The Internship Experience with a Newly Formed Sport Franchise

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Students enrolled in sport management/administration programs utilize various forms of internships and workplace learning to prepare for employment in the sport industry (Bell, Crebert, C-J Patrick, Bates & Craginolini, 2003; Stratta, 2004; Sutton, 1989). Kelley (2004) proposes the primary purpose of such internships is to offer experiences leading to job placement or career advancement. These two goals are typically desired by students, organizational administrators, and academic programs, therefore it is increasingly common for internships to be a required component of a university's sport management curriculum (DeSensi, Kelley, Blanton, & Beitel, 1990). While each individual university and participating internship location provides a different experience for students, previous studies documented many of the commonly discussed issues involved in the internship experience. These include basic academic requirements (Choinard, 1993), searching for internships that align with career goals (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1993), finding a work environment that is both physically and mentally safe (Stratta & Kelley, 2001), consideration of legal issues (Moorman, 2004), the selection of qualified organizations to place students (Verner, 2004), and expectations of both the student (Peretto Stratta, 2004) and the participating organization (Williams, 2004). Aside from these aforementioned areas of interest, research has yet to look specifically at the learning experience provided by a newly formed/forming sport team franchise. More specifically, there is a gap in the previous research when it comes to discussing how internships should be developed with newly formed/forming sport franchises, unique benefits these organizations provide students, and potential issues that might arise when working for such an organization.

Therefore, this presentation seeks to extend current theory and practice related to experiential learning and the sport management/administration internship by evaluating the internship experience provided by a newly formed/forming team participating in the Professional Arena Soccer League (PASL-Pro). Participant observations and interviews with students, academic advisors, and franchise executives form the foundation of two major purposes. First, the presentation will describe the pros and cons of the internship experience in regards to the student, the newly formed/forming franchise, and the academic program. While the relationship between the three aforementioned groups has been considered by a few previous studies (Sutton, 1989; Fleming & Ferkin, 2005; Kelley, 2004), others tend to offer findings based on only one perspective (Overton, 2004). Further, no known studies could be found dealing specifically with these three groups in relation to newly formed/forming sport franchises.

Based on the consideration of the three perspectives, the second purpose of the study is to discuss the pros and cons each group encounters in regards to the overall internship experience with a newly formed/forming sport franchise. The benefits of participation in student internship experiences are well documented (Hager, 1984; Parkhouse, 1978, 1984, 1987; Parks, 1991; Sutton, 1989; VanderZwaag, 1980; Peretto Stratta, 2004). However, no known previous research specifically describes the pros and cons associated with interning for a newly formed/forming sport franchise. The presentation will compare and contrast the pros and cons with those previously mentioned in relation to mature sport organizations.

Discussion of the pros and cons of the internship experience provided by newly formed/forming sport franchises is grounded in observations of the aforementioned PASL-Pro team. Organizations such as this sometimes form quickly, and employees are given very little time to develop and prepare for the first season. Students who become involved with newly formed/forming sport franchises must adapt quickly and hit the ground running (O'Shea & Watson, 2007). Harvey (2004) suggests these are the very skills many employers look for in today's job candidates. Additionally, the expectations placed on interns by newly formed/forming sport franchises are increased for two primary reasons. First, newly formed/forming sport franchises sometimes have small (or smaller than usual) numbers of full-time employees. And second, the work conducted by interns is critical to the organization's success. While interns working with mature sport franchises may fill any number of tertiary positions, newly formed/forming sport franchises utilize student interns to fill the gaps left by small budgets and time constraints.
Previous research offered recommendations for academic supervisors in regards to their interaction with the student and site supervisor. Such recommendations typically include discussion on setting expectations, standards, and workload for the overall experience (Chouinard, 1993; Kelley, 2002; 2004). However, recommendations pertaining to the interaction between the academic program and the newly formed/forming sport franchise must be expanded for two reasons. First, in situations similar to the PASL-Pro team described in the presentation, the newly formed/forming team’s administration may not be aware of nearby sport management/administration programs. The very nature and network of academic programs typically provides them with insider knowledge on new events and teams in the surrounding geographic region. While it may not be the responsibility of academic administrators to initiate contact with newly formed/forming sport franchises, it is likely early opportunities to become involved may be overlooked by the sport franchise if such considerations are not brought to attention. Similarly, while the academic administrators are typically well connected to the sport industry-related events of local communities, the sport management/administration students as a whole may not be so well connected. Therefore, the academic programs should attempt to make early efforts to assess basic needs of, and form relationships with, newly formed/forming sport franchise. This will help introduce the opportunities a sport management/administration program can provide to the newly formed/forming sport franchise and to students as soon as possible, thereby adding to the overall value of the experience for each of the groups involved.

From the student’s perspective, the pros of being involved with a newly formed/forming sport franchise include the opportunity to become highly involved with a variety of responsibilities, observe the process required to develop a sport franchise, and the opportunity to network with many practitioners and peers in the sport industry. The cons include not having an experienced on-site mentor and dealing with unreasonable expectations on the part of the franchise administration. From the academic program’s perspective, pros of sending interns to a newly formed/forming sport franchise include development of a continuing relationship with a new avenue for sending interns and developing the academic program’s overall network. Cons include not knowing the quality of experiences and training the intern will undergo. The newly formed/forming sport franchise experiences many pros from the use of student interns, including free or inexpensive labor, publicity, and help with organizational development.

In summary, the presentation is unique because it expands on current knowledge regarding the sport management/administration students’ internship experience with a newly formed/forming sport franchise. Previous research has yet to explore the differences, benefits, and difficulties specifically associated with student internships provided by newly formed/forming sport franchises. Additionally, the presentation also offers insight from the perspective of the student, the academic administrator, and the participating organization. While some researchers and practitioners have incorporated all three perspectives into their findings, this is not always the case. It is important for future research in this area to continue to simultaneously consider the needs of each party involved in order to develop best practices for working with newly formed/forming sport franchises.