

Toward a values-driven research culture: passion, collaboration, and decency

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Toward a Values-Driven Research Culture: Passion, Collaboration and Decency

Abstract

An overemphasis on publishing metrics often shifts attention away from the true purpose of research, i.e., advancing knowledge and encouraging discovery. This piece explores the potential for a values-driven approach to academia emphasizing i) passion, ii) collaboration, and iii) decency as foundational principles. Given the growing pressure on early-career researchers to meet publication demands, there is an opportunity to consider how academic environments might better support meaningful contributions over sheer output. We reflect on the importance of nurturing genuine curiosity, embracing open science, and fostering collaborative, diverse teams to address complex global challenges relevant to tourism. By contemplating a shift from metric-driven to values-driven priorities, we discuss how academia might more closely align with its core mission of knowledge creation and dissemination.

Keywords: Research Culture; Passion in Research; Collaboration; Decency; Open Science; Early-Career Researchers; Publish-or-Perish

1 Introduction

2 In an academic world increasingly shaped by metrics, rankings, and the relentless pressure to
3 publish, the fundamental purpose of research — generating new knowledge, fostering
4 discovery, and advancing understanding — often risks being overshadowed (Trueblood et al.,
5 2025). While these metrics are designed to provide benchmarks for performance, they often
6 distort incentives, promoting a "publish or perish" culture that may compromise originality,
7 depth, and societal relevance (Moher et al., 2018; Fire and Guestrin, 2019). This dynamic
8 disproportionately affects early-career researchers, who may prioritize strategic publishing
9 over meaningful inquiry due to job market pressures (Wilsdon et al., 2015; Lee and
10 Benjamin, 2023). In tourism academia, this pressure has manifested in a surge of manuscript
11 submissions and a growing emphasis on high-impact publications, sometimes at the expense
12 of innovative or interdisciplinary research (Agarwal et al., 2024). Consequently, the broader
13 academic mission — advancing understanding, fostering discovery, and engaging with
14 societal challenges — risks being reduced to a numbers game.

15 The field has seen a significant growth in submissions over the past two decades. For
16 instance, the Journal of Travel Research has experienced a substantial rise in manuscript
17 submissions, from approximately 300 per year in 2008 (Perdue et al., 2009), to more than
18 1,300 in 2024 (personal communication with the editor, 2025). Similarly, Annals of Tourism
19 Research has surpassed 1,000 submissions annually—based on triangulated data available on
20 the journal's website and Scival analytics—which further confirms this trend. The same
21 pattern is evident across the tourism and hospitality, with an exponential and sustained
22 growth between 2019 and 2021, driven by the additional time scholars had during the
23 pandemic to engage in writing (Font et al., 2023). Unfortunately, this upward trend in output
24 is not linked to an increase in academic-industry collaborations and is only partially related to
25 an increase in international collaborations (Scival, 2025). Strengthening collaborations is
26 essential because the complex, multifaceted challenges faced by the tourism industry — such
27 as sustainability, technological disruption, and socio-cultural impacts — require
28 interdisciplinary approaches and practical insights (Okumus et al., 2018). Partnerships
29 between academics and industry practitioners enrich research relevance, enable knowledge
30 exchange, and foster innovation that can better respond to real-world needs (Scott et al.,
31 2017). Moreover, international collaborations broaden perspectives and promote diversity in
32 approaches, enhancing the global applicability of tourism research.

1 In light of these challenges, recent academic reform movements have gained
2 momentum, advocating for more equitable, socially just, and impact-driven practices within
3 scholarship. For instance, Benjamin et al. (2024) critically examine how systemic pressures
4 and metric-driven cultures undermine inclusivity and quality in tourism research. Their
5 critique focuses on three main issues: the overemphasis on publishing metrics, structural
6 inequalities in academia, and systemic pressures that disadvantage marginalized scholars.
7 Expanding on this, Gard-McGehee (2024) introduced the “Deep Scholarship Movement”,
8 proposing three key strategies for academic reform: mobilizing leadership, redistributing
9 resources, and building consensus. This discussion has sparked global debate about academic
10 success metrics, particularly visible in Tourism Research Information Network (TRINET)
11 discussions and editorial debates.

