

The Frost Heaves experience: A case study of collaboration with professional organizations to provide practical experience

Craig Paiement, Western Michigan University

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Abstract 460**

Experiential learning is a cornerstone of the sport management curriculum. Experiential learning is a process for learning through action (Dewey, 1933). This is the time where students make a transition in applying theory to practice within the sport industry. Most sport management programs offer a variety of credit for practical experiences obtained by their students. The nature of the industry and the current economic condition provide many opportunities for sport management students to participate in real life professional situations as part of their educational program. Experiential learning includes all forms of internship, practica, apprenticeship and service-learning.

As we identify opportunities for experiential learning for our students, we must be diligent in protecting students from exploitation and ensure a proper learning environment. This is especially imperative in experiences prior to the culminating internship activity, but includes all practical experience (Schnieder & Stier, 2006). Faculty must be cognizant of the academic importance and rigor that practical experience for credit should require. It seems that many times students are left to their own devices to obtain, interview for and organize the internship experience. In some cases, faculty merely sign the required paperwork and provide a grade when the student has completed the required hours. This type of supervision does a disservice to the sport management student and the internship process. It leaves the education component to the site supervisor, who in many cases is ill-equipped to fully comprehend the academic component, as they are concerned with their own organizational responsibilities.

Experiential learning as an academic exercise is grounded in theory first presented by Dewey (1933). Kolb (1984) then modernized and further developed the theoretical perspective of meaningful experiential education. Kolb identified a model of experiential learning that utilizes concrete learning, reflection, abstract thinking and refinement. Practical experience faculty supervisors have the obligation to address these theoretical implications to help students make the transition from student to professional.

Each sport management program has certain challenges that must be faced. Many programs have a dearth of local opportunities, while other programs have an abundance of students that must be accommodated with experiential opportunities. The purpose of this presentation is to identify and discuss the method by which one small sport management program in a rural setting partnered with regional organizations to provide practical experience to their students in a controlled environment. The premise was to provide a circular learning experience as described by Kolb (1984) with concrete learning, reflection and abstract thought within a combined classroom and practical experience.

A course was developed as a "seminar" in sport management. One portion was titled the "Frost Heaves Experience", thus named after the minor league basketball team in the partnership. The idea was hatched between the owner, operations manager and the sport management program director. The focus of the course was to provide an in-depth version of experiential learning, with the additional benefit of direct mentoring to benefit the students learning objectives. The students were placed in charge of specific positions within the organization. One student was charged with directing all game day operations; he supervised a staff of additional students to manage during games, to include promotions, scorer's table, ticket sales and concessions. Another student was placed in charge of public relations and sports information; the team owner, who also was a national sports writer, mentored her in this position.

The students met weekly in a classroom setting and practiced reflective learning techniques of themselves as individuals and as a group. This approach provided interesting qualitative data on the usefulness of reflection and mentoring in the practical experience realm.

A second group of students chose to assist in the management of the regional fieldhouse. These students also benefited from the expertise of the operations manager and the programming manager. Students were charged with different levels of responsibility and supervision in the successful operation of the fieldhouse and the programs that are offered. They were also part of a classroom experience that focused on reflective learning techniques.

An in-depth presentation on the specific issues that were addressed by the operations staff of both organizations to ensure an educational experience, while benefiting from the efforts of the students will be discussed. The legal, practical and academic

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implications will also be presented. The method by which the partnerships were forged and ideas on possible modification by other programs within their own contexts and challenges will be identified.