STHM hosts 21st Annual Graduate Education and Graduate Student Research Conference

More than 325 faculty and graduate students in the fields of tourism and hospitality management traveled from around the globe to attend the 21st Annual Graduate Education and Graduate Student Research Conference, hosted by STHM and held Jan. 7-9 at the Doubletree Hotel Philadelphia.

This annual conference provides a platform for networking and the exchange and fostering of cutting-edge research within the tourism and hospitality fields.

One of the conference’s top highlights came from a keynote address delivered by Christopher Thompson, President and CEO of BrandUSA, the nation’s public-private partnership dedicated to increasing international visitation to the United States. Mid-sentence, Thompson paused his keynote and allowed a smile to inch across his face. He couldn’t help himself, as he enjoys talking about what he loves.

“I did not create this brand, but it’s one of the most-compelling brands in the world,” Thompson said, referring to the United States. “Those three letters — USA — are intimidating. But I’m lucky. In my job, I get to wrap my arms around those three letters and leverage their power and brand. And to me, we’re only getting started.”

A welcome session by STHM and Sponsors’ Reception capped the first day of the three-day conference. “Our school will soon celebrate its 18th anniversary, and I know this elite conference will serve as one of the highlights in our history,” said STHM Associate Dean Dr. Elizabeth H. Barber, the conference’s chair, who lauded the tireless efforts of conference program chair Dr. Michael (Chihyung) Ok.

Thompson, of Brand USA, joined two others as the conference’s keynote speakers. Jack Ferguson, President and CEO of the Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau, spoke to attendees Jan. 7, sharing all that the City of Brotherly Love has to offer. The next evening, following Thompson’s lunchtime address Jan. 8, Duane Vinson gave attendees a glimpse into his work as Vice President and Assistant Director of STR SHARE Center, which serves as the barometer for all hotel statistics research and works with hospitality and tourism schools around the world.

Two individual awards were presented at the conference’s conclusion. Dr. Richard Perdue of Virginia Tech University received the Founder’s Award, in recognition of his world-class scholarship and research contributions in tourism and hospitality. The Founder’s Award is handed out annually in honor of conference founder Dr. Kaye Chon, of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Additionally, Dr. Fevzi Okumus of the University of Central Florida received the University of Delaware Michael D. Olsen Research Achievement Award, recognizing scholars who have concentrated on hospitality at a higher level and have entered the scientific realm of new knowledge contribution.

—Christopher A. Vito