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**DISCOVERING THE UNIQUE SYNERGY POTENTIAL OF UNDERGRADUATE  
RESEARCH AND TOURISM SERVICE NEEDS**

**BY**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the needs and benefits for using undergraduates as a resource at tourism University Centers. The purpose of undergraduate tourism programs varies, but programs strive to combine theory with application, and research plays a role in this process. Undergraduates stand to benefit from the managerial and decision-making skills they can learn through research. The number of university tourism research centers has increased worldwide. These centers often function on small budgets and have limited research centers, yet their services and clientele base are increasing. This paper explores how some universities have involved undergraduates in university tourism research, focusing heavily on the University of Nebraska Travel and Tourism Program and the related Nebraska Tourism Resource Center. This program utilizes NTRC projects for class projects within the tourism program. A model explains the synergistic relationship between these two university entities.

**INTRODUCTION**

*"Tell me, I will forget. Show me, I may remember. Involve me, and I will remember." -- Chinese proverb*

Slightly more than ten years ago, tourism educators explored the relatively new phenomenon of tourism as a course of study at institutions granting Bachelors' degrees or higher. At this time, tourism educators such as Jafari and Ritchie (8, p. 26) commented that it was not yet possible to have a trans-disciplinary program since the study of tourism was too young.

More than a decade later, the idea of what knowledge tourism education should include is still unclear. Tourism programs differ among the departments in which programs are housed, the courses that are offered, and the relationships that programs have with the tourism industry. One important realization that has occurred, however, has been the industry's growing awareness of the importance of professionalizing. As the author of an introductory tourism textbook

writes, the tourism industry is starting to seek entry-level employees who have both academic and vocational training since it is now much more difficult to learn the tourism industry simply through on-the-job training (5, p. 327). Many higher-education tourism programs have responded by providing a combination of theoretical and practical training. In light of the fact, however, that many graduates of college and university tourism programs will eventually work their way into management, an additional skill that tourism programs should offer is the ability to perform research to use in managerial decisions. This paper explores the needs for undergraduates to learn research as a managerial skill in a tourism program.

At the same time that academic programs for tourism began to form and evolve in North America, growth of research and service centers increased significantly. During the past decade, tourism centers have multiplied many times over. Their formation signals the need for an institutional response to the general dearth of wide-spread research and especially the need for technical assistance to communities and the industry. Nevertheless, many tourism centers have been established on a shoestring budget and lack any significant resources for their efforts.

This situation, a new undergraduate tourism program seeking to develop meaningful competencies in students and a new tourism center with extremely limited resources, have influenced the formation of a powerful synergy between the academic program and the tourism resource center. The paper will focus on the experiences of the Travel and Tourism program at the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK), a program which, through coursework, utilizes

undergraduates in research for the university's Nebraska Tourism Resource Center (NTRC).

## **NEEDS FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SKILLS**

As a prelude to his description of the travel behavior model, Jafari (7) explains that knowledge of tourism has passed through four historical eras, advocacy, cautionary, adaptancy, and knowledge-base, each phase resulting in increased professionalism and education in the industry. The last era includes the realization that tourism must be treated as a separate body of science if people are to understand it, a realization which resulted in the inclusion of tourism as an academic subject at colleges and universities. Researchers differ in their opinions of what tourism education should accomplish. Jafari (6, p. 8) describes the study of tourism as being:

"the study of man away from his usual habitat, of the industry which responds to his needs, and of the impacts that both he and the industry have on the host's socio-cultural, economic, and physical environments."

Cohen (2, p. 31) writes that universities should teach students to understand tourism's complexity rather than to focus on one specific theoretical approach. Nyberg (9, p. 7) asks if, after more than a decade of existence, universities must still rely on providing tourism education that is tied to other tourisms (economics of tourism, sociology of tourism) rather than being able to stand on itself. He further describes the purpose of his own Tourism Management Programme at the University of Ostersund in Sweden as training students to be able to "analyze tourism situations, to prescribe and

conduct relevant action in a broad range of professional areas ...." (9, p. 7). The purpose of tourism education should be to enable students to be effective long-term managers in the tourism industry rather than to simply train students for their first career in tourism.

