Pioneering a rural hospitality research center: examining best practices and stakeholder perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory research provided an analysis of hospitality research centers throughout the United States. The study documents the experiences and insights of universities that host existing hospitality research centers, with a concentrated focus on the characteristics of those that serve a rural audience. The successes of these centers are highlighted for potential implementation at a proposed hospitality research center at a university based in southern Utah. Website content analyses and telephone interviews were performed with directors from universities that host hospitality research centers. Focus groups were conducted with private and public sector hospitality industry stakeholders from the southern Utah area. The information received in these focus groups served as the basis for the development of an on-line survey with the intent to reach a more generalized sample, and to allow for statistical analysis of stakeholders' perceptions of the development of a rural hospitality research center.

Key Words: hospitality, research center, focus groups, stakeholders, content analysis

INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of the hospitality management program at Southern Utah University, there has been a desire to develop a hospitality research center that would serve the tourism and hospitality industry in southern Utah. This area of Utah is home to many of the world's most renowned natural resources, which include five National Parks, four National Monuments, one National Recreation Area, and 15 state parks. Though this area attracts a great deal of global visitors, little research has been done on the tourism and hospitality industry of southern Utah.

The main purpose of this study is not only to provide information to guide the development of a hospitality research center at Southern Utah University, but also to document the characteristics of many hospitality research centers around the nation. The research will assist in the establishment of a hospitality research center, as well as share valuable information for existing and potential centers. This study was comprised of two major phases. Phase 1 included: (1) the documentation of the experiences of universities across the nation that house hospitality research centers, and (2) the identification and examination of attributes inherent to research centers that specifically serve rural areas.

The second phase of this study involved conducting focus groups among the proposed rural hospitality research center stakeholders. From the responses received in the focus groups, an on-line survey was created as a means to reach a more generalizable population of southern Utah area constituents who would have an interest in a hospitality research center.   The primary objectives of the focus groups and on-line survey instrument were to gain the stakeholders' perceptions of the proposed hospitality research center's (a) potential effectiveness; (b) preferred attributes and services; and (c) overall interest in a hospitality research center. The data collected from both the focus groups and on-line survey provided valuable suggestions for the structure and operation of the proposed rural hospitality research center. The process also helped to communicate to the southern Utah communities the potential existence of a center while simultaneously promoting participation and support.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research was directed by two objectives. The first was to generate a comprehensive list of hospitality research centers and to perform a content analysis on the respective centers. The second was to gather information regarding stakeholders' perceptions of the development of a rural hospitality research center in Southern Utah.

The research reported is the result of an initial investigation in which content analyses on websites of universities that currently host hospitality research centers and focus group interviews with hospitality industry practitioners (owners and executives) were used to generate a composite of desired attributes and services for the development of a rural hospitality research in southern Utah. To continue interpretation of the desired attributes and services derived from the qualitative studies, with a goal to further explore the need for the development of a rural hospitality research center in greater depth, employing a quantitative research design with a more representative sample of the population of hospitality stakeholders was vital for its ultimate success. These desired attributes and services can be utilized by administrators and educators in U.S. based undergraduate and graduate hospitality management programs. Guiding this study were the following four research questions:

R1:   What is the value of having a rural Hospitality Research Center?

R2:   What are the attributes and services that should be provided by a rural Hospitality Research Center?

R3:   What are the incentives needed to enhance the willingness of stakeholders to participate in the efforts of the rural Hospitality Research Center?

R4:   What is the best model to develop a Hospitality Research Center in a Rural Area?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In conducting a literature review on hospitality research centers, it was determined that there was very little literature dedicated to the formation of a center. There were many articles, however, that focused on how to manage and operate an established center. Of particular importance to this study was Geiger's (1990) work on research centers and how centers have advanced research at universities throughout the United States since World War II. During times when funding for research is limited and when many universities avoid organizing centers, Geiger (1990) suggests that there are still many benefits to be derived from the creation of a research center.

Stahler and Tash (1994) wrote about the issues research centers can create for universities that host such organizations. Although centers are not easy to run, the benefit a research university receives from having a center highly outweighs the costs associated with it. Therefore, they strongly encourage the creation of additional research centers.

Bozeman and Boardman (2003) discuss the point of funding as a major issue research centers face when trying to become established. They state government funding has started to give less money to specific individual research projects and has started to redistribute money more towards funding research centers. State governments are doing this because of the quantity of successful research that has come from university run research centers.

