

## 2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

### Experiential and Service Learning: Linking Course, Campus, & Community Through the Special Olympics

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**Teaching**

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**20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)  
(Room 410)**

**Abstract 2013-187**

**8:55 AM**

As educators and mentors we strive to provide students with the theoretical foundations of the sport management discipline and a way to develop their skills through experiential learning. This combination is becoming increasingly important as sport industry professionals seek graduates who can connect theory and practice successfully in the workplace (Southall, Nagel, Legrande, & Han, 2003). While implementing experiential learning into sport management curriculum is problematic enough for faculty to balance with a course load (Inglis, 2007), many institutions of higher learning are emphasizing the importance for students to engage in service activities in the classroom. Boyer (1990) suggests that educators should think of creative ways to integrate campus and the community while applying theory to practice. He also states that a university's commitment to community can be beneficial for both students and faculty, as engagement can enhance cognitive and moral development. Although few examples of service learning through sport exist (Bruening, Madsen, Evanovich & Fuller, 2010; Bennett, Henson & Drane, 2003; Lee, Bush & Smith, 2005), the importance of implementing service learning in sport management curricula is a growing necessity.

Service learning is described as a credit-based educational experience that meets community needs and enforces students' sense of civic responsibility and course content through reflection activities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Through service learning, students "may experience a wide variety of emotions as they begin to understand...socioeconomic inequalities, institutional racism, and systems of privilege in place in our country" (Dunlap, Scoggin, Green, & Davi, 2007, p. 22). In this case, the service learning course focuses on gaining and spreading knowledge about people with intellectual disabilities through the Special Olympics and its programs. The Special Olympics is an organization that strives to create a better world by fostering the acceptance and inclusion of all people through year-round sports training and competition (Special Olympics, 2012). In order for sport management educators to effectively implement a service learning course or project, a partnering organization or event must be identified. The organization or event should provide students with relevant sport or recreation-related opportunities that focus on community interaction. Additionally, the pairing would be best aligned if the organization shared the same values and objectives as the university and its students.

The development of a course entitled "Program Development & Implementation: Special Olympics" at the author's institution has addressed experiential learning, service learning, and theory in a successful manner. In its fifth year, the course allows sport management students to learn about the Special Olympics organization, interact with Special Olympics participants and employees, and connect with members of the community and campus. Since 1968, athletes with intellectual disabilities have participated in state, national, and worldwide competitions. Today, with over 500,000 athletes participating in 30 sports in North America alone (Special Olympics, 2012), the Special Olympics reaches into nearly every community. In addition to the accessibility, the mission and programs of the organization make it an ideal partner for a sport management service learning course, which incorporates experiential work with campus and community involvement.

The semester-long, three-credit course focuses on the Special Olympics of Maryland's annual Fall Sports Fest. Students are fully in charge of developing and implementing a sport event category (i.e., track and field, cycling events, field sports), while aiding in the production of the rest of the Festival. The remainder of the course centers around bringing awareness to the campus and community, as well as the helping to change perceptions of intellectually disabled individuals - one of the largest and least understood minority groups in the United States (Ferguson, 2006). Also included in this class is spreading of one of the Special Olympics' education platforms, the "R-Word: Spread the Word to End the Word" campaign.

The evaluation and assessment of students' expected performance plays a vital role in determining if learning objectives are met and if the course has contributed towards meeting the program's learning outcomes (Anwar,

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Ahmed, & Mohammed, 2012). For this course, learning objectives include: (1) a demonstrated understanding of the mission, philosophy, and importance of the Special Olympics movement to society; (2) an analysis and discussion of the roles and functions of members of an event planning team, with an emphasis on sports events; and (3) practicum experience as an active member of an event management team. All course learning objectives are assessed through planning and event evaluations, debriefs and discussions, and a culminating exam.

Referencing Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning and Boyer's (1990; 1996) work on the importance of service learning, this presentation will explain the logistics of the course facilitation, combining experiential and service learning with theory. Specific methods for student involvement in the community and on campus, through combined efforts with a sport management student club will also be discussed.