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ESTABLISHING AN INTERINSTITUTIONAL TOURISM RESEARCH CENTER

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ABSTRACT

Timing is essential in higher education to the positive development of a tourism center. Another essential ingredient is an inter-disciplinary team that allows for the development of an integrated approach to solving tourism problems. Tourism is a complex economic venture and impacts each state differently. Only through an integrated comprehensive approach can each state find its uniqueness and success in the travel industry.

ESTABLISHING AN INTERINSTITUTIONAL TOURISM RESEARCH CENTER

Sometimes the right idea is advanced at just the right time. That was the case with the Oregon Tourism Institute. As the State was beginning to look harder at its tourism marketing and development activities, the administration and faculty at Oregon's state colleges and universities were beginning to ask how higher education could help the industry. The result was the Oregon Tourism Institute, a consortium of seven of Oregon's public colleges and universities (only the Health Sciences University was omitted). Its story is told in the paragraphs which follow.

FLEDGLING EFFORTS

As in many other states, tourism is one of Oregon's leading industries, contributing over 2.5 billion dollars annually to the State's economy and supporting more than 60,000 jobs. It is an industry which is growing, and takes advantage of Oregon's innate beauty and abundant natural resources. The State is spending millions of dollars on tourism marketing and development activities, yet it is an industry about which credible data are scarce and about which development and marketing information are virtually nonexistent. Though tourism provides many entrepreneurial opportunities, many of them are in small businesses needing assistance. Finally, for those regions, counties, and communities developing tourism strategies, technical assistance is needed to assess potential development opportunities, to formulate and implement strategic plans, and to assess potential impacts of tourism development. In short, tourism is a diverse, decentralized industry which is vital to Oregonians, but without an information base to develop policy and plans for sustained development.

Over the past few years, higher education had responded sporadically to segments of this industry. Faculty at the University of Oregon (UO) and Oregon State University (OSU) were doing contract research for the State. OSU faculty were heavily involved in tourism-related research for federal agencies such as the National Marine Fisheries Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Park Service. Oregon's regional colleges, through various institutes and centers, were involved in regional studies and technical assistance. The Extension Service at OSU was heavily involved in Community Economic Development and courses and academic programs were cropping up. None of this activity was coordinated on any one campus and certainly not among campuses. The need existed for coordinated action, but we were not organized to deliver. Recognizing this at OSU we attempted to get our house in order.

CREATING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY TOURISM OFFICE

In light of the above needs for reliable tourism research, faculty members (including both of the authors) from the College of Forestry, Department of Forest Resources and the College of Business, Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Management Program formed a nucleus to discuss how Oregon State University could better focus its tourism research and technical assistance. The group's efforts were easily legitimized because OSU's new president began to promote a university effort focused on the tourism industry.

Concurrently, the university was in the process of completing a comprehensive strategic plan for the future. As Oregon's Land Grant and Sea Grant institution, OSU is responsible for developing new knowledge and technology through research and for delivering this knowledge to users through its teaching and extension education programs. A major university goal that evolved from this mission and the planning process was to "conduct basic and applied research that addresses Oregon's social and economic potential." The goal clearly supported the notion of

developing an interdisciplinary tourism research office. The role of OSU in supporting development of the two largest Oregon industries of forestry and agriculture was well established and responding to another major industry seemed natural.

After fleshing out a draft proposal for a center for tourism research and technical assistance, meetings were held with key deans and directors to solicit their ideas and support. The President endorsed the idea of establishing a center and he provided the critical element of leadership. He scheduled a meeting of all interested faculty and administrators to legitimize and support the initial steps in developing a tourism research center.

The Vice-President for Research, Graduate Studies, and International Programs suggested that we immediately establish an Office for Tourism Research and Development and he provided funds by absorbing office overhead and other incidental expenses. Within a four-month period, the OSU Office of Tourism Research and Development (OTRD) was created. To ensure an interdisciplinary focus, the OTRD coordinator reported directly to the Vice-President for Research, Graduate Studies, and International Programs. This was consistent with other interdisciplinary research centers on campus.

