The Perceived Preparedness of Collegiate Sport Facility Managers

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The number of schools offering sport management programs has grown markedly since the first program was established at Ohio University in 1966 (Masteralexis, Barr, & Hums, 2012), with more than 300 college and universities in the United States offering some combination of undergraduate and graduate sport-focused degrees (Mathner & Martin, 2012). The rise in academic program offerings has coincided with the economic growth of the sport industry, which has led to increased employment opportunities in spectator sport, participant sport, sport tourism, sporting goods and apparel, college athletic departments, and various other sport-related enterprises (Pitts & Stotlar, 2002; Taks, 2007).

With a growing number of sport career opportunities, there is a need to produce competent managers and employees to organize the daily operations of various programs, including marketers, business officers, sales staffs, and facility managers among a host of others. Sport management researchers have called for the inclusion of sport industry professionals when designing and evaluating curriculum in order to ensure those skills valued and expected in the field are being adequately covered in the classroom (Eagleman & McNary, 2012; Petersen & Pierce, 2009). However, Mathner & Martin (2012) noted that literature focusing on the preparedness of sport management graduates upon entering the workforce is scarce. In an effort to fill that gap among one subset of the sport management workforce, the purpose of this study is to qualitatively examine collegiate facility managers' perceived degree of preparedness from their academic experiences and preparatory courses to their requirements, expectations, and responsibilities as athletics administrators.

Previous research of recreation facility managers has utilized survey design to collect data, and has only assessed soft skills of practitioners (Case & Branch, 2003). To date, no study has been conducted to identify the specific knowledge and hard skills utilized by collegiate athletic facility practitioners on a daily basis. This phenomenological study will use participant voice to look into the unique lived experiences of facility managers in an attempt to discover commonalities among participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). This data will assist researchers in developing "best practices" or "standards" which allows for the formulation of a suggested framework that sport management faculty can utilize in curriculum development to more adequately prepare future professionals.

As empirical research regarding athletic facilities in general (and specifically about facility managers) is limited, this qualitative study attempts to understand the lived experiences of collegiate athletic facility managers through the following research questions: (a) How do collegiate athletic facility managers describe their job requirements and daily tasks? (b) What skills and knowledge do athletic facility managers identify as the most important aspects of their daily responsibilities? (c) To what degree did the collegiate athletic facility managers' academic background adequately prepare him/her to fulfill these requirements?

Data collection for this study is in progress with two of the anticipated six interviews completed. The interview protocol includes 12 semi-structured questions designed to elicit responses that would not normally be available via quantitative survey instrumentation by asking for open-ended responses to prompts in order to more richly understand the lived experiences of those individuals working in athletic facility management. Analyses of the interviews could lead to the identification of themes and commonalities across participants and the development of best practices (Hays & Singh, 2012).

This study will utilize a stratified purposeful sample by soliciting interview data from various facility managers within intercollegiate athletics. In order to establish parameters for inclusion in the research, participants must hold a facility management position and title within an intercollegiate athletic department at the time of the interview.

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Interviews will be recorded and transcribed, with member checking being utilized to establish trustworthiness. Two research team members will independently review the transcripts to gather a general sense of the data, list all relevant statements, then cluster these units into themes. After initial independent coding, the research team will come together for consensus coding in phases throughout the data analysis process to agree on consensus codebooks and ensure reliability.

The initial phase of data analysis for this study supported the findings of Case & Branch (2003), that sport facility managers find budgeting, communication skills, goal setting, problem solving, delegation, and decision making as important competencies. However, this research goes beyond the generic soft skills and competencies in an attempt to discover what specific formal and informal knowledge is most important to prepare future collegiate athletic facility managers. Specifically, five structural descriptions were identified through the first round of consensus coding, utilizing the first and second interviews: daily job duties, skills utilized, things you wish you learned in school, on-the-job skills, and curriculum emphasis.

Among the textual descriptions found in initial coding, four were mentioned in multiple structural clusters and should perhaps be considered the most salient: 1) Communication-related themes such as dealing with vendors and public speaking were present in the clusters titled skills utilized, things you wish you learned, and on-the-job skills. 2) Turf management was identified in the structural descriptions things you wish you learned, on-the-job skills, and curriculum should emphasize, while one participant presented a potentially valid avenue to adding turf to the curriculum of sport management programs at universities that house agricultural departments. 3) The overarching theme of people management was present in each of the five descriptions. Termed human resources, staffing, delegation, teamwork, and relationship building, the core emphasis of each of these descriptions is the importance for facility and event managers to manage various stakeholders such as coaches, student-athletes, administrators, student-workers, and contractors. 4) Project and construction management was also present in all five structural clusters, and should also include closely-related textual descriptions such as procurement, budgeting, facility operations, turf management, and bidding, as they are also part of the overarching theme of capital construction.

This study of collegiate sport facility managers has the potential to contribute to the field of sport management by providing information concerning a segment that is under-represented in the literature. Although no accreditation standards exist specifying exactly what needs to be taught, this project provides a starting point to discuss reassessing how faculty approach the facility and event management components of the curriculum at their own institution. Furthermore, this research may encourage schools to consider adding a specialized facility and event management track to the existing curriculum structure and/or seek instructional collaboration with other departments such as construction management and turf management.