Following the literature review, a content analysis was performed on websites of universities that currently host hospitality research centers ("Cornell," 2007; "Florida," 2007; "International," n.d.; "Purdue," n.d.; "Research," n.d.; "Rosen," 2007; and "Sloan," 2007). All of the schools selected had well established hospitality research centers with websites that provided a great deal of information about the missions of and the services offered by such centers.

After comprehending how many of the leading hospitality schools operate research centers, it was important to focus on hospitality research centers which specifically serve rural areas. Therefore, in order to better understand these types of centers, the websites of schools that provide research services to rural regions were carefully reviewed ("Hospitality Research," n.d., "Huck," 2006, and "Research," n.d.). Telephone interviews were conducted with directors from the respective hospitality research centers. The combination of website content analyses and telephone interviews led to many insights about how a rural research center is different from other types of centers, and thus proved to be very helpful in furthering research for this study.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology was multi-phased; with the initial phase being a content analysis performed on existing hospitality research centers followed by structured telephone interviews with the respective managers. Data gathered provided a foundation for the development of a focus group discussion guide. Results from the focus group research were used

to create an on-line survey questionnaire. The primary objectives of the focus groups and on-line survey instrument were to gain the stakeholders' perceptions of the proposed hospitality research center's (a) potential effectiveness; (b) preferred attributes and services; and (c) overall interest in a hospitality research center.

Hospitality Management Programs Website and Phone Interview Content Analyses

To identify the universities that currently host hospitality management programs, the list of participating universities from the American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA) ("School," 2007); National Restaurant Association (NRA) ("Hospitality Schools," 2007); and the Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education (CHRIE) ("Accreditation," 2006) were utilized. These three lists were compared to find those schools that would be the most likely candidates to host a hospitality research center. From the content analysis it was found that 32 universities represented in Table 1 (Appendix) appeared on all three of the lists. Thus, it was concluded these 32 universities were very dedicated to growth and advancement in the respective hospitality programs.

Following the identification of the 32 universities with hospitality programs, content analyses were performed on the websites to determine which schools hosted hospitality research centers. For those universities with websites that did not clearly state the existence of a research center, a phone call was placed to the respective hospitality management departments to clarify the existence or non-existence of a hospitality research center.

Upon the completion of the website searches and phone calls, 14 universities were found to host hospitality research centers. After performing a content analysis of the data, an additional five schools were eliminated due to the lack of rural emphasis in the respective research centers. Thus, the nine remaining universities became the focus of this study. After many attempts to contact all nine universities, seven universities fully participated in this study.

Telephone Survey Design

The telephone survey was divided into three sections: (1) an introduction; (2) demographic information; and (3) the attributes of the hospitality research center. The demographic information consisted of the respondent's name, title, university, and telephone number.

The attribute section of the survey encompassed eight questions:
1) How many hospitality research centers are at the university?
2) How long have the center(s) been in existence?
3) Does the center employ a full-time director?
4) Does the center employ a full-time staff?
5) If not, who is responsible for performing the research?
6) What are the publication requirements for faculty members?
7) What is the center's source for funding?
8) What suggestions would you have if you were to create another hospitality research center?

The data gathered in these discussions provided a foundation for the ensuing focus group research.

Focus Group Research

After the completion of the interviews with established hospitality research center directors, it was determined that the researchers needed to interview local stakeholders of the proposed rural hospitality research center. As such, two focus groups were conducted in December of 2007.

Organization and Participants

Two focus group interviews were conducted in December 2007. A total of twelve attendees participated in the focus group sessions. Potential participants of the focus groups were invited based on their participation in the Southern Utah Visitor Profile Study conducted by Dr. Emmett Steed during the 2006-2007 academic year. This study was used as a selection tool for focus group attendees, as participation in this study required a great deal of dedication. Therefore, if stakeholders were devoted enough to participate, it indicated they were vested in the success and growth of the hospitality program at Southern Utah University.

Demographically, the participants were a homogenous group. Each of the groups consisted of both females and males employed in a sector of the hospitality industry. The typical participant was White, non-Hispanic, general manager with a baccalaureate degree and an average of 11.6 years of hospitality industry experience.

Focus Group Procedures and Questions

Focus group interviews were chosen as an appropriate method for generating a broad range of quality indicators in a short time (Morgan, 1998). Focus group interviews are based on group dynamics and rely on group interactions to produce breadth of insight (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Additionally, focus groups are grounded in the participants' vocabulary.

