Teaching Sports Management: Engaging Industry and Leveraging Relationships

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If experience differentiates job applicants for jobs in the sports management and marketing industry then experience must be integrated into the academic curriculum. To do so, engaging the sports management and marketing industry is essential for the colleges and universities that offer sports administration, management, marketing majors/minor programs.

The sports marketing and management industry is a very competitive, demanding and gratifying profession that is over-sensationalized, over-hyped, over-studied in US colleges and universities. The current number of graduating majors far exceeds the availability of job openings. Further compounding the competition is the increasing number of students from non-sports management and marketing majors seeking positions in the industry. As a result, the sports management and marketing industry may require more “power of who” than any industry to enter and advance.

The accessibility, responsiveness and engagement that administrators, alumni, professors and staff provide students are critical to the students’ professional development. While the in-class academics are required, experience is the necessary component to the education of future professionals. While the academic class offering needs relevance to the industry, experience in general and interest-specific areas greatly advance the students’ education. Accountant majors don’t compete for jobs against students with chemistry degrees but sports marketing majors compete with degrees from business, communications, finance, journalism, marketing, management, public relations, tourism and others.

The level of engagement by academia with the sports management and marketing industry provides direct, immediate and long-term benefits for students and their schools. How to engage the industry for the benefit of the students should be a primary focus of all professors.

Alumni are a critical component to the “team” of resources to be engaged and leveraged for internships, full/part-time jobs, and projects for students. Far beyond donations that alumni could and should provide institutions through academic and athletic department support, alumni are resources for student development and a potentially key differentiator for prospective students when evaluating academic programs for application.

Alumni programming and activities should be managed in partnership with alumni department staff and include all professors and current and former alumni working in the industry. A point-person should be designated to schedule and manage alumni communications to optimize the efficiency and prevent one-off requests. For example, a monthly enewsletter could highlight program updates, new personnel, recent graduates, future events and conferences, speaker requests, etc. Opportunities for alumni engagement should be communicated through web, social media and emarketing platforms. Leadership among the alumni will advance the initiative and increase engagement with professors and students.

Alumni programs and activities include adjunct professor positions, blogs postings, class projects, conferences, guest lecturing, informational interviews, job fairs, mentorship, testimonials, tours, and webinars.

If students learn by doing then student projects provide learning experiences that complement reading and in-class discussions. Projects can be for class assignments only or performed for the benefit of on-campus clubs, employers of alumni and athletic departments.

Individual and group projects assigned in sports management and marketing classes establish the conceptual understanding necessary for students to apply to subsequent projects. For students to understanding the “what to do” is the first step toward instinctively knowing “how to do it.” Areas for assignments can include advertising...
campaigns, market research, marketing plans, operations plans, and ticket sales campaigns for fictitious or real-life organizations.

On-campus clubs stage events as fundraisers and to offer student programming. Each event requires club members and other volunteers to produce the event as well as increase attendance and participation in the event. Class assignments can be structured to include individual and/or group projects, class extra-credit or for students’ professional development. Grading can be optional; however, in-class discussion and evaluation should be integrated into the class curriculum and student advising.

While students may secure part-time or full-time positions in the athletic department, game-day operations require that athletic departments hire part-time workers for most of their sporting events. Class projects are available for game-day (concessions, sponsor fulfillment, program sellers, ticket sellers, etc.) but also throughout the season to prepare for game day. Professors that engage athletic department personnel will enhance the ability for students to secure positions and class project assignments. Experience for students in intercollegiate athletics provides valuable experience that is transferrable to other event marketing sectors of the industry.

Event management provides a “team” environment as staff and volunteer collaborate their individual energies and resources to share the common goal of producing the new or existing event. The development of an Operations Plan necessitates that assigned staff and/or volunteers execute specific tasks that result in a never perfect staging of the event. Continual evaluation of administrative, marketing, operations, staffing, etc. provide on-going instructional and student development opportunities.

Student-run sports management and marketing clubs/alliances, etc. provide the critical entity to facilitate relationships with active alumni and industry representatives beyond those engaged through faculty and staff. The ability of student organizations to independently engage alumni, secure project assignments for students through the athletic department or employers of alumni, and on-campus clubs provides basic “Power of Who” experiences and understanding of the “power in number.”

Supervision and support by faculty and staff to the student-run clubs/chapters is critical for their growth and development. Indeed, “student-run” should require that students manage all aspects of the club/chapter; however, the advancement of the club can be directly impacted by the supervision and support provided by an advisor and other professors. Additional support and resources can be provided through an “Advisory Council” comprised of alumni, athletic department personnel and other industry professionals that reside in the area. The increased level of engagement with industry personnel through the club/chapter provides the much-needed link to industry professionals.

NASSM and its members should support the advancement of student-run organizations for sports management and marketing majors with “How to” sections of the NASSM website and other communications resources. Unlike the majors of most degrees, sports management and marketing students rely on experience to compete for entry-level jobs and do so against majors from many other degrees. Just as the competition on the playing field is intense, jobs in sports management and marketing are highly contested and require classroom preparation and training as provided by a comprehensive real-life academic curriculum. Additionally, the experience gained through class projects, on-campus clubs, athletic department projects and part-time/full-time jobs, employers of alumni and other resources provide a critical component to the students’ development and marketability.