Examining the Use of Student Extension Tours To Expose the Costs and Benefits of Tourism To Rural Communities

Patrick Maher
University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada
maherp@unbc.ca

Nicole Vaugeois
Vancouver Island University
Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada
nicole.vaugeois@viu.ca

Dan McDonald
Vancouver Island University
Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada
dan.mcdonald@viu.ca

Abstract

This article focuses on the use of student extension tours to understand the realities of tourism development in the rural context through dialogue with community and business leaders. The examples provided will be drawn from three tours that took place within British Columbia from 2006 to 2008. In an extension tour, the learning environment is expanded outside of the classroom as a group of faculty and students (usually from a number of tertiary institutions) venture into rural communities. In this project, the focus of extension activity was to (a) give students from typically urban backgrounds the opportunity to gain insight through a "rural lens"; (b) connect rural community operators and local/municipal government agencies with resources from the academic sector; and (c) initiate dialogue about the realities of tourism in rural Canada. Theoretically, the notion of extension tours follows along the continuum of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, with a modification that such a cycle links to both individual students and the wider communities with which they interact. Students, as future industry leaders, learned to apply their book knowledge to real life in a rural setting. During their experience they became more aware of the costs and benefits, challenges, and opportunities of and for tourism in rural areas. Upon reflection that took place each evening, students were able to generalize what should or could be done differently or better. They then applied these lessons in the next community along the route. Through a number of mechanisms this knowledge was then fed back to participants on the other side of the dialogue (community members/operators/local and municipal government), both in immediate and longer-term ways.

Keywords: extension tours, tourism development, rural communities

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1.0 Introduction

Many geographic areas utilize tourism as an economic development tool, particularly in rural locations where other industries are in transition or decline. In making the transition to tourism, leaders often seek out expertise and resources from consultants, government agencies, and funding organizations. The resources usually have to be imported from urban environments where lessons learned about tourism development are expected to be universal and transferable to the rural context.

Rural areas are fundamentally distinct and need to be understood to fully support tourism development. In a time when people are fed a constant diet of urban information, society has disconnected from the realities in rural areas and, consequently, efforts to support economic diversification efforts are likely yielding limited results. This disconnect includes tourism, where the realities of what it takes to develop tourism in the rural context is not yet fully understood. Can we assume that the basic principles and realities of tourism development in urban settings apply in rural contexts? What knowledge and resources are rural areas tapping into to initiate tourism? What processes are being used? What resources are useful, applicable, and helpful in this transition?

For the academic community, these questions should be of considerable interest. In colleges and universities, students are being educated on tourism development processes such that they can apply their new knowledge throughout their career. Many academics are also engaged in service with communities and businesses in rural areas. For these reasons, academics must ask whether the realities of tourism development in rural areas are fully understood or whether new strategies to support economic transition need to emerge. If as Higgins (2009) suggests we need to assist students to understand the complexity of sustainability problems, perhaps we as academics need to better focus our research on how we can make a difference using outreach methods, such as extension tours, as a means of constructive experiential education (Sibthorp, 2009).

One of the most important mechanisms to build awareness of differences in the rural context begins with the development of a *rural lens.* According to the Canadian Rural Partnership (2009), a rural lens is defined as a way of viewing issues through the eyes of rural Canadians and raising awareness of these issues across all federal departments. Additionally, the rural lens highlights other rural concerns, including maintaining safe communities and promoting the value of rural Canada as a place to live, work, and raise a family. Once a person develops a rural lens, or way of seeing the world, it is believed that policies and programs will be developed that are more in alignment with, and have stronger application in, rural areas.

This type of connection has received growing attention in higher education with regard to the need to develop place-based knowledge with learners (see Gruenewald, 2003, 2008). Similarly, attention to concepts such as deep learning, experiential education, and service learning are gaining popularity among faculty who are interested in a variety of innovative learning paradigms. Academic programs focused on the well-being of rural areas have experimented with approaches to engage their faculty and students. In other applied disciplines, literature has shown that efforts to bring students into the field with experiential education has produced positive outcomes, such as increased likelihood of

placement of students in rural areas after graduation (see Abuzar, Burrows, & Morgan, 2009; Barney, Russell, & Clark, 1998; Beckerman & Burrell, 1994; Cauley et al., 2001).

