UW | Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute

2025-2026

ANNUAL REPORT



Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute faculty and staff attending the Governor's Convention for Hospitality and Tourism in Cheyenne, WY (from left to right): Sara Ghezzi, Morgan Holland, Taylor Kruger, Jordan Kobliska, Hailey Sorg, Zach Blair, and Dan McCoy.

Executive Summary

In 2025–2026, the Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute turned a historic foundation into statewide execution. In its first full year as a named, endowed institute, the WORTH Insitute advanced its mission to expand and diversify Wyoming's visitor economy through an integrated focus on research, statewide engagement, and workforce development.

This year's work shows an institute moving from establishment to execution, embedding students in every mission area and putting Wyoming's visitor economy on firmer research, workforce, and partnership footing.



Photo credit Wyoming Office of Tourism

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE YEAR INCLUDE:

Statewide Reach: The WORTH Institute documented 133 engagements reaching 22 of Wyoming's 23 counties, anchored by two signature statewide events in Saratoga — the 2026 Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Summit and Wyoming Search and Rescue Conference — plus four Wyoming Ag & Art Tours and five Knowledge Exchange webinars that drew more than 300 registrants.

Workforce Innovation: Outdoor Guide Certification courses trained 62 guides from China, bringing enrollment to 329 participants across 30 courses since 2021. New free online courses, Jackson Hole Pro and Guiding for the Future–Wyoming, extended training to frontline hospitality workers and fishing guides, and 21 students earned the CHIA industry credential.

Student Impact: Six students received internship scholarships of $1,000 to $17,000; a UW team won first place and $15,000 in the Pulte Gateway to Hospitality Innovation Challenge; 45 students toured three Wyoming communities on the Wyoming Tourism Industry Familiarization Tour.

Research Leadership: The WORTH Institute produced Wyoming's first outdoor business needs assessment, the first resident sentiment survey in Wind River Country, a recreation funding guide for local governments, and a fourth annual Outdoor Recreation Report with new county-level estimates, now reaching 3,000 addresses statewide. A study underway suggests public lands support $22.7 billion in economic output and more than 64,000 jobs, nearly a quarter of Wyoming's GDP and employment.

National Recognition: Director Dan McCoy represented Wyoming in Washington, D.C., at the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable's first National Executive Forum on Health and Outdoor Recreation and with tourism industry leaders through the U.S. Travel Association. Five students presented research at the ICHRIE Eta Sigma Delta symposium in Boston, and the Institute shared its cross-state research collaboration at CUPSO in Anchorage.

Strategic Growth: An $83,000 AmeriCorps planning grant launched the design of RATOR, which will place members in rural Wyoming communities to build local tourism and outdoor recreation capacity. The Faculty Fellowship Program launched with two fellows, and the first class of WORTH Institute Partners raised $10,000 for student professional development.

Letter from the Director

Dear Colleagues, Partners, and Friends,

It is my pleasure to share the 2026 Annual Report for the Jay Kemmerer Wyoming Outdoor Recreation, Tourism, and Hospitality (WORTH) Institute. Last year we celebrated becoming the nation's first named, endowed institute of its kind. This year we put that foundation to work. Our research, programming, and partnerships reached 22 of Wyoming's 23 counties, and we added new capacity including a faculty fellowship program, a national service program in development, and new training built with and for Wyoming's guides and frontline hospitality workers.

In May, the University of Wyoming conferred an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters on Jay Kemmerer. It is a fitting recognition of a Wyoming legacy four generations deep and of a family whose investment in this state's people and outdoor economy made this Institute possible. Congratulations, Dr. Jay.

Tourism remains a cornerstone of Wyoming's economy. In 2025, the industry generated a record $5 billion in direct visitor spending, supported nearly 34,000 direct jobs, and returned $291.8 million in state and local tax revenue. Tourism is the state's second-largest industry by economic impact and its largest private employer. These figures explain why the work in the following pages matters well beyond our sector.

None of it would be possible without the faculty and staff of the WORTH Institute. Their creativity, rigor, and service run through every page that follows: the summits and conferences they convene, the training they build, the research they publish, and the students they mentor into Wyoming careers. This year we also said goodbye to valued colleagues whose contributions shaped this Institute, and we are grateful for their work.

The year ahead is already taking shape. Our 2026–2027 work plan organizes 17 initiatives and 70 action items across our three pillars, with students embedded in every one. We aspire to stand up the Center for Western Hospitality, complete our AmeriCorps planning grant, welcome an expanded faculty fellowship cohort, and continue the research our communities and decision-makers rely on.

To our partners, faculty, students, donors, and community leaders — thank you for making this work possible. We are grateful for your continued support.

Sincerely,



Dan McCoy, Ph.D.
Director, The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute



Photo credit Wyoming Office of Tourism

Donor Spotlight



Debbie Pummel is the Regional Director of Sales for Safari Hospitality. With over 30 years of hospitality experience, she currently promotes thirteen hotels in Wyoming.

Debbie focuses her attention on being a servant leader, caring about people, and creating outstanding experiences. She loves mentoring future stars who are interested in the world of hospitality and being involved in the community. Her career and service exemplify the leadership, passion, and commitment that define Wyoming's thriving visitor economy. Her commitment to true Wyoming hospitality is evident the moment you meet her. Throughout her career, Debbie has made an incredible impact on the hospitality industry and received the 2026 Big WYO Award for her accomplishments.

Debbie currently serves on the Wyoming Hospitality and Travel Coalition (WHTC) Board, the WHTC Education Foundation, the Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute Advisory Board, and the Wyoming Business Alliance Event Planning Committee. Debbie is a wife, mother to four adult children, stepmom to two adult children, and MeeMaw to twelve grandchildren — eight boys and four girls, ages 1 month to 18 years.

What is something the Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute does that is most important to you, your organization, or the industry? The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute's commitment to strengthening Wyoming's hospitality and tourism workforce is most important to me. Providing practical education, leadership development, and industry partnerships helps our hotels attract and retain quality employees while preparing the next generation of hospitality leaders.

What inspires you to give? I am inspired to give because I believe in investing in people and strengthening Wyoming's hospitality and tourism industry. Helping create opportunities for future leaders and supporting a strong workforce benefits our communities, businesses, and the entire state.

What most excites you about the future of our industry? What excites me most is the next generation of hospitality and tourism leaders. Their fresh ideas, energy, and commitment, combined with Wyoming's strong sense of community, will help our industry grow, adapt, and create memorable experiences for visitors.

What would you say to an individual or organization considering supporting the Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute? Supporting the Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute is an investment in people, stronger businesses, and the future of Wyoming's hospitality and tourism industry. Your support helps develop skilled professionals and future leaders who will strengthen our communities for years to come.

