

West Virginia Interpretive Guide Training: A Collaborative Effort

Abstract

West Virginia University's Extension Service partnered with the Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Resources Program to improve guide performance in West Virginia's tourism industry. The result of this partnership is a West Virginia Interpretive Guide Training program aimed at providing low-cost, widely available training to guides throughout the state. The course is divided into two components—a set of online modules and an in-person skill assessment workshop. We expect the benefits of completing the West Virginia Interpretive Guide Training to be similar to the benefits gained by completing national certification courses.

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Introduction

West Virginia University's (WVU) Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Resources Program (RPTR) and Extension Service Community Resources and Economic Development (CRED) formed a unique partnership to train interpretive guides in the West Virginia (WV) tourism industry. The collaborative team is offering an interpretive guide training program, built on the interpretation expertise of RPTR faculty and students, and the community engagement and training experience of CRED. Research on West Virginia tourism and interpretation outcomes, requests for training from local tour companies, and a recently developed Ten Year Tourism Plan for WV inspired the partnership and creation of the training program (AECOM, 2012).

Tourism is an important component of WV's economy, generating \$4.27 billion in spending (Dean Runyan Associates, 2011). Outdoor and heritage experiences are some of the top reasons for travel to West Virginia (Longwoods International, 2010). Continual improvement of the tourism experience is crucial to encourage new and repeat visitors (West Virginia Division of Tourism, 2012). Despite the obvious necessity for tour guides in tourism (McDonnell, 2001), guides receive no attention in WV tourism strategic plans (West Virginia Division of Tourism, 2012). Lack of attention to guiding is a concern because effective guides can influence tourist satisfaction (Ham & Weiler, 2007; Pearce & Moscardo, 1998), raise awareness about resources, and inspire visitors to return (Weiler & Ham, 2002).

A guide's ability to increase visitor understanding and connection depends on interpretive skill (McGrath, 2004). By providing accurate and compelling interpretation, guides can maximize positive impacts of tourism while minimizing negative (Powell & Ham, 2008; Sweeting, Bruner, & Rosenfield, 1999). Therefore, interpretive training of guides in West Virginia can have a positive impact on the tourism industry and economy of West Virginia.

Several national certification programs in interpretation exist. However, cost of certification and time required to obtain certification may act as barriers to guides (Black & Weiler, 2005). National certification programs have extensive accreditation requirements, which can result in high costs for the certifying body and training participant. Becoming a nationally certified interpreter can cost hundreds of dollars (e.g., National Association for Interpretation

[NAI] certification costs \$125-\$200, plus travel costs and recertification fees) and require a multiple day on-site training, making certification unattainable for many guides. Since 1998, only eight WV guides have completed the Certified Interpretive Guide training through NAI.

To address these challenges, WVU's team developed a low-cost (\$50; to cover workshop costs) guide training using online training and in-person assessment. Lower costs, less time commitment, and easier access will allow more guides to become formally trained in interpretation. By using available resources at WVU, costs for developing the program were minimal. By offering the bulk of the program online, travel costs are also minimized for trainers and participants. This type of low cost public sector partnership is a model potentially viable in other states.

Similar nature education and training programs (e.g., Master Naturalist Programs) are offered by numerous state Extension services (Larese-Casanova, 2011). For example, Texas A&M University's AgriLife Extension Nature Tourism program and the Corpus Christi Convention and Visitor Bureau partnered to provide a low-cost training and certification for Wildlife Guides in Texas. However, WVU's innovative partnership is novel because it focuses specifically on interpretive training/certification. There appears to be no other Extension programming that focuses specifically on interpretive training for tourism professionals.

Course Creation and Implementation

Extension has an extensive history in programs that generate public value by improving participants' skills, increasing stakeholder satisfaction, and creating stronger community economies (Kalambokidis, 2011). The complexities involved in tourism development provide opportunities for collaborative programming across Extension disciplines, as well as with other partners (Honadle, 1990; National Extension Travel and Tourism Advisory Committee, 1993). The collaborative partnership between CRED and RPTR offers a unique outreach opportunity that applies faculty and Extension expertise to a community need.

Success of the course relies on the combination of expertise and resources from WVU's RPTR department and the Extension CRED unit. Extension's role as the front porch of the university allows them to connect with faculty expertise throughout the university. CRED staff provided experience with the WV tourism industry, online and community course design, course promotion and recruitment, and program branding. RPTR faculty and students' knowledge and skill in interpretation and course delivery provided expertise to develop effective curriculum.

Because the target audience is guides who are geographically dispersed throughout WV, training is divided into two components—an online course and an in-person assessment. The majority of the course is a set of self-paced, online modules offered through WVU Extension Services' Online Community Learning System (extcommunity.wvu.edu). Five online modules are offered over a 3-month period, giving guides flexibility to complete the course around their schedules. Topics covered online are:

1. History and purpose of interpretation,
2. Topic and theme development,
3. Research and brainstorming,
4. How to develop and deliver an interpretive talk, and
5. A summary of interpretive talk design.

After online course completion, an in-person workshop assessment is led by RPTR faculty, graduate students, and/or WVU Extension's Tourism specialist. During the workshop, guides deliver a 10-minute interpretive talk (prepared during their online assignments). Workshops give guides experience in personal interpretation, provide a forum for guides to receive feedback, and introduce guides to the interpretive evaluation process. After successfully completing training, guides receive a certificate and pin from WVU Extension Service and are recognized as a West Virginia Interpretive Heritage Steward. The first cohort of guides is expected to complete the program in the fall of 2013.

Program effectiveness will be evaluated in a number of ways. Short online pre- and post-course surveys (closed and open-ended questions) will measure changes in knowledge and attitude related to guiding and interpretation (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001; Broun, Nilon, & Pierce, 2009). Post-course surveys will also measure course satisfaction and potential program changes. Additionally, after 4 months, a follow-up survey will ask questions related to changes made to programs based on new knowledge and skills.

Expected Outcomes

Similar nature guide and volunteer training programs (e.g., Master Naturalist Program) are offered by numerous state Extension services. Evaluations of these programs have demonstrated that participants' knowledge and skills improve after training (Bonneau, Legg, Darville, Haggerty, & Wilkins, 2003; Broun et al., 2009; Larese-Casanova, 2011). Thus, we expect this interpretive training to increase interpretive knowledge and skills of participants.

More broadly, we also expect the training benefits to be similar to benefits gained by completing national certification courses. Intangible outcomes for professionals include increased recognition, affirmation of skills and knowledge, and increased career competitiveness (Interpretive Guides Association, n.d.; National Association for Interpretation, n.d.; National Park Service, n.d.). Tangible outcomes may include professional development opportunities, increases in salary, and promotion (Black, 2007). Additionally, businesses will be able to promote guide services more effectively (Corpus Christi CVB, 2012). Finally, visitor benefits could include enhanced tourism experiences, and greater satisfaction (Black, 2007; Ham & Weiler, 2007).

Conclusion

Through a novel collaborative effort, WVU Extension Service and RPTR Program are offering an interpretive guide training course to WV guides. The low-cost training has the potential to impact WV tourism on multiple levels. The course aims to increase visitor satisfaction and spending by improving the skills of guides around the state. By evaluating the effectiveness of this innovative program in the future, RPTR and CRED hope to provide a template for the creation of similar programs elsewhere.

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