Beyond developing this affinity toward work in rural communities, field-based experiential learning also extends student outcomes beyond those produced in typical university classroom instruction. Hope (2009) observes that when students "see it for themselves" they experience both increased enjoyment of learning and increased understanding of material. The material suddenly can become more relevant and more real with personal relationships having been developed (Bialeschki, 2007). Students also develop a heightened perception of their own ability to effect positive change (Boyle et al., 2007), especially if they have had a central role in the planning and facilitation of the field experience (Estes, 2004).

Experiential learning often utilizes journaling to ensure that students reflect on what they encounter in the field. There is growing evidence that such reflective dialogue activity produces deeper learning, improves the ability be self-evaluative, and improves communication skills (Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, & Mills, 1999; Dummer, Cook, Parker, Barrett, & Hull, 2008). Journaling also contributes, when paired with applied research activity, to a more developed awareness of the real-world complexities of research and to a more nuanced understanding of how to use the skills learned in the academy to best meet the needs of the communities they will work with professionally (Cox & Burdick, 2001).

Extension tours are simply one method of experiential education that holds promise for developing a rural lens in learners. The Tourism Research Innovation Project (TRIP) is a 3-year, multipartner initiative taking place in the Province of British Columbia to enhance rural tourism development. The initiative links people in rural communities, such as leaders and operators, to a host of education partners (faculty and students) and government agencies to share information and resources, create stronger networks, and reshape policy and programs in ways that reflect a rural lens. The project utilized numerous methods to share knowledge, including annual extension tours, where faculty and students from partner institutions visited rural areas of the province.

This paper will explore the use of the extension tours in the project with specific emphasis on its value for students, faculty, and rural communities.

2.0 Methods

The observations in this paper were developed over a series of 3 years (2006 to 2008), during which three extension tours were implemented throughout rural British Columbia.

The general objectives of the extension tours were

- to engage undergraduate students in learning and dialogue with business and community leaders in rural areas that pursue tourism as a form of economic development, and
- to understand the realities of tourism development in rural areas, including the processes used, players involved, and successes or struggles encountered.

For 3 weeks each year, a group of university faculty and students from educational institutions throughout the province traveled to rural communities in a different

region of British Columbia. In 2006 a group went to northeastern British Columbia, in 2007 they traveled to central British Columbia, and in 2008 they spent time in the northern and coastal regions of the province. The purpose behind the extension tour was not to be a visitor in the communities but to engage in dialogue with the community leaders and entrepreneurs who are working to diversify British Columbia's rural economy through tourism. Their efforts and strategies vary as do their track records; however, each has knowledge about what has worked and what is not working. This knowledge, when captured and shared, has the potential to benefit all communities, as it acts like a barometer for the collective efforts of the rural tourism industry. The TRIP project was intended to serve as a conduit for this knowledge to be shared from community to community, from communities to educational institutions, and to various levels of government. Another purpose was to introduce emerging tourism professionals to the realities of developing a vibrant tourism industry in a rural area. In this sense, the extension tour was like rural immersion for emerging professionals and was intended to help them develop the rural lens as a way of looking at the world. They could then bring and use this perspective in future career positions.

The opportunity to participate in the tours was made available to learners from four academic institutions early in the academic year. Students had to apply to participate and were selected to represent the different institutions based on their overall learning goals and potential contributions. After students were selected in January, they actively participated in the design of the extension tour on biweekly conference calls with the students in the other institutions. Together, the group selected the general route and undertook research to shape the itinerary. Each student was responsible for leadership on a particular leg of the journey, which required them to make contact with leaders in the community, set up meetings and other learning opportunities, and to facilitate learning with the faculty on those days.

When the extension tour began, learners participated in a 2-day orientation to the overall TRIP project, rural communities, and basic research skills, such as journaling, in-depth interviewing, and project report writing. From here, the group travelled together to the communities in vans and stayed in a range of local tourism accommodations to get the feel of being visitors. While en route, the team gave presentations to communities that requested specific information (e.g., signage audits, innovations from other rural communities/operators), implemented short studies where appropriate, and developed a bank of innovation snapshots on successful operators (see www.trip-project.ca for more details). Learners were also responsible for reading a set of academic articles prepared for them by the faculty leading the tour. Every second evening, the group would engage in debriefing sessions to absorb the reading material and the key themes that they had been hearing and seeing en route. Debriefing sessions have been shown to be an important component of praxis for students (Breunig, 2005; Mackenzie, 2002). The extension tour ended with a 2-day working session, usually back at a university campus, to pull together an annual research report on the key observations of the research team. This report was fed back to every person met along the route and was used as a way to give voice back to the partners in the project, government agencies, funding bodies, and the like.