The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute faculty, staff, and students extend their deepest gratitude to all of our donors who help us fulfill our mission. Thank you!

UNIVERSITY of WYOMING GIVING DAY
IT'S GIVING
OCTOBER 21-22 NOON to NOON

This UW Giving Day, the WORTH Institute is raising funds to support professional development that prepares students for rewarding careers in outdoor recreation, hospitality, and tourism. Mark your calendars for Wednesday, October 21, and Thursday, October 22. All donations to the WORTH Institute will help students follow their passions in outdoor recreation right here in the Cowboy State!

The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute's Mission

Expand and diversify Wyoming's economy by supporting the outdoor recreation, tourism, and hospitality industries. We achieve our mission through three operational pillars:

Research: Provide timely and relevant research to address industry opportunities and challenges.

Statewide Engagement: Produce impactful programs and services for communities, businesses, and stakeholders across Wyoming.

Workforce Development: Supply opportunities for students and working professionals to develop the skills and knowledge to thrive in the tourism, hospitality, and outdoor recreation industries.

Our Unique Value Proposition

Few university institutes bring all three of UW's defining commitments to the industries that make up the visitor economy. The WORTH Institute does.

Land Grant Institution — we work where Wyoming works, reaching nearly every county and providing workforce training and development that serves Wyoming's largest private employment sector: tourism.

Research 1 (R1) status from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education — our economic impact studies and applied research products and services influence policy and support local communities and decision-makers. Our research advances UW, the state, and the industries we serve.

Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement — our agenda is set with communities and industries vital to our state's economy. Our programs and services are intentionally designed to serve the people and communities of Wyoming.

The result: the nation's first named, endowed institute of its kind.

Statewide Engagement Map

This map showcases the breadth of our statewide engagement. These activities reflect the WORTH Institute's commitment to strengthening Wyoming's second-largest industry by supporting communities, students, and tourism professionals throughout the state. Our reach in 2025-2026 included:

22 of 23
counties represented in programming and services

66+
towns and cities engaged through research, training, or event participation

Multiple
program types per location (internships, research, outreach)

Internships and Agreements: Locations of interns and internship agreements.

Summit or Conference Participation: Counties represented at the 2026 Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Summit and the 2026 Wyoming Search and Rescue Conference in Saratoga.

Sponsored Research Projects: Counties where the WORTH Institute is conducting or has completed research projects.

Economic Impact Reports: Locations where the WORTH Institute has delivered or collaborated on economic analysis for key events or organizations.

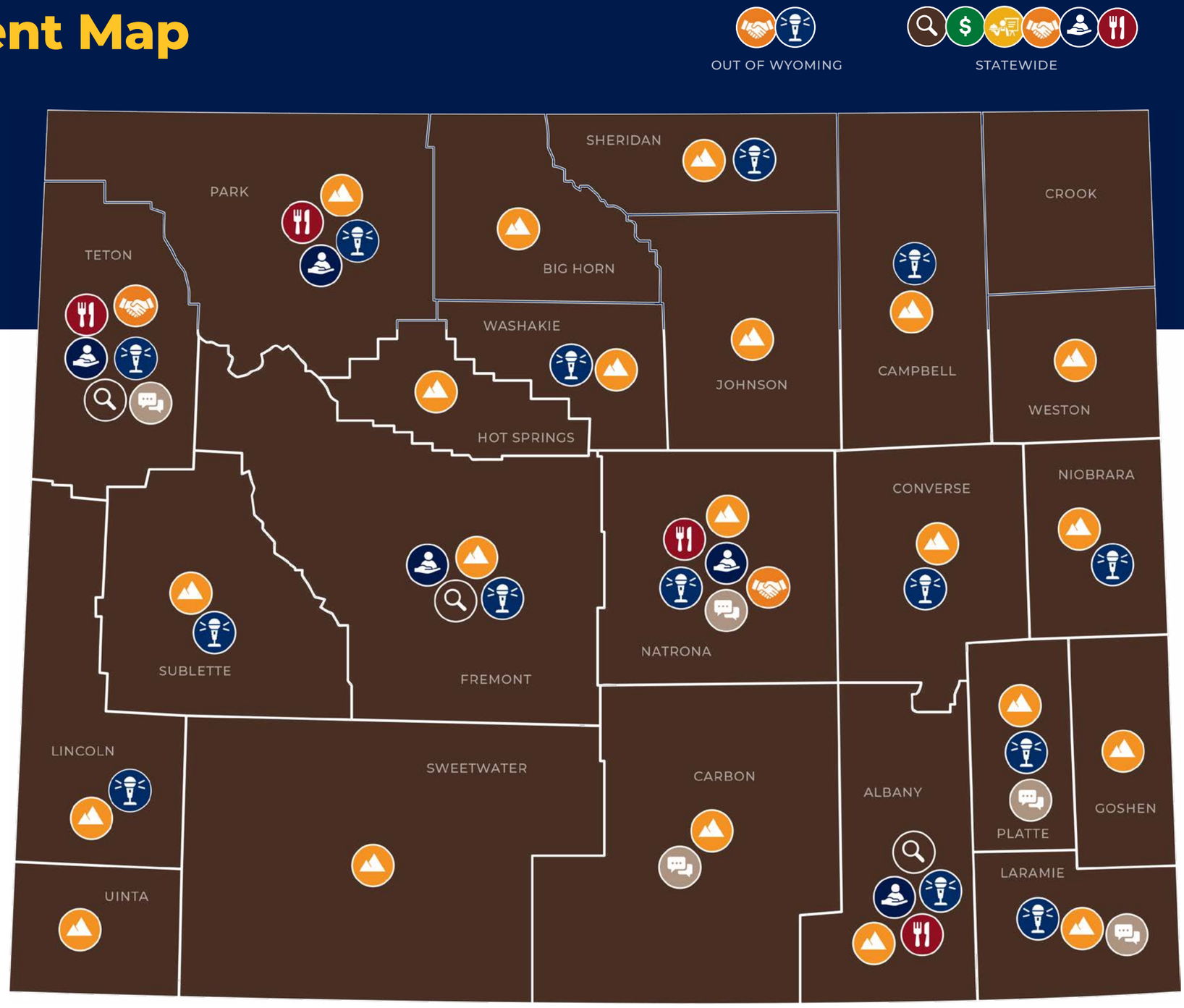
Student Networking and Industry Engagements: Locations of structured events where students interacted with industry professionals.

Hospitality and Tourism Fair Vendors: Business or organization locations of those who attended the spring 2026 Hospitality and Tourism Fair.

