

QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS IN AVIATION BACCALAUREATE PROGRAMS:
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF COLLEGIATE PUBLICATIONS

by

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Prospective students in the aviation career field are faced with a wide array of choices in baccalaureate programs. Accordingly, it is important for postsecondary institutions to ensure that their promotional materials showcase the attributes that influence student choice. Purposeful monitoring of the content and language contained in collegiate promotional materials takes on critical significance in maintaining a competitive edge in recruitment.

Quality has been identified as a major factor in aviation baccalaureate student choice. Recognizing that quality is an important factor to prospective students, the question of what elements define quality in aviation baccalaureate programs arises. Previous research resulted in the development of a model for quality in aviation programs that enumerates ten quality characteristics as determined by aviation industry experts and educators.

The purpose of this study was four-fold: 1) to identify and establish the quality indicators of aviation academic programs; 2) to apply these quality indicators to 72 aviation programs and rank order these programs; 3) to examine the publications and marketing materials disseminated by these programs; and 4) to compare and contrast the nature of these materials in top-ranked and lower-ranked aviation programs. A software program that performs a controlled content analysis on text, DICTION, was used to analyze promotional material associated with 72 aviation programs.

The findings of the study were as follows: a) it is feasible to apply a set of uniform quality indicators to aviation academic programs; b) a significant variety exists

across programs in terms of these indicators; c) the content analysis demonstrated a significant difference in the verbal tone found in promotional materials for two of the DICTION master variables.

Future research is needed that includes additional stakeholders (such as prospective students and their parents) in order to develop other notions of aviation program quality, such as flight safety records or other measurable program outcomes. In addition, the development of custom aviation-specific dictionaries for the DICTION software may improve the usefulness of the program in evaluating promotional materials.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1—Introduction.....	1
Context Statement.....	1
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Research Questions.....	5
Significance of the Study.....	6
Limitations.....	12
Delimitations.....	14
Assumptions.....	14
Definitions.....	14
Organization of the Study.....	20
Chapter 2—Review of Selected References.....	22
An Evolution of Aviation Education in the United States.....	22
Overview of Accreditation.....	30
The Aviation Accreditation Board International.....	32
Background.....	32
History of the AABI.....	34
Governance of the AABI.....	35
The AABI Accreditation Process.....	38
AABI Accreditation Guidelines.....	41
Content Analysis and its Application to this Study.....	46
Content Analysis Overview.....	46
Content Analysis and the Field of Aviation.....	47
Content Analysis and Quality in Higher Education.....	48
Content Analyses Using College Catalogs and Related Materials as Sources of Data.....	50
Chapter 3—Methodology.....	60
Introduction.....	60
Selection of the Population.....	60
Research Design.....	61
Determining Quality Characteristics.....	61
Investigating Quality Characteristics through Content Analysis.....	66
Validity and Reliability in the Present Study.....	66
Developing Quality Characteristic Profiles.....	68
Computer-Aided Content Analysis Using DICTION.....	78
Introduction.....	78
Background.....	78
Assessing the Verbal Tone of Program Rhetoric.....	84
Data Collection and Analysis Plan.....	87
Chapter 4—Presentation of the Data.....	89
Introduction.....	89
Phase One Data.....	89
Phase Two Data.....	93

Data Collected Using the Content Analysis Form.....	93
Qualitative Observations from Phase Two Data.....	101
Phase Three Data.....	102
Summary.....	113
Chapter 5—Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations.....	115
Discussion of Findings.....	115
Significance of Findings.....	119
Suggestions for Future Research.....	121
Conclusions.....	124
References.....	127
Appendices.....	141

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Cohen's kappa for Overall Inter- and Intra-rater Agreement.....	68
Table 2	Operational Definitions for Non-numeric Quality Characteristics.....	70
Table 3	Operational Definitions for Sub-category of Number of Aviation Students.....	72
Table 4	Operational Definitions for Sub-category of Total Number of Students.....	73
Table 5	Questionnaire Scoring Summary Results (N=22).....	90
Table 6	Quality Characteristic Rankings (from most important to least).....	91
Table 7	Ranking Based on Overall Quality Profile (from high to low).....	94
Table 8	Ranking Based on Curriculum Score (from high to low).....	95
Table 9	Ranking Based on Students Score (from high to low).....	96
Table 10	Ranking Based on Faculty Score (from high to low).....	97
Table 11	Schools with Maximum Scores for Equipment and Facilities.....	98
Table 12	Schools with Scores of Three or Higher for Leadership.....	99
Table 13	Schools with Scores of Three or Higher for Resources.....	100
Table 14	Schools with Scores of Two or Higher for Reputation.....	101
Table 15	Group Statistics.....	103
Table 16	Independent Samples <i>t</i> Test.....	111
Table 17	Spearman Coefficients for Master Variables and Quality Profile Score....	113