Research skills can play a role in each of these visions of tourism education, providing a link between the theoretical and the applied, and providing students with a skill that can be used with any management career in the industry. However, neither students nor the tourism industry may be taking advantage of this opportunity. The theoretical and applied parts of a program may exist separately from each other, a phenomenon which Parsons (10, p. 12) describes as a U.S. tendency to affix some management-type courses onto an already existing lower-level program in food service or travel operations. Research does not play a large role in this type of program environment.

Part of the problem may be due to the nature of the tourism industry. As an industry only starting to enter the marketing orientation with its understanding of the value of research, and as an industry which is made of many small and fewer large businesses, the tourism industry is not currently geared toward research. Sessa (11, p. 7) writes:

"the economic system of the tourism industry as such requires no research system which has a disadvantageous effect (in the development of the cultural and educational systems ... Such a temporal discrepancy between the economic, cultural and political systems explains the difficulties confronting, among other things, education and training at the university level. As a consequence, knowledge of the phenomenon of tourism,

and thus training in the tourism trade, lag far behind...."

Parsons (10, p. 10) gives an indication that the marketplace is changing. Increased global competition and client expectations have made it essential for businesses to be more adaptive and competitive. Businesses' successes will rely mainly on the abilities and knowledge of their managers.

As potential managers, students can use research experiences to learn this type of ability and knowledge. Research situations they may encounter in an increasingly competitive and professional tourism industry range from economic to marketing to environmental to socio-cultural. The ability to succeed will depend on that student/potential manager's ability to collect information, analyze it, and use it in such a way that he or she adapts to the environment.

A problem with this approach is that many hospitality and tourism businesses do not yet recognize the value of employees who have graduate degrees in these fields. Few hotels, for example, may actively seek graduates with Masters' degrees. In fact, a Masters degree student who has not worked in the industry previously to entering the graduate program may be at a disadvantage when competing for a job position directly with a Bachelor degree student because the latter has had more hands-on training and internship opportunities in the industry. Most students with graduate-level degrees seem to enter the higher education field. This phenomenon makes a case for educating undergraduates in research skills. As the currently more hireable graduates, Bachelors' degree students are in a prime position to learn research skills they could use in managerial careers. Another

argument for undergraduate research education in tourism is that it helps students to learn the value of what they are studying. The experience of Travel and Tourism students at the University of Nebraska at Kearney has been that their research projects for actual clients has helped them realize that the theories they were studying could be applied to the real world. These research projects seem to play as much of a role as the required student internships in helping students to realize how complex the tourism industry really is.

### **NEEDS OF THE TOURISM RESOURCE CENTER**

With limited resources, both human and financial, the new tourism center struggles to provide the research and technical assistance demanded by communities and clients. Communities may seek help in planning and marketing. Entrepreneurs may seek help with business plans and feasibility studies. The economic impact of tourism to a region may be important to chambers of commerce. General research may be essential and can be applied in many of these technical assistance requests.

Almost without thinking, class projects in UNK's Tourism Program began to be matched with requests for help to the Nebraska Tourism Resource Center. Small rural communities and upstart entrepreneurs are rarely able to afford the cost of the research or assistance they seek. Turning these projects to students in a closely supervised setting provides a symbiosis of benefits to students and clients. Communities and tourism businesses gain attention to their problem with suggested solutions in a written report and professional presentation at virtually no cost to them.

Students benefit from the practical experience of applying theoretical and analytical skills to a meaningful situation that truly matters in the real world.