Technical Assistance & Partnerships: Communities and organizations where WORTH Institute faculty and staff serve as advisors — sitting on boards, steering committees, and working groups, contributing to plans, and providing direct technical support to partners.

Hospitality & Workforce Training: Locations where the WORTH Institute delivered training, courses, or credentials for employers and working professionals in hospitality, outdoor recreation, and guiding.

Presentation or Conference Session: Places connected to WORTH Institute presentations — conferences, association meetings, commission and committee sessions, and Outdoor Recreation Knowledge Exchange webinar series participants.





Statewide Engagement

The WORTH Institute continues to serve as a vital connector for Wyoming's tourism and outdoor recreation economy through an array of extension, outreach, and statewide engagement efforts. These efforts reinforce our commitment to community collaboration, economic development, and workforce support across the state.

Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Summit

The 2026 Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Summit was held on April 30–May 1, 2026, in Saratoga, Wyoming, at the Platte Valley Community Center. The theme, "Building Capacity for Tomorrow," emphasized intergenerational knowledge exchange, strategic planning, community support, and the importance of partnerships.

Day 1 began with place-based field trips in the Saratoga area. Attendees had five options to choose from: a guided hike along the newly rehabilitated Tie Hack trail, a tour of historic downtown Saratoga and museum, a trip to the Grand Encampment Museum, a workshop session focused on place-based experiential learning for public K-12 educators, and a tour of the Saratoga





National Fish Hatchery. In the afternoon, event attendees convened back at the community center for welcome remarks and a keynote address from Stacy Bare, leading advocate for the use of outdoor adventure as mental health treatment and current director of Friends of Grand Rapids Parks in Michigan. Bare spoke about the impact and transformational quality of outdoor experiences, specifically those that test physical and mental limits.

Day 2 featured general and breakout sessions throughout the day, with built-in networking and vendor mingling time. Attendees heard from Wyoming Office of Tourism Executive Director Domenic Bravo and Visit Bentonville President Kalene Griffith in a fireside chat about the potential strategies and thresholds of outdoor recreation development. Other sessions focused on equipping current and future leaders in Wyoming's outdoor recreation sector with practical tools, resources, and connections to help their communities and organizations thrive. Additionally, three University of Wyoming student groups presented original capstone research projects that they developed for the Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Management major.

Three main takeaways from the event were: 1) Wyoming's outdoor recreation network is maturing from grassroots effort into coordinated infrastructure; 2) Local, homegrown projects are proving the model for outdoor recreation development and stewardship; and 3) The next generation is already in the room, providing opportunity for knowledge and experience transfer. For more information on the Summit, go here.

Search and Rescue Conference

The 2026 Wyoming Search and Rescue Conference (SARC) was held on Saturday, May 2, at the Platte Valley Community Center in Saratoga, Wyoming. This one-day conference brought together Wyoming's SAR community — county sheriffs, SAR teams, state council members, technology experts, and medical partners — for a mix of strategic discussion, technical training, and hands-on skill-building.







The day opened with a keynote from Rulon Gardner, a Wyoming-born Olympic gold medalist who shared a personal search and rescue story and then moved into governance discussions about the possibility of formalizing a statewide structure for search and rescue. The afternoon sessions shifted toward practical and technical sessions (avalanche operations, technology tools, helicopter operations) and closed with a team skills competition and social hour. Three main takeaways from the 2026 SARC were: 1) Wyoming SAR is moving toward formal statewide coordination; 2) Technology and resources remain central to modern SAR missions; and 3) Peer-to-peer learning drives the program. For more information, please go here.

Ag & Art Tours

The WORTH Institute Extension Educator Hailey Sorg helped organize and run four Wyoming Ag & Art Tours this year, a self-guided tour showcasing farms, ranches, agricultural sites, and artisans across the state. The program connected visitors with Wyoming's agricultural heritage, provided opportunities to meet farmers and artists, and offered meaningful experiences of rural life. Events took place in Albany, Laramie, Natrona, and Fremont Counties.

Outdoor Recreation Knowledge Exchange Webinar Series



In our second year of the Outdoor Recreation Knowledge Exchange webinar series, we hosted five webinars covering a variety of relevant outdoor recreation topics and had over 300 registered attendees. This series is a partnership with Colorado State University Extension and several other institutions across the West.

AmeriCorps Planning Grant

The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute is developing a new AmeriCorps program: Resource Assistance for Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Economic Development in Rural Communities (RATOR). This service model is intended to place dedicated AmeriCorps members in rural Wyoming communities to expand local capacity for tourism, outdoor recreation, and economic development.

Tourism and outdoor recreation are cornerstone industries in Wyoming, yet many rural communities lack the human capacity to implement plans and projects. RATOR is designed to close that capacity gap through an extra set of boots on the ground. RATOR will recruit six full-time AmeriCorps members for yearlong placements with host communities around the state. Members will serve as Resource Development Specialists for their host organization while receiving oversight, training, and administrative support from the WORTH Institute.

The seeds for this volunteer program were planted in April 2026 when the WORTH Institute was honored as a recipient of an AmeriCorps planning grant totaling just over $83,000. The planning grant is administered through Serve Wyoming, the official state commission for national service and volunteerism, helping coordinate AmeriCorps programs and connect residents with local volunteer jobs.

Initial meetings with potential partners commenced in summer 2026 and garnered much enthusiasm. Site visits to partner locations are ongoing through fall 2026. Preparation of the formal proposal for AmeriCorps' full operational program grant will be completed during winter 2026–2027, with a final submission deadline in spring 2027.



Workforce Development

The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute remains a hub for developing a highly skilled and adaptable tourism, hospitality, and outdoor recreation workforce in Wyoming. Our efforts span professional certifications, experiential learning opportunities, industry engagement, and targeted trainings benefiting students, professionals, and employers across the state.

Outdoor Guide Certification

We continue to offer the Outdoor Guide Certification both domestically and internationally four times a year. This year, we offered two custom courses for 62 guides from China.

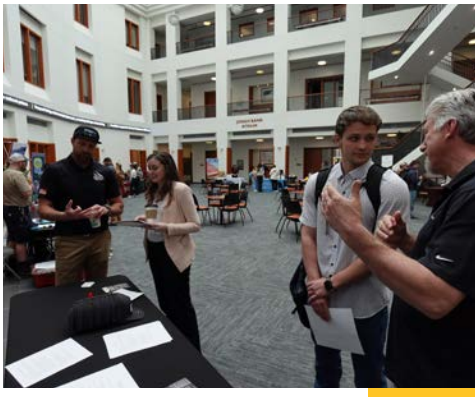
By the numbers:

30 Number of courses since 2021

329 Number of people enrolled in courses since 2021

Hospitality and Tourism Fair

In February 2026, the WORTH Institute hosted its best-attended Hospitality and Tourism Fair to date. The event welcomed more than 125 students and 20 employers — including Wyoming State Parks, Xanterra, and the Ford Wyoming Center, all members of the WORTH Institute Partner Program. A new raffle activity drew more students and kept them at the fair longer, fostering meaningful employment and internship connections.



