

First tourism leadership class graduates recognized

[Ms. Susan M. Collins-Smith](#)

MSU Extension Service

RAYMOND, Miss. -- Members of the inaugural Excellence in Tourism Leadership Program graduated from the program and received their certificates on Oct. 5.

The two-year program helps tourism professionals learn how to market and increase tourism while gaining insight into leadership, advocacy, public policy and administration. Participants can earn an associate certificate and an advanced mastery certificate.

The Mississippi State University Riley Center in Meridian hosted a graduation ceremony in conjunction with the 2023 Mississippi Tourism Association Governor's Conference on Tourism for class members who completed the mastery level.

"I am incredibly impressed with the creativity, professionalism and dedication of the class," said Rachael Carter, tourism specialist with the MSU Extension Service Center for Government and Community Development. "The projects they have implemented to enhance tourism and quality of life in Mississippi will generate positive economic impacts and are truly examples of excellence in leadership."

Class members who completed the mastery level are Katie Coats, director of marketing and public relations with Visit Ridgeland; Ashley Gatian, sales and marketing manager with Vicksburg Convention and Visitors Bureau; Kimberly Lewis, destination development manager with Visit Jackson; Ferrin Rainey-Calvert, tourism executive with Tishomingo County Tourism; Danielle Morgan, executive director of Mississippi Tourism Association; Kristen Brock, director of programs and promotions with Visit Hattiesburg; Billye Jean Stroud, director of community development and New Albany Main Street Association with the city of New Albany; and Paige Hunt, director of tourism with Greater Starkville Development Partnership.

Those who completed the associate level are Frances Glen, marketing director with Visit Columbus; Nancy Carpenter, chief executive officer with Visit Columbus; Stratton Hall, Jackson area director of sales with Desai Hotel Group; Rachel Obermeier, director of sales with Visit Mississippi; Sharon Johnson, financial assistant with Visit Columbus; Amanda Roll, tourism director with EDA of Jones County; Janet Reihle, executive director of Chamber of Flowood and Visitor Center; Ashley Farmer, executive director of Greenwood Convention and Visitors Bureau; and Emily Steen, brand manager with Visit Corinth.

Participants who complete the first year's coursework and attend in-person events earn an associate certificate. Those who continue into the mastery certificate program complete advanced training, which requires additional coursework, the completion of a capstone project and a presentation to the class.

The program was designed and implemented by the MSU Extension Center for Government and Community Development in partnership with the Mississippi Tourism Association. MSU experts and industry professionals provided training.

Application to be a part of the next Excellence in Tourism Leadership Program opens Nov. 1 at <https://tinyurl.com/bddzrcty>. For more information about the program, visit the Extension website at <https://tinyurl.com/cn49kbsn>.

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Janet Reihle of the Chamber of Flowood was chosen by the Mississippi Tourism Association as a scholarship recipient to attend the Excellence in Tourism Leadership program and has completed the associate's degree. She plans to continue and complete the mastery level next year.

She says, "I can't say enough about how much this program helped me understand the impact tourism has on our local businesses. I am very grateful to The Mississippi Tourism Association for investing in me with this scholarship and learning experience."