12 While we support these structural reform calls, we argue that lasting change in
13 academia requires more than systemic restructuring — it demands a shift in academic culture
14 itself. Scholars have highlighted that traditional academic structures often prioritize
15 managerial success over values-based leadership, which can hinder meaningful research and
16 innovation (Whittaker and Montgomery, 2022). Embedding core values throughout academic
17 practice ensures that curiosity-driven inquiry and ethical engagement remain central to
18 scholarship. Additionally, research on cultural policies demonstrates how a value-driven
19 framework can shape institutional transformations, promoting sustainability and collective
20 progress (Mlitz and van den Hoogen, 2023). Our contribution is not intended as a definitive
21 solution, but as a catalyst for dialogue and grassroots change. By articulating a clear vision
22 for a values-based academic culture — centred on passion, collaboration, and decency — we
23 aim to provide a shared language and moral foundation that early-career scholars and
24 academic leaders alike can use to reimagine practices in their own institutions.

25 As a young research division lead and a seasoned professor with extensive editorial
26 experience, we write from distinct but complementary standpoints within academia. This
27 piece is grounded in a positionality statement, reflecting our lived experiences navigating
28 institutional demands, mentoring early-career scholars, and shaping research agendas. Our
29 reflections are informed by our respective roles in fostering academic communities and
30 promoting inclusive, meaningful scholarship. By sharing this perspective, we aim to
31 contribute to ongoing conversations about how academic environments might better support a
32 values-driven research culture — one that prioritizes passion, collaboration, and decency over
33 productivity metrics.

The Problem: Metrics Over Meaning

At its foundation, the publish-or-perish mindset emphasizes output quantity over the substance of contributions. Indicators such as citation counts, h-indices, and journal rankings have become dominant measures of academic achievement, influencing decisions on promotions, funding allocations, and institutional standings (Moosa, 2024; Trueblood et al., 2025). Although these metrics offer a quantitative framework for assessment, they often promote behaviours that detract from the fundamental goals of research. For example, the pressure to satisfy metric-based criteria can encourage practices like focusing on safe, incremental studies that are easier to publish but contribute less to advancing knowledge (Kozlov, 2023; Fire and Guestrin, 2019).

Moreover, researchers may feel obligated to chase “popular” topics rather than those that truly resonate with their skills or intellectual interests, thereby diminishing the uniqueness and depth of their work (Baum et al., 2020). A clear example of this phenomenon was the surge in academic papers on COVID-19, where scholars across disciplines — often beyond their primary areas — pivoted to pandemic-related topics in response to funding and publication opportunities (Zenker and Kock, 2020). More recently, the explosion of interest in Generative AI has prompted a similar wave of submissions, often prioritizing trend-driven outputs — such as descriptive pieces on the dark side of Generative AI — over deep, foundational inquiries (Van Dis et al., 2023). While engaging with pressing societal issues is important, an overemphasis on short-term relevance can sometimes come at the expense of sustained theoretical, practical and methodological depth. These dynamics are particularly pronounced for early-career academics, who frequently face unstable job prospects and are driven to “navigate” the system strategically to secure an academic position (Lim, 2025). This cycle of metric-focused publishing not only perpetuates itself but also undermines the enthusiasm and curiosity that should define academic exploration. Importantly, without real societal or industry relevance, academic knowledge risks becoming insular, raising questions among policymakers about the return on public investment in research (Martin, 2011).

To counteract the unintended consequences of a metric-dominated system, we argue that academia must re-center itself around core human values that inspire genuine scholarship. One such value — perhaps the most intrinsic to meaningful academic work — is passion.

The Role of Passion in Research

Passion is a key driver of transformative research — that is, research that challenges established norms, reshapes conceptual paradigms, or creates meaningful impact within and beyond academia (National Science Board, 2007). While curiosity often sparks initial interest in a topic, passion represents a deeper, enduring emotional and intellectual commitment that sustains researchers through the long, often uncertain journey of inquiry (Kashdan and Silvia, 2009; Chen and Zhao, 2024). Passion is more than just an academic interest - it is the fire that drives scholars to challenge conventional wisdom, push disciplinary boundaries, and persist through setbacks. Passion is what makes researchers wake up in the middle of the night to jot down an idea or spend years refining a theory despite repeated failures (Chen and Zhao, 2024). It is, in many ways, an uncontrollable force — an emotional and intellectual commitment that gives purpose to the academic journey (Curran et al., 2015). Scholars who are genuinely committed to their work are more inclined to address difficult questions, adopt pioneering methodologies, and spend days and months deeply engaged with their subjects. Research fuelled by passion achieves higher quality outcomes and motivates others, cultivating an environment of curiosity and innovation.