Pulte Gateway to Hospitality Innovation Challenge

University of Wyoming students Savannah Avey, Kara Waskowiak, Cori Holland, Finn McCoul, and Kellen McCoul earned first place and a $15,000 cash prize in the 2026 Pulte Gateway to Hospitality Innovation Challenge.

Throughout the semester, students in a three-credit course taught by Dr. Sara Ghezzi developed design ideas, new food and beverage offerings, and strategies for community engagement at the Hilton Garden Inn Laramie as it prepares to become Graduate by Hilton Laramie. Students worked directly with Hilton Garden Inn leadership, Graduate by Hilton brand leaders, and the Pulte Family Charitable Foundation to shape their proposals.

The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute is grateful to the Pulte Family Charitable Foundation for its continued support of this hands-on learning opportunity, which gives students valuable industry experience and the chance to apply classroom learning to a real-world hospitality project.



Students with Parker Henderson (second from right), Brand Leader, Graduate by Hilton



1st Place Team (from left to right) — Finn McCoul, Cori Holland, Kara Waskowiak, Savannah Avey, and Kellen McCoul.

Student Internships

In 2025–2026, the WORTH Institute supported six students through the WORTH Institute Internship Scholarships and the Pulte Gateway to Hospitality Student Transformation Fund. These awards, ranging from $1,000 to $17,000, empowered students to pursue high-impact internships across Wyoming with organizations such as:

Xanterra Legendary Hospitality with a softer footprint®

National System of Public Lands — U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management

WCC Wyoming Conservation Corps

Hilton Garden Inn™

Wild West Paddle Club

Visit us here to watch our student stories series.

WORTH Institute Partner Program



The WORTH Institute welcomed our inaugural group of WORTH Institute Partners, raising $10,000 for student professional development programming, internship scholarships, and more. We would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to our 2025–2026 partners: Xanterra (Gold), Jackson Hole EcoTour Adventures (Silver), Maven, Wyoming State Parks, Hilton Garden Inn, and Ford Wyoming Center (Bronze). For more information about the Partner Program, go here.



Partner Highlight: In October, we hosted Gold Partner, Xanterra, on campus for a Company Day. The event included tabling in the Union, visiting classrooms, participating in a job interview workshop, and hosting a luncheon meet-and-greet with students. Xanterra interacted with 38 students.

Student Professional Development

The WORTH Institute provided numerous experiential learning opportunities in 2025–2026:

Wyoming Tourism Industry Familiarization Tour: A three-day trip for 45 students to Casper, Glendo, Guernsey, and Cheyenne included site visits, industry mixers, and networking with more than 30 tourism, hospitality, and outdoor recreation professionals. Special thanks to our hosts in each community!



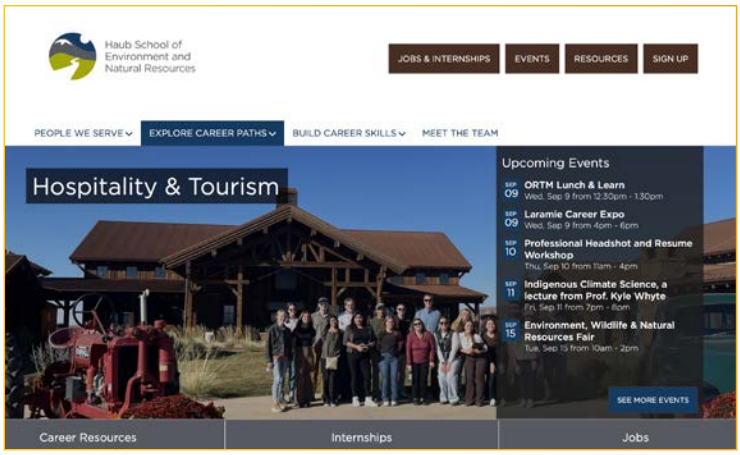
Wyoming Governor's Hospitality and Tourism Convention: We sponsored 11 students to attend this year. Each student was a junior or senior interested in learning more about career pathways and work opportunities in Wyoming. Each student was matched with an industry mentor who shared their professional interests.



Students with Governor Gordon at the Governor's Convention for Hospitality and Tourism.

Brush Creek Ranch Visit: Brush Creek Ranch hosted a group of 12 students at its properties to learn about its hospitality and tourism operations. We had a tour of the facilities and listened to a panel of managers, discussing their roles and backgrounds and promoting work opportunities.

Haub School Virtual Career Center: The Virtual Career Center (haubcareers.uwyo.edu) launched in February 2025. We evaluated our first year of engagement data. Compared with spring 2025, fall 2025 saw more than double the number of users. Engaged sessions — platform visits lasting longer than 10 seconds — also doubled. "Total users" exceeded the graduate and undergraduate student population in the Haub School. This platform has reached beyond current students, attracting attention from alumni, employer partners, faculty, and staff at UW. All figures demonstrate growth in meaningful engagement between the launch period and first full semester of use. The site provides professional development resources, a job and internship board, an event board, and career pathways for students in ORTM and hospitality.



UW Students Present Research at National Hospitality Symposium

Five students (Kara Waskowiak, Elisabeth Ressler, Grace Dahill, Skylar Edmund, and Savannah Avey) presented research on the Pulte Humanitarian Hotel Model and the Pulte Gateway to Hospitality Innovation Challenge at the 2026 International Council on Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Education (ICHRIE) Eta Sigma Delta Undergraduate Research Symposium at Boston University. The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute supported student travel, creating valuable opportunities for research and professional development. While in Boston, students also toured Canopy Boston Downtown and Pennyweight Hotel Boston, Curio Collection by Hilton, where they connected with hotel leaders and managers.



Grace Dahill, Skylar Edmund, Savannah Avey, Elisabeth Ressler, and Kara Waskowiak

UW Launches Eta Sigma Delta Honor Society Chapter

Thanks to the work of Dr. Sara Ghezzi, the University of Wyoming was awarded a chapter of Eta Sigma Delta, the international honor society for hospitality and tourism management, recognizing students for academic achievement,

professionalism, leadership, and service. The inaugural class included 16 students from the Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Management program and Hospitality Business Management minor and track: Cole Grant, Katy Fleming, Sophia Spiva, Addie Kane, Savannah Avey, Kara Waskowiak, Cori Holland, Carter Watsabaugh, Priya Chaudhari, Jakob Haenisch, Savannah Page, David Willems, Lawson Enley, McKayley Lane, Sadie Vandenberg, and Elijah Kern. The new chapter will provide students with additional opportunities for leadership, professional development, and community engagement. More information here.



