

The Influence of the Senior Internship Experience on the Career Decision Making and Development of Tourism, Recreation and Sport Management Students

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**Teaching
Abstract 2013-235**

**Saturday, June 1, 2013
9:20 AM**

**Poster
(Ballroom)**

Internships have become ubiquitous in the sport management industry and education in the United States (Eagleman & McNary, 2010, King, 2010, Parkhouse, 1987). Although undergraduate sport management programs vary on the parameters, a large proportion of them require students to complete a full-time internship as their final semester before graduation making it the culminating educational experience for students. Despite the integral role in the education of the student research examining the effects of the internship on the student has been limited.

Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent and Turner's (2005) longitudinal study provided the most insightful account to date of how the final-semester internship can affect the career decision making of sport management interns. In their study, anticipated career satisfaction, affective occupational commitment, and intent to enter the vocation all decreased over the time of the internship. Given that it is usually the students' first exposure to full-time work, a decrease in anticipated career satisfaction and intent to enter the vocation is not surprising. That is, after full-time immersion, students may find that this line of work does not suit them. However, amidst anecdotal evidence of sport organizations abusing and exploiting free or cheap intern labor (Schneider & Stier, 2006), it cannot be assumed that career-related change over the time of the internship is a function of a normal self-discovery on behalf of the students. Since the internship acts as a career entry point, if the internship experience is deterring otherwise qualified future employees it may have a detrimental effect on the long-term quality of the workforce in the sport industry. In light of this, the purpose of this study is to investigate the underlying mechanisms of career-related decision making for sport management students completing their full-time internship prior to graduation.

The unfolding model of voluntary turnover was used to examine the decision-making process of interns (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). This theory outlines several paths that an organizational leaver may take when exiting the organization. These paths are classified based on job-related factors, the nature of deliberations, and the presence of shocks or critical events that may prompt a person to leave a job. The unfolding model of voluntary turnover is built upon image theory (Beach, 1990), which states that individuals construct a decision frame for a particular decision. This decision frame contains three images: (1) a value image, which consists of the individual's general set of values pertaining to the decision (2) a trajectory image, which consists of a set of goals, and (3) a strategic image, which consists of behavioral tactics for goal accomplishment (Beach, 1990; Beach & Connolly, 2005).

The present study adopts a longitudinal design, assessing the decision frame (i.e., value, trajectory and strategic images) of sport management students (N = 11) from a large Southeastern university prior to and after their 12-week internship. Participants were interning at a variety of organizations including a youth sports venue, marketing agency, and golf course. Saturation was reached in the pre-internship round when the decision frames became repetitive. This occurred at twelve participants, however, one participant withdrew from their internship for administrative reasons, yielding a final N=11. Interview questions were adopted from a previous cross-sectional test of the unfolding model (i.e., Lee, Mitchell, Wise & Fireman, 1996) and altered to fit a longitudinal design where changes to the decision frame and the influence of shocks could be assessed. Additionally, the post-internship interview assessed the role of learning, supervisor support, job challenge and role stress during the internship on the decision-making process, following previous research showing their potential for influencing job attitudes in interns (see: Dixon, Cunningham, Sagas, Turner & Kent, 2004). Following Lee et al. (1996), three coders assessed the images of the decision frame in both the pre and post-internship transcripts and commented on change.

The results provide unprecedented insight into the influence of the internship experience on the career decision-making process of sport management students. At the time of the post-internship interview 3 of the participants had been accepted into graduate school, 3 decided to continue working temporarily at their internship site, 1 accepted a

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

full-time position with their internship site and 5 were still in the job search process. Pre-internship value images were primarily focused on location, money, work environment and ability to maintain a personal life. Change to the value image was minimal for most, but a handful admitted to becoming more realistic about the criteria that will shape their job search. Pre-internship trajectory images contained short-term and long-term career goals. After the internship, few participants commented that the experience affirmed their career choices; most commented that they had actually eliminated career paths from consideration. During the post-internship interview, 4 participants admitted they were considering leaving the vocation. Strategic images were vague both before and after the internship revealing a general “one step at a time” approach for most of the participants. Six of the participants experienced shocks including admission into graduate school, job offers, voluntary relocation and an insightful conversation with a supervisor; these shocks played a significant role in altering their respective decision frames and career choices.

Definitive connections were not found between vocational turnover cognitions and learning, challenge, supervisor support and role stress during the internship. However, significant insight was gained regarding the dynamics of these concepts and how they might influence career decision making. For example, participants described learning in terms of gaining knowledge about the industry as a separate process from learning new skills. This information can inform future quantitative studies in finding factors that can distinguish quality internships.

In sum, this study provides a basis for understanding the decision-making process of students completing their final internship before graduation. Educators can use this information to help students select internships that match their decision frame, and to mentor students who may experience personal or career-related shocks during the internship. This study also speaks to the larger issue of the career decision making beyond the internship, as it appears many students may be achieving graduation without having completely decided their professional future.