SEED: Cultivating a Sport Event Management Laboratory

Tim Lampe, Virginia Commonwealth University, Center for Sport Leadership
Carrie LeCrom, Virginia Commonwealth University, Center for Sport Leadership
Nathan Tomasini, Virginia Commonwealth University, Center for Sport Leadership

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Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand." - Chinese Proverb

At the Center for Sport Leadership (CSL) at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), we have embraced this message and created an outlet through which students practically apply course work through the implementation of a variety of local sport events. This outlet, called Sport Entertainment and Event Development (SEED), is a two-semester course focused on providing students with hands-on event planning and management experience. In other words, it is an event management laboratory where students directly apply the program's general sport leadership curriculum in a minimally-controlled environment (ie, students are empowered to make the decisions).

To gain an overall perspective, the CSL at VCU offers a 36-credit master's degree in sport leadership that is grounded in practical, hands-on education. The program is designed for a cohort of students that typically matriculate within 12-15 months. The curriculum includes eight required courses (sport marketing, sport business, sport law, leadership models, research methods, sport sociology, SEED, and an internship), in addition to several electives.

Given the applied nature of the industry, in which students, more often than not, enter the working world directly after graduation; it is imperative to provide real-world application opportunities of both the theoretical and practical aspects of sport management. The execution of this aim, however, requires a combination of several learning objectives similar to Fink's (2003) learning-centered paradigm. Fink's (2003) interactive taxonomy of significant provides a student with the following educational constructs: foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. Unlike other educational taxonomies, such as Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956), Fink’s is non-hierarchical. This allows each of the six areas of learning to be relational and interactive, and one construct is not sacrificed to achieve another. Given the short time our students are on campus, this integration is vital, and SEED has become the unique vehicle through which Fink’s (2003) paradigm is implemented.

The course is taught by VCU’s Director of Facilities, however, as a laboratory/melting pot for the entire curriculum, each CSL faculty member is involved. The first semester of the course focuses on foundation knowledge, human dimension, and ‘learning how to learn’ factors. For instance, students are introduced to the core competencies involved with public assembly facilities and event management as defined by the International Association of Venue Managers (IAVM). In addition, students work in a team environment as they are divided into five core event groups, one for each event to be conducted in the second semester. Each group is comprised of students with different skill sets assessed through two personality inventories (the Strong Interest Inventory, which is frequently used for educational guidance as one of the most popular career assessment tools (Donnay & Borgen, 1996), and the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO PI-R), which is a highly-regarded assessment of personality (McCrae, Zonderman, Costa, Bond, & Paunonen, 1996)). Based on the results of these tests, the instructors assign groups of students with a balanced mix of strengths so that each group has the potential to accomplish the following seven tasks: facilities and risk management, operations, sponsorship sales, design and research, marketing and advertising, hospitality, and documentation.

The second semester incorporates the remaining educational factors of integration, application, and caring as the students plan and execute events for the community of Richmond. Two of the four or five core events, Kickin’4 Kidz and Young Aces Open, were completely created by the SEED students in 2009 and 2010, respectively, and are now annual events. Kickin’ 4 Kidz won the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll Exemplary Project for 2009 award in its first year and the Young Aces Open event won the United States Tennis Association’s Mid-Atlantic 2010 Community Program of the Year in its first year. Both events strive to promote a healthy and
active lifestyle, sportsmanship, teamwork, and community spirit among Richmond’s inner-city youth through sport.

In addition to these organic programs, students have successfully executed and managed the following notable events as part of the SEED curriculum: the Harlem Globetrotters, the Virginia High School League State basketball and volleyball championships, the Richmond Symphony Orchestra, and the Washington Wizards 2009 training camp and exhibition game against the Memphis Grizzlies.

The educational experiences gained by the students in the SEED course include such areas of sponsorship (the CSL initially funds the events, but students are expected to recoup costs through donations and sponsorships), timeliness, logistics and equipment, liability insurance and risk management, food and beverage operations, and parking and transportation. Most importantly, from concept to implementation to evaluation, students are the decision makers. Students work hand-in-hand with community members to secure funding, local officials to obtain proper permits, local stores and restaurants to acquire food and beverage items, and local public schools and community centers to ensure youth participation. This takes a leap of faith for faculty members and more than a few bumps in the road, but student involvement is a crucial factor in creating a meaningful learning experience. Lastly, this form of community service learning not only helps local people in need, but also contributes to the overall development of successful sport leaders, which is a core component of the CSL curriculum.

In all, SEED is an ever-changing and forward-leaning course similar to the general sport marketplace. Most importantly, it is a symbiotic relationship wherein sport management students gain invaluable hands-on educational experience, the community gains vital education-based sports programming, and the academic unit gains positive notoriety for its cogent social responsibility efforts. Successes and practical implications of this course design for student development and sport management education will be discussed in this presentation as well as obstacles and growing pains. The presentation’s focus will encourage sport management faculty to engage in similar ‘off-road thinking’ in creating opportunities for students to benefit from hands-on learning. Also, an opportunity for a guided dialogue of other best practices in facility and event management pedagogy will be encouraged.