The extension tour was set up to actively engage learners in applied research, which has been advocated for in the literature (Cox & Burdick, 2001; Panelli & Welch, 2005). Collectively, the team met and talked to numerous stakeholders in

many communities. The field researchers each kept a journal of observations, profiled innovators in tourism development for the project's website, took photos and video footage, and developed a list for follow-up based on the nature of each meeting. The key theme for each extension tour was different: The 2006 focus was on northern, Aboriginal, and remote communities, the 2007 was on cultural and heritage tourism, and the 2008 coastal BC extension tour examined the role of tourism in sustainable development and revitalization of rural and Aboriginal communities in coastal British Columbia, particularly linked with protected areas.

The findings reported in this article were obtained through qualitative analysis of the field journals and reflection on debriefings held during the extension work. The field journals for each year contained a final entry by students on their overall learning experience. These entries were analyzed for emergent themes on the impact of the work on career trajectory plus insights gained about rural development. Themes were grouped into categories and illustrative quotes were extracted and profiled to portray the theme.

3.0 Outcomes

Upon review of the field journals written by all team members (faculty and students) for each of the three extension tours, several themes emerged that provide evidence of the learning that took place by students.

3.1 Realities of Rural Tourism Development and Rural Tourism Assets

From student journals, when students reflected upon the realities that being rural presented to those developing tourism, there was a high degree of consent that a disconnect from technology such as cell phones and high-speed or wireless Internet dominated how people interacted and business was conducted. As well, students seemed to indicate that what they learned was new to them in the sense that it had not been introduced in any way in the classroom or through academic materials. Here are some of their remarks:

> "I have learned through this course that there is a real disconnect between
> rural life and the urban perception of rural life."

> "Rural tourism is very different from urban tourism and this is very
> evident from the feedback from community leaders and residents in the
> rural communities. Even during the research part of this course I was
> reminded of how rural people prefer the direct, yet personal
> communication rather than the e-mail. For example, I was receiving few
> replies from my e-mails; however, once I began to call individuals, the
> response was overwhelming to the project. At times it was difficult to
> reach many people during a time period that I set aside to work because
> they continued to talk and share!"

> "Through the unique vehicle of the extension tour, I was able to learn first-
> hand about the realities that exist for rural and remote areas trying to

develop tourism as an economic resource. As tourism is an intangible product, actually being there in the community and, in some cases, participating in the tourism experience, I was able to better understand some of the complexities of rural, coastal, and Aboriginal tourism development."

"My eyes were open to the many common struggles that rural communities, remote communities and especially Aboriginal communities face when attempting to build a sustainable tourism industry and a sustainable community."

The rural context for development seen by the students echoes the work of Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, and Van Es (2001). Linked to development realities was the recognition of the assets available in rural British Columbia. The extension tours served to showcase the amazing culture and exotic potential available in the students' own backyard. Students began to view tourism assets and the identification of tourism assets more broadly. One student remarked,

"[My] aha moment of the trip was [recognizing] the many natural and cultural assets we have in this province that most of our group had no idea existed."

3.2 Development of a Rural Lens

Students reflected that the experience of so-called rural immersion helped them to see the world differently, that is, from a rural perspective. Outside of the field of tourism, this is an issue shown to need some attention (see Beckstead & Brown, 2005; MacLeod et al., 2004). Development was not just an idea anymore; the students had enhanced their actual understanding of what it looked like in a rural context. Here are remarks from some of them:

"Through growing up in Vancouver for over 20 years, I felt completely sheltered from rural life and rural communities until I was exposed to it through this trip. As a result of education and through community engagement, I've opened up my rural lens to a completely different perspective beyond the urban cities."

"… [An extension tour to rural communities] has helped me to develop a rural lens. I am now more aware of the realities of tourism and the struggles that rural operators are facing."

> "[This tour] helped me to recognize the diversity of rural and the importance of seeing, understanding and working with each community's unique attributes."

3.3 Skill Development

Related to the conceptualization of much experiential education, students also had the ability to grow as individuals through coleadership and reaching out beyond their comfort zones. As stated by Ruhanen (2005), experiential learning serves to play a valuable role in bridging the divide between academic knowledge and practical skills, but it also serves to encourage personal growth (Ferrari & Jason, 1996; Richardson, 2006). The following comments support such observations:

> "[The experience of an extension tour] took me out of my comfort zone and made me plan and implement an itinerary and engage with local people from all walks of life."

