

Sport Management Students: Ready to Take (on) the Field?

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Professional preparation

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(including questions)
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Introduction

As a result of the evolution of workforce needs and the expectations of the collegiate experience, experiential learning has become a driving force of universities around the world (Cantor, 1995; Kuh, 2008; O'Neill, 2010; Rosenstein, Sweeney, & Gupta, 2012). This has resulted in the professor's increased responsibility to ensure that students are competitive as they prepare to enter a highly aggressive job market. As such, this trend has become particularly important for future sport industry professionals (e.g., Cuneen, 2004; Moorman, 2004; Stier, 2002), given the competitive nature of the industry. Therefore, faculty must allow programs to evolve in order to ensure that students are prepared for a rapidly changing industry, allowing external experience/professional development components of programs to address industry-specific needs.

While this academic component has been discussed in regards to importance with its initial inception into the sport management curriculum (e.g., Chouinard, 1993; Jowdy, McDonald, & Spence, 2004; Sutton, 1989), the discussion of its evolution – as a result of significant industry changes – has only been touched on (Surujlal & Singh, 2010; Yoh & Choi, 2011). There has been an acknowledgment of the role of internships in linking theory to practice (Young & Baker, 2004) and using this experience as a mechanism for professional preparation (Surujlal & Singh), addressing both the student's (Ross & Beggs, 2007; Stratta, 2004; Yoh & Choi) and employer's (Ross & Beggs; Williams, 2004) perspectives of the sport management internship. Specifically, it has been noted that these opportunities provide experiences and guidance that assists in the bridge between theory and practice, laying a foundation for the development of one's "professional self" (Todd, 2006; Surujlal & Singh). Importantly, Surujlal and Singh recently assessed student's perception of the value in the internship experience itself. While this did not provide evidence of their level of preparedness for these opportunities, findings did indicate that sport management internships (in South Africa) provided various levels of preparation for post-collegiate activities, including the student's professional/personal development, marketability, and adaptability.

In general, research in the area of sport management field experience trends towards the program characteristics of and best practices relating to facilitating quality internships for students (e.g., Case, 2003, 2007; Chouinard, 1993; Cuneen, 2004; Jowdy et al., 2004; Kelley, 2004; Verner, 2004; Young & Baker, 2004), students perception of their internship (e.g., Ross & Beggs, 2007; Stratta, 2004), their ultimate career choice (e.g., Case, 2007), and the level of preparedness for this (e.g., Williams, 2004). As students appear to be more prepared in the career fields that most sport management programs tend to cover through their curriculum (Yoh & Choi, 2011), it is vital that faculty continue to assess their curriculums and adaptations are made. This will ensure that industry needs are addressed and students are prepared for new challenges that they might face as early as their field work or internship experiences (i.e., the implications/use of social media and other skills that will ensure their marketability). However, there is a dearth of material examining the role of the sport management program in preparing the student for these earlier professional pursuits (i.e., field experience and internships). This research seeks to answer a variety of questions that will assist in the progression of sport management curricula to ensure a superior level of preparedness for such experiences. As such, the purpose of this study is to begin to examine the preparedness of sport management students for both their collegiate (i.e., field experience, internship) and post-collegiate (i.e., graduate school, work) practical experiences.

Method

Through the process of evaluating professional preparedness of sport management students, this research will begin the exploration of factors deemed necessary for the development of successful future professionals. Using a mixed methods approach via personal observation, a web-based survey, and a performance analysis, this pilot study will

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provide a robust analysis of student and supervisor's perceptions of the preparedness of a group of Fall 2012 sport management interns. Specifically, the analysis will assess if: student's non-classroom experiences correlate with post-graduation opportunities; student's satisfaction with a site/opportunity reflects what was learned in the classroom; performance with a site/opportunity reflects what was learned in the classroom; individual on-site internship performance correlates with overall classroom performance (i.e., GPA); students feel prepared for their industry-based internship; students feel prepared for graduate school and/or entry-level positions within the sports industry; site supervisors believe that students are prepared for industry experience; site supervisors believe that the sport management curriculum meets current industry needs?

Implications, Limitations, & Future Research

While various researchers have noted the importance of experiential experiences for professional development (e.g., Surujlal & Singh, 2010; Yoh & Choi, 2011), minimal work has been done to examine what "preparedness" actually looks like in the field of sport management. As such, this research provides a foundation from which both academicians and practitioners can benefit by further examining the importance of this particular piece of the sport management curriculum. This work will allow us to determine (a) theoretical implications regarding the effective use of experiential learning experiences in sport management and (b) the appropriate course of practical action for the future (i.e., adaptations in curriculum, etc.), benefitting students, faculty, and site supervisors/future employers. Given this exploration is in its infancy, there will be a need for continued examination of both interns and site supervisors in a longitudinal manner. Theoretically, this will provide a foundation for the examination of internships over a span of time at a number of different universities in order to determine an effective course of action to best prepare future sport managers. Implications, limitations, and future studies will be expanded upon in the presentation.