Knowledge transfer is the key
By Simon Hudson

The argument is often made is that the academic research we do seldom influences the real world of practice, and that for knowledge transfer to assist the industry, a paradigm shift is required. Such a shift has occurred in South Carolina in 2002 when the General Assembly used state funds to create Centers of Economic Excellence in research areas that would advance the state’s economy. Each Center is awarded from $2 to $5 million in Education Lottery funds, which must be matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis with non-state investment.

As part of this program, our “SmartState Center of Excellence in Tourism and Economic Development” was established in 2010, and is housed in the College of Hospitality, Retail and Sport Management at the University of South Carolina. In conjunction with industry, faculty, and graduate students, the goal for the center is to perform tourism and hospitality- based research directly applicable to South Carolina, ultimately leading to the creation of jobs in the state.

In this our second newsletter, we highlight a number of initiatives that show the transfer of knowledge from academia to industry. We discuss our branding assessment and development project for the Town of Bluffton; we introduce the feasibility study we are conducting to open up South Carolina’s waterways for tourism; and we summarize our efforts to understand the motivations of wellness tourists and their ability to attain psychological growth, integration and well-being from wellness vacations.

We also profile the latest achievements of our companies in our tourism and hospitality business incubator; and we introduce our training program for tourism and hospitality employees. What I hope we have shown in this newsletter is that academic research centers can be of great benefit to tourism destinations, especially if knowledge is transferred effectively and regularly between scholars and tourism practitioners.

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Dr. Kevin So to join the SmartState team

Kevin Kam Fung So joins the University of South Carolina as an Assistant Professor in the School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management and a Research Associate in the SmartState's Center.

He recently earned his PhD in Tourism and Hospitality Marketing from Griffith University, Australia. To date, he has published in internationally recognized journals, participated in a number of consultancy research projects, received honors and awards for his academic achievements, and secured three postgraduate scholarships for his doctoral studies.

Dr. So has five years teaching experience at Griffith University. His research interests include services marketing and service brand management, service evaluation, customer engagement, brand loyalty, and internal branding. With a strong statistical background, Dr. So is particularly interested in the application of advanced quantitative methods to research in these areas.

SmartState Center start-up to tap growing Chinese travel market

Our center sponsors three companies in the USC/Columbia Technology Incubator, and we welcomed our newest company to the incubator in January 2014 – Smart Palmetto.

Smart Palmetto is a Chinese Tourism Company that hopes to lure tourists from China to the Palmetto State by providing these tourists with tailored packages that meet the leisure interests of the Chinese tourist, provide culturally appropriate activities and assist with the administrative and governmental protocols related to US travel. Di Wang and Lin Zhao are the company’s founders. Both are working hard to recruit hospitality companies to develop tours primarily aimed at the promotion of Golf, Shopping and Beach tourism to South Carolina. The duo are primarily targeting Chinese tourist and hope to launch the first tour groups in early 2015.

According to Lin Zhao, the business idea for Smart Palmetto evolved from an appreciation of the rapid growth in Chinese travelers to the US, among whom there is little awareness of the southeastern states and what these have to offer overall. With first-hand experience of all our state has to offer, Lin and Di want to ensure a share of the outbound Chinese market reaches South Carolina. Said Lin, "We believe that with the proper advertising, we will attract a lot of Chinese tourists to SC to stimulate the local economy and increase the employment opportunities....(We hope) to let Chinese travelers know SC better and promote a positive image of SC."

Deals-a-go-go selected as one among first of six Tminus6 start-ups

Tminus6, a recently launched Columbia startup accelerator program aimed at launching new companies within 6 months, has accepted six companies into its 2014 class.

Deals-a-go-go, the web and mobile application for the hospitality and restaurant industry supported through the SmartState Center of Economic Excellence in Tourism and Economic Development, is among the six programs. Deals-a-go-go is a last-minute deals web and mobile application for the hospitality and restaurant industry focused on real-time pricing and allocation of perishable resources to otherwise unreached audiences.
For the last eight months, the Center has been involved in an initiative to rebrand the Town of Bluffton, a growing coastal community in South Carolina. The goal was to develop a brand that would pinpoint Bluffton’s qualities and promote tourism and economic development within its borders. The campaign had three key stages (see Figure 1 below).