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Construction of Master Variables.....	84
Figure 2	Data Collection and Analysis Plan	88
Figure 3	1996 and 2006 Quality Characteristic Rankings Comparison.....	92
Figure 4	Lower-half Activity Score Histogram.....	104
Figure 5	Upper-half Activity Score Histogram.....	104
Figure 6	Lower-half Optimism Score Histogram.....	105
Figure 7	Upper-half Optimism Score Histogram	105
Figure 8	Lower-half Certainty Score Histogram.....	106
Figure 9	Upper-half Certainty Score Histogram from high to low).....	106
Figure 10	Lower-half Realism Score Histogram.....	107
Figure 11	Upper-half Realism Score Histogram.....	107
Figure 12	Lower-half Commonality Score Histogram.....	108
Figure 13	Upper-half Commonality Score Histogram.....	108
Figure 14	Box Plot for Lower-half Master Variables.....	109
Figure 15	Box Plot for Upper-half Master Variables.....	109
Figure 16	Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for Normality.....	110
Figure 17	Mann-Whitney Test Statistics.....	112

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A	Schools Offering Baccalaureate Degree Programs that are Accredited by the Aviation Accreditation Board International (U.S. only).....	141
Appendix B	List of Schools Offering Aviation Baccalaureate Programs.....	145
Appendix C	Aviation Program Quality Characteristics Questionnaire.....	150
Appendix D	Content Analysis Form.....	152
Appendix E	DICTION Output Files.....	154
Appendix F	Quality Characteristic Profile Results.....	350
Appendix G	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Curriculum Score.....	354
Appendix H	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Students Score	356
Appendix I	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Faculty Score.....	358
Appendix J	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Program Activities Score...	360
Appendix K	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Equipment Score.....	362
Appendix L	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Facilities Score	364
Appendix M	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Leadership Score.....	366
Appendix N	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Resources Score	368
Appendix O	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Reputation Score.....	370
Appendix P	Quality Characteristic Results Sorted by Value Score.....	372
Appendix Q	DICTION Master Variable Scores for Schools in the Lower Half.....	374
Appendix R	DICTION Master Variable Scores for Schools in the Upper Half.....	376
Appendix S	Permission to Use Copyrighted Material.....	378

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Context Statement

There have been numerous events over the last three decades that have had a significant effect on the business of commercial aviation in the United States. Among these was the air traffic controller's strike of 1981. In addition to having a profound impact on the air traffic control system, it also played a role in the evolution of postsecondary aviation education.

The nationwide strike by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in 1981 was a landmark event that added to the pressures already facing the airline industry in the wake of the Airline Deregulation Act (ADA) of 1978. Forty-eight hours after the strike began on August 3, 1981, President Ronald Reagan fired the 11,350 controllers that had not returned to work (Pels, 1995). Representing nearly 70% of the workforce, this action seriously depleted the ranks of qualified air traffic controllers thereby creating a need for replacement personnel.

Following the air traffic controller's strike, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) sought to improve the quality of aviation education programs that would ultimately provide qualified graduates to fill important positions (to include air traffic controllers lost due to the strike) within the national airspace system. Officials of the FAA approached the University Aviation Association (UAA) with a proposal to develop a standardized curriculum. The result of this effort yielded the Airway Science Program in 1982.

The introduction of the Airway Science Program does not account for all of the growth in the number of aviation programs, however, as other programs across the country for aviation professionals have also been established over time. In fact, there has been remarkable growth in the number of professional aviation (non-engineering) baccalaureate programs in the United States. Today, prospective students interested in collegiate aviation programs are faced with a dizzying array of choices. For example, the UAA lists 95 member schools, with 64 of them reported in the latest *Collegiate Aviation Guide* as offering baccalaureate degrees that span more than 150 different degree programs (University Aviation Association [UAA], 2003). This is in contrast to approximately 20 programs that were offered in 1968 (Lindseth, 1996). A search of Internet web pages and college guides reveals still more programs available nationwide.