Focus group interviews were conducted in meeting rooms Cedar City and St. George, Utah and lasted two hours with an intermission halfway through. The two locations were centralized for the intended participants in order to minimize the travel distances in southern Utah. The rural atmosphere and extensive geography issues that were considered for focus group participation may also influence the types of services the Southern Utah University research center could offer. The sessions were audio and video taped. A single moderator, the first author, conducted the two focus group interviews. The moderator received extensive training through graduate courses in qualitative research; by observing and assisting in three focus group interviews conducted by an experienced focus group moderator; and has since conducted focus group research numerous times for scholarly activity. The additional authors assisted in the focus groups and observed to ensure that similar procedures were followed across the interviews.

A two-part, structured moderator discussion guide was developed to elicit participants' perceptions about the value they placed on: (a) hospitality research; (b) the effectiveness of a hospitality research center; (c) the attributes and services the participants would like to see provided from such a center; and (d) and the respondents' willingness to participate in the efforts of the research center. The phone interviews conducted with the hospitality research centers' program administrators in phase one of this research provided a basis for additional questions.

First, a free-elicitation approach was used to obtain information about the participants' hospitality industry experience and the value each participant placed on hospitality research. This initial process uncovered distinctions that the participants considered in discriminating the value of a rural hospitality research center. Next, a laddering process was employed to reveal links among the value descriptors. Patterns of responses and observed similarities across individual responses were utilized in summarizing the descriptive data.

A questioning route approach was used in the development of the questions to be asked by the moderator in the focus group session to ensure a practical structure for organizing the discussion sequence and to facilitate the analysis of results. Each section included uncued and cued questions in an open-end and sentence completion format. Opening questions were formulated to get individuals talking and gain insight into the participants' industry/academic experience, and overall assessments of and reactions to the recently conducted Southern Utah Visitor Profile Study. Introductory questions were designed to obtain the participants' thoughts and opinions about hospitality research. Transition questions were developed to discover how the participants' measured the successfulness of their hospitality businesses and if a hospitality research center could assist in their efforts in trying to measure and improve on this successfulness. Key questions were constructed to obtain a detailed response from the participants of the overall effectiveness of developing a hospitality research center and a comprehensive list of desired attributes and services of such a center. Ending questions were designed to gain closure to the discussion and ensure that no critical aspects related to the development and implementation of a rural hospitality research center had been overlooked in the discussion.

The focus group questions and procedures were reviewed by a panel of three university educators experienced in teaching, developing, and assessing hospitality curriculum, as well as planning, conducting, and publishing focus group research. Based on comments and recommendations from the expert panel, questions were clarified and procedures adjusted prior to conducting the focus group interviews.

Participants gathered at a pre-session thirty minutes prior to convening the focus group session for lunch. The research team observed participant interaction during the pre-session and name tents were used to designate the seating arrangement. Prior to the beginning of each focus group session, participants were asked to sign a consent form agreeing to be audio and video taped. At the beginning of each session, the moderator provided an overview of the discussion sequence and topic focus. At the intermission, the moderator consulted with the research team to confirm the coverage of topics. At the conclusion of each session, participants completed a questionnaire regarding demographic information. As a final step, the moderator debriefed the participants and presented each with a gift in appreciation for their time and input.

At the completion of two focus groups, saturation of response had been achieved; new desired attributes and services were not being mentioned by the participants. Throughout the interviews, special care was taken to ensure that responses were offered from all participants and that no single individual dominated the discussion. Opinions were specifically solicited from any participant who appeared reticent to offer suggestions. After the completion of the focus group research, participant responses were analyzed by researchers. These responses were used to assist in the creation of an on-line survey.

On-Line Sampling and Data Collection

Population

The population of interest included both public and private sector hospitality stakeholders such as: general managers of participant properties in the Southern Utah Visitor Profile Study; owners of food and beverage establishments in the southern Utah area that would be serviced by the hospitality research center; and hospitality industry related government officials. The food and beverage establishments were invited to partake in the survey based on participation in the respective local Chambers of Commerce. The government officials were from the Utah Office of Tourism; local, county, and city tourism directors; chamber of commerce executive directors; economic development directors; national and state parks; and Bureau of Land Management officials. These three groups of individuals were felt to be key constituents in determining the usefulness of a hospitality research center and the services desired in such a center. Due to the broad geographic locations of each of these participants, an on-line survey was deemed as a good medium to collect data from the local government, lodging, restaurant, and tourism stakeholders.

Faculty members from the Southern Utah University's School of Business were also invited to participate in the on-line survey. Whereas the three aforementioned stakeholder groups would be interested in what services were offered by a hospitality research center, this academic group would be the determinants of what services faculty would realistically be willing and able to offer in a research center. Therefore, this group was also very crucial to include in the on-line survey participants group.