### **TOURISM EDUCATION MODELS**

As so many researchers in the tourism field tend to use systems theory to explain the touristic phenomenon, so do educational institutions create models to explain the structure of their program. Institutions which have described their schools' models have included the graduate-level Travel and Tourism Program at George Washington University in the United States (4), and the undergraduate programs at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil, (1) and the University of Ostersund in Sweden (9). Some authors have also described specific roles research plays at their institution. At the Department of Urban Studies and Tourism at the Universite de Quebec a Montreal, for example, Baccalaureate students are required to perform a research project under the instruction of a professor. The purpose is to test students' analytical skills and to help them understand the research process' place in tourism (2). The two-year Tourism Management Programme at the University of Ostersund offers students an optional third year where students can learn the research process and take part in interdisciplinary research projects in economic, planning and behavioral sciences (9).

#### **University of Nebraska at Kearney Model**

The model for the University of Nebraska at Kearney's Travel and Tourism program is outlined below. The university began offering tourism studies in 1989 as a response to the increasing numbers of

foreign and domestic visitors to the region. An advisory team of tourism professionals helped design the program. The program is interdisciplinary, with coursework coming through the Colleges of Education (Recreation), Business and Technology (Management, Marketing, MIS), and Natural and Social Sciences (Geography, Biology).

The Nebraska Tourism Resource Center (NTRC) was designed in 1989 to be a service arm of the university which provides research, education, consultation, administration, and leadership resources to the state. Currently, there is no graduate program in Travel and Tourism at the university; graduate programs tend to be in education or in business, the latter of which does not require a formal research project. Tourism undergraduates serve as the students best educated to perform NTRC projects.

The model shows how the tourism program assimilates with the needs of the NTRC. The program could be divided into four knowledge bases, Managerial, Theoretical, Applicational; and Professional. Each of these bases is built through relevant coursework. All the bases rest on a platform of general studies coursework (compulsory coursework for all majors, a common tradition at American universities) and the basic, prerequisite introductory course (Dimensions of Tourism). The output, or desired goal of the program, is to produce competent tourism managers.

The Dimensions of Tourism course is the foundation course for the tourism program. The course exposes students to industry sectors, impacts, policy and planning issues. The research process and its importance is briefly touched upon, and students are

required to write a series of small research papers to introduce them to various information sources for the industry.

The managerial base is the least involved with the NTRC. These courses are taught by faculty outside the Travel and Tourism program, but these courses do teach students important skills they will need for management.

The Theoretical Base is comprised of coursework students take in their second and third years of study. Research projects help introduce students to important knowledge areas of the industry while assisting Nebraska communities and the NTRC at the same time. The Travel Behavior course focuses on behavioral science research relating to the tourism field. Students are taught the basic research process in this course and are required to write a paper related to tourism and the behavioral sciences. Students are encouraged to conduct their own surveys, and those who do are assisted closely by faculty. Promising papers are published in an NTRC collection of papers.

The Tourism Marketing course exposes students to their first research project for Nebraska clients. Communities and attractions volunteer to have student groups perform a situation analysis and offer marketing suggestions for them. Students are then required to present their findings to the class, who evaluates their presentation. Faculty assist students with the information collection and report writing. This format is still new for this course, and a goal is for the NTRC to have an active list of tourism-related clients for situation analyses. So far, clients have ranged from attractions on the Oregon Trail to entire communities to direct suppliers, such as airlines and hotels.

The Tourism Economics course is the most theoretical of the program, yet it requires students to apply their knowledge through an individual economic impact analysis of a Nebraska Tourism attraction. An ongoing client has been the Buffalo County Visitors Committee. As economics remains the most visible part of tourism, the economic impact analysis will teach students/potential managers how to evaluate and justify their organizations' contributions to the economy.

The other two courses in the theoretical base are taught outside the tourism program and do not involve projects for the NTRC.

The applications base provides the opportunities for students to practice the theories and basic research skills they learned in the theoretical base. Students take these courses in their senior year. The tourism planning course focuses on planning, development and policy issues. Students are required to perform an actual case study for a Nebraska community, a skill which they will use in managerial careers. They must identify and analyze tourism problems in the community and suggest solutions for the problems. The student projects benefit the NTRC because these projects represent a community service for the center.