The initial activity for the Office of Tourism Research was to conduct an inventory of Research and potential resources within OSU. This inventory was distributed both on campus to nurture interdisciplinary linkages and provide a resource profile to external constituents. The wide array of tourism-related university resources was enormous and included the following:

State-Wide Service Units :

Agricultural Experiment Station
Extension Services
Forest Research Laboratory
Sea Grant Program

Centers and Institutes

Marine Science Center (5th largest Oregon tourism attraction)
Survey Research Center
Transportation Research Institute
Water Resources Research Institute
Western Rural Development Center

Departments and College Programs :

Agricultural and Resource Economics
Anthropology
Economics
Forest Recreation Resources
Geography
Home Economics
Hotel, Restaurant, Tourism Management
International Business
Marine Resource Management
Museum Studies

After assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the tourism resources on campus, and the research and service needs of the tourism industry, the Office of Tourism Research and Development articulated its mission as assisting in the development of tourism by conducting and coordinating research and development programs at OSU. Specifically, it would facilitate collaboration and interdisciplinary research and service programs among OSU units and with local, state, regional, and federal agencies; conduct research that assesses the development opportunities, marketing strategies, and impacts of tourism with particular emphasis on Oregon; become the focus for tourism research in Oregon and the Pacific Northwest by providing salient research results to public decision-makers, private investors, small business operators, and others involved in the tourism industry; and provide research-based knowledge to OSU faculty and students involved in tourism education and research programs, and to extend research-based knowledge and services to Oregon citizens through Extension programs and instructional workshops.

Another important element in the creation of the Office of Tourism Research and Development was the strengthening of working relationships with the tourism private sector and the Oregon Tourism Division of the Oregon Economic Development Department. Also, the combination of "being at the right place at the right time" with a responsive university administration provided a unique opportunity for the OTRD. The OTRD was just six months old when a unique opportunity knocked on its door.

The Oregon Tourism Division was planning its Annual Governor's Tourism Conference with the major theme of "Resources Available to the Tourism Industry." Not only was the OTRD successful in developing a major conference session on "Resources Within Higher Education," but OSU's President was chosen as the keynote speaker, and the OSU Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Management students served as conference hosts. At the end of the two-day conference, the OTRD was visible to the tourism industry in Oregon and we were fortunate to have had this opportunity to build linkages with our most important external constituents.

CREATION OF AN INTERINSTITUTIONAL TOURISM INSTITUTE

With the high level of support exhibited at the Governor's Tourism Conference, Oregon State University decided to increase its tourism activities and elevate the stature of the Office of Tourism Research and Development. OSU submitted a proposal for the creation of an OSU Center for Tourism Research and Development to the Oregon State System of Higher Education (OSSHE). The OSU proposal was not requesting funding from the OSSHE, but rather was seeking to increase its visibility and stature by creating the Center.

Discussion of the proposal in the Chancellor's Office and the Academic Council (Provosts of the eight OSSHE institutions) brought to light the growing level of interest in tourism on several State System campuses. The Academic Council tabled OSU's proposal and recommended that an interinstitutional Tourism Program Review Committee be established to examine how the OSSHE could best contribute to the development of tourism in Oregon.

The OSSHE Tourism Program Review Committee, composed of representatives from the state universities and regional colleges, as well as the Oregon Tourism Division, consulted with many experts in tourism both in Oregon and throughout the United States. Included in the Committee's charge were completing a comprehensive inventory of tourism programs and resources within the OSSHE, reviewing appropriate university organizational models found in other states committed to tourism development, determining the research and service needs of Oregon's tourism industry, and recommending how the OSSHE could best contribute to the development of tourism in Oregon.

After five months of study, the Tourism Program Review Committee completed its report. The report concluded that the vast majority of the state's specialized research expertise is located within OSSHE. Despite the need, the full potential of this expertise had not been drawn upon by the tourism interests of the state. Current research was fragmented and scattered across several campuses; very little cross-campus communication and dissemination had occurred. The absence of a comprehensive framework would lead to duplication, lack of coordinated effort, and other inefficiencies among tourism programs of OSSHE. With additional funding, OSSHE would be in position to make a substantial contribution to meeting the critical needs of the tourism industry in Oregon.