Research Instrument

A self- administered questionnaire was developed for the study to emulate all of the data gathered in the focus group research. The instrument consisted of the following sections: (a) usefulness/value of hospitality research; (b) hospitality industries of southern Utah; (c) desired assistance of the proposed rural hospitality research center; (d) desired attributes and services of the center; and (e) a demographic profile. Respondents were asked to indicate on a five point Likert type scale ranging from "unimportant" (1) to "extremely important" (5) the importance of each indicator. In addition, open-ended questions were asked in order to allow respondents an opportunity to voice their opinions beyond the confines of the Likert scale. Demographics included gender, ethnicity, occupation, education, and geographic location. A panel of five School of Business faculty reviewed the questionnaire for face and content validity. After revisions, the instrument received a final review by the panel of faculty experts and was approved for pilot testing. In order to examine the survey instrument's reliability, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was calculated and examined using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 13.0). After the pilot test, minor modifications were made.

The on-line survey instrument was administered through SurveyMonkey.com. It included an individual e-mail cover letter briefly explaining the survey and the link to the actual survey. In an effort to enhance response rate and is suggested by the Dillman post-card method (Dillman, 1978), a reminder e-mail and the link to the survey was sent two weeks later to the database to thank the respondents and encourage participation from the non-respondents. The survey was available for a three-week period on SurveyMonkey.com with the total number of hospitality stakeholders invited to participate being 106.

DATA ANALYSES

Hospitality Management Programs Website and Phone Interview Content Analyses

The second author conducted all website analyses and phone interviews. Detailed notes on each website, as well as a comprehensive transcription of individual interviews, were copiously recorded. The research team reviewed the documentation and identified patterns in responses. Factors considered encompassed frequency or extensiveness of comments; intensity of comments; specificity of responses; vocabulary; and context.

Focus Group Research

The research team prepared a verbatim transcription of each focus group using detailed notes taken at the interview sessions; viewing of the video tapes; and listening to the audio tapes. A comprehensive list of desired attributes and services for the proposed rural hospitality research center stated by the participants during all phases of the discussion was developed. Words, phrases, and sentences used by participants to describe an experience, observation, or opinion about the research center were regarded as units of data.

The following factors were considered when performing the content analyses: words; context; internal consistency; frequency or extensiveness of comments; intensity of comments; the specificity of responses; and non-verbal cues. It is critical to recognize that the group is the fundamental unit of analysis, whereby the analysis must begin in a group-by-group progression. As shown in Table 2 (Appendix), explicit translations instead of numerical equivalents were utilized in the coding scheme to interpret areas of agreement and disagreement (Templeton, 1994).

Following each focus group session data were content analyzed independently by members of the research team, reviewed by each member for cross-validation, and a composite analysis for each focus group session was prepared. During the analysis of each session, the research team focused on the major ideas that were brought to the forefront in response to the key questions as well as throughout the discussion. The patterns were determined by: (a) recording the number of times a topic was mentioned, (b) reviewing verbal and non-verbal cues, and (c) discovering agreement and disagreement among participants. Information from the three composite analyses was cross-validated by members of the research team and a final composite analysis for both focus group sessions was prepared.

When conducting the cross-validation of the two composite analyses, the researchers focused on specific trends or patterns represented by both focus group sessions, independently and collectively. Upon the emergence of trends and patterns from the analyses, it became apparent that no specific trend or pattern was unique to an individual session. Consequently, the perceptions and opinions expressed by the participants in all focus groups are presented collectively.

On-Line Survey Instrument Data Collection

Data were collected during a three week interval in spring 2007 via an on-line questionnaire administered through SurveyMonkey.com. A total of 106 hospitality industry stakeholders were invited to participate in the on-line survey. After eliminating respondents with invalid email addresses and automated out of office responses dated beyond the survey close date, a total of 100 surveys reached the intended participants. The initial e-mail included a cover letter briefly explaining the survey and the link to the on-line survey. In an effort to enhance response rate, a reminder e-mail with the link to the survey was sent two weeks later to those who had not responded.

Statistical analysis on the responses to the self-administered on-line survey was computed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 13.0 for Windows). In order to obtain an overall view of the data provided by the sample population descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) were employed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The academic stakeholders who participated in the telephone interviews offered valuable perspectives on the conceptualization and development of a new hospitality research center. The questions asked to each of the seven participating universities and the corresponding responses can be viewed in Table 3 (Appendix). The seven schools that partook in the phone interview were structured as state schools, comparable to Southern Utah University. Being state universities all faced similar funding issues for the hospitality research centers.

