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PENN STATE'S CENTER FOR TRAVEL AND TOURISM

BY

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ABSTRACT

Based on the findings of a feasibility study, a tourism research center was created at Penn State University in the spring of 1987. The primary purpose of the center was to foster interdisciplinary tourism research at the university. Studies have been undertaken to determine the economic and social impact of tourism within the state and to establish benchmark data which will be used to evaluate the state's tourism promotion efforts. Initial problems include personnel and financial constraints.

PENN STATE'S CENTER FOR TRAVEL AND TOURISM

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A CENTER

Tourism is Pennsylvania's second largest industry. In 1987, it was estimated that the industry generated over \$11 billion for the state economy. Although the number one industry, agriculture, is supported by a rather extensive research and technical assistance program at Penn State, no similar effort was in existence for tourism at the university in the mid-1980's.

In 1986, Dr. Geof Godbey was given a grant by the College of Health, Physical Education and Recreation and the College of Business Administration to determine the feasibility of establishing a travel research center at Penn State University. In order to accomplish this task, he conducted interviews with faculty members at Penn State who had been active in travel-related research and individuals in both the public and private sector who were involved in tourism. In addition, he visited a number of existing university-based travel research centers located around the country. In the fall of 1986, Dr. Godbey invited directors from two of these centers to talk to interested individuals on the Penn State campus.

One of Dr. Godbey's initial conclusions was that there was already a

great deal of expertise related to travel research at Penn State. Research directly related to the tourism industry was already being carried on within several academic disciplines, e.g., in the School of Hotel and Restaurant Institutional Management, the Transportation Institute, the College of Business Administration, the Department of Recreation and Parks, the Sociology Department, and the Department of Forestry. In addition, he found that there was interest by faculty members in several of these and other departments as well, who were not directly involved in tourism studies, but had an interest in the area.

The establishment of the Center for Travel and Tourism Research (CTTR) was announced in April of 1987 at a reception attended by representatives of the Penn State faculty and administration, local travel industry, and the Pennsylvania Bureau of Tourism Development. In conjunction with this announcement, a directory had been produced which included over 60 faculty members on the Penn State campus that had expressed an interest in travel and tourism related research.

The CTTR was physically housed within the Department of Recreation and Parks (DRP), within the College of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. The Dean provided an initial grant to purchase equipment, furniture, and material for a resource room. A quarter-time director was appointed, a graduate assistant was provided and the center was officially open for business.

Although initially located within the DRP, a short-term goal was to eventually elevate the center to college-level status. Other primary short-term goals for the center were to publicize the existence of the center and to begin establishing the interdisciplinary nature of the center.

In addition to the Directory of Tourism Scholars, a brochure describing the rationale for the center and the objectives of the center was produced to help in making people aware of the center. These two items were sent to members of the Pennsylvania travel industry when the center was announced.

In order to promote the interdisciplinary nature of the center, an advisory board was created which was composed of faculty members from several different disciplines on campus. The initial board contained representatives from the following disciplines: Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management, Forestry, Recreation and Parks, Ag Economics, Sociology, History, English and Business Administration.

#### INITIAL VENTURES

During the first year, the center was involved in four studies. The most significant one was a contract with the Pennsylvania Office of Communications, which oversees the state's tourism efforts, to help establish benchmark data that could be used in evaluating the state's promotional campaign. Other studies include an analysis of the methodology that had been used in a previous study of the economic impact of the Penn State football games on the local economy, and evaluation and

economic impact studies of a 10K road race in Pittsburgh and a local arts festival.

Both the benchmark study and the football study involved members from different academic units at the University. Although problems were encountered due to this arrangement, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, these initial ventures were considered a success and provide a model for future interdisciplinary efforts.

The center has been hired to do a follow-up study of the 10K road race. Although the study will continue the evaluation process done in the past, the study also involves analyzing the relationship between the level of specialization among race participants and their attitudes towards the race and their participation in the race. This is especially important as the center wants to establish a reputation for both applied and theoretical research. However, since the center does not receive any discretionary funds, all studies must be funded by outside sources.

#### INITIAL PROBLEMS WITH THE CENTER

There are several problems that have been encountered during the first year and a half of operation. First and foremost is the lack of personnel and monetary resources. The center director is on the faculty of the Department of Recreation and Parks and has only a quarter time appointment as director. As such, in addition to the center responsibilities, he is expected to teach a reduced load, advise students, be a member of department and college committees and to publish in refereed journals. Although this is not insurmountable, and certainly not unique (many of the college-wide centers are staffed by quarter-time directors), it has caused problems in allocating time to the many things that need to be done to promote the interests of the center.

The second personnel problem is the availability of additional staff. The center has been fortunate in having access to the DRP's and the college's support staff. However, the center must share the DRP's resources with 12 other faculty members.

Also, during the first year of operation, the center was extremely fortunate to have a graduate assistant that had been directly involved in the Pennsylvania tourism industry before returning to school. Her knowledge of the state travel industry was crucial in the initial success of the center. Unfortunately, her direct involvement with the center ended after the first year of operation. The loss of this personal knowledge is missed, since the director of the center came to the state in the spring in 1987 and is still trying to establish contacts within the state travel industry.

Another problem involved a reorganization within the university that occurred during the semester after the center was created. The College of Health, Physical Education and Recreation and the College of Human Development were merged. While the Department of Recreation and Parks was left intact for the short term, its future status is subject to a two-year review that is beginning in the fall of 1989. In the interim

period, the Department will have an Acting Chair. This has caused some problems in defining the direction for the center.

While the staff and reorganization problems are important, the lack of funding for the center is considered to be a major limitation. At the present time, there are no dollars specifically earmarked for the center's use. The center is expected to generate its own funds. In order to help with this process, the College of Health and Human Development provides an initial line of credit for the center that must be paid back. A request for \$5,000, earmarked as operating funds, has been made for the 1989-1990 academic year.

Obviously, pursuing research opportunities is an expensive proposition. The College of Health and Human Development did authorize the necessary funds to pursue a contract with the State Department of Transportation. Although the effort was not successful, the proposal process cost several hundred dollars and was extremely time consuming for the center director and the department's support staff. The problem lies in not knowing how much money is available to pursue outside research.

One problem in attempting to encourage interdisciplinary research efforts is the bureaucratic nature of the university. For example, the Deans of each study member included on the proposal described earlier had to sign off on the proposal, in effect saying that the researcher could spend "x" amount of time on the project. In this case, three separate Colleges were involved. Fortunately, the College of Health and Human Development had an excellent research grants office and much of the paperwork involved with the proposal was handled by them in an expeditious manner.

#### FUTURE ACTIVITIES

One of the major problems still being faced by the center is that its role and potential function within the travel industry in Pennsylvania is still not widely understood. Thus, a number of initiatives will be taken to spread the "word" about the center and its capabilities.

One of the objectives of the arts festival study was to develop a methodology that could be used by other communities to evaluate short-term festivals. The center plans to distribute this report to each county in Pennsylvania with the hope that it will generate some possible studies and interest in the center.

The Director will continue to attempt to establish a dialogue with state government officials and industry leaders. The major objective of this initiative will be to become an integral part of the state's efforts to gather travel related information. As with many of the other centers, one result of this could be the establishment of a data base that could be made available to tourist industry personnel through the Penn State Agriculture Extension staff.

In addition to the above efforts, the center plans to produce a

quarterly newsletter that focuses on how research can help various segments of the industry. If the newsletter finds a niche, the center can look at the possibility of making it available on a subscription basis, with the objective of generating revenue for the center.