> "[My] fears were quickly overturned as I found myself surrounded by a group that openly supported one another and continuously fed one another's desires to learn all we could in the communities we were in."

> "The whole experience made me realize my capabilities not only as an individual but as a professional in the tourism industry."

> "[The experience of an extension tour] taught me the importance of meeting everyone in the community and immersing myself in their culture when I first start working in their town. Forming social relationships when I first move to a town for work is key. I was slightly aware of this before. However, … the strong responses and appreciation that [were] felt when we toured communities and met their leaders showed me that I should not be hesitant about getting out into the community."

3.4 Deep and In-Time Learning

As illustrated by Dummer et al. (2008), deep learning methods enhance students' critical reflection. In the extension tours the richness of group interaction, across institutions and between faculty and students, played an important role in the experience for students. Responses from them included:

> "The depth and breadth of the field-school learning experienced was brought about by an awakening of learning on a deeper level."

> "[O]ne of the most valuable aspects of the field experience were the nightly debriefing sessions where all the students talked about the day and

shared their insights and observations, which then initiated powerful group

discussions and group reflection."

"What I gained from the trip far exceeded my expectations educationally

and personally. I wish I could have done the tour after my first year

because it would have given subsequent theory and content a new depth

and context."

3.5 Emotive Learning

For many students, the exposure to rural residents' realities created powerful emotive responses in their learning experiences. The quotes that follow support the work of Boyle et al. (2007) in terms of the significant effects that work in the field has on them emotionally:

"Wow, where do I start? The knowledge I gained paints a realistic picture

of rural living and the need for survival. I hope that through tourism, many

of the communities we visited will survive. I am left with an uneasy

feeling that some may not."

"[The experience of an extension tour] provided an opportunity for

meaningful interaction with rural citizens and in turn an emotional

attachment to the issues, successes, and celebrations of rural BC and rural

tourism…."

"Overall, the experience opened my eyes to the importance of rural

communities within British Columbia. It highlighted a desire to want to

work within rural British Columbia once I am finished school, for although

there are many issues being faced, the heart of the rural communities in

BC is uniquely exceptional."

Some students reported that they now had deepened connections to people and places. They had expanded interactions with real people and exposure to their issues. One of them said,

"I am from a rural community and have been already looking at life

through the rural lens, but this trip strengthened my values. The trip

allowed me to be with like-minded individuals who looked at life the same

way as I did, fostering unique, lively, and expressive conversations. I

didn't realize how strongly I felt about this particular topic."

Student learning outcomes readily reveal themselves in the quotes made by students above. For faculty members, taken from journal entries, extension tours were a

valuable means for both theoretical and practical intellectual stimulation. With peers from multiple institutions there was an excellent opportunity to network and "vent" and to offer support for like-minded individuals. The immersion time with students allowed for greater interaction and deep learning. With the usual timing of the tours happening just as faculty entered professional development time, the activity allowed for excellent transition from teaching to research.

Communities can often find universities unapproachable entities that can serve to intimidate contact and sustained dialogue. For many communities visited on the extension activity, having the universities come into the community was a first. Typically, rural residents have limited opportunities to engage in learning within their own context, as conferences, workshops, and education offerings are only available in larger urban centres. The expense of time and money to benefit from these opportunities is something many operators or community leaders cannot afford. The extension activity led to opportunities for relationship building and has resulted in stronger links to knowledge resources and people in academic institutions. Follow-up projects have taken place with communities that were visited by students either through course projects or faculty consultation. One of the most important benefits for each community was having the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences with others in different communities or at the government level.

4.0 Discussion

Moving along from all the outcomes, one student summed together every theme:

> "Rural isn't just a population classification, it is a lifestyle indicator that means you *have* to do things differently. It means you hold on to what works, innovate when you can to make things better, and though not entirely true all the time (and nothing against urban living) it generally means that you have a more genuine, intimate, and supportive relationship with your neighbors. And it means you are resilient.

> "As our urban centres become increasingly aware that the lack of support for rural lifestyles has translated into a degraded quality of life for all, the definitive outcome will (with any luck) perhaps be the reawakening of the rural way of thinking (which holds so many answers to so many of the issues we consider prevalent)."