Subsequent to the spokesperson's responses to the seven questions represented in Table 2, each individual was asked what suggestions could be offered for the development of a new hospitality research center (HRC). The suggestions and insights commonly offered were:

1) In hospitality research centers without full-time staff, a condition that occurred in five of the interviewed centers, faculty members performed the research. Thus, prior to developing a HRC, there is a need for a sufficient number of interested faculty members to perform the research. If the faculty is passionate about participating in the research center, the likelihood of success is increased.

2) Release time for faculty conducting HRC related research is critical, as a defined balance is needed between faculty research, teaching, and service responsibilities.

3) Faculty researchers are only one group of stakeholders involved with the success of the hospitality research center. Other involved stakeholders include but are not limited to: local industry, associations, government, communities, and universities. Building, nurturing and maintaining relationships with these constituents is crucial to the success of the HRC, while simultaneously ensuring stakeholders' needs are satisfied.

4) Funding is a major issue for all of hospitality research centers. There were two common alternatives suggested in regards to funding. Alternative one was to secure funding from local governments, private donations, or grants with the primary focus being recurring funding. Resultant from secured funding sources, the center can focus more on conducting research, rather than focusing efforts on revenue generation. The second alternative offered was to engage in contract work, thus, becoming self-funded. Essentially, the center would become a private business within a public university.

Fluctuation in demand for hospitality research and economies may pose challenges in this scenario, making it a more precarious venture.

While not all of the universities agreed on one best way to fund a center, consensus was met regarding the mission of the center. The mission and goals should be driven by the amount of funding the center is expected to receive.

The additional recommendations, not common to all universities but worth noting were:

1) Begin slowly when trying to get established. There are many tasks that need to be successfully accomplished before a hospitality research center can open, so it is crucial to the success and the future of the center that all of these tasks are completed with careful consideration.
2) If the hospitality research center is going to have a board of directors, it is important that the board be comprised of a diverse group; meaning it should have representation from all areas of the hospitality industry, both private and public sectors.
3) Due to the rural nature of the proposed hospitality research center, it should provide on-line services in order to better reach and serve its stakeholders.
4) The proposed HRC should seek continuous improvement. It should regularly reinvent its mission and objectives and try new concepts and models to improve its initial structure to better serve its stakeholders.

Focusing on the two primary objectives of this research: (1) to generate a comprehensive list of hospitality research centers and to perform a content analysis on the respective centers, and (2) to gather information regarding stakeholders' perceptions of the development of a rural hospitality research center in southern Utah, and subsequent to the HRC phone interviews, it was determined that the researchers needed to interview local stakeholders of the proposed rural hospitality research center. As such, two focus groups were conducted. Themes regarding the proposed HRC arose during the focus group data transcription. Evidence of themes was based upon the number of times an attribute or service was mentioned and by the number of participants that were interested. The themes were categorized as: (a) desired attributes and services; (b) essentiality of attributes and services due to rural location; (c) on-line services; and (d) revenue generation for all stakeholders.

Due to the single, focus group qualitative research data collection method employed, giving rise to the potential for a common methods bias, caution needed to be exercised in interpreting the strength of the study's results. Accordingly, an on-line survey anchored in the emerged focus group themes was developed to reach a larger group of southern Utah hospitality stakeholders.

Descriptive statistics were engaged to analyze the on-line survey data. A total of 26 surveys were determined usable generating a 26% response rate. The participants in this study (n = 26) were male (61.54%) and female (38.46%). Hospitality industry managers and government individuals comprised the large majority of the sampled population (76.92%), and academia represented the remaining population of those individuals sampled (23.08%). A variety of educational backgrounds were characterized, 42.31% held Baccalaureate degrees; Master's and Doctoral degrees each represented 19.23%; Associate degrees were earned by 11.54% of the participants; while the remaining 3.85% had other types of educational experiences for employment in the hospitality industry.

Following a comprehensive review of data, the ensuing conclusions were identified:

1) 80% of individuals whom received the Southern Utah Visitor Profile Study data found the contained information to be moderately to very useful. This indicated that the

significance of future studies conducted by the proposed HRC can add a great deal of value to public and private industries affiliated with hospitality.

2) 65.38% of the participants of the survey thought the hospitality businesses in the southern Utah area were only moderately well operated. Such room for improvement could be facilitated by training and development services provided by the HRC.

3) The three primary factors affirmed as the sources of hotel revenue generation were proximity to national and state parks; leisure travelers; and internet sales.

4) Restaurant revenue generation primarily resulted from leisure dining; freeway/highway visibility; and proximity to national and state parks.

5) Greater than half (53.85%) of participants confirmed services provided by the proposed rural HRC very to extremely useful for their organizations. 34.62% stated a research center would be moderately useful, and 7.69% said it would only be slightly useful.