The tourism research course requires students to perform a primary data collection senior project. Students work closely with faculty in developing surveys and inputting, tabulating and analyzing data. Through this course, students have the opportunity to learn how to use SPSS statistical software. Topics are the student's own choice and have ranged from a variety of ideas such as fear of flying, tourist driving speeds, and needs of a graduate tourism program at UNK. The final

applications course, Consultanship, bears the strongest relationship between students and the NTRC. Students become members of a consulting team to assist a small, tourism-related business with solving a problem. The course is offered with assistance from the Nebraska Business Development Center, but the NTRC provides faculty assistance and computer facilities. Often, primary data collection is required for consulting projects. For example, one student group performed a feasibility study for a small community on erecting a butterfly garden. The students performed a marketing study to determine tourist interest in such an attraction. In addition, they performed a financial analysis to determine the pricing structure for the attraction. This course provides students with important decision-making and research skills, but the communities benefit enormously from the students' results.

The professional base serves to provide students with valid employment experience through a field experience and internship. Students also choose a specialization to learn a technical skill in one area of tourism, such as marketing or airline management. The Tourism Professionalism course also holds potential for research. As part of the course, students may participate in ongoing NTRC projects. For example, one class assisted the NTRC in researching background information about a reservoir in southern Nebraska for which the center was performing an economic analysis. The students' legwork helped the NTRC in developing an appropriate tourist survey for the study.

Students who show promising research potential are encouraged to do their field experiences and internships at the NTRC. These students become actual research

assistants who perform a considerable amount of the research for the NTRC. In return, the NTRC assists students with tuition waivers or small salaries.

As one can see, students are exposed to many research opportunities through the NTRC and the Travel and Tourism Program. The NTRC and the program serve students by providing them with research opportunities. Good research projects can be good additions to students' resumes. The NTRC benefits from the students' training. Undergraduates represent the best source of assistance for the center and the program. Trained in the program, the students understand the importance of research to the travel and tourism industry.

NTRC and program inputs into student research include close faculty advisement to assist the students in developing surveys; computer facilities with state-of-the-art statistical, data base, spreadsheet and word processing programs; and phones and office space for students to develop and conduct surveys.

Students produce reports for their courses, which are distributed to the clients the students served. Promising research papers are acknowledged in several ways. The NTRC prints a collection of the best student papers each year. Interesting, relevant student research findings are printed in a column of the NTRC newsletter the Great Plains Tourism Connection, which is distributed nationwide on a quarterly basis. Two future possibilities include the binding and selling of student research which has useful public implications, and faculty-student research for tourism-related publications.

## FURTHER ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

This undergraduate research program brings up some interesting issues. One extremely important issue is quality control. Student research for communities and the center must be good quality research. Not all undergraduates have the ability to be good researchers. The NTRC encourages the exceptional students to work with the center on projects while trying to educate all students on what characteristics make research good and useful. Students are exposed to many research studies and journal articles to help them understand the format and process of research writing. Student research grades are based on the researcher's ability to design a good study, to follow the accepted format in performing the research, to make sense of the information they found, and to use that information to draw useful implications for the tourism industry.

Motivation is important in maintaining quality control. The current "twenty-something" student population places a great value on an educational experience's ability to benefit students' future employment opportunities. Faculty have found that students are interested in performing good research if it can be considered an addition to their resume. Research conducted for a real-world client provides the student with evidence in-hand of their experience in research and decision-making.

Several implications of undergraduate research deserve comment. One issue is what happens at an institution where there exists a graduate tourism program. How can both sets of students conduct their research



experiences and be treated equally? How do the graduate students' research projects differ from the undergraduates? With the growing college and university emphasis on creating more and more specialized programs of study, how does one keep undergraduate tourism research programs from becoming too specialized and, thus, inflexible? Finally, if undergraduates came to graduate school from a tourism program