From what faculty saw, heard, and documented in their own field journals it was evident that students had profound learning experiences on the extension tours. However, such learning is only as good as its eventual application. Not to discount the value of simply building new awareness, but change in awareness needs to take place so that action or application will occur. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle speaks to this (see Figure 1).

An important realization with these extension tours is that they are in fact following a modification to Kolb's experiential learning cycle, whereby there are

the linkages at the individual student level, as Kolb intended, but there are also connections to a broader cycle happening for the wider student group (i.e., reflection as a group may then affect both individual student application and group-level application). There could even be linkages made between individual and group-level learning cycles to wider community interaction. For example, if the student or students experience some aspects of rurality and then help community or business members to reflect upon them, generalize them, and then apply such aspects or learning, then there is an even wider scope to the cycle.

Students, individually and collectively, experienced tourism in the rural context and benefited from the experience of those working in rural areas. Students became more aware of the costs, benefits, challenges, and opportunities of tourism in rural areas. Community members and operators had some of their experiences placed in other contexts (from earlier on a particular tour, or externally to the place) or had their experiences confirmed or justified within their own context. The justification of a rural context having value is one that requires further study (see Eider Jr., 1963, for early thoughts on this notion). If rural community members saw this value would it change their ability to apply their experience?
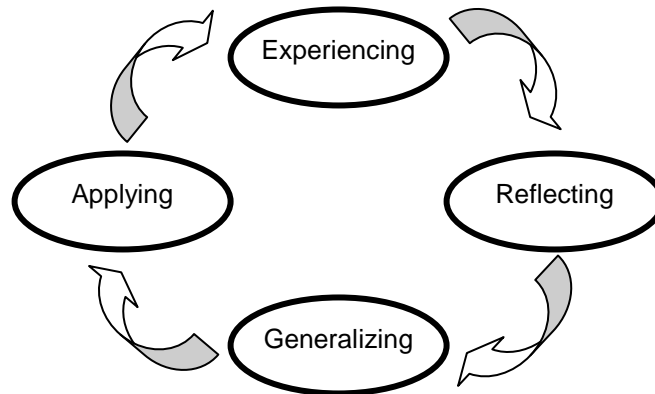

Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (adapted from Frame, 2004, p. 8).

Student reflection on the experience took place in a formalized manner, but likely more informally throughout the entire tour and afterward. Without this feedback loop, field studies might not be fully integrated back into classroom curriculum (Mackenzie, 2002). For community members and operators, engaging with the extension tour may have been the first time they sat down to reflect on their experiences within the industry, but more likely the discussions with the students and faculty served as an initial formal reflection, whereas "nagging" informal reflection may have happened prior to engagement with the extension team.

Generalizing about rural tourism realities was quite often the most valuable connection point for the communities and operators, again similar to the work presented by Wilson et al. (2001). What the communities and operators were experiencing and reflecting upon seemed to be happening elsewhere, which provided some validation to their experiences while at the same time providing grounded observations to the researchers and students. An excellent example comes from the 2008 extension tour during which the team engaged with numerous cultural heritage sites along the route. Some had rich histories, others

were brand new; some had multimillion-dollar budgets, others were struggling; some were built quickly, others took their time. They each had a story to tell and it was really not until the students came through the tour in its entirety and connected the stories together that generalized learning took place. From the students' perspective, these individual experiences may appear to have little in common, yet when viewed together as a set of case studies, generalizations and commonalities were observed that placed the student as a *researcher* who not only was learning new knowledge but also was creating it. By the end of the tour students had developed a rich, general understanding of tourism development in a rural context that shaped their final report.

Application for students started out as they learned to apply their book knowledge to real life in a rural setting. However, it quickly became so much more. Students applied their experiences by capturing individual operator experiences in short innovation snapshots (a short assignment for their coursework), which are available to view at www.trip-project.ca. Application also began when other students applied their experiences by continuing to assist individuals they met along the tour, which is continuing even today. The team (faculty and students together) also applied their learning by preparing an observation report to present to government and by nominating communities/operators, who warranted it, for provincial awards, thereby supporting their work.