Jackson Hole Pro

In collaboration with Jackson Hole Travel and Tourism Board and the Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, Taylor Kruger developed the Jackson Hole Pro course—a free, self-paced online course built to equip frontline tourism and hospitality workers with the local knowledge, customer service skills, and Western hospitality principles needed to deliver an exceptional guest experience in Teton County. The course gives frontline hospitality workers the answers, context, and confidence to represent Jackson Hole like a local. Check out the course here.

Guiding for the Future–Wyoming

Working with Wyoming fishing guides Mike Dawes and AJ Sanders, Taylor Kruger developed a Wyoming version of Montana's Guiding for the Future course — an online program designed to strengthen the knowledge, professionalism, and stewardship ethic of Wyoming's fishing guides. The course provides science-based instruction on Wyoming's aquatic ecosystems, fisheries biology, river hydrology, and watershed health, alongside practical training in state and federal regulations, water law, and ethical guiding practices. Participants developed the skills to serve not only as high-quality guides, but also as informed ambassadors for Wyoming's rivers and fisheries capable of educating clients, collaborating with agencies and land managers, and supporting the long-term sustainability of the state's outdoor recreation and tourism economy. Learn more about the course here.



Research

The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute is a leader in applied, interdisciplinary research that informs tourism, outdoor recreation, and hospitality policy and practice across Wyoming. In 2025–2026, WORTH researchers produced timely and impactful studies on topics ranging from economic impact to resident sentiment, workforce, and visitor experience. This body of work advances WORTH's goal of being the go-to research hub for Wyoming's visitor economy.

Student Capstone Projects



This spring, 19 students in the capstone course of the University of Wyoming Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources' Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Management (ORTM) program completed a series of applied research reports to help Wyoming communities, agencies, and businesses make informed decisions about outdoor recreation, tourism, and hospitality development.

The reports were produced through the program's senior capstone course, in partnership with community organizations, public agencies, private businesses, and the Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute. Student teams worked with partners across the state to collect data, conduct interviews, review best practices, and develop recommendations that will be used in real-world planning and decision-making. Read the reports here.

Graduate Student Research

This summer, Jenny Bautz and Bianca Walder, graduate students studying Environment, Natural Resources and Society, collected data for their master's thesis projects in Teton County, Wyoming. Both of their projects are funded by Friends of Pathways, a Teton County nonprofit focused on advancing active transportation, recreation, and healthy living in Teton County.



Bianca Walder



Jenny Bautz

Bianca's project examined pathway users in Grand Teton National Park, aiming to understand who uses the pathway, what motivates them, and whether preferences or opinions differ across user demographics. She conducted a visitor intercept survey this past July and August, talking with more than 300 pathway users. This fall and winter, she will analyze and interpret the data she collected to write her master's thesis, which she plans to defend in April 2027.

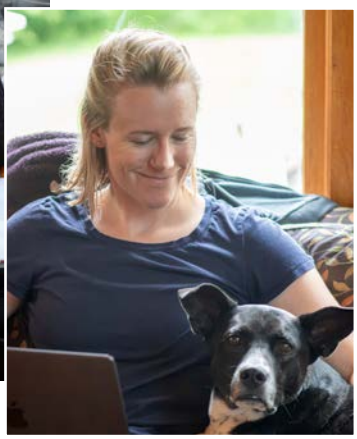
Jenny gathered intercept survey responses from more than 400 visitors to U.S. Forest Service trail systems near Jackson Hole this summer. Responses will be analyzed this fall to determine visitors' perceptions and preferences related to trail system amenities, and to report on demographic comparisons. Jenny will use these data to write her master's thesis and is investigating a focus on local versus non-local perspectives. Jenny plans to defend in April 2027.

Faculty Fellowship Program

The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute launched its Faculty Fellowship Program during the 2025–2026 academic year, creating a new opportunity for University of Wyoming faculty to advance applied research, workforce development, and statewide engagement in support of Wyoming's outdoor recreation, tourism, and hospitality economy. The inaugural fellowship cohort included two faculty members, Sara Ghezzi and Bonnie Johnson, whose work exemplifies the program's commitment to connecting academic expertise with industry and community needs. Supported through the Jay Kemmerer WORTH Faculty Excellence Fund, the program expands faculty impact while fostering innovation, collaboration, and meaningful partnerships across Wyoming. The 2026–2027 cohort includes five faculty from three schools and colleges at UW. More information here.



Sara Ghezzi



Bonnie Johnson

JAY KEMMERER WORTH INSTITUTE

Faculty Fellowship Program

Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Business Needs Assessment and Opportunities



The Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Business Needs Assessment and Opportunities is the first comprehensive outdoor business needs assessment ever conducted for Wyoming. The report was developed through a partnership between the University of Wyoming Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute and Founded Outdoors, with research contributions from students in the UW Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Management (ORTM) capstone class. Findings draw on a survey of 111 Wyoming outdoor businesses and in-depth interviews with 19 owners across 18 counties. More information here.

Economic Impact Research

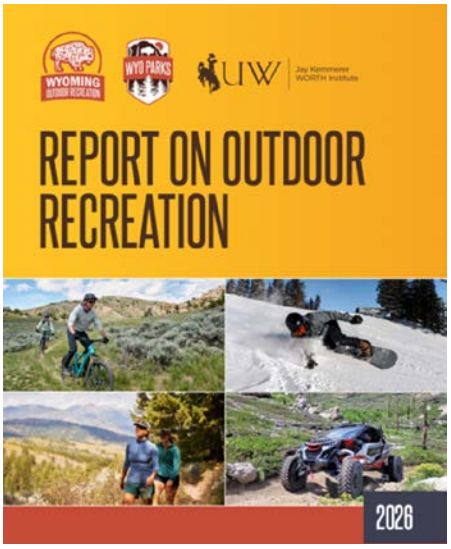
The Value of Public Lands

The WORTH Institute is currently working on an economic impact study of the contribution of public lands to Wyoming's economy. Preliminary results suggest that public lands support $22.7 billion in economic output, $12.8 billion in value added (GDP), $5.5 billion in labor income, and more than 64,000 jobs. This amounts to nearly 25% of Wyoming's GDP and 23% of Wyoming's employment.