Since there is a relationship between the number of students, course offerings and tuition costs, it is important to postsecondary institutions to recruit and select students (Astin, 1975; Clark, 2004). Thus, a large population of schools for potential aviation students to choose from introduces a marketing problem for an institution—how does a student (buyer) choose a school, and how does a school (seller) "break out from the crowd" in attracting students? An institution's approach to solving this "marketing problem" therefore takes on critical significance.

As suggested by Hurd (2000) and Bejou (2005), schools that are successful in attracting and retaining students treat them like customers. One way a school might attempt to break out and appeal to a potential student is by showcasing the attributes that are important to these prospective "customers." As noted by Clark (2004), aviation

schools use several methods to attract students such as written materials, presentations and electronic media.

College catalogs and web pages are examples of these types of written materials and electronic media that would be expected to be important sources of information.

Indeed, the FAA's publication, *Postsecondary Aviation & Space Education Reference Guide* (1994), instructs readers that college catalogs are the most authoritative source of printed and programmatic information available on aviation education programs.

Moreover, as stated by Arden and Whalen (1991, pg.39), the college catalog is "the most representative publication" of a college or university and is therefore a primary resource for information.

In one study, student perceptions of academic quality were found to be influenced most by information from an institution's catalog (Kealy & Rockel, 1987). In addition, in a study on the role of parents in the community college choice process Bers and Galowich (2002) reported that college publications (to include catalogs, brochures and class schedules) were one of the two most important types of resources used by the parents of prospective students. According to Kacmarczyk and Rickes (1984, pg. 21), a college catalog should "...contain all information necessary to promote the college to prospective students." Selman (2005) points out that the original needs for a college catalog (informing students of the full range of curricular offerings, documenting degree requirements, use in advisement, serving as a historical document, and for meeting policy and legal records standards) have not changed.

Thus, college catalogs—and related materials found on school websites—could be expected to offer a variety of information such as an overview of the program, admissions criteria, required courses, the number of hours necessary to graduate, course descriptions and other explanatory data that describe the various aspects of a particular school or program.

Clark (2004) reports that one of the top ten reasons (second only to a life-long desire to be a pilot) aviation students choose a particular four-year postsecondary institution is “program quality.” Therefore, it follows that if a prospective student’s perception of a program’s quality is important, then one way a school may attempt to distinguish itself from others is through the use of catalogs, brochures, web pages or other means to describe the various characteristics of its aviation programs that might have a bearing on a perception of quality. Accordingly, these college catalogs and related materials should be considered as important sources of information to virtually all stakeholders in the student admissions and retention process for any college program—to include aviation programs.

Recognizing the potential importance of college catalogs and related materials as vehicles for depicting program and quality characteristics, it is appropriate to introduce what those quality characteristics might be in an aviation context. Lindseth (1996, 1998) developed a model of program quality in aviation baccalaureate programs that included the following major categories: Curriculum, Students, Faculty, Program Activities, Equipment, Facilities, Leadership and Innovation, Resources, Reputation and Value. Lindseth also reports that studies involving other disciplines have identified similar

factors. These quality characteristic categories form a framework for this study and will be further explored in Chapters 2 and 3. It should also be noted that many of these same categories are included as specific areas of evaluation in the *Accreditation Standards Manual* of the Aviation Accreditation Board International (nee Council on Aviation Accreditation) (Council on Aviation Accreditation [CAA], 2005).

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to verify and validate a range of quality characteristics for aviation baccalaureate programs in the United States and—by applying human coding content analysis techniques to information sources commonly available to prospective students—to develop a quality characteristic profile for each school. The first two research questions will address this issue. The secondary goal of this study is to investigate—through computer-aided content analysis—whether there are differences in how aviation baccalaureate programs verbally depict themselves in collegiate publications such as catalogs and websites. The third research question will address this secondary goal.

Research Questions

1. What are the indicators of quality for aviation bachelor's degree programs in the United States?
2. What are the quality indicator profiles of aviation baccalaureate programs as derived from college catalogs and program-related materials?

3. Is there a significant difference in the verbal tone characteristics of catalog and website program descriptive rhetoric for schools that display higher levels of quality indicators in their profiles?

These research questions, along with a detailed discussion of the methodologies to be employed in answering them, are further developed in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

This dissertation will contribute to the further understanding of quality indicators in aviation baccalaureate programs, while perhaps serving as a supplement to existing publications that describe aviation careers and programs. However, this study is also significant in that it adds content analytic techniques to the investigation of aviation program quality. A recent search of dissertation abstracts for a combination of the terms "catalog" and "content analysis" reveals only 36 results. Add "aviation" to this same search and the results narrow to zero. Accordingly, this study breaks new ground in applying content analytic techniques to the study of collegiate baccalaureate aviation programs.