6) Participants revealed strong willingness to provide researchers' access to people, information, and resources. 96.15% of those that participated said they would be at least moderately likely to allow staff members to be interviewed by researchers.

7) Participants were also very positive about each of the following: allowing researchers to conduct surveys, providing non-financial information, and meeting personally with researchers.

8) Participants were hesitant about providing financial business information to researchers and to providing financial support for services rendered. Results signified a large majority would be only moderately likely to participate in these two areas. The researchers speculate the center would need to develop a quality reputation as implied by the ability to handle confidential information and provide valuable products and services. Once the quality reputation is established, hospitality stakeholders would allow financial information to be released and commit to pay for the services offered.

The quantitative data gathered through the on-line surveys supported the opinions of focus group participants and other universities' responses to what a hospitality research center should be. Levene's test for equality of variances was conducted to identify the significance of attributes and services needed for the southern Utah hospitality industry (Table 4, Appendix).

As represented in Table 4, Levene's test indicated the importance each participant placed on the following attributes: professionalism, customer service, hospitality products, economic impact of tourism, and ecotourism. The test supported that hospitality stakeholder (academia, industry, and government) perceptions were aligned regarding the importance of specific attributes for the proposed rural HRC. Thus, none of the attributes proved to be statistically significant illustrating that the foci of the group rendering the services are in agreement with the groups receiving the services. Subsequently, the data will assist in the development of products and services to be offered by the proposed HRC.

A second Levene's test was performed to provide researchers with information about the significance of desired attributes and services and what Southern Utah University academics were willing to offer (Table 5, Appendix).

The existing hospitality research centers were clear when responding that the desired attributes and services of the hospitality industry stakeholders must match the willingness of academia to provide such attributes and services. Without agreement, the likelihood of success for either constituent group is minimal. Accordingly, the results denoted in Table 5 were crucial to the future success of the proposed rural HRC. Data was categorized by responses from either academia or public and private hospitality industry stakeholders. Significance was revealed in

two attributes; executive education and financial analysis and consultation. The proposed HRC was willing to offer both of these services; however, the hospitality industry stakeholders did not desire such services.

The remaining seven attributes: (1) visitor profile; (2) competitive and market analysis; (3) destination marketing assistance; (4) human resource assistance; (5) customer service evaluation and training; (6) research and consultation of legal issues; and (7) on-line availability to information were not significant. After further review of the descriptive statistics available for the seven attributes, it was found that academia and the public and private hospitality industry stakeholders highly agreed on a few of the non-significant characteristics. Four attributes emerged that were both strongly desired by the public and private hospitality industry stakeholders and that academia was very willing to offer. The attributes were: visitor profile research; customer service training; destination marketing assistance; and competitive and market analysis, respectively. Hence, it was determined from the comprehensive amount of qualitative and quantitative data collected; these four aforementioned attributes should be the initial focus of the proposed rural hospitality research center. Other identified attributes and services may be added after the inception, but as learned in the first phase of this study, research centers must be careful to not try to offer too many services initially or to grow too quickly. Therefore, researchers are heeding the advice of the experts to ensure the most likely success for the proposed rural center.

Concisely, the data achieved through the process of using Levene's test for equality of variances supported both the focus group participants and other universities' responses to what a hospitality research center should encompass. Consistency throughout the existing HRC interviews; focus group attendees; and on-line survey participants were important for truly determining what attributes all stakeholders' desire from the proposed hospitality research center.

CONCLUSIONS

Data gathered through the website content analyses and director interviews provided many similar and valuable suggestions offered by universities with existing hospitality or rural research centers. Findings indicate that focusing predominantly on the stakeholders of the center, with concentrated efforts on the faculty researchers, would be of utmost importance in the establishment and maintenance of the center. Providing faculty with adequate time for research through course release time was considered an important characteristic of faculty participation. The assurance of base funding was found to be essential when establishing and maintaining a research center. It was also suggested that a research center should start slow and grow according to the demand for research and the capability of faculty to complete that desired research. Another important point that arose due to the rural nature of the area that the prospective research center will service was the inclusion of the on-line capability the center should have in order to be able to report research and communicate with the center's stakeholders.

Based on the results of Levene's test for equality of variances, the quantitative data obtained through the on-line surveys supported the opinions of focus group participants and other universities' responses to what a hospitality research center should be. This consistency throughout the interviews with other universities, focus group participants, and on-line survey participants was important when determining what perceptions stakeholders' possess of the

development of a rural hospitality research center in southern Utah. From these stakeholders' perceptions and suggestions for the proposed hospitality research center, it was easy to determine what services were desired and what was willing to be offered. These services included: (a) visitor profile research, (b) customer service training, (c) destination marketing assistance, and (d) competitive and market analysis; thus leading to the primary focus when establishing the research center. Additional services may be offered in the future of the proposed rural hospitality research center, but further studies will need to be conducted to determine the necessity prior to the expansion process.

