Experiential learning is a crucial component within the sport management curriculum, and programs should utilize those experiences to prepare students for professional employment within the sport industry (Attle & Baker, 2007; Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003). Sport management students want to use experiential learning opportunities to establish a professional network and a professional reputation prior to entering the sport industry (Stratta, 2004). Downward and Ralston (2005) found that volunteering at a sporting event appeals to the enhancement of personal, sporting, and employment prospects. Furthermore, Green and Chalip (1998) suggest that sporting events provide a relatively short-term, but intense experience for volunteers whereby they can immerse themselves in the subculture. Therefore, it is important for the sport management educator to have an understanding of those student experiences.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of sport management students during an experiential learning trip. More specifically, this study explored the experiences of students who worked ancillary events leading up to Super Bowl XLVII in New Orleans, Louisiana, attempting to preserve the student voice so that sport management faculty may learn how best to assist in creating the optimal experiential learning environment.

Ethnography was the methodology of choice for this study because it was a “qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and languages of a culture-sharing group” (Creswell, 2007, p. 68). The researchers used convenience sampling in this study, leading a group of students on an experiential learning trip to volunteer at Super Bowl XLVII. The final sample consisted of 11 participants, all students at a large university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant-observations, and reflections. Participants were asked to submit responses to an initial open-ended questionnaire prior to arriving at the trip’s destination to gain insight into the students’ expectations of an experiential learning trip. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the participants during the week of the trip and two weeks after returning. Questions were adapted from prior quantitative studies focused on behavioral intentions, motivations, and satisfaction of volunteers (Clary et al., 1998; Farrell, Johnston, & Twynam, 1998; Landrum, Prybutok, Zhang, & Peak, 2009; Love, Hardin, Koo, & Morse, 2011).

Findings revealed that students explained their experiences using the themes of (1) career preparation, (2) learning, and (3) social benefits. Students shared that the experiential learning trip prepared them for working in the sport industry by exposing them to behind-the-scenes situations and placing them in scenarios where backup plans were essential but not always properly executed. Students were appreciative of opportunities, but critical of how volunteer managers used volunteers who were invested in the event and the industry. Students frequently felt underused and replaceable. Learning was constructed as a theme as management concepts of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling were discussed in coursework but witnessed and experienced in the work setting. Students stated that characteristics such as flexibility and customer service became moments of truth for them, connecting classroom learning with real-world application. Social benefits were constructed as the third theme, as students identified the social benefits as perks that came with volunteering in a major sporting event, such as VIP concert tickets for volunteers and being exposed to the professional athlete social scene.

Practical implications for this study are focused toward faculty, sport organizations, and students. Faculty can use these results to better understand what students may be seeking from experiential learning and to assist the student in selecting beneficial opportunities. Sport organizations that use student volunteers can use these findings to gain knowledge on student experiences, specifically to gain their perspective toward management of volunteers. Students
said an experiential learning trip to a mega sporting event was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that shed light on the career before them while expanding their learning beyond the classroom walls. However, sport managers who use student volunteers should be mindful that these volunteers are invested in working the event and gaining experience. This two-way street of benefits empowers the student and assists the sport organization.