In addition to the foregoing, this study also adds computer-aided content analysis as a methodological tool that may be used—possibly complementing other tools such as readability indices—to evaluate the latent characteristics of the collegiate publications themselves. While the next chapter will discuss some of the studies that have used content analysis in investigating other disciplines, none of them combined the results of computer-aided content analysis with their descriptive analysis. Thus, the present study

adds an additional and unique approach to a more fundamental means of comparing aviation education programs.

It is also recognized that there is another way—besides describing their attributes in collegiate publications—in which a school may attempt to showcase its quality attributes, and that is by seeking specialized accreditation. Thus, this study is also significant because it includes a discussion of the specialized accreditation process for aviation programs. This is an important point to highlight, since Lubinescu, Ratcliff and Gaffney (2001, p. 8) characterize program (or specialized) accreditation as a quality assurance process based on program review. They also state that it provides “...a means to verify the quality of academic programs and of institutions to external stakeholders.” Rozanski (1994) stresses that accreditation is a formal mechanism for assessing quality in postsecondary institutions, and that it has a focus on determining and promoting acceptable levels of quality. Moreover, she asserts that specialized accreditation is “...purported to enhance program quality” (Rozanski, 1994, p. iii).

While acknowledging that saying a program is accredited does not necessarily mean it is one of high quality, Lindseth (1996) emphasizes that accreditation is the only external monitor of quality assurance in baccalaureate aviation programs. In making a related point as applied to computer science programs, Rozanski states that, “...accreditation status alone, or more precisely the lack of accreditation, does not mean that a department lacks quality” (Rozanski, 1994, p. iii.). Still, the public sees the accreditation process as one that serves its best interest and as a mechanism for a sort of consumer protection (Rozanski, 1994). Accordingly, in the course of investigating the

quality characteristics of aviation baccalaureate programs this dissertation also sheds light on the specialized accreditation process as an additional means for establishing quality criteria.

The specialized accrediting agency for aviation programs is the Aviation Accreditation Board International (AABI), an organization formerly known as the Council on Aviation Accreditation (CAA) prior to July 2006. Within the larger population of schools offering aviation baccalaureate programs, there are only 22 U.S. schools that presently hold CAA/AABI accreditation for at least one of their aviation programs. Because the preponderance of schools with aviation programs do not have this accreditation, relying on this as the sole factor in sizing up a program's quality characteristics would unnecessarily limit the options available to potential students. Therefore, by including a spectrum of aviation baccalaureate programs in this study—and not just those that have attained specialized accreditation—it highlights the quality attributes (as depicted in collegiate publications) associated with a wider range of aviation programs.

Besides college catalogs and related publications, there are also sources of information on baccalaureate aviation programs that are not published by the schools themselves. For example, the FAA has published a guide to postsecondary aviation programs, but it is more than a decade old and includes little more than information on the types of degrees offered (FAA, 1994). The UAA also publishes a guide to collegiate aviation programs and it contains many programmatic details, but a cursory search of the

Internet and other sources—such as college guidebooks—reveal many schools and programs not covered in this publication.

So, while there are several sources for information on postsecondary aviation programs, there is no documented effort that specifically compares a range of quality characteristics of aviation schools across the widest spectrum of programs. This study uses sources that are currently available to prospective students—college catalogs and Internet websites—as the primary information source in a review of aviation program quality characteristics.

In addition, there are no documented studies wherein aviation colleges and schools have evaluated their publications in relation to others in the field. Thus, the results of this study provides insight to the schools themselves as to the amount and types of information related to indicators of program quality that are found in collegiate publications across the aviation higher education enterprise.

Comparing the raw content of these catalogs, web pages and brochures is just one way to view the information found in these publications. Introducing an additional component, such as a readability index, is another way to approach an evaluation of educational marketing materials (Kacmarczyk & Rickes, 1984). In fact, as reported by Whalen and Arden (1991) the authors of *Catalogues are for Students, Too* conducted a readability study of college catalogs and discovered a mean Flesch Reading Ease Score of 28.6—a score usually found in scientific and professional journals. While this study was conducted nearly 50 years ago, it nonetheless illustrates the importance of evaluating marketing materials vis-à-vis their intended audiences. In a more recent study on the

readability and focus of college catalogs from 21 two- and four-year institutions in Arkansas, Terrill and Hammons (1996) made a similar finding. More specifically, they found that 16 of the catalogs were rated as “very difficult” on the Flesch scale and the remaining five were rated as “difficult.”