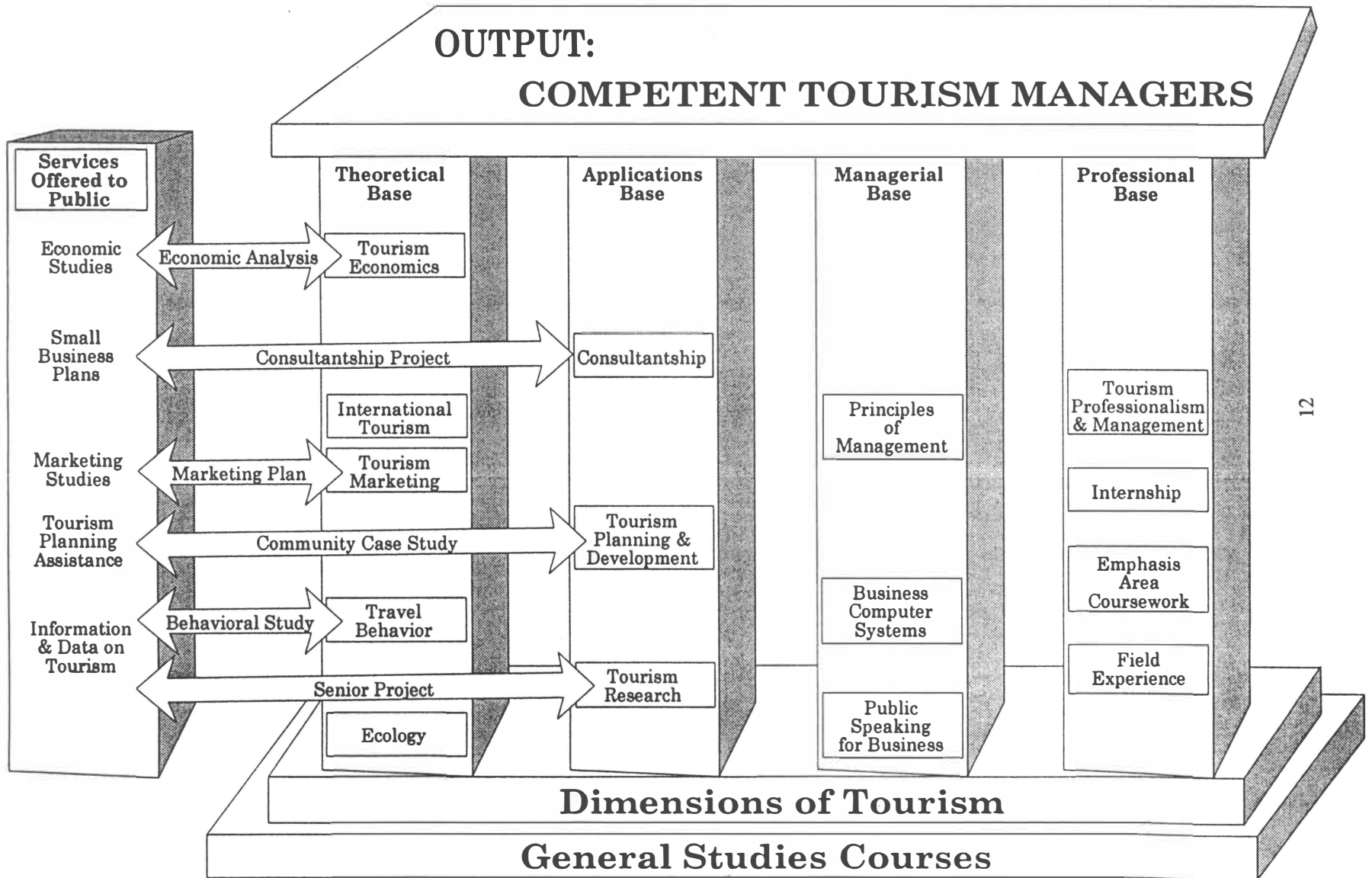
that had a strong background in research, what sort of research opportunities would they be ready to conduct in graduate school?

As schools begin to answer the current questions on what role educators must play in developing students for tourism management careers, it will be interesting to see the role undergraduate research programs play in the process.

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# Relationship Between Nebraska Tourism Resource Center and University of Nebraska Tourism Program



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