students' core curriculum required to obtain a degree.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the experiences and challenges faced by BS Tourism Management students, focusing on the reasons behind their decision to shift to other programs. Additionally, the research aimed to identify strategies that could be implemented to address these challenges within the university. Through comprehensive in-depth interviews, the researchers identified several key themes, including student counseling and mentorship, stress and loss of interest, passion for tourism and travel, financial constraints, and limited participation in extracurricular activities related to tourism management.

The findings underscored the importance of counseling and mentorship, with six out of eight participants highlighting its significance in enhancing the appeal of the program within the university. This research offers valuable insights for the improvement of the program and aims to reduce the rate of student transfers. Nonetheless, the study acknowledges the limitation posed by the relatively small sample size from a single institution. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring the identified themes across a broader context, involving larger and more diverse participant groups. Additionally, future studies are encouraged to include multiple universities offering similar programs to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing students' decisions to shift academic programs.

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