

Mitigating risk in athletics through service learning.

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According to Cunningham (2007), 62% of athletic administrators responsible for risk management practices at Division I football schools reported having no formal training, education, or certifications in safety and security of an athletic event and/or emergency preparedness. Baker et al (2007) indicated that industry professionals are concerned about terrorist attacks at their facilities with the majority reporting no formal professional development in the area. In the recent years, the emergence of this threat has seen an overwhelming combatant approach of mitigation and preparedness at the industry professional level.

The researchers implemented a unique curriculum in risk/emergency management with the emphasis of incorporating engagement, hands-on learning, and real-world situations and challenges. The study combined action research and service learning to address safety and security concerns in the athletic department. Service learning is an experiential learning technique (Mumford, Inungu, & Smith, 2007), whereby students are engaged in a community-based project to the benefit of both participants. Action research (Baumgartner & Hensley, 2006) is applied practical research that addresses local needs, problems or issues. Sport management educators are in the unique position to facilitate service learning through a mutual respect for the academic arena (students) and the community (athletic department). An experiential learning opportunity between the two provides students with an enriched comprehension of learning objectives, while the community benefits from a solution to a real-world problem through classroom knowledge (Mumford et al, 2007). This community and classroom experience has been addressed through practicums, experiential learning, assistantships, internships, and most recently, service learning. The purpose of this study was to assess the service learning component (student-community interactions) during this experiential learning activity, within a risk management curriculum.

The aim of the researchers was to foster collaborative work incorporating several dynamic entities which included academics with industry standards, and students (future professionals) with industry professionals. A class of graduate of students (n=7) at a Division I-AA institution was used as a pilot group, in partnership with the respective athletic department at the university, to assist in developing emergency management plans (athletic specific EMP's, evacuation plans, and continuity of operation plans). The same students also participated in a vulnerability study, side-by-side with athletic staff and industry professionals, the results of which were deemed a priori to be "sensitive information".

The majority of service learning assessment is comprised of reflections from all parties involved (Gelman, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001), including the students and the athletic event staff in this situation. Through qualitative analysis, pre and post reflections served as the primary data source. In turn, the process of coding was used to identify, as well as collapse, patterned regularities within the reflections. As a result, the authors will discuss general themes that indicated an exhibition of mutual respect between the two parties, as well as an agreement for the need of this training, knowledge, and advancement in emergency management plans.

This presentation will also provide learning objectives and the challenges of proper assessment of those learning objectives. The uniqueness of service learning can provide students with hands-on learning activities to reinforce the applications of classroom theory and discussion, in efforts to address real-world issues facing the sport industry. While service learning may not be a new pedagogical method in sport management, challenges still remain for documentation and assessment of both the learning and effectiveness of community relationships, through teaching endeavors at the collegiate level.