The first stage of the research involved conducting a series of charettes and in-depth interviews with residents and local decision-makers, exploring the core values of Bluffton and painting a picture of the future. Overall, respondents were clearly engaged and passionate about the Bluffton community. A Bluffton personality that is strongly linked to the Old Town, the beauty of the May River, and the rustic, relaxed, laid-back (but caring) nature of the people was identified. Preserving the Old Town’s unique characteristics was highlighted.

In the second stage of the research, surveys were administered to existing and potential businesses, local government officials/people of influence, visitors, and Town of Bluffton residents. Survey questions were based on previous research and explored the dimension of the existing brand as well as the image of Bluffton in terms of infrastructure and socioeconomic environment; natural and cultural resources; overall atmosphere; social setting environment; and image. In summary, all stakeholder groups described Bluffton as quaint, friendly, charming, and beautiful. The highest ranked attributes were the May River, Live Oaks and the laid-back nature of Bluffton, and the lowest ranked attributes were the job prospects, education quality, and public transportation. The consistencies between the qualitative and quantitative data analysis validated the credibility of the findings.

The team’s recommendation was that Bluffton’s brand communications should be built around a positioning statement that encompassed both the quality of life and economic indicators that are important to all stakeholders, but emphasized economic development—an area that where Bluffton needs to strengthen its image.

The last phase of the project involved taking this positioning statement, and developing the ‘message’ or written and visual components through which the brand identity would be communicated. Based upon the comprehensive analysis of the data, our partners in the project, Charleston marketing company Rawle Murdy created various tagline options and different concepts for tourism and economic development.

Bluffton elected to go with the tagline ‘Heart of the Lowcountry’ because they could see the power of the connection to the heart (emotion), location, quality of life and the heart icon. The logo selected was Bluffton in lower case (confidence, it reflects who they are, understated and authentic/real), with the two hearts in the negative space formed by the two “f ’s” in Bluffton. The new creative was unveiled in February 2014, and tourism messages were carried across four southeastern states in television, radio, outdoor, and digital advertising.

To see the full report, please go to:
http://www.hrsm.sc.edu/CoEETourismED/PDFs/BlufftonReport.pdf
Their year in review: Center faculty reflect on 2013-2014

By Dr. David Cardenas

Over the past year, I was fortunate to have had some wonderful opportunities to travel to exotic locations. My travels started in May 2013, when Dean Mahalik, Dr. Rich Harrill and I visited the Universidad San Francisco De Quito (USFQ), in Ecuador and travelled to the Galapagos to visit a satellite campus. We are in the process of developing a program to teach sustainable tourism on the island. While in the Galapagos, I also swam in crystal clear azure waters, was chased by sea lions and observed the Frigate and Blue-foot Booby birds in their natural environment.

In October and November 2013, I co-taught Sustainable Tourism & Destination Marketing with Dr. Rich Harrill in Jinan, China at Shandong University. While in China, I was immersed in the remarkable Chinese history and culture, visited the Great Wall of China, and interviewed several prospective students (one of whom will be my Ph.D. student next year). Finally, I presented on the “Benefits of Education Travel for the Destination” at a regional conference.

In December 2013, I traveled to Curacao to meet with faculty members at the Inter-Continental University of the Caribbean to establish future partnerships. I was subsequently invited to return to Curacao in March 2014 to teach a one-week intensive course on Branding. In addition to my travels, I added three published articles to my research portfolio. I was able to co-publish these with fellow colleagues, former graduate students, and more importantly with friends that I graduated with from my alma mater, North Carolina State University.

By Dr. Fang Meng

I have truly enjoyed working with the Center team on all the various tourism projects. In the past year of 2013/14, I also had some great opportunities, conducting additional research of personal interest, publishing academic articles, teaching a new course, advising graduate/Ph.D. students, and serving in an international tourism organization and multiple academic journals/conferences.

I worked with my graduate student (now Ph.D. student) Ms. Pei Zhang on a study of outbound Chinese tourists’ shopping behavior last summer, and am now continuing this research topic to the second phase. I was able to collaborate with colleagues and graduate students, and had four journal articles published/accepted in 2013/14. I am teaching a new course this spring 2014, which provides me the opportunity to develop a new course for the HRTM program. In addition, I was selected to serve on the Expert Committee of the World Tourism Cities Federation (WTCF), and traveled twice to Beijing, China for the WTCF Expert Committee meeting in June, and the Tourism Summit of World Tourism Cities 2013 & Second Meeting of the WTCF Council in September, 2013.

