
Dr. Whitney Knollenberg

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Emerging Scholar Profile

Dr. Whitney Knollenberg is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management at North Carolina State University. Whitney earned her PhD in Hospitality and Tourism Management at Virginia Tech where she also served as an instructor. Whitney holds a Master of Science in Sustainable Tourism from East Carolina University and a Bachelor of Science in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Resources from Michigan State University.

Whitney strives to play an active role in the tourism industry by examining research questions related to the role of leadership in planning efforts and policy that guide sustainable tourism development. This overarching research focus emerged from Whitney's efforts to maintain close relationships with industry organizations such as destination marketing organizations (DMOs), trade associations such as the Virginia Restaurant and Lodging Association (VRLTA), and non-profit community development entities. This helped her established two lines of research, one focused on the need for a greater understanding of how advocacy impacts the tourism industry and another focused on how rural and remote communities can leverage existing resources to advance sustainable tourism development.

Whitney's interest in understanding the impact of advocacy on the tourism industry grew from hearing the common lament of "the tourism industry can't get no respect" – this twist on Rodney Dangerfield's classic line was a refrain she heard in many industry conferences and meetings. This statement was a reflection of the tourism industry's belief that tourism's value should be obvious to policymakers, citizens, and other industries.

However, the message of the industry's economic, social, and environmental impact clearly needed to be amplified. Through her dissertation research Whitney sought to identify the individual leaders who were delivering this message and create an understanding of how they developed as leaders. Whitney intended this knowledge to be a foundation upon which more leaders could be developed to advocate for the industry and spread the message of its impacts.

The results of her dissertation work indicated that many DMOs are limited in their capacity to advocate for themselves and thus must rely on sectors within the industry (e.g., lodging, food and beverage, etc...), members of adjacent industries (e.g., retail, real estate), other non-profit entities (e.g., local economic development offices, Chambers of Commerce), and citizens to create a voice for the benefits of tourism. This finding led Whitney to study how DMOs can enact effective community engagement strategies as a means of developing advocates. This work is ongoing but will offer findings that can benefit DMO leaders, staff, and their members.

The outcomes of her dissertation also revealed that there is limited knowledge of how tourism organizations plan for advocacy efforts. This finding was particularly concerning as there is an ever-increasing need for the industry to engage in advocacy to avoid crises caused by policy change such as: loss of state DMO funding (as seen in in the states of Florida, Missouri, and Washington); passage of social policy that negatively impacts the image of destinations (e.g., House Bill 2 in North Carolina); or changes in policy that impact the natural resources that tourism relies upon (e.g., advancement of off-shore oil drilling). To improve the knowledge of how tourism organizations should plan for advocacy Whitney, along with Dr. Ashley Schroder and Dr. Amanda Stewart, are leading a national study of tourism advocacy planning efforts. Through this study they aim to identify best practices that tourism organizations can implement to improve their advocacy efforts.

While advocacy is becoming a top priority for the tourism industry there are also considerable opportunities to engage more communities in sustainable tourism development as a means of diversifying their economies and preserving cultural and natural resources. This is particularly true in rural and remote communities where financial resources for development are frequently limited, but human, social, cultural, and natural resources are plentiful. Whitney has studied how leadership, policy, and planning can be utilized to leverage existing resources to sustain and grow tourism development in these communities. In partnership with other emerging scholars including Dr. Stefanie Benjamin and Dr. Emily Yeager Whitney examines how communities in North Carolina leverage existing cultural resources (e.g., locations where beloved movies were filmed or legacies of fishing and mariculture) to establish and sustain tourism development. She has also explored the opportunity for tourism to serve as a means of strengthening local food systems through the expansion of food tourism, craft beverage tourism, and agritourism.

Whitney is actively involved in the Travel and Tourism Research Association (TTRA) as it helps her gain insight on the critical challenges the industry faces which she can address through her research. She helped lead the development of TTRA's Emerging Leaders program in an effort to help cultivate the tourism researchers and scholars that will be the industry leaders of tomorrow. She also serves on local tourism development boards in North Carolina and is proud to be the advisor of the Tourism Management Association at North Carolina State University.