Grand Slam Marketing: A Student Organization and Metadiscrete Experiential Learning Model for Sport Management Programs

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Introduction

In sport, we have all likely heard the infamous phrase, “It’s not what you know, but who you know,” that will help you land a job. The more contemporary phrase might read, “It’s what you know and who you know,” that produces true hiring success, especially in today’s poor economic climate. Students majoring in sport management need to take advantage of every available opportunity to build their skill sets and their resumes in order to be viable candidates in the current sports job market. According to Street & Smith’s Sport Business Journal (2009), who recently published a special edition on the uncertainty of the sport management degree, over 300 universities in the United States now offer sport management programs and roughly 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students currently possess that major. With many more graduates than job openings, the competition for entry-level positions, and even internships, is fierce. Students must be well-qualified candidates long before they graduate if they truly wish to be competitive and employed in the sports industry.

Framework

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.41; Yeganah & Kolb, 2009). Experiential learning (EL) is a pedagogical approach in which students are given the opportunity to apply conceptual knowledge to practical situations (Muir & van der Linden, 2009; Rogers, 1969). Experiential learning opportunities are one way that sport management programs are preparing graduates for employment in the industry. Experiential learning opportunities allow students to bridge the gap between “cognitive classroom theories and concrete sport experiences” and include two distinct types: Nondiscrete and discrete (Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, and Han, 2003, p.28). Nondiscrete EL opportunities are often encapsulated in the course curriculum and include field trips, site visits, and role-playing activities. Discrete EL includes activities independent from classroom content such as internships, practica, and senior capstone projects (Southall et al., 2003). These opportunities allow students to enter their desired field on a temporary basis, typically for course credit, to gain related work experience and practice skills they have acquired in the classroom. These experiences, however, are usually a requirement for graduation and take place in the student’s final semester of study before searching for employment. For this reason, many students have limited related industry experience prior to applying for an internship or permanent sports industry position. Southall et al. (2003) suggest the creation of a metadiscrete EL model in which sport management programs provide out-of-classroom learning opportunities under the guidance of faculty mentors which are offered throughout the entire college experience.

Purpose

Grand Slam Marketing (GSM) at Georgia Southern University is a prime example of the metadiscrete EL model prescribed by Southall. GSM is a faculty-guided, student organization at Georgia Southern University (GSU) that is comprised of undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of majors including sport management. The mission of GSM is to promote Georgia Southern baseball and softball to the campus and community while also providing the ultimate fan experience to those attending Eagle baseball and softball games. The purpose of creating GSM was to provide an EL environment where students interested in the field of sport marketing could actively engage in real-life marketing and promotional strategies that would simulate a true sport industry setting. GSM has a hierarchical organizational structure (similar to what you would encounter in a professional sport organization) with two sport management faculty members serving as joint CEO’s. Four previous GSM members act as student directors overseeing student staff members in four areas of operation including: 1) On-field promotions, 2) Concourse marketing and research, 3) Retail operations, and 4) Customer Service. Students are trained and receive experience throughout the season in all four areas of operation and are encouraged to return the following season to

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apply for the supervisory positions. GSM is an ideal opportunity for students all across campus, at any age, to begin developing their professional skill sets in sport marketing and management as well as their resumes in order to be competitive candidates prior to their required internships.

Conclusion

A plethora of implications for professors and students can be formulated from evaluating the GSM model. First, this metadiscrete EL model can be applied to a variety of sports settings depending on the sport management program implementing the model and the corresponding university athletic departments’ marketing needs. Second, several campus organizations (athletics, bookstore, etc.) can be solicited to participate, and this provides students with a more comprehensive and dynamic industry experience. Third, student members gain valuable expertise during data collection processes and can obtain valuable information for faculty members conducting academic research. Lastly, students who participate, especially early-on in their academic careers, will bring work-related sport marketing and management experience into their upper-division classes, as well as their future industry internships and jobs.