During my travels, I was also invited to host the Forum of WTCF Tourism-Related Businesses, and give a guest speech to faculty and students in Beijing International Studies University. I joined the editorial review board in the journal of Tourism Analysis in 2014, and have served as a reviewer for multiple journals and conferences.

The year of 2013/14 has been productive and rewarding, and I appreciate all the support from my colleagues, family and friends. I look forward to working on upcoming projects in and out of the Center, and continuing my research, teaching, and service activities next year.
Ideas that ignite

Dr. Hudson was invited as a featured speaker in November 19, 2013 to the Ignite! event sponsored by EngenuitySC. Held for the 5th consecutive year in Columbia SC, the event serves as an annual celebration of its public-private sponsors and attracts young and upcoming leaders in the business, tech and art communities.

In the run up to the event, Dr. Hudson was quoted in the local press as saying, “I see so much potential here in South Carolina to bring international tourists, particularly, because I think we have such an amazing product, and I think we’ve been kind of underrated.”

In addition to South Carolina as a destination, Dr. Hudson focused on the numerous benefits of travel more generally. To hear why you should travel within South Carolina, as well as take that annual vacation, Dr. Hudson’s full presentation may be viewed at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnVJ-1OL3t0

Center partners with Santee Cooper, Santee Cooper Country

The vast Santee Cooper waterway, stretching roughly from Columbia, SC to the ocean, encompasses the Congaree, Santee and Cooper Rivers, Lake Marion and Lake Moultrie, and the Trailrace Canal. This waterway has long been considered an undeveloped gem. Analysts and consultants who have visited have noted that opening the area to water-way activities as well as off-water activities could deliver significant economic benefits to the neighboring rural counties as well as established urban centers. Santee Cooper and Santee Cooper Country recognize both potential economic impacts as well as the importance of conservation for tourism development in the region.

They have partnered with the Center to conduct a 9-month study to examine the feasibility of current and potential tourism attractions along the waterway. By examining similar waterways, the team will identify products and services that are particularly successful as well as measure demand for access to the waterway. Community members and key stakeholders will also play a vital and active role in this study.

The research study kicks-off in the Summer of 2014.

Leading hotels keep repeat customers happy

Among the articles Dr. Hudson has written for Hotel Business Review, one of his latest focused on how hotels create Apostles -- customers with the highest satisfaction and loyalty scores. Such guests are so satisfied that they seek converts to share their experiences, and would not dream of staying anywhere else. What Dr. Hudson found was that leading hotels are customizing experiences for guests to make them feel unique, as if they have been singled out for special attention. At the Grand America in Salt Lake City, for example, employees are empowered to make guests’ stay exceptional. The hotel also has a ‘Grand Ambassador’ whose role is to ensure that repeat guests are recognized appropriately. “Our operating system will track all of our guest preferences, and our Ambassador then reviews all reservations and prepares for these requests,” said Director of Guest Experience, Annie Fitzgerald.

Wellness tourism, the ‘softer’ side of medical tourism, is the subject of a new article in the Medical Tourism Magazine February 2014 issue. The article describes research we are conducting to understand more about this fast growing sector. Results to date offer tentative insights into the manner in which psychological wellbeing is facilitated. To read more, visit: http://www.medicaltourismmag.com/wellness-vacations-softer-side-medical-tourism/

Read more on this topic, or access other articles published in Hotel Business Review, by going to: http://hotelexecutive.com/author/727/Simon-Hudson
Community outreach in rural South Carolina

Expanding South Carolina’s tourism industry is one of the SmartState Center’s core mandates. On March 28th, 2014, in partnership with the SC Great Outdoors, Drs. Hudson (pictured left) and Cardenas (below) facilitated a day long hospitality and tourism customer service and small business training as well as destination branding, in the town of Calhoun Falls.

Dr. Hudson also conducted hospitality training in the picturesque Visitor Center and Art gallery in Gaffney, SC (pictured on right) in February, 2014. The training was facilitated by the SmartState Center, but organized by the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor, which received a rural Enterprise Business Grant from the United States Department of Agriculture.