Research passion shares striking similarities with entrepreneurial passion (Cardon et al., 2009). Just as entrepreneurs take risks to bring innovative ideas to life, scholars navigate the uncertainties of discovery, often without immediate rewards or guarantees of success. Entrepreneurs are driven by a deep conviction in their vision, much like researchers who dedicate years to a problem they believe is worth solving. Both fields require resilience, adaptability, and a willingness to challenge established norms. Passion is not merely an individual trait; it is a value that underpins a more meaningful and principled approach to academic life. In the context of a values-driven research culture, passion represents a commitment to intellectual integrity and long-term scholarly contribution (Cardon et al., 2009; Curran et al., 2015). When passion is embraced as a core value, it guides researchers to pursue work that matters — to themselves, their disciplines, and wider society — even when that work may not immediately align with mainstream metrics or trends (Chen and Zhao, 2024). In this way, passion anchors research in authenticity and purpose, and supports environments where intrinsic motivation can thrive (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

However, the current academic landscape often suppresses passion. The pressure to align with institutional agendas discourages researchers from pursuing unconventional or high-risk topics (Willmott, 2011). This challenge is particularly acute for young scholars,

1 who often face the dual pressure of producing high-quality publications while also competing
2 for limited funding opportunities (Lee and Benjamin, 2023; Lim, 2025). The rising
3 expectations for early-career academics to publish during doctoral studies — a requirement
4 increasingly seen as essential for securing academic positions — exacerbates this tension.

5 The sheer volume of submissions to journals has also escalated, driven in part by
6 institutional incentives that reward publication quantity over quality and a competitive
7 academic job market that pressures early-career researchers to publish rapidly and frequently
8 (Benjamin et al., 2024; Lee and Benjamin, 2023). This intensification of the publication race
9 heightens competition and can crowd out more exploratory or high-risk intellectual work. For
10 younger researchers, navigating this crowded landscape can feel overwhelming, as they are
11 required to balance the demands of publishing, teaching, and securing funding, all while
12 building a sustainable career trajectory (Benjamin et al., 2024). Institutions must create
13 conditions where passion can thrive. This might involve granting researchers more freedom
14 to choose topics, funding exploratory projects, or valuing contributions that do not fit neatly
15 into traditional metric-based success measures.

16 Academics must also take responsibility for aligning their efforts with their personal
17 interests. Instead of asking, “What will secure an output soon?”, we should ask, “What
18 excites me? What challenges me? What difference can I make through this work?” By
19 grounding our research in passion, we can achieve both personal satisfaction and meaningful
20 impact in the long run because we will be recognized as an expert in the field (or
21 methodological approach) we are passionate about. While passion anchors the research
22 process in authenticity and purpose, it is through collaboration that ideas are enriched, tested,
23 and brought to fruition. In a values-driven academic culture, working with others becomes
24 not just a means to an end but a core value in itself — one that fosters diversity, inclusivity,
25 and mutual learning.

26 **Collaboration Across Boundaries**

27 Collaboration is fundamental to cultivating a values-based research culture (Bozeman and
28 Boardman, 2014). Effective collaboration is not just about dividing tasks — it’s about
29 exchanging ideas, learning from one another, and fostering synergies grounded in empathy,
30 fairness, and integrity. This is particularly critical for addressing complex, interdisciplinary
31 issues that demand diverse expertise and complementary competences (Fyall and Garrod,
32 2005).

1 Collaboration is not without challenges. Power imbalances within teams can result in
2 uneven workloads, often leaving junior researchers disproportionately burdened while
3 receiving minimal acknowledgement (Benjamin et al., 2024; Kwiek, 2020). Moreover,
4 institutional silos can hinder efforts to form partnerships that span disciplines or organizations
5 (Cummings and Kiesler, 2007). To mitigate these challenges, it's essential to foster a
6 collaborative environment where all voices are heard, and contributions are valued. This
7 requires not only clear communication from the very outset but also a genuine commitment to
8 building trust and respect among team members.

9 To make collaboration more inclusive, meaningful, and aligned with our core values, we
10 offer the following strategies:

- 11 • **Promote diversity in research teams:** Invite varied perspectives across gender,
12 geography, discipline, and career stage to enrich the intellectual and ethical quality of
13 research.
- 14 • **Set clear expectations from the outset:** Clarify roles, responsibilities, and credit-
15 sharing early to build trust and reduce potential conflict.
- 16 • **Build emotionally supportive teams:** Choose collaborators who energize you,
17 celebrate your successes, and support you in failure. Research should be a shared,
18 human experience.
- 19 • **Reflect on the broader impact of your work:** Prioritize projects with relevance
20 beyond the academy, and write in ways that engage stakeholders and communities.
- 21 • **Foster inclusive, boundary-crossing collaborations:** Go beyond disciplines,
22 institutions, and borders — not to chase prestige, but to co-create knowledge with
23 those who bring complementary insights and commitments.