Friends of Pathways

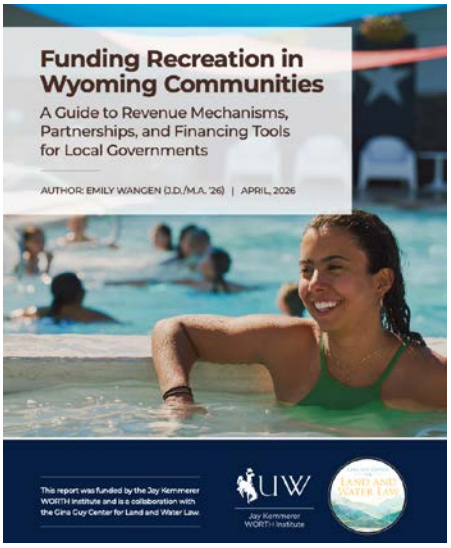
As part of the fee-for-service research sponsored by Jackson Hole Friends of Pathways, the WORTH Institute conducted an economic impact analysis of visitors who use the Jackson Hole paved pathways system. The research leveraged intercept surveys, visitor estimates for Teton County, and cellphone location data to determine how much visitor spending in Jackson Hole comes from pathways users along with secondary economic impacts.

Outdoor Recreation Report



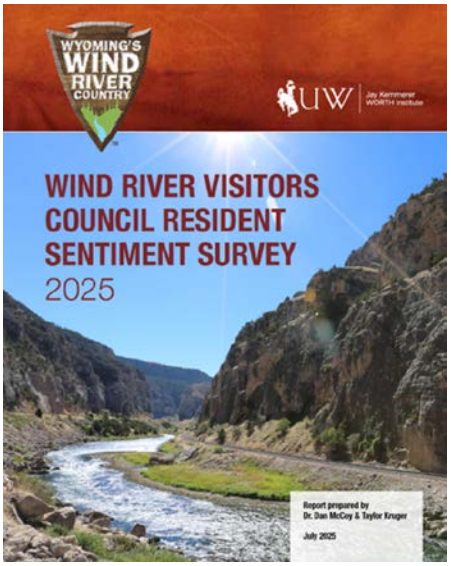
The WORTH Institute, in partnership with the Wyoming Office of Outdoor Recreation, compiles annual reports to document several key elements of how outdoor recreation contributes to Wyoming's economy. In our fourth annual report, we document the work of outdoor recreation collaboratives, the establishment of the Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Trust Fund, and economic impacts from outdoor recreation. In addition to estimating the secondary economic impacts of outdoor recreation in this year's outdoor recreation report, the WORTH Institute added new county-level estimates of outdoor recreation establishments and employment. The report, now shared with 3,000 addresses across Wyoming, continues to be the go-to resource for outdoor recreation statewide. Full details are available here.

Funding Recreation in Wyoming Communities: A Guide to Revenue Mechanisms, Partnerships, and Financing Tools for Local Governments



Working with Dr. Temple Stoellinger and her law student, Emily Wagen, from the College of Law's Gina Guy Center for Land and Water Law, the WORTH Institute supported the development of this report. The report documents the primary funding mechanisms Wyoming law allows counties, municipalities, school districts, and unincorporated communities to build and maintain recreation infrastructure, from trails and parks to aquatic centers and community facilities. Full details are available here.

Wind River Visitors Council Resident Sentiment Survey



The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute, in partnership with the Wind River Visitors Council, conducted the first comprehensive resident sentiment survey in Wind River Country in 2025 to assess local perspectives on tourism. With 511 responses from across Fremont County and the Wind River Indian Reservation, the survey achieved a statistically significant sample. Results show strong overall support for tourism, with 85.6% of residents agreeing it benefits their area and 72.7% wanting to see tourism thrive. Residents recognize tourism's economic importance but express concerns about being left out of decision-making, environmental impacts, and quality-of-life issues such as housing affordability and infrastructure strain. The findings highlight opportunities for greater resident engagement, transparent communication, and sustainable tourism practices. This research provides a valuable foundation for data-driven planning and community-focused tourism strategies in the region.





The WORTH Institute News and Noteworthy Events

Jay Kemmerer Awarded an Honorary Degree

At commencement on May 16, 2026, the University of Wyoming conferred an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters on Jay Kemmerer, the Institute's namesake and founding benefactor. The degree, approved by the UW Board of Trustees, recognizes a Wyoming legacy four generations deep — his great-grandfather, Mahlon Kemmerer, is the namesake of the town of Kemmerer — and a lifetime of investment in the state's people and its visitor economy. Since purchasing Jackson Hole Ski Corp. in 1992, Dr. Jay Kemmerer helped shape one of the world's premier mountain destinations, and the Kemmerer family has reinvested more than $350 million in Wyoming tourism and more than $30 million in philanthropy across the state — including scholarships, the Kemmerer Fellowship in the Haub School, and the gift that created the WORTH Institute. Congratulations, Dr. Jay!



Dean John Koprowski, Dr. Jay Kemmerer, and UW Trustee Michelle Sullivan.

Goodbyes

With a heavy heart, we said goodbye to two exceptional members of the WORTH team, Hailey Sorg and Zach Blair, as they transition to the next phase of their careers. Both individuals contributed a great deal to the Institute, and they will be missed. We are currently recruiting for both positions and look forward to announcing their replacements soon.



Hailey Sorg



Zach Blair

Faculty and Staff Retreat



This year we were fortunate to spend two days at the Absaroka Ranch with our staff reflecting on successes and challenges from 2025–2026 and charting a path for 2026–2027. We would like to extend our sincerest thanks for the amazing western hospitality offered by Lindsay and Brooklyn Judd and Budd Betts.

Elizabeth Blau Connects with UW Hospitality Students

Renowned restaurateur and hospitality consultant Elizabeth Blau visited the University of Wyoming as part of the Smyrnios Speaker Series at the College of Business. During her visit, Blau shared insights from her career in restaurant development, entrepreneurship, and hospitality with students.

Students in the Pulte Gateway to Hospitality Innovation Challenge also had the opportunity to join Blau for a dinner sponsored by the Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute, where they discussed their projects and received one-on-one feedback on their ideas for the Hilton Garden Inn Laramie renovation.

U.S. Travel Association Destination DC

In April, our director, Dr. Dan McCoy, again traveled to Washington, D.C., with a group of tourism industry leaders from Wyoming to discuss issues and opportunities of our visitor economy with our federal delegation.



Outdoor Recreation Roundtable's National Executive Forum on Health and Outdoor Recreation

Director Dan McCoy represented the WORTH Institute in Washington, D.C., in May 2026 at the first National Executive Forum on Health and Outdoor Recreation, hosted by the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable. Alongside U.S. Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum, White House Senior Advisor Kathryn Burgum, and author Richard Louv, participants worked to establish outdoor recreation as part of the nation's health infrastructure, with sessions on youth wellbeing, chronic disease prevention, and rural access.



