Working with Industry: How to Cultivate Practitioner Partnerships within a Sport Management Program

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Over 20 years ago in the Journal of Sport Management, Weese (1995) called for the academic field of sport management, similar to the field of management in general, to be more practitioner-focused. His argument centered primarily on the issue of research, insinuating much of the scientific work emerging in the field was heavily theoretical and was often inaccessible to practitioners, significantly reducing its value. Irwin and Ryan (2011), among others, have echoed this challenge to sport management scholars, but expanded the focus of the relationship between academic and practitioner beyond scientific study. They outlined the many benefits occurring when sport management faculty engage with industry through course work, in the forms of case studies, role plays, simulation exercises, and internships, in addition to research collaborations, and demonstrated a need for an increase in quality academic-practitioner collaborations.

Experiential learning is one of the ways sport management programs collaborate with practitioners and numerous studies have illustrated the associated benefits (Pierce & Petersen, 2015; Pate & Shonk, 2015; Pauline, 2013). Several authors (Jinkins & Cecil, 2015; Pauline & Pauline, 2008) have suggested a re-examination of sport management curricula with greater emphasis on collaboration and real-world experience. Couching her manuscript in Dewey’s Experiential Learning Theory, Bower (2014) suggests it is incumbent upon faculty members to serve as the conduit between academics and industry to cultivate student learning. As Jenkins and Cecil (2015) point out, however, collaborations between academic sport management programs and sport industry partners can be difficult because both parties may act to protect or insulate themselves from breakdowns in the partnership. The best collaborations, they suggest, are able to tear down these silos enabling both sides to have more ownership or buy-in with the relationship, ultimately resulting in a better experience for all involved.

Other researchers have determined sport management students desire more applied coursework and activities (Braunstein-Minkove & DeLuca, 2015) and gaining practical experience by working with practitioners through internships and graduate assistantships are extremely important in career development (Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent, & Turner, 2005; Petersen & Pierce, 2009; Popp, Weight, Dwyer, Morse, & Baker, 2015; Yoh & Choi, 2011). However, Mathner and Martin (2012) found significant differences between how students and practitioners view a variety of factors related to working in the sport industry. As such, it important for sport management programs to develop industry partnerships which can paint a more accurate and educational picture for sport management students.

An overarch view of sport management academic programs reveals a myriad of ways programs have partnered with industry. These collaborations manifest themselves in a variety of forms including, but not limited to: (a) guest speaking opportunities (b) internships and graduate assistantships, (c) research and consulting opportunities, (d) hosting workshops and symposia, (e) applied industry courses, (f) advisory boards, (g) media appearances, (h) donations, and (i) job opportunities for students. In recent years, several sport management programs have pushed the boundaries of merging academics with industry, such as the recent collaborations between the sport business program at the University of South Florida and the National Hockey League’s Tampa Bay Lightning (King, 2015), or the sport management program at Ohio University and the Southern Ohio Copperheads collegiate summer baseball league team (Frasure, 2010).

Each type of partnership or collaboration provides benefits to students, faculty, and practitioners. However, establishing these partnership can be difficult, particularly for doctoral students, for newer faculty members, for
faculty who teach at institutions with limited resources, or in communities with fewer sport organizations with which to partner. In addition, some sport management academics have little professional experience or personal industry networks from which to develop natural connections to the field. These challenges can be intimidating and prohibitive in establishing industry relationships. Additionally, many academic systems do not encourage or reward professional collaborations, thus hindering the motivation for faculty to partner with practitioners.

The purpose of our panel presentation is to offer a discussion on how sport management academic programs can cultivate effective industry collaborations. Panelists will discuss their individual experiences with a variety of industry partnerships and the best ways to initiate and maintain those partnerships. Talking points will include specific personal examples from the panel on the benefits and realistic expectations regarding collaborations as well as some of the pitfalls and things to avoid when partnering with practitioners. The format of the presentation will be a panel discussion with one author serving as an emcee in order to stimulate greater conversation and discuss a greater number of topics.