Gaffney is the hometown of Francis “Frank” Underwood from the critically acclaimed TV series House of Cards. The show (which is hugely popular in China of all places) stars Kevin Spacey as a fictional U.S. congressman representing South Carolina’s 5th congressional district. Gaffney, and The Peachoid, played a significant role in the third episode of House of Cards and may well help in attracting tourists.

The Center recently won an Economic Development Administration grant to establish a brand identity in the Pee Dee. The first stage of research focuses on establishing core values and so the team recently started conducting interviews with area stakeholders. One of the first interviews was with the charismatic Pearl Fryar (pictured with Dr. Hudson on left) owner of the renowned Pearl Fryar Topiary Garden in Bishopville.

Dr. Hudson’s paper can be found at the following url:


BrandUSA

Following the so-called ‘Lost Decade’ - that is the years between 2000 and 2010 - during which the country's share of international arrivals declined from 17 percent to 12.4 percent, the Travel Promotion Act of 2011 established Brand USA to oversee a global marketing campaign. Astonishingly, until then, America had never embarked on a coordinated international campaign.

Through in-depth market research, unflattering perceptions of the US emerged, including that Americans were perceived as unwelcoming, overly familiar, brash and arrogant. The country itself was furthermore perceived as “middle-aged”, neither as attractive as the historical destinations of Europe, nor as appealing as the newcomers of the East.

Brand USA marketers subsequently developed a campaign that focused on the diversity, pop culture, optimistic spirit and larger than life presence of the country, inviting visitors to see, hear and feel the US in novel ways.

Although more refined metrics in the evaluation of the brand campaign impacts have been called for, a preliminary report released late 2012 suggests has apparently met with some success in raising awareness and intent to visit the US in Canada, the UK and Japan.

Dr. Hudson has just published a paper in the Journal of Destination Management & Marketing that takes a closer look at the entire process, providing valuable insight for both academics and practitioners.
Center offers PhD Assistantship

The Center seeks highly motivated and qualified Ph.D. applicants. The Center provides doctoral students with high quality education and research training. Students will help develop practical solutions for community partners and contribute to the highest level of scholarship.

Admitted doctoral students will have the opportunity to learn and work on cutting-edge research including tourism, economic impact modeling, consumer behavior, destination marketing and management, and sustainable development. Interested candidates must demonstrate a strong command of English, potential for scholarly writing, a solid foundation in quantitative research, and developed econometrics and analytical skills.

Doctoral research assistants receive a highly competitive 9-month stipend of $18,000, plus paid tuition and health insurance. Students work 20 hours per week as graduate assistants. Starting from the second year of the program, qualified students may also have the opportunity to teach. The package offered is a wonderful foundation for those who are interested in research and teaching and helps to foster an outstanding future career in academia.

For information about the assistantship, please contact Dr. Simon Hudson at shudson@hrsm.sc.edu

For information on admission requirements and application, go to: http://www.hrsm.sc.edu/hrtm/graduate/PhD/default.shtml

Recent publications:

Since the first edition of this widely acclaimed text the landscape of golf tourism has changed. Golf Tourism 2nd edition was revised and updated to reflect contemporary issues and trends.

Each chapter includes a Golf Tourism Spotlight focusing on individual or organizational achievements. Also in each chapter are two short, real-life cases which illustrate a particular concept or theoretical principle and one detailed Case Study to foster critical thinking.

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Visiting Professors’ Corner

Dr. Rhodri Thomas, Professor of Tourism and Event Policy, from Leeds Metropolitan University, visited the Center and the College of Hospitality in September 2013. Dr. Thomas is the Head of the International Centre for Research in Events, Tourism and Hospitality (ICRETH) at Leeds.

Dr. Thomas is recognized as a “specialist expert” on policy issues for the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), the European Commission and other government agencies and serves on the editorial boards of several other industry and academic journals.

While visiting, Dr. Thomas gave guest lectures to an undergraduate course, conference planning and meeting planning course, Graduate seminar and Graduate Consulting Course. He also provided valuable individual consultation to ongoing research projects.

If you are interested in coming to South Carolina as part of our Visiting Professor program, please contact Dr. Hudson at shudson@hrsm.sc.edu

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