(left) Frank Hugelmeyer, President and CEO, National Marine Manufacturers Association (Moderator); (right) Secretary Doug Burgum, U.S. Department of the Interior

Consortium of University Public Service Organizations (CUPSO)

In May, graduate student Jenny Bautz and our director Dan McCoy traveled to Anchorage, Alaska, to present their research collaboration among institutes in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming at the CUPSO conference. The research collaboration is ongoing with several projects underway.



CUPSO presenters (left to right) Mackenzie Thompson, Vanessa Fry, Melissa Weddell, Dan McCoy, and Jenny Bautz)

Hospitality Students Earning CHIA Certification

The Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute supported 21 students in HOSP 3000: Managing Profitability in Hospitality by sponsoring the Certification in Hotel Industry Analytics (CHIA) exam. The CHIA is an industry-recognized certification that introduces students to hotel performance metrics, benchmarking, and industry analytics used by hospitality professionals. Through this support, students have the opportunity to strengthen their data analysis skills while earning a professional credential that can benefit them as they enter the hospitality industry.

Engaging with Our Content

Between June 2025 and June 2026, the WORTH Institute expanded its reach across web, email, social, and open-access publishing. The Institute's website drew 7,640 new users and 19,318 page views, with just over half of that traffic arriving through organic search — evidence that audiences are finding the WORTH Institute on their own rather than only through direct promotion. Visitors also stayed: the Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Summit page and the Institute homepage held readers longest, with engagement rates near 60%.

Email remained a dependable channel, reaching 3,039 subscribers with a 27.1% open rate and 3,347 total clicks. Video and social content delivered the widest reach, with Instagram reels and posts generating roughly 37,000 views in 90 days and individual posts drawing between 2,600 and 7,000 views apiece. Three WORTH Institute publications hosted on WyoScholar were viewed 388 times and downloaded 255 times, extending the Institute's research to practitioners and local governments across Wyoming.

Engagement highlights

19,318 website views from **7,640 new users**

50.5% of web traffic came from organic search

37,000 Instagram views in just 90 days

3,039 email subscribers and **3,347 clicks**

5,000 video views and **53 hours watched**

16,914 views on the year's top-performing social media post

255 downloads and **388 views** of select WORTH reports on WyoScholar

Looking Ahead: The 2026–2027 Work Plan

Every year the WORTH Institute team steps away from the day-to-day to ask a simple question: what should this Institute accomplish next, and who is responsible for making it happen? The 2026–2027 work plan is the answer. Built at our team retreat in June 2026, it organizes the year under the three pillars of our mission — Workforce Development, Statewide Engagement, and Research — plus a set of cross-pillar commitments that connect them. Every action item carries a named owner and a budget line where one applies, and the full plan is reviewed in standing check-ins throughout the year.

3
MISSION PILLARS

18
INITIATIVES

71
ACTION ITEMS

100%
NAMED OWNER

Research

5 INITIATIVES
23 ACTION ITEMS

Provide timely and relevant research to address industry trends, opportunities, and challenges.

- Lead signature research projects, including the annual Outdoor Recreation Report
- Pursue emerging projects, from the public lands study to Greater Yellowstone collaborations
- Inform policy and planning, including monitoring legislation relevant to the visitor economy
- Engage Faculty Fellows in their first full program year
- Broaden dissemination by translating research into audience-specific content

Statewide Engagement

5 INITIATIVES
18 ACTION ITEMS

Produce impactful programs and services for communities, businesses, and stakeholders across Wyoming.

- Deepen community presence through active outreach to destination marketing organizations, chambers, and local leaders
- Deliver strategic events, including the 2027 Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Summit
- Onboard a new Extension Educator in close collaboration with UW Extension
- Strengthen partnerships, with the AmeriCorps RATOR program a top priority
- Elevate communications and newsletters

Workforce Development

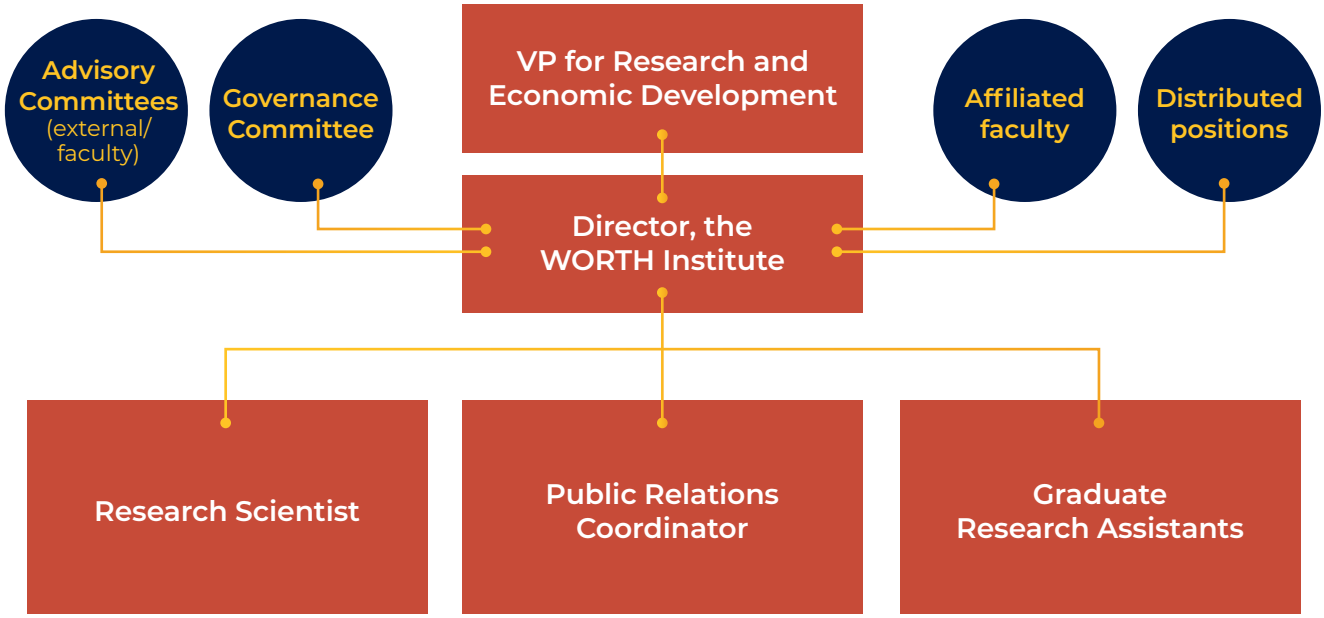
7 INITIATIVES
25 ACTION ITEMS

Provide timely and relevant research to address industry trends, opportunities, and challenges.

