

The Foster Five-Step Process: An Inclusive Sport Management Experiential Learning Model

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Over several decades, sport management programs have turned to internships to assist and prepare students in their transition from classroom to the workforce. However, with increasing pressure on university resources, there have been significant challenges to incorporating and maintaining high-quality experiential learning opportunities. These challenges have the potential of undermining the bridge students rely on to link theory and practice. From 1993-2008, the Sport Management Program Review Council (SMPRC) provided standards regarding the importance of field experience in sport management. The standards state, "An undergraduate student will benefit from a culminating in-depth practical experience before entering the sport industry. These experiences help the student bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical application in sport settings" (SMPRC, 2000, p. 9). In 2008, the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) finalized their new accreditation principles. Under the common professional component, programs are required to include integrative experiences that encompass internships and other capstone opportunities (COSMA, 2008). The requirements of these governing bodies confirm that experiential learning is an integral component of a quality sport management program. Much of the research in this area points to ways in which internships can be more effectively implemented and managed, particularly by universities, to better meet the needs of students and hosting organizations (Hurd & Schlatter, 2007; Dixon, Cunningham, Sagas, Turner, & Kent, 2005; Stratta, 2004). Additionally, students have reported the benefits of internships have exceeded their expectations, with the internship impacting both their academic and enterprise skills (Stratta, 2004). Studies have also reported positives in a number of key areas, including applying and reinforcing classroom-learned concepts, gaining new knowledge outside the classroom, building experiential learning skills, enhancing personal growth and development, facilitating career exploration, and broadening horizons through exposure (Chouinard, 1993; Gordon & Heinemann, 1980).

However, internships can be just one avenue for assisting students in gaining experience or exposing them to the sport business industry. Because the SMPRC standards preferred a culminating internship which is an excellent lead to a full-time position, some students may select an internship in a field in their senior year, only to find the specific segment of the industry selected is not a good fit. Thus, enhancing the educational experience with multiple learning opportunities is a proactive system exposing the student much earlier in their academic journey. Experiential learning is the term often used today to define the encapsulation of these multiple opportunities. While the history of this concept can be traced back to John Dewey, who believed that through varied experiences the student is better prepared for future life, and life as a whole (Dewey, 1997), the entire learning process and resulting measurable outcomes are greatly enhanced when multiple experiential learning opportunities are utilized. According to Kolb, experiential learning theory is a circular relationship between concrete experience, observation and reflection, forming abstract concepts, and testing new situations (Kolb & Fry, 1975). Fish (2008) does not debate the effectiveness of one method of experiential learning over another, but rather reinforces the use of a multitude of different approaches including internships.

Research has supported the belief that learning occurs best when students are actively involved in concrete experiences (Fish, 2008). Studies comparing student-centered learning (e.g., projects) to instructor-centered learning (e.g., lectures and readings) favor student-centered methods as a means to better motivate students. This greater effectiveness is because student-centered learning provides more relevant, real-world experiences (Fish, 2008). As a result of the information published in the literature, the authors recognized the need for a comprehensive experiential learning model for sport management programs. The Foster Five-Step Experiential Learning Process Model, developed by one of the authors, illustrates a comprehensive process that encapsulates multiple steps of experiential learning from the first semester on campus until the day of graduation. The goal of this presentation is to describe and present the essential components of an effective experiential learning program by explaining the components of the model, and concluding with an outcomes assessment of its validity