Early Experiential Learning & Perceived Career Development Outcomes in Capstone Sport Management Internships

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Experiential learning has long been a hallmark of sport management academic programs (DeSensi et al., 1990; Eagleman & McNary, 2010; Parkhouse, 1987). Experiential learning’s place in the discipline is further evidenced by the fact that first the Sport Management Program Review Council and now the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) have endorsed experiential learning as a characteristic of excellence in sport management education (COSMA, 2010; NASPE-NASSM Joint Task Force, 1993). Additional empirical research shows that employers in the sport management industry rate experiential learning, field experience specifically, as crucial to effective professional preparation (DeSensi et al., 1990; Petersen & Pierce, 2009; Stier & Schneider, 2000). Taken together, these bodies of knowledge from the literature clearly show that the topic of experiential learning is of great relevance and significance to the sport management discipline.

A review of the literature shows that many forms of experiential learning, ranging from field experience (e.g. Chinomona & Surujlal, 2012; Cuneen & Sidwell, 2009; Cunningham et al., 2005; Sotiriadou, 2011; Yoh, 2011) to service-learning (e.g., Bruening et al., 2010; Mumford & Kane, 2006) to experiential learning projects (e.g., McKelvey & Southall, 2008; Pierce et al., 2011; Sheehan et al., 2009) are represented in sport management’s empirical body of knowledge. These studies generally focus on results from one particular type of experiential learning. However, given that experiential learning is uniquely important to the discipline and that many diverse forms of experiential learning are represented in the literature, it is reasonable to conclude that sport management students may be exposed to several different experiential learning endeavors over the course of their college careers. Further strengthening this supposition are sources that explicitly call for students to engage in multiple experiential learning opportunities (e.g. Foster & Dollar, 2010; NASPE-NASSM Joint Task Force, 1993).

Thus, an interesting research direction for experiential learning in sport management is to examine relationships between or cumulative effects of exposure to multiple experiential learning endeavors during a sport management student’s academic preparation. Some research of this nature has been conducted outside of the sport management discipline (Green & Farazmand, 2012; Parks, 2003) and this present study seeks to begin exploration of the topic within the discipline by examining whether the level of change in career development during a student’s capstone internship may be influenced by the number of experiential learning assignments and/or the number of semesters of early field experience that student completed prior to the capstone internship.

Thirteen undergraduate sport management programs from across the United States participated in a survey that was administered in 2013-2014. The sample was purposive (Andrew et al., 2011) as programs were selected for inclusion based upon their similarity in the structure of their required capstone internship and their diversity in the amount and type of experiential learning offered or required prior to that capstone internship. The response rate for the survey was 44% and a total of 139 usable surveys were generated.

The survey consisted of three major sections: demographics, questions to ascertain the amount and type of early experiential learning completed, and scales to determine level of change during the capstone internship in several areas of development, including career development specifically. The scales were developed, tested, and utilized in prior research in cooperative education (Parks, 2003; Parks et al., 2001). Within this present study, the career development scale reached a satisfactory reliability level with a Cronbach’s alpha of .91. The survey questions focused on early experiential learning were carefully drafted per a review of the literature; they were then subjected to expert review, focus group analysis, and cognitive interview testing. Further, careful comparison between participant responses and expected responses that had been identified through a review of each program’s website and conversations with faculty in the programs indicated that the questions yielded valid responses.
Descriptive data indicates that the sport management students in the study perceived rather high levels of change with respect to career development during the capstone internship, with summed means for individual items ranging from 5.77 to 6.08 on a 7-point Likert scale. The Pearson product-moment correlation was performed for hypotheses focused on relationships between early experiential learning and level of change in career development in the capstone internship. No significant relationship was found between the number of semesters of early field experience a student completed and the level of change in career development during the capstone internship. However, the number of completed experiential learning assignments weakly, but significantly and positively correlated with the level of change in career development during the capstone internship ($r = .178, p < .05$).

Further, a 2x2 factorial analysis of variance was performed for hypotheses examining differences between groups of students with low and high levels of early experiential learning and for exploring possible interactions between the two independent variables in the study (experiential assignments and early field experience semesters). No significant main effects were generated but there was a significant interaction between the number of semesters of early field experience and the number of completed experiential assignments on the level of change in career development during the capstone internship, $F(1, 127) = 4.208, p < .05$. This effect indicates that participants who engaged in high numbers of experiential course assignments reported higher levels of change in career development during the capstone internship when they had completed fewer semesters of early field experience than when they had completed more semesters of early field experience. Conversely, participants who engaged in low numbers of experiential course assignments reported higher levels of change in career development during the capstone internship when they had completed more semesters of early field experience than when they had completed fewer semesters of early field experience.

These results are particularly interesting when considering prior work in sport management focused on experiential learning, career development, and success in the industry (e.g. Hutchinson et al., 2010; Kjeldsen, 1990; Surujlal & Singh, 2010). Further, possible explanations for the findings are intriguing as they may draw from Southall et al.’s (2003) notion of a “metadiscrete” sport management experiential learning opportunity, Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning, and the studies outside the discipline that examine multiple experiential learning endeavors (Green & Farazmand, 2012).

The findings of this study yield important academic and practical contributions to the field of sport management. Academically, they represent a first step in the new research direction of better understanding how multiple experiential learning exposures impact professional preparation. Practically, the findings empirically show students, educators, and the sport management industry that there is value in engagement in early experiential learning endeavors as they have an impact on an individual’s future career development growth. Further, the findings encourage reflection on how best to structure a course of study in order to gain the maximum benefit with respect to career development. In sum, the study yields important implications for subsequent research and practice.