Creating Service Learning Experiences in Sport Management

Andrea Pent, Neumann University
Charles Crowley, California University of Pennsylvania
Brenda Pitts, Georgia State University
Wardell Johnson, Eastern Kentucky University
Doris Lu Anderson, California State University, Long Beach
Nalani Butler, University of Tennessee

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Preparing students to be engaged, productive citizens is one of the foundational purposes of public education in the United States (Education Commission of the States, 2013). Sport management curricula commonly require volunteer activities of students that serve a multitude of community needs; and, in sport management, experiential learning can form a large part of the curriculum. The standards of the North American Society for Sport Management curricular certification standards require that schools require at least 400 hours of field experience. While the Commission for Sport Management Accreditation standards no longer dictates these minimum requirements, most programs have continued to require 400 hours of field experience. This standard often exceeds the minimum requirements of many business schools. Since most field experiences in sport management are unpaid positions, these positions are generally viewed as volunteer activities which can lead students to believe that their field experiences are service work.

Previous research (Pent & Crowley, 2011) that examined experiential learning activities of college students in sport management found that students perceived their volunteer activities in a professional sport setting to be service oriented. Students in that study indicated that in addition to allowing students the opportunity to use academic skills and knowledge, their experiential learning activities helped develop a sense of caring for and about others and that their work improved the quality of life for persons served. While these characteristics of service quality may be part of commercial enterprise, they should be differentiated from activities that provide assistance to underserved populations in an academic setting.

Few studies exist in the sport management that address service learning. Bennett, Henson, & Drane (2003) reported that students reported benefits of improved social interaction, awareness of social responsibility and interaction with diverse cultures in addition to resume building and development of practical skills. More studies that examine the effects and benefits of service learning exist in the fields of recreation and education (Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, & Scott, 2008; Moorman, & Arellano-Unruh, 2002; Mumford & Kane, 2006; Strickert, 2010; Sharpe, 2010) which are more likely to have a service orientation for special needs populations.

Stevens (2008) defined service learning as “an experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets a particular need of a community” (p. xii) and integrates service and gaining of experiential knowledge that should have positive outcomes for both the recipients and the providers of the service. The service learning process “encourages self-reflection, self-discovery, the acquisition and actualization of values, skillfulness, and wisdom in addition to presenting opportunities to explore contentious societal issues, including inequalities prevalent in race, gender, socioeconomic status, and accessibility in direct meaningful ways” (Strickert, 2010, p.335).

The Kellogg Presidents’ Commission on 21st Century State and Land Grant Universities (1996) recommended the development of more engaged institutions that are intimately connected to their communities. Through the integration of these service learning concepts to experiential learning activities, sport management instructors can maximize the impact of the activities that are already incorporated in their curriculum. Sadly, research has demonstrated that institutions of higher education have perceived the value of collaboration with community agencies as being more valuable than the agencies (Barcelona & Bocarro, 2004). Kirschebaum and Reagan (2001) suggested that effective collaboration can satisfy a desire for university personnel and students to contribute positively to the surrounding community in the process of providing meaningful experiences for students and creating interesting research opportunities for faculty. From a community’s perspective, an engaged university can
offer a vast and diverse array of resources (Carr, 2000). Experiential learning also plays a key role in enhancing intercultural sensitivity and competence within the context of international education (Wagenknecht, 2011). The combination of classroom learning, discussion of current events and controversial issues, and service learning activities are all part of a new educational paradigm.

The purpose of this forum will be for panelists to discuss current experiential learning activities that include professional, college, nonprofit, and international markets and are already a part of their course requirements and to consider ways that these experiences can help create reciprocal community partnerships while fostering a greater sense of civic duty and responsibility among their students through the application of service learning principles. Specifically panelists will be asked to describe how institutions and students meet actual community needs, how experiences are integrated into the academic curriculum, how active student reflection is facilitated, how students are encouraged to use new skills and knowledge and how students develop a sense of caring for and about others while improving the quality of life for the persons served.