While approaching the present study of aviation program publications from a readability standpoint would certainly offer some insight, this research effort establishes a unique path for part of its examination. That is, this study evaluates the use of computer-aided quantitative content analysis software to assess the verbal tone of the “marketing messages” that are being conveyed to prospective students and other stakeholders via their collegiate publications, in order to determine if there are latent differences in how schools portray themselves in writing.

Using information gathered from college and aviation program publications, profiles for each school were developed using content analysis to detect the presence of selected indicators of program quality. Once quality characteristic profiles were developed for each program, a computer-aided content analysis of the text from the program information found in each college catalog (or other related material, such as a web page, that provided the same type of information) was performed. More specifically, a computerized content analysis program called DICTION (Hart, 2000) was used to analyze programmatic descriptive text in order to obtain scores for variables that measure the verbal tone of the passage being examined. These variables were then used to make statistical comparisons with the results yielding an additional means for establishing similarities and differences between programs.

There are five master variables computed by the DICTION software that include measures of Certainty, Optimism, Activity, Realism and Commonality (along with 35 sub-variables that are used to compute the master variables). Scores for the five master variables and 35 sub-variables were derived by running the text of college publications describing an aviation program through the DICTION software. The master variable scores, along with the quality indicator information gathered, were compared across the population of aviation baccalaureate programs. The results provide insight for institutions that are seeking to evaluate how prospective students, accrediting officials, or other stakeholders in aviation higher education might perceive their school catalogs and other marketing materials. That is, this study is significant in that the findings may help institutions benchmark their publications vis-à-vis other schools.

Underscoring the potential importance of benchmarking collegiate publications is the fact that a previous study conducted by Kealy and Rockel (1987) found that the description of programs (among other material found in catalogs) was influential in shaping college choice. To the extent that the information found in college catalogs and web pages is aimed at prospective students and is a communications vehicle that is controlled by the school itself, it may be beneficial to school administrators to gain the best possible understanding of the characteristics of the “message” they are sending about their programs.

Other studies involving postsecondary programs have used content analytic techniques, such as those by Weidman (1992) for construction management, Frey (1990) for textiles and Hardin (1997) for music. This study demonstrates the results of applying

a methodology similar to these and other studies in gathering quality characteristic information regarding non-engineering aviation baccalaureate programs. As noted, however, this study includes an important additional step since none of the previous studies have used computer-aided content analysis to evaluate program descriptive text as a supplement to a human-coder based content analysis.

By adding the element of computer-aided content analysis, this study demonstrates an extension of the content analysis methodology in investigating the differences in educational program offerings, as well as how programs are presented to stakeholders. In addition, this study provides empirical findings that can serve as a theoretical basis for the use of computer-based content analysis in evaluating the publications of other postsecondary programs. Thus, this same analysis could serve as a first step for schools that are preparing their own programs for specialized accreditation, or for simply comparing the quality characteristics of existing programs with others in the field. Furthermore, educational researchers may find the computerized content analysis of program rhetoric useful in studying other disciplines.

Limitations

1. While this study intends to evaluate the quality characteristics of aviation baccalaureate programs in the United States, it is not likely to include every school with such a program as there are undoubtedly some that eluded discovery during the course of this research effort.

2. The population of aviation baccalaureate programs used for comparison is limited to those discovered during research conducted between May 2006 and January 2007.
3. The data was gathered primarily by examining the latest information found in school catalogs and associated web pages. Since different schools publish these catalogs and associated publications at various times, the data collected spans different timeframes. For example, some school catalogs covered a three-year span from 2005-2007. Other schools published their catalog annually and the most recent catalog was for the 2007 school year. In any case, the most recent versions of school catalogs or web pages were used. Similarly, data extracted from other sources, such as collegiate guidebooks or brochures, was the most current version available.
4. Some schools rely on contractors to provide flight training and equipment, and as a consequence provided links to the web sites or other information providing details on the contractor's operation. In these cases, the text that described these services was included with the school's information for content analysis.
5. The results of this study do not purport to imply relative quality of instruction at the various schools, but rather the results merely showcase the degree to which quality indicators are displayed to prospective students or other stakeholders. The quality indicators used in this study are limited to those identified by previous research and verified through an updated questionnaire.