24 By embracing both the intellectual and emotional sides of collaboration — from
25 cultivating diverse, supportive teams to pursuing broader societal impact — researchers can
26 forge stronger relationships and generate more meaningful, enduring contributions.

27 **Decency in Academic Publishing**

28 With the term decency, we refer to some minimal standard of conduct expected within an
29 academic setting. This goes beyond compliance with formal rules or ticking procedural
30 boxes. Decency means acting with responsibility, fairness, and respect — not because
31 external codes demand it, but because it reflects a deeper commitment to the values that

1 should guide scholarship (Chapman et al., 2022). A values-driven culture of decency
2 prioritizes intellectual honesty over metrics, meaningful contributions over opportunistic
3 authorship, and integrity over convenience.

4 This commitment can take many forms. Authorship should reflect genuine intellectual
5 contribution — not simply strategic positioning. Decency also requires resisting citation
6 manipulation — whether through excessive self-citation or citation cartels (Trueblood et al.,
7 2025) — and instead, referencing work that meaningfully contributes to the argument at
8 hand. Transparency in data collection and analysis, including sharing materials where
9 possible and preregistering studies, reinforces trust and enables scrutiny (Deer et al., 2025).

10 In qualitative research, where interpretive flexibility and researcher reflexivity are
11 central, decency involves particular commitments. Sharing interview protocols, codebooks,
12 and analytic decision trails can enhance trustworthiness without compromising
13 confidentiality. When full data sharing isn't possible, transparency can still be achieved
14 through methodological appendices or reflexivity memos. Preregistration frameworks, even
15 in qualitative settings, help document analytic decisions and reduce hindsight bias (Haven &
16 Van Grootel, 2019). With the increasing use of AI tools — such as transcription, sentiment
17 analysis, or thematic clustering — researchers must transparently report what tools were
18 used, how outputs were verified, and what biases may be introduced (e.g., ChatGPT for
19 thematic summarization or automated coding in NVivo). These reflections ensure that
20 technological assistance enhances, rather than compromises, ethical scholarship.

21 Integrity in data handling also extends to emerging practices, such as the use of
22 synthetic data generated by large language models. While such data can support research
23 under resource constraints, they must not replace rigorous, human-sourced data without
24 proper validation. Clear documentation of data generation processes, model parameters, and
25 limitations is essential to maintain credibility (Sarstedt et al., 2024; Viglia et al., 2024).

26 Decency, however, is not the responsibility of individual researchers alone. Journals
27 and editorial boards share the duty to uphold values-based publishing norms. They should
28 prioritize research that meaningfully advances theory and practice — not merely papers
29 predicted to attract citations. Encouraging open data, methodological transparency, and
30 preregistered studies can help build fairer, more credible scholarly ecosystems (Nosek et al.,
31 2015).

32 While many of these practices are already known, they are not yet universally
33 followed. Our goal is not to introduce new technical tools but to advocate for a cultural shift:
34 where transparency, integrity, and fairness are not afterthoughts, but foundational

expectations. Upholding decency is not just about methodological rigor — it is about cultivating a research environment grounded in trust, mutual respect, and shared purpose.

Practical Recommendations

While transforming research culture is ultimately a systemic challenge, tangible progress can begin with individual, institutional, and editorial choices. The following practical recommendations are directly anchored in the core values discussed throughout this letter — passion, collaboration, and decency. These principles serve as a compass for making decisions that foster integrity, innovation, and inclusiveness in research. Whether through prioritizing meaningful work, building supportive networks, or upholding transparency, these actions contribute to shaping a more values-driven academic ecosystem.

1. For Academics

- **Communicate findings in accessible and engaging ways** (*Passion & Decency*): Inspire broader audiences by writing clearly and with purpose, helping bridge the gap between academia and practice.
- **Leverage synthetic data ethically** (*Decency*): Use synthetic data for exploratory phases, while validating findings with real-world data to maintain research integrity.
- **Seek international collaborations with complementary researchers** (*Collaboration*): Build global teams that offer diverse perspectives, fostering cross-cultural learning and co-creation.

2. For Institutions

- **Support high-risk, high-reward projects** (*Passion*): Encourage bold research by funding ideas that may not align with mainstream trends but have transformative potential.
- **Offer training on ethical data practices** (*Decency*): Equip researchers to use emerging tools like AI-generated data responsibly and transparently.

3. For Journals

- **Promote transparency in peer review** (*Decency & Collaboration*): Foster trust and accountability by making editorial decisions more open.

- **Curate special issues on unconventional themes** (*Passion & Collaboration*):

Encourage boundary-pushing research that addresses novel or interdisciplinary questions.

