Enhancing student learning in sport management through applied research

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Abstract 205

Regarding business research methods, Zikmund (2002) differentiates between basic (pure) research, which is intended to expand the boundaries of knowledge through the development of concepts and theories, and applied research, which is undertaken to address specific problems or situations. As stated by the author, both types of research employ the scientific method to better understand business phenomena; albeit to varying degrees. Many student research projects in the area of sport have followed along traditional models of academic research (i.e. basic research) required of faculty seeking tenure and promotion within their institution. Applied research is an often forgotten type of research in which students may develop their research skills and provide value to the sport industry. In fact, the research processes involved in business and management research is often misunderstood even by those within the community (Remenyi, 2002). The highly competitive nature of today's sports marketplace requires educators to consider adjusting traditional teaching models when educating future sport managers. Specifically, the use of applied research needs to be incorporated to a greater degree in the classroom.

The purpose of this presentation, therefore, is a) to discuss the value of applied research when developing students as researchers, b) to share examples of successful applied student research projects, c) to share innovative approaches to creating valuable applied research opportunities, and d) to demonstrate how applied research, with front-end planning, could also be framed as pure research.

The presenters contend that applied research should be incorporated to a greater degree in contemporary sport management curriculums. This approach serves to expand or alter the thought process of students while also providing them with the critical skill sets and content knowledge needed to address specific problems facing sport organizations. In the end, students will be better prepared to enter the sport industry and will be valued more highly by sport organizations as job candidates.

One example to be discussed is a marketing research project which focused on a Division I athletics department. The project used an applied approach and featured an integration of new technology. The learning objectives of this project were to teach interviewing techniques, basic survey design, data collection via the use of handheld PDA's, operation and use of the software package, and data analysis. Zikmund (2002) classified this type of research as a performance-monitoring research project. For this project, customized research software and handheld PDA's were used to collect data. The data was analyzed and feedback was then provided to the NCAA Division I athletics department on the effectiveness of their advertising efforts. In addition, demographic data on attendees of the department's events was collected and used to create a more targeted market for future advertising campaigns.

Many opportunities for applied research exist; however, it often takes time and effort by faculty to facilitate relationships with sport organizations and individuals in the sport industry in order to create these new opportunities. Internally, enhanced relationships between sport management faculty and the university's athletics department can foster more opportunities for students to explore real-world situations while providing a service to the institution. Externally, relationships with sport organizations may provide ideas for research while answering an organization's research question. By simply asking a sport organization if there is a problem that needs to be researched, faculty may come across valuable ideas and opportunities for research projects. In addition, connecting with alumni of the sport management program is another possibility for identifying a research need. Finally, seeking out sport businesses using new technologies may also provide opportunities for student research. These companies are often willing to teach students new technologies as the students, now familiar with their product, may one day be the technological decision makers within their sport organization.

With careful up-front planning, applied research can be framed as pure research. A second study to be discussed, examining the economic impact of the golf course industry on one state's economy, provides an example of tying together applied and basic research. Graduate students and faculty conducted the applied research portion of the study and returned a report to a professional organization for golf course owners that described the economic impact of golf courses on their state. This report enabled the state association to use the economic impact data to lobby state legislatures for funding that would be used to
promote the golf industry to tourists. The consumption patterns of golfers were not only of interest to this particular professional organization, but also provided for a discussion of classical consumer theory. Thus, using the data collected from the applied research project, the researchers examined whether or not golf patrons treated travel costs as sunk costs or bundled costs. Results revealed information that expanded the body of knowledge regarding the golf industry and consumer behavior. Projects such as this allow for direct benefit to sport organizations while also examining existing theoretical models in a new and innovative ways. The opportunities for applied research, basic research, and a blending of the two are limitless.

It is critical, however, to remember that applied research involves a systematic process that includes objectivity in gathering facts and the testing of creative ideas for alternative business strategies (Zikmund, 2002). Faculty choosing to conduct applied research are cautioned that not all research opportunities are valuable to students. But, through teaching applied research concepts, tapping into internal and external networks in the sport industry for meaningful research opportunities, and working with students to develop new and pertinent research projects using the latest technological innovations, faculty members will successfully prepare students to use data to critically solve organizational problems as they enter their chosen profession.

References: