Using a Case Study Competition as a Concentrated Learning Experience in Sport Management

Lawrence Judge, Ball State University
James Johnson, Ball State University
Elizabeth Wanless, Ball State University
Laura Simon, Ball State University

The case method is a widely accepted teaching methodology utilized in a variety of different academic disciplines. Using this methodology, students are faced with a case or problem and are tasked with finding a solution as decision makers. Malouf (1993) identified the following as advantages of the case method: active involvement and interaction by students; material covered in depth; practical application of knowledge and skills; and most closely resembles reality. Similarly, Merseth (1991) explained five related advantages of the case method: aids in development of critical analysis and problem solving skills; encourages deliberate action and reflective practice; melds theory and reality; immerses students in their own learning; and promotes a community of learners.

Empirically, Van Eynde and Spencer (1988) found that the utilization of case studies produced better retention of material than other teaching methods. Furthermore, students have indicated a more integrated view of teaching and learning after using the case method resulting in a higher level of student satisfaction (Orlansky, 1986; Smith, Malkani, & Dai, 2005). Within the discipline of sport management, the case method has been supported by a variety of scholars (Dixon, 2008; McDonald and Milne, 1999; Pitts, 1998; Sanchis, 2007; Young et al., 2004; Zeigler, 1959; 1982). The support for the case method emerges from the applied nature of a sport management degree whereby graduates will largely be employed to manage and administer sporting environments. These applied sporting environments require graduates to solve problems and make difficult decisions in a way that is unique to the world of sport (Boucher, 1998).

As teachers of this applied field, sport management educators are best served to find methods by which students can translate theory into practice. Case studies allow sport management students to simulate the decision-making process of real-world situations, practice effective problem-solving strategies, communicate alternative solutions with classmates, and develop realistic action plans. In essence, case studies allow sport management students to imitate the skills they will need in the complex and growing business of sport (Corey, 1998; Leenders, Mauffette-Leenders, & Erskine, 2001; Pitts, 1998). Although most often delivered in a classroom or curricular environment, case studies have also been utilized in a competition format. Student teams from different schools compete against each other in presenting the best case solution. The element of competition brings with it an intensified approach to the case methodology, and provides unique teaching and learning opportunities that, if approached strategically, can provide benefits beyond routine coursework.

Incorporating a national competition to the traditional case method of teaching offers a unique and intense learning experience beyond what can be achieved in a typical classroom format. From these competitions, Maier-Lytle et al. (2010) highlight several potential benefits beyond the traditional case study. For example, national case study competitions provide students exposure to specialized knowledge not found in some curriculums, improved oral and written communication opportunities pitted against a diverse student population, development of ‘soft skills’ (e.g., confidence, motivation, responsibility, and teamwork) that may not develop in a less intense classroom atmosphere, and a competitive edge that can prepare students for an often unforgiving job environment (Maier-Lytle et al., 2010). All of these potential benefits occur within a competition structure that requires a large amount of work in a short amount of time, thus creating an ideal opportunity for an in-depth learning experience. Furthermore, case study competitions regularly occur at a conference or professional gathering which offers additional professional development opportunities that students might not have pursued otherwise. Although the case method is one of many potential experience-based teaching methodologies within sport management (e.g., internships, co-ops, event planning courses, conferences, etc.), its use in a competitive environment is relatively novel when compared to the ample competition opportunities in business (Menna, 2010; Maier-Lytle, McGuire, & Ehlen, 2010) and education (Sudzina, 1995; Sudzina & Kilbane, 1994).
For example, Maier-Lytle et al. (2010) identify at least 27 accounting and business case study competitions at the regional or national level. The CSRI Case Study Competition is an example of an innovative approach to educating sport management students by combining experiential learning and service learning in a co-curricular club sponsored activity. The case study competition utilized for this particular experience was sponsored by The College Sport Research Institute (CSRI), and is the only national sport management competition of its kind. CSRI is a nonprofit organization comprised of faculty from around the world with an interest in college athletics.

Headquartered at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, the CSRI is dedicated to collection and analysis of data relevant to pervading issues at all levels of collegiate sport (CSRI, 2011a). As part of the annual CSRI Scholarly Conference on College Sport, the case study competition is available to both undergraduate and graduate students. This poster presentation will highlight a graduate Sport Administration team and faculty experience from preparation to presentation in the case study competition annually sponsored by the College Sport Research Institute (CSRI).

The role of the faculty advisor is explained from both a theoretical and functional perspective with particular attention given to advising in a competition format. Student learning experiences were assessed using open-ended survey questions designed to encourage student reflection. Although students reported an immense time commitment, they were overwhelmingly satisfied with their competition experience that included in-depth learning, essential skill building, and real-world application.