- Lead signature research projects, including the annual Outdoor Recreation Report
- Pursue emerging projects, from the public lands study to Greater Yellowstone collaborations
- Inform policy and planning, including monitoring legislation relevant to the visitor economy
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Organizational Structure

The WORTH Institute is organized under the Research and Economic Development Division. The director reports to the Vice President for Research and Economic Development. See the organizational chart below.



Distributed Positions

Distributed positions are financially supported by, and perform duties for, the WORTH Institute, but report to their respective colleges/departments. These positions are allocated to colleges or schools through a Memorandum of Agreement with the WORTH Institute.

Research Scientist/ Economist, CBEA (COB)	Sustainable Tourism, Assistant Professor (Haub)	Internship and Employment Coordinator (Haub/COB)	Extension Educator, Tourism (ALSNR)	Assistant Professor, HOSP (COB)
Morgan Holland	Kelly Dunning	Jordan Kobliska	Vacant	Dr. Zoë Schumm

Affiliated Faculty

Affiliated faculty maintain appointments in other units; however, their work intersects with WORTH Institute-related projects, research, or services. The WORTH Institute affiliated faculty include:

- Ahmed Abdelaty, an Assistant Professor in Civil and Architectural Engineering and Construction Management, UW
- Melanie Armstrong, Director of the Ruckelshaus Institute and Associate Professor in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources, UW
- Eric C. Atkinson, Associate Professor of Biology at Northwest College, Powell
- Yi-Ling Chen, Associate Professor in the School of Politics, Public Affairs, & International Studies, UW
- Kayla Clark, Assistant Lecturer in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources and the Communication & Journalism department, UW
- Kelly Dunning, Timberline Associate Professor of Sustainable Tourism and Outdoor Recreation, UW
- Sara Ghezzi, Professor of Practice of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Management, UW
- Matt Hamilton, Associate Professor and Eldon and Beverly Spicer Chair in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources, UW
- Bonnie Johnson, Assistant Lecturer and Degree Coordinator in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources, UW
- Elizabeth Minton, Associate Professor of Marketing, UW
- Brian Linton, Central Wyoming College
- Tarissa Spoonhunter, Assistant Professor in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources and Director of the High Plains American Indian Research Institute, UW
- Temple Stoellinger, Associate Professor and Wyoming Excellence Chair with a dual appointment in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources and the College of Law, UW
- Richard Vercoe, Assistant Lecturer in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources, UW
- Darran Wells, Central Wyoming College
- Chen Xu, Associate Professor in the School of Computing, UW

Advisory Committees

The WORTH Institute relies on the expertise, feedback, and input from an external advisory committee consisting of industry professionals in Wyoming, a UW faculty advisory committee, and a governance committee.

External Advisory Committee

The WORTH Institute Advisory Committee supplies advice, support, and coordination between both private industry and agencies. A majority of the members represent various private industry sectors. The current membership is below. If you are interested in serving on the Advisory Committee, please contact the Director. The expectations of the external advisory committee members are to:

1. Participate in bi-annual meetings timed with the Fall Hospitality and Tourism Summit and the Governor's Hospitality and Tourism Conference (the dates and times vary each year).
2. Advise the WORTH Institute.
3. Offer insight on current and future trends and needs within the recreation and tourism industry.
4. Provide expertise to assist UW in supporting the recreation and tourism industries in Wyoming.

External advisory committee membership:

First Name	Last Name	Title	Organization
Budd	Betts	Owner	Absaroka Ranch
Domenic	Bravo	Executive Director	Wyoming Office of Tourism
Chris	Brown	Executive Director	Wyoming Hospitality and Travel Coalition
Dave	Glenn	Director	Division of State Parks, Historic Sites, Trails, and the Outdoor Recreation Office
Tom	Holland	Executive Director	Wilderness Adventures
Sarah	Howe	Director of Sales and Marketing	Grand Teton Lodge Company
Mike	Keller	General Manager of Yellowstone National Park Lodges	Xanterra Parks & Resorts
Karen	Kemmerer	Haub School Board Member	CM Ranch
Alex	Klein	Vice President and General Manager	Grand Teton Lodge Company and Flagg Ranch Company
Amy	Larsen	Industry Relations Manager	Wyoming Office of Tourism
Mike	Lilygren	Co-Owner	Maven Outdoor Equipment Company
Debbie	Pummel	Director of Hotel Performance	Safari Timberline Hospitality
Shannon	Schiner	Guest Experience Director	Jackson Hole Mountain Resort

UW Faculty Advisory Committee

Membership on the faculty advisory committee consists of a diverse array of campus constituents. The Director invites members to the committee through college deans, faculty senate (for the at large position), and the vice president for research and economic development, to serve two-year terms. The committee meets at least twice per year. The purpose of the UW faculty advisory committee is to:

1. Understand the WORTH Institute background, history, relevance, and importance and,
2. Advise the WORTH Institute on current initiatives, future directions and,
3. Increase cross-campus collaboration.

UW faculty advisory committee membership:

First Name	Last Name	Department
Chase	Thiel	College of Business
Bonnie	Johnson	Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources
Derek	Scasta	College of Agriculture, Life Sciences, and Natural Resources
Mark	Lyford	Office for Research and Economic Development
Caroline	McCracken-Flesher	College of Arts and Sciences
Jeff	Hamerlinck	At large

Governance Committee

The WORTH Institute Governance Committee provides high-level guidance and strategic oversight to the Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute. Comprised of senior university leadership, the committee ensures that the Institute's mission, programs, and partnerships remain aligned with the University of Wyoming's strategic priorities and land-grant mission. This committee serves as a vital conduit between the Institute and the broader university administration, offering input on major initiatives, funding opportunities, academic integration, and long-term sustainability.

The committee advises on:

- Strategic direction and alignment with university and college/school goals
- Opportunities for cross-college/school collaboration and interdisciplinary research
- Integration of workforce development initiatives across academic units
- Evaluation of institutional support and resource needs
- Advancement of the WORTH Institute's statewide and national profile

The WORTH Institute Governance Committee meets bi-annually, as needed, to review progress, provide feedback, and help shape the future of the Institute in service to Wyoming's visitor economy.

Governance committee membership:

First Name	Last Name	Title
Scott	Beaulier	College of Business
John	Koprowski	Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources
Kelly	Crane	College of Agriculture, Life Sciences, and Natural Resources
Parag	Chitnis	Office for Research and Economic Development



UW | Jay Kemmerer WORTH Institute

WYOMING INNOVATION partnership

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College of Business, Rm. 370 · 1000 E. University Ave., Laramie, WY 82071

Phone: (307) 766-5009 · Email: worth@uwyo.edu · www.uwyo.edu/worth