Looking at best practices in this domain, an award-winning interdisciplinary study published in the *Journal of Travel Research*, authored by a global team from Australia, Slovenia, and Austria, explored a sharing-based approach to encouraging environmentally friendly behaviour among tourists (Dolnicar, Knezevic Cvelbar, and Grün, 2019). This paper not only addresses a substantive issue in tourism but also exemplifies how research with a global team can have a meaningful impact, further reinforcing the relevance and potential of tourism research in driving real-world change. Additionally, another interdisciplinary study published in this same outlet, authored by a diverse team of authors, explored the representation of the online tourism domain in search engines. The research combines insights from tourism studies, information science, and digital marketing to address the challenges and opportunities in effectively marketing travel destinations (Xiang, Wöber, and Fesenmaier, 2008). This paper not only tackles a critical issue in the tourism industry but also exemplifies how a multi-disciplinary approach can have a meaningful impact, further highlighting the relevance of tourism research in addressing real-world challenges.

Conclusion

Academic culture stands at a turning point. While metrics offer one lens for recognizing contributions, they must not obscure the deeper purpose of scholarship: generating meaningful, transformative knowledge that contributes to society (Dolnicar, 2025; Kozlov, 2023; Lim, 2025). The systemic pressures identified by Benjamin et al. (2024) and Gard-McGehee (2024) are real, but responding to them requires more than structural reform — it calls for a cultural shift grounded in values.

A value-driven research culture places passion, collaboration, and decency at the centre of scholarly life. Passion fuels inquiry driven by curiosity and intrinsic motivation. Collaboration connects diverse minds to co-create knowledge that transcends disciplinary or geographic boundaries. Decency grounds research in ethical practices, humility, and a shared responsibility to contribute honestly and transparently. These values are not idealistic add-ons — they are foundational to the integrity, sustainability, and relevance of academic work. Our letter contributes to the ongoing debate not by offering a new metric or policy tool, but by reframing the conversation: from performance to purpose, from competition to community.

We aim to inspire early-career researchers and institutional leaders alike to rethink academic success in more human, values-based terms.

For early-career researchers, the stakes are especially high. As Lee and Benjamin (2023) note, the expectation to publish extensively and secure funding early on can make academia feel exclusionary and unforgiving. Institutions must respond with value-aligned structures: mentoring, flexibility, realistic evaluation criteria, and funding mechanisms that support experimentation and well-being. Without these supports, even the most passionate and ethical researchers can burn out or drop out. However, there are still limitations to the proposed approach. For instance, differences in fundings between teaching-intensive and research-intensive universities, as well as between institutions in different regions of the world, can affect the fairness of the system. Integrating open research practices — from data sharing to pre-registration — is one way to embed values like decency and transparency into the academic workflow (Nosek et al., 2015; Deer et al., 2025). But openness alone is not enough. We must also humanize our research relationships.

A final thought. Collaborate with co-authors who challenge and inspire you. Look for people who are smarter than you, bring energy to the table, and complement your skills — whether that is the write-up (e.g., the “story” of the paper) or the method. These kinds of partnerships push your research forward. The best learning comes through writing. We can’t edit a blank page, and it’s through writing that ideas and solutions start to take shape.

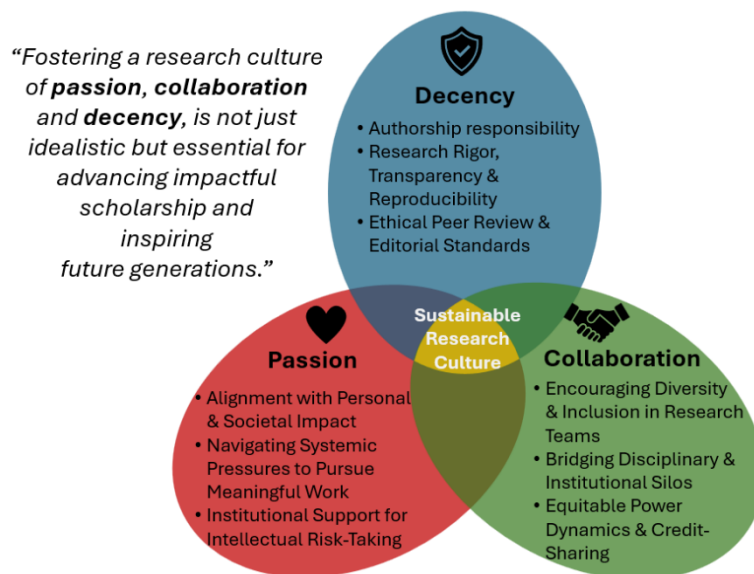


Figure 1: A conceptual overview of the core values underpinning a sustainable research culture.

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