The Need for Experiential Learning in Career Preparation: An Examination of Sales Training in Sport Administration Education

Megan Shreffler, University of Louisville
Samuel Schmidt, University of Louisville
Matthew Paras, University of Louisville

Teaching Thursday, June 2, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-036 11:40 AM (Forum East 2)

Those who desire to break into the sport industry encounter the daunting reality that the industry oftentimes requires long hours and the willingness to begin in lower-level positions in areas such as ticket sales (King, 2012). Given the emphasis on ticket sales in the industry, the inclusion of sales-oriented coursework within sport administration programs is necessary to ensure the success of students upon graduation. This notion was supported by leading sport sales academics Irwin and Sutton (2011) who asserted that a focused, dedicated, well-trained and professional sales team approaching the market in a strategic way is the key to success in sport ticket sales. Although ticket sales may not be an area of interest for many students, it is undeniable that many who desire to work in other areas of sport organizations must first prove themselves capable at sales before being promoted to other positions of interest. Because of the emphasis on service within the industry, even organizational employees that do not directly sell tickets must be able to sell the organization and themselves when communicating with key stakeholders. As such, regardless of the particular segment of the industry in which one works, having a basic understanding of sales is essential.

Research has suggested that the failure to include sales training in sport administration programs limits the success of graduates as they do not possess the requisite skillset of interest to hiring sport managers (Irwin & Sutton, 2011). Poor listening skills, lack of product knowledge, and improper planning and preparation have been identified as factors that inhibit the success of salespeople (Ingram, Schwepker, & Hutson, 1992). These factors, in addition to the development of a positive attitude, can be established through a proper educational training program. Additionally, sales coaching has been identified as one of the most important activities in the influencing of sales performance (Corcoran, Peterson, Baitch, & Barrett, 1995). Further support for the inclusion of sales training in sport administration programs is found in a previous study which suggested that experiential learning is a critical element for career preparation in the sport industry (McKelvey & Southall, 2008). For these reasons, it is necessary to ensure that students of sport administration programs receive appropriate training through their respective programs.

While the importance of sales training is obvious, the question of whether or not students are being provided with enough experiential learning to ensure that they are properly prepared for their future careers in the sport industry remains unanswered. For this reason, the purpose of this study was two-fold. First, the study aimed to discover the expectations of sport industry hiring managers with respect to students entering the field. This objective was addressed in the first phase through interviews of hiring managers across the country, at all levels of sport, in which sales are an area of emphasis. The study also looked to ascertain how sales training is being implemented at other universities throughout the country. This objective was met in the second phase of this study through the examination of curriculum guides for sport management programs.

Method
Phase 1

The first phase of the study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore the expectations of sport industry hiring managers with respect to students entering the field. Participants (N = 10) were recruited for participation in the study at a sport sales combine. Purposive sampling was used by the principal investigator to identify individuals within the sales departments of sport organizations that were responsible for hiring new sales staff. Phone interviews and Skype calls were the encouraged method of interview, due to the ability to ask clarifying questions when
necessary. However, when phone and Skype calls were not available, an electronic form of the questions was distributed through Qualtrics.

Participants that selected phone or Skype as the method of interview were give semi-structured, open-ended interview questions that addressed five areas: (a) prior industry experience, (b) educational degree experience, (c) educational curriculum experience, (d) success in the industry, and (e) role of higher education in the sport industry. Participants that chose to complete the survey online were emailed a link to Qualtrics that contained the survey. They were asked a set of 15 questions that mirrored the questions from the phone or Skype interviews. The job title, organization the practitioner worked for, and years in the sport industry were also recorded. All phone and Skype interviews were transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers. A number of key findings emerged from the interviews. First, good work ethic and passion are important to success in the sales segment of the sport industry. Second, there is no preference to degree type but the consensus tends to be that those with a sport management degree have a better understanding of what they are getting into. Third, sport management programs are getting better at providing expectations for the sport industry, but need to do more with sales. Fourth, hiring managers believe industry experience trumps GPA/academics. With respect to this finding, emphasis was placed on the importance of using internships to build students' resumes.

Phase II

The second phase of the study utilized a content analysis to examine how many sport management programs offer a sales class. A list of sport management programs was obtained through the North American Society for Sport website (N = 401). A search of each program’s curriculum was conducted to examine the following elements: region, state, status (public/private), school in which program is housed, enrollment, program name, the required internship credit hours, whether or not a sales class was offered, and whether or not sales was required. Given the importance of sales education and experience outlined in Phase I of the study, it was imperative to explore how sport management programs are preparing students. The content analysis revealed that a majority of programs are located in the Midwest (31.8%) although Pennsylvania was the school with the most programs (N = 30). Most programs are public (61.7%) and do not offer sales classes (72.0%). Of those that offer a sales class, 62.5% of programs require students to take it. Furthermore, the content analysis identified that 79.1% of programs require internships while 20.9% do not. Additional results will be presented in Orlando if selected for presentation.

References