Finally, the Tourism Program Review Committee proposed the creation of an interinstitutional Oregon Tourism Institute. Oregon State University was proposed as the host for this Institute. A campus location was deemed desirable because of the availability of supporting computer, library, and other facilities, and because the primary aim of the Institute is to coordinate disparate research, curricular, and community service activities now taking place in the State System.

Coordination through Oregon State also was selected because of its centrality, comprehensive research programs, and unique outreach capacities. OSU is the home of Oregon's Extension Service and Sea Grant Extension Program.

The Institute was to be governed by an executive board which includes representatives from each of Oregon's colleges and universities, state government, and the public. An advisory board of people from the tourism industry was to advise the Executive Board. Because it is interinstitutional, the Institute director was to report directly to the Vice-Chancellor of Academic Affairs, as State System representative.

The Institute proposal called for an annual administrative budget of \$120,000. Additional funds would be generated from contracts and grants. Since the proposal was made near the end of the 1987 legislative session, we knew it might be difficult to secure the administrative funds, but we made the proposal anyway.

The proposal was reviewed by the seven institutions, the OSSHE Academic Council, and various representatives in the legislature, state government, and the tourism industry. There was enthusiastic support for the interinstitutional institute concept and we were given strong assurances that both the state and industry would be interested in

supporting research programs through the Institute. There also was a strong belief that the Institute could contribute to the growth of tourism in Oregon, which is an important element in the State's economic development plan. The proposal was submitted to the Oregon State Board of Higher Education for final consideration. At their June 1987 meeting and with little discussion, the Board voted unanimously to establish the Oregon Tourism Institute.

GETTING STARTED

An interim operating plan for the Institute was submitted to the Chancellor's Office for approval and to obtain the first year's operating funds. The plan outlined the interim organization with a planning and management team that was responsible for developing specific Institute initiatives and programs.

When the Institute's management team met with the Vice-Chancellor to discuss the operating budget, it became obvious that funding was going to be a serious problem. This was due to a severe OSSHE budget deficit and the fact that the Institute's budget was one year out of step with the biennial legislative cycle. Hence, the Chancellor's Office was able to provide only \$25,000 in start-up funds, an amount which was far short of the proposed budget.

With a bit of frustration, the Institute management team started operating the Institute at a restricted level. The Executive Board was appointed and the Institute by-laws were written and approved by the State Board. The management team held discussions with the Oregon Tourism division and representatives of the tourism industry and identified the most important research needs in Oregon. The Institute published its first issue of a quarterly newsletter (OTI NewsNet) and developed state-wide statistics on 1987 tourism. Two contracts were negotiated with the Oregon Division of Tourism to evaluate the effectiveness of the Tourism Division's marketing campaigns. Within a few months, the Institute was in operation.

Finally, the Institute submitted a \$400,000 biennial budget request to the Chancellor's Office to be considered in the next budget cycle. The Chancellor's Office endorsed the request and has included it in the priority budget to be submitted to the Governor. Our job now is to develop a plan to make sure the legislature provides the funds to support the Institute and to initiate needed projects.

DEVELOPING THE INSTITUTE

With secure funding we should be able to fulfill many expectations created when the Institute was formed. We will be able to hire a director and office staff and we will be able to launch research independent of external sponsors as well as provide matching funds for state and industry-supported projects.

Most importantly, we will be able to work on making an interinstitutional institute work. The Executive Board is made up of people who want the concept to work, but so far they are borrowing time and resources from other programs to get the Institute launched. What we need now are projects which we can do together so that we can learn how to use each other in creating something more than we had with independent programs. We need to find ways to support and pay off each other, and as we do it we will create an Institute having the resources and creativity of seven academic institutions. If it works, and with a little more luck, we will have a powerful partner for the Oregon tourism industry.