While the value of extension tours is not measured by the number of students working in a rural context, it is valuable to track the career paths of those involved in extension activity, similar to the work shown by Abuzar et al. (2009) for dental program graduates. All students indicated at the end of the extension tour that they felt better equipped to work in a rural context based on their learning. Many learners have utilized the experience of the extension tour in their career choices. In tracking students' career paths since their participation in the project, approximately one third have worked in a rural area. While many of the others have chosen careers in an urban context, they utilize their understanding of rural communities in their work. Urban understanding of the barriers that exist in rural settings is tremendously important (see Barney et al., 1998); with the lack of population in rural areas becoming a persistent issue there will be urban linkages to tourism development in rural Canada. Examples from the TRIP extension tours are that one student was offered the opportunity to work in a rural region when he was on the extension tour. In an area where few have an education in tourism, his responsibilities quickly grew to a point where he was engaged in regional marketing of the rural communities in a large geographic region. Another student decided to work in a northern rural area in a different province before returning to British Columbia to work in a provincial agency in tourism. Her knowledge of tourism development in the rural context has been invaluable to the province at a time when economic transition through tourism has been a priority. Some have chosen to work in a rural area for a short period of time to expand their understanding. This experience can expose even deeper realities of the complexities of tourism development as the students become more acquainted with the players on an ongoing basis. One graduate commented after returning from a half-year position with a rural community that one of the biggest barriers to development is the lack of social capital and trust that exists among the stakeholders in the community. While this insight was gained on each extension tour, it had even more relevance to the student after working within the community.

Given Canada's vast land area, reaching out to rural areas is easier when done collaboratively among universities. In the BC context, a host of academic institutions ranging from colleges to universities worked collaboratively to share resources with their rural communities. Doing this for a period of 3 years has resulted in stronger networks among the academic institutions, evidenced by the emergence of new joint initiatives, such as research projects and student fieldwork. This model holds promise for other regions in Canada where tourism programs may be scarce. Working together allows institutions to share faculty time and expertise and to pool students such that rural extension activity can take place when each institution may not have sufficient students by themselves. University and college programs can assist with initiating dialogue (see Bodorkós & Pataki, 2009; Thacheen & Lauzon, 2006) but also offer some security to the communities and operators involved, as they tend to be fairly stable institutions. Such stability and security are also present for the students. If, for example, they fear connecting to people in rural and remote areas, especially First Nations communities, extension tours offer a way to begin and navigate positive relationships (see Bixler & Carlisle, 1994).

While the emphasis of the overall TRIP project was to share current knowledge and resources, the extension tours in particular produced value-added learning opportunities and created new knowledge about tourism development among faculty and students and within rural communities. By visiting rural areas, documenting the commentary from various stakeholders and reflecting upon it with each other, project participants learned a great deal about how to develop tourism in rural areas. Many of the insights concerning barriers to development or realities of tourism in rural areas are not yet evidenced in the literature and are less likely understood by practitioners in economic development. This provides even more support for continued extension activity as a method of inquiry to build grounded theory in tourism development.

5.0 Conclusions

At a time when many rural areas in Canada are pursuing tourism development, academic institutions can assist through research and extension work. Dialogue with community and business leaders in rural British Columbia has revealed that realities exist in the rural context that make the introduction of tourism complex. By seeking more knowledge about these realities, researchers will be better equipped to propose solutions and resources that fit the rural context. Another important mechanism to support tourism in rural areas is to ensure that students are equipped with an understanding of these realities. Taking students out into the field for rural immersion has been shown to produce a range of benefits for students and faculty. For students, the experience was, in many cases, an emotional one, thereby producing deep learning experiences. Active engagement with multiple stakeholders engaged in tourism development allowed students to understand the complexity of such development both in terms of the processes used and the players involved. Over a 3-year period, the experience has also been beneficial to students in terms of career decision making, where some chose to work in rural areas or others have utilized their understanding of the rural context to support policy and program development. This extension tour experience may not be the best learning model for all students (see Dunphy & Spellman, 2009), but it has worked in this instance with a small, select group. For faculty, engagement with extension tours has resulted in stronger networks with community stakeholders, other academic partners, and government agencies. These have produced new

collaborative initiatives, sharing joint questions about the nature of tourism development in rural areas, and continue on today.

Extension tours are not yet the norm in the academic setting and appear mainly on an *ad hoc* basis where a champion exists and resources are available. As Gruenewald (2003) encapsulates, extension tours are a type of "place-based pedagogy," which is needed in higher education. Such pedagogies educate citizens with direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places they actually inhabit. Further efforts to apply extension models to rural contexts should be undertaken to determine whether they should become a more visible option for learners to engage with communities. If so, mechanisms to support faculty and enable extension activity must evolve to provide rural areas with an ongoing, reliable link to the academic world and the knowledge that exists in tourism development.

6.0 Acknowledgements

7.0 References

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