The development of a rural hospitality research center offers added benefits to the university, students, alumni, faculty, and the hospitality industry. Such implications can be manifested through (a) undergraduate and graduate research opportunities; (b) service-learning, by bridging the gap between academia and industry; (c) alumni support; (d) faculty currency and expertise in content area; and (e) hospitality industry partnerships.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was an initial effort in developing a comprehensive list of hospitality research centers; performing a content analysis on the respective centers; and gathering information regarding stakeholders' perceptions of the development of a rural hospitality research center in southern Utah. As with any study, the findings must be interpreted in light of its limitations, which also point to potential directions for future research. First, the study's participants consisted of only southern Utah hospitality industry professionals and Southern Utah University School of Business faculty and administrators, whereas, consideration of hospitality stakeholders representing the state of Utah could have proven beneficial to the relevance and generalizability of the findings. The data underline the relevance of a regional heterogeneity perspective when explaining the findings. Recognizing, however, the implications were not only for those specific users, but to serve as a foundation for what Southern Utah University could address to create optimum outcomes for all of the constituents. Additional research with faculty, administrators, and industry representatives encompassing the United States or other countries could yield different results. Further quantitative research is needed to examine these findings with a larger sample of faculty, administrators, and industry representatives globally.

Despite the limitations of exploratory research, we believe our research advances the understanding of the factors that influence the development of a rural hospitality research center. Further, we believe this topic is academic and industry relevant and that increased understanding of the concept is an important step toward the generation of related research.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. 32 Universities with Hospitality Programs and Memberships in AHLA, NRA & CHRIE

University	State or Country Represented
Arizona State University	Arizona
Cal Poly Pomona	California
Cornell University	New York
Florida International University	Florida
Georgia State University	Georgia
Iowa State University	Iowa
Kansas State University	Kansas
Michigan State University	Michigan
New Mexico State University	New Mexico
Northern Arizona University	Arizona
Ohio State University	Ohio
Oklahoma State University	Oklahoma
Purdue University	Indiana
Texas Tech University	Texas
The Pennsylvania State University	Pennsylvania
University of Central Florida	Florida
University of Delaware	Delaware
University of Denver	Colorado
University of Guelph	Canada
University of Hawaii	Hawaii
University of Houston	Texas
University of Massachusetts	Massachusetts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas	Nevada
University of New Orleans	New Orleans
University of North Texas	Texas
University of Otago	Canada
University of South Carolina	South Carolina
University of Utah	Utah
Utah State University	Utah
Virginia Tech	Virginia
Virginia State University	Virginia
Washington State University	Washington

Note: n=32

Table 2. Focus Group Data Coding

| Terminology	Definition
A Couple	One or two in each panel
A Handful or Several	At least three in each panel, but less than one-third of the panel
Some	At least one-fourth, but not much more than one-third of the panel
A Fair Number	At least one-third, but less than one-half of the panel
Evenly Divided	one-half of panel
Many	More than one-half, but less than two-thirds of the panel
A Preponderance	More than two-thirds, but less than three-fourths of the panel
Most	At least three-fourths, but less than 90 percent of the panel
Almost or Virtually All	At least 90 percent, but less than 100 percent of the panel
Participants	100 percent of the panel
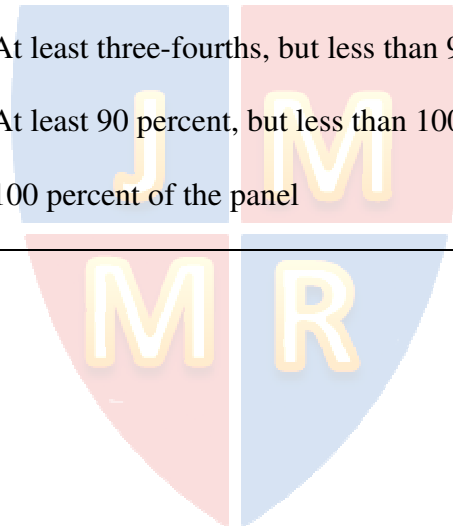
Table 3. University Responses to Hospitality Research Center (HRC) Queries

| University Number:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
# of HRCs on Campus?	1	1	1	1	Rural Center	1	2
Length HRC Existed?	16 years	28 years	December 2007	In the Process	17 years	18 years	4 & 15 years
Full-Time Director?	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Full-Time Staff?	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
If No Full-Time Staff, Who Performs Research?	Faculty/ Students	Faculty	Faculty	Faculty	N/A	N/A	Faculty/ Contracted Consultants
Publications per Faculty?	4 per year	Varies	2 per year	2 per year	N/A	N/A	Varies
Source of HRC Funding?	Contract/ State/ University	State/Private	State	State	State/ Private	Contracts/ Grants/ State	Contract/ Grants/ Private
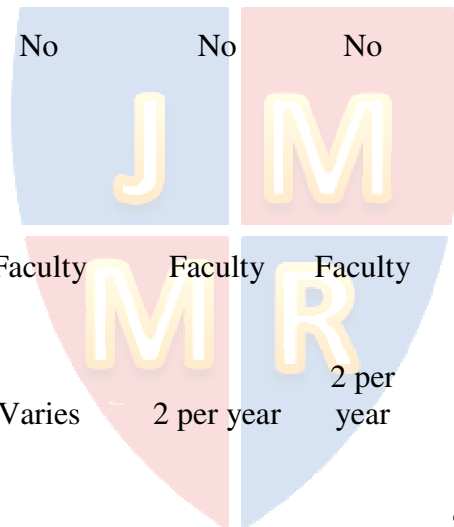
Table 4. Importance of Desired Attributes of Proposed Rural HRC

Attribute		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Professionalism	Equal variances assumed	.739	.398	-.603	24	.552	-.217	.359	-.958	.524
	Equal variances not assumed			-.773	13.516	.453	-.217	.280	-.820	.386
Customer Service	Equal variances assumed	2.083	.162	.621	24	.540	.233	.376	-.542	1.009
	Equal variances not assumed			.903	19.014	.378	.233	.258	-.307	.774
Hospitality Products	Equal variances assumed	.377	.545	-.230	23	.820	-.096	.420	-.966	.773
	Equal variances not assumed			-.215	7.661	.835	-.096	.448	-1.139	.946
Economic Impact of Tourism	Equal variances assumed	.226	.639	-1.060	24	.300	-.317	.299	-.933	.300
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.224	10.627	.247	-.317	.259	-.889	.255
Ecotourism	Equal variances assumed	2.759	.110	-1.431	24	.165	-.450	.314	-1.099	.199
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.498	8.866	.169	-.450	.300	-1.131	.231

Note: n=26

Table 5. Stakeholder Desired Attributes & Services vs. Proposed HRC Willingness to Provide

Attribute		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Visitor Profile	Equal variances assumed	.338	.567	.094	23	.926	.026	.280	-.553	.606
	Equal variances not assumed			.100	9.314	.923	.026	.264	-.568	.620
Competitive & Market Analysis	Equal variances assumed	.165	.688	.193	23	.849	.061	.318	-.597	.720
	Equal variances not assumed			.179	7.580	.862	.061	.342	-.763	.859
Destination Marketing Assistance	Equal variances assumed	.072	.791	.712	23	.483	.281	.394	-.534	1.096
	Equal variances not assumed			.727	8.707	.486	.281	.386	-.597	1.158
Human resource Assistance	Equal variances assumed	.018	.894	.053	23	.958	.026	.500	-1.008	1.061
	Equal variances not assumed			.053	8.593	.959	.026	.494	-1.099	1.152
Customer Service Evaluation & Training	Equal variances assumed	.550	.466	-.208	23	.837	-.096	.463	-1.055	.862
	Equal variances not assumed			-.247	11.740	.809	-.096	.390	-.948	.755

Table 5 (cont'd.). Stakeholder Desired Attributes & Services vs. Proposed HRC Willingness to Provide

Attribute		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Financial Analysis & Consultation	Equal variances assumed	4.643	.042	1.482	23	.152	.640	.432	-.253	1.534
	Equal variances not assumed			2.229	21.231	.037	.640	.287	.043	1.238
Research & Consultation of Legal Issues	Equal variances assumed	1.154	.294	-.987	23	.334	-.465	.471	-1.439	.509
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.184	11.990	.259	-.465	.393	-1.320	.391
Executive Education	Equal variances assumed	6.384	.019	.962	22	.346	.444	.462	-.513	1.402
	Equal variances not assumed			1.449	21.434	.162	.444	.307	-.193	1.081
On-Line Availability to Information	Equal variances assumed	.011	.917	.000	23	1.000	.000	.458	-.947	.947
	Equal variances not assumed			.000	9.323	1.000	.000